

A communicative approach to foreign language learning and computers

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Introduction

Innovation in educational technology has brought the need to reconsider new insights into the whole learning and teaching process. Moreover, within second language learning the innovation has appeared to us as an increasing launching of technology-facilitated learning centres. The learning programmes offered by these centres challenge not only the established roles of teachers and learners, the nature of materials and the organisation of classrooms, but also the language curriculum as a whole.

Current teaching approach

The Communicative Approach is the currently recognized approach and generally accepted norm in the field of foreign language teaching and, although there are numerous possible interpretations to it as well as classrooms applications, there are certain central issues which arise from adopting a communicative approach to the learning of language.

Mainly as Richard Alwright (1983) suggests in his paper: *Language Learning through Communication Practice*: the focus is consequently on “learning communication via language” instead of “learning language for communication”. In other words, communicative competence is the major aim of language learning but this will also necessarily imply the need to involve developing most areas of linguistic competence.

If we are looking at an approach to language learning which will develop the ability to communicate then, we have not only to be concerned with some of the considerations involved in linguistic competence and the nature of discourse, but also with the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of languages. In other words, draw our attention to context and cultural influences which affect language in use. Canale and Swain (1983) interpreted the concept of communicative competence as including four dimensions: linguistic competence; socio-linguistic competence; discourse competence and strategic competence. Dimensions which do not

develop separately, but which interrelate. Now, the methodological issues this framework implies are quite complex:

- The exploring of pedagogical means for “real life” communication in the classroom.
- The equipping of learners with the tools for generating unrehearsed language performance.
- Facilitating life-long language learning.
- Looking at learners as responsible partners in a cooperative venture.

Foreign language teaching and computers

Foreign language teaching has traditionally made use of various teaching aids among which the computer has become yet another. And although educational software is not as new as it may seem, there has been a recent and increasing production of hypertext educational software which we believe are having a marked influence on central issues in promoting communicative competence and greater autonomy in language learning.

Communicative Approach and Information Technology

Jones and Mercer (1993) in their article “*Theories of Learning and Information Technology*” argue that any teaching is based upon a model of learning, either consciously or not. Educational software, therefore, being a resource designed to support teaching and learning, will likewise incorporate such models. They turn to communicative theories of learning, taking the work of the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, as their basis. The relevance of his work to learning and information technology can be summarized by saying that it provides the basis for a “communicative” perspective on the process of teaching and learning. Although there is little evidence of socio-cultural theory having yet influenced the educational software design community - Vygotsky’s communicative theory of learning has this social dimension. Vygotsky distinguishes the need to look upon the linguistic system as having a representational nature essential for communicative language performance. The interrelation of these processes invites us to analysis language from a semiotic approach.

Vygotsky emphasized the social aspects of cognition in two main ways. First he pointed to the vital role that language plays in cognitive development, problem-solving and learning. Secondly, he perceived human learning as presupposing a specific social nature. Vygotsky states that what invariably distinguishes human psychology is the creation and use of artificial stimuli in addition, to already existing stimuli, to determine human behaviour promoting qualitative development of the psychological abilities of the individual.

Applied to language acquisition, and for communication to occur, Vygotsky claims then, that a certain level of arbitrariness and conventionality, previously agreed upon by the members of the social group, is necessary. The references of the signals used should be shared by the speakers converting language into a system of interpsychological functional signals representing reality moreover, providing the

user with an individual dimension, that is offering the possibility of manipulating semiotic "copies" of the external real world. With a more accurate picture of natural discourse, we are in a better position to evaluate the descriptions upon which we base our teaching, the teaching materials, what goes on between learner and teacher and the end products of our teaching.

The self-access project: aula multimedia de idiomas

The Aula Multimedia de Idiomas de la Universidad Pública de Navarra was an initiative launched during the academic year of 1994-1995 to experiment with greater learner independence and choice in the learning process. Pedagogically, this technology-facilitated centre was the space to create the opportunities for students to complement teacher directed classes with a self-directed practice which included regular tutorial sessions and so, enhance autonomous learning.

The initial phase was a modest beginning in which we intended to introduce the foreign language student to multimedia software on CD-ROM platform available for the learning of foreign languages as self-study packs. Further implementation of the self-access centre was to be developed gradually once we had started. This experience implied different attitudes in the learning process for both learners and teachers.

Learner Independence and Greater Autonomy

The roles of learners and teachers have radically changed with the new approaches to language teaching and learning. There has been a gradual shift towards a learner-centred view of teaching. The teacher no longer has the predominant role in the classroom. The self-access centre project emphasized this change in the roles of learners and teachers.

