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The Internet and computer-mediated artefacts for foreign language learning and practice, and intercultural communication: MOODLE, Second Life, and others

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Abstract

The present study aims at discussing the potential of the Internet and computer-mediated artefacts for education. The understanding of digitalised and technology utilised education, which is the current trend of our age, is highlighted and some computer-mediated artefacts such as the so called modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment (*MOODLE*), the online virtual reality chatting game *Second Life*, and some others are introduced in a unified connection to show how they can be practically integrated in education, and how they can foster foreign language learning and practice, and intercultural communication. It is emphasised that the current situation of the physical conditions, and also the needs, interests and abilities of the new age learners should be considered more carefully to give education a correct direction in the future.

Keywords: The Internet, computer-mediated artefacts, intercultural communication, MOODLE, Second Life, FL learning and practice

1. Introduction

The current age of digital technologies often urges educators to try and use a variety of computer-mediated artefacts, which are usually easily accessed through the Internet. Numerous websites that contain plenty of foreign language (FL) learning materials and software have been prepared and activated during the last decade. It seems that computer assisted language learning (CALL) holds every potential to replace the traditional educational settings and approaches, since it provides not only learners but also teachers with richer resources of educational equipments and opportunities, more flexible working environments, and better options in relation to the individual needs, interests, abilities, and intelligence types. Therefore, searching the ways to take the utmost advantage of the digitalised world for the sake of progressive and improved quality in education should not be ignored. Chapelle (2003, p.1) emphasises that things change, and as technology becomes the dominant means of learning and communication, unusual alterations might occur in expectations about the abilities that language learners should acquire, and also teachers should possess. So, it is argued that all language professionals need to reflect on the ways in which technology is shifting the perspectives, implications, implementations, etc. of the profession of FL teaching. There is also need for educators to question themselves as significant criticisms have been forwarded recently against the teachers and authorities who lack the necessary qualities and awareness. They are blamed for not possessing the

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skills and knowledge to integrate technology effectively into their classrooms, and that they are not as effective as they should be in motivating students to learn, and also that they have a lot to learn from students (e.g. Becker, 2007; Prensky, 2003; Gee, 2003; Thorpe and Edmunds, 2011; Melville, 2009; Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005). The recent debates indicate that a serious incompatibility exists between the two parties of the modern world (the teaching side vs. the learning side). Prensky (2001, p.2) emphasised that the single biggest problem facing education today is that our "digital immigrant" instructors, who speak an outdated language are struggling to teach a population- "digital natives"- that speaks a much different language. So, two things seem to require careful consideration and revision: 1. generally speaking, the needs, abilities, and interests of the 'new generation' learners (the learners in short), and 2. the content that is to be delivered to the learners as well as the philosophies, methodologies, and approaches adopted while realising the educational aims and goals (the content and procedures).

In the following, these two aspects are going to be reviewed and discussed in relation with the current innovations in FL teaching, facilities and trends in education and the ways in which learning-technology-teaching triangle can be set up.

2. The modern versus postmodern approach to education

The philosophical stance that is adopted in education plays a crucial role during the whole processes and applications. At this point, it is possible to discuss about two understandings in education: the modern approach to education vs. the postmodern approach to education. Figure 1 describes the characteristics and general tendencies of these two approaches to education.
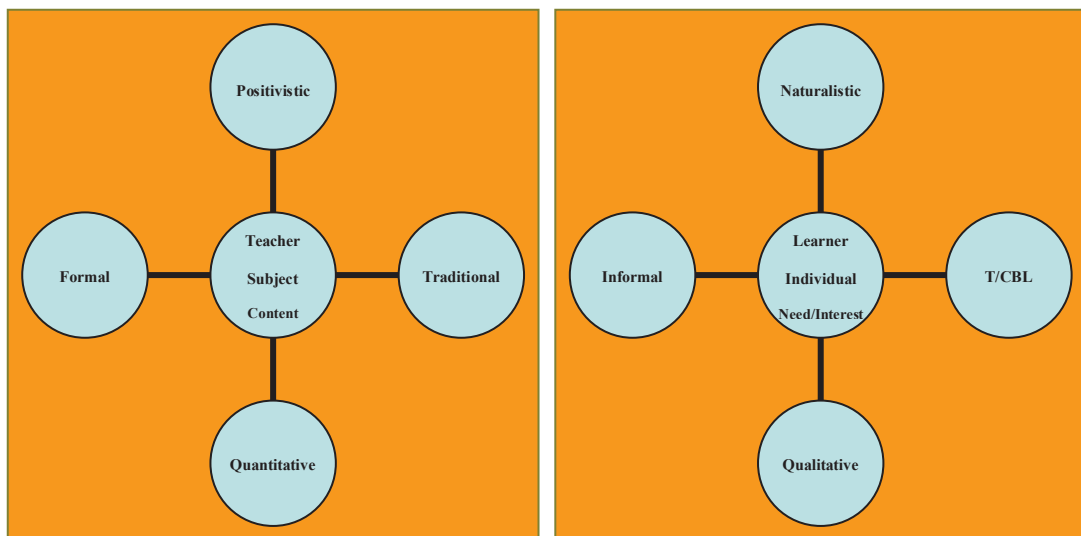

Figure 1. Modern vs. Postmodern approach to education

The modern educational system contains dichotomies such as traditional language learning vs. computer assisted language learning, formal education vs. informal education, social/group learning vs. autonomous/individual learning, etc., and although there is no