The movement for learner independence springs from the commonsense perception that it is learners who do the learning. It is strengthened by the further observation that every learner is different from every other learner. Learners are seen as individuals with different needs, styles and interests; they differ in their cognitive abilities and language learning aptitude.

The first move in our self-access centre project was to observe the student's learning process and performance. We asked the students about the level and skill performance they thought they had and contrasted it with a placement test; collected information on his/her learning background and learning record; needs; motivation; personality features; empathy; principle sensitive channel and learning style.

The learner is consequently encouraged towards self-directed learning, in other words, moving the attention towards the responsibility for learning rather than the provision of materials. It is the learner who is expected to decide the route that best suits his/her interests with help of the "tutor". Jeanrenaud, P and Woodward, T (1997) offer some ideas for running effective tutorials with language students to contribute on aspects of self-access and learner independence. These are some of the considerations on the content and methods of the tutorials. The early sessions will

be useful for identifying goals and raising awareness of the study schedules and means necessary for achieving the goals. Some time will have to be spent at each meeting on 'what is on top' of the student's mind-discussing something good that has happened since you last met. Other topics being progress, attitudes to the foreign language, programme methodology, materials, etc. Although it is the tutor who directs the session, it is the student who chooses the topic and leads the discussion. However the tutorial is conducted and whichever techniques used, it is a good idea, at the end of the session, for the student to restate what he/she thinks has happened in the time spent. This way the important points do not get lost in the conversation.

The ultimate stage of self-directed learning is autonomous learning. The autonomous learner decides *what* to learn keeping in mind *why* he/she needs to learn, and then, decides *how* to tackle the problem. The autonomous learner takes the full responsibility to learn upon him/herself. Strutridge (1993) sees the process of autonomy as "individualisation" where any attempt to provide for specific, individual needs is a step towards more autonomous learning:

"It is a long road, and teachers have to decide how far along it they are able or wish, to go."

(Strutridge, G 1993, pp11)

The Role of the Teacher

Bunice Fisher (1993 eds) gathered comments of teachers involved in situations in which innovation technology was being used that reflected the role changing of the teachers. The findings suggested the role of the teacher is seen as a supporter or facilitator in what pupils are trying to do, but stressing the importance of standing back, allowing the pupils to develop their own ideas. The shift of control over learning away from the teacher towards the pupils, shows the crucial role the teachers play in this process as fundamental to our understanding of autonomy in learning. In the gradual development of pupil autonomy, there is at the same time, an emphasis on the importance of an appropriate teacher strategy which offers support. In tutorial sessions, precisely for tutor development, there would be a case for asking the student's permission to record the tutorial so that the tutor could listen to the recording and monitor for the quality of their interventions, how faithfully the tutorial had followed the aims set for it at the end of the prior meeting, and reasons for any divergence. These observations build up a picture of a changing role for teachers who work with computers. It seems that this change offers many possibilities of increased motivation of pupils and more flexible approach to learning though it is clear that teachers need to be aware of their own strategies.

Computers

Working with computers means that not only are the considerations about the changing roles of learners and teachers, but also about the relationship that is established with the computer itself and the learning material. A communicative appro-

each might place less emphasis on the relationship an individual learner has with the computer (viewing the computer as either an impersonal tool for full autonomous learning or as a surrogate, robot teacher) and more on the computer as a medium through which a 'teacher' and learner can communicate.

Using computers as an educational aid has considerable advantages for enabling greater learner independence:

Interactivity: what distinguishes the computer from other educational aids is its interactive capability. Assessing the learner's reply, recording it, pointing out mistakes, giving explanations...etc. It guides the learner towards the correct answer, and generally adapts the learner's performance.

Flexibility: It allows the learner to choose between several modes of presentation. Also obtain immediate feedback.

Privacy: It promotes individual learning relieving those students from the fear and anxiety of being ridiculed for their mistakes in front of an audience.

Learning rate: It adapts to each learner's pace. Not every learner needs the same time to acquire a language. The computer is tireless, it can repeat as many times as the learner might think it necessary. Also, it provides extra optional activities for early finishers.

Consistency: The computer is consistent, unbiased and it has no 'depressing days'.

Attractiveness: The computer holds a kind of fascination for people as a result, this attraction has frequently a positive effect on learner motivation.

Effectiveness: Another of the advantages of C.A.L.L. is the factor of time. On the whole students in a computer managed environment require less time to achieve the same level of mastery than conventionally taught students according to Patricia Dunkel (1991). Furthermore, she asserted that computer-assisted instruction was shown to be most effective in the areas of science and foreign language learning.

Record-keeping facilities: Everything that the learner does is recorded on the programme and the tutor may have access to detailed information on their pupils' strengths, weaknesses, and progress which, firstly, helps to assess individual learners and secondly, to evaluate the materials and methods they have been using.

Non-linear: Hypertext software permits a freer navigation through the programmes opening the learner the possibility to make his/her own choice in where to start and where to go on next.

The Learning Material

The other fundamental element in this process is the learning material. Hypertexts and hypermedia are today widely discussed by educators interested in information technology. Great claims have been made for their educational potential.

A hypertext consists of a set of screen displays, linked together by 'buttons' which once activated takes the user to another linked screen. A hypertext is then, defined as an open-ended set of topics connected by variable links. The topics may be presented in passive form (texts, pictures, diagrams, graphs) or active form (animated sequences, short musical or voice sequences). As with printed texts there can be links from individual terms to passages, to an index or chapter headings, or cross-

links from one passage to another or indeed, to a complete different text. Links can be of many kinds. And here, hypertexts have advantages over the printed book. Authors presenting a topic could for instance provide links from the given topic to examples, counter-examples, supplementary details, synopsis, an alternative formulation or a refutation of the claims being made. Using a set of buttons on the screen, the reader/user could choose which of these aspects to follow up, and then move easily back to a main topic to choose another aspect, or press on into a new topic. The network that links produce may also be very variable, in both structure and complexity. At one extreme one might have a linear pattern of links; at the other extreme, every topic may be connected to every other, being a hierarchical pattern another possibility. Hypertexts differ therefore, in balance between the freedom allowed to, and the support provided for, the reader/user

Conclusions

The implications of using computers and educational software then, for learners and teachers are increasingly becoming more defined and are demanding attitudinal changes.

Hypertext system materials for language learning are the beginning of a new era. The screen provides what has been called the virtual classroom, a classroom that has no single physical location, and one in which all the sources of advice and information are sucked into the computer and optimally structured for learner use. The first original CAI/L material of mechanical, decontextualised lists of exercises have been left a long way behind. The possibility of recreating animated sequences are a step closer to observing truly social interaction.

The strengths of hypertexts are that they can be progressively developed by the user as an externalisation and record of his/her individual understanding and thought; the links are those that the user sees as important, the topics those that the user chooses, described and assessed in the terms that the user values. Information which the tutor has access to.

As to the changing roles of learners and teachers, the use of the computer makes it:

“possible for the teacher to adopt a more facilitative approach to teaching, by leaving the computer to carry out the more basic-operational/didactic functions of classrooms management. If this is so, the teacher is then released to concentrate more on the educational needs of pupils and can free pupils from the need to operate within the usual classroom discourse frameworks”.

(Fisher, E. 1993, p.73)

Promoting greater individualised learning implies making the learner reflect upon his/her specific goals and needs in language learning; learning styles and how through this awareness he/she can become a better learner. On the whole being responsible for his/her learning. Assisting the learner in doing this is the tutor's task. We believe computers and the new educational software materials are timidly providing the possibilities towards greater autonomy in language learning.

When using these materials the tutor has access to the routes and links chosen by the learner and consequently, more information about the student's individual learning process. In this sense, educational software is a tool that permits a high degree of adaptability to the individual learner and that tutors can use to produce the most appropriate material and cater for the students real needs. The authoring packages which come with many of these initial software material is a tool for teachers to experiment in this field. This of course is a great demand on teachers at present because mastering and using educational software of this type is not only time-consuming but also implies attitudinal and approach changes.

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ABSTRACT

Innovation in educational technology and, more specifically applied to foreign language teaching and learning, has revealed an increasing market of software learning materials (CD-ROM platform) that, is gradually drawing a new perspective on methodological issues and on the different components involved in the learning process. On one hand, there is the issue of how these new materials comply with the communicative approach, considered to be the general norm in the field, and on the other, how they influence the changing roles of the teacher and the learner as well as the whole learning process.

RESUMEN

La influencia de las nuevas tecnologías en la enseñanza de la lengua extranjera concretada en la creación y proliferación de materiales de software (soporte CD-ROM), está perfilando todo un panorama que afecta profundamente a la metodología y a los distintos componentes del proceso de aprendizaje. Por un lado, está la cuestión de la adecuación de estos nuevos materiales al enfoque comunicativo tomada como corriente general en la enseñanza-aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera y por otro lado, el cómo inciden en los roles cambiantes del alumno y profesor así como en el proceso de aprendizaje en su conjunto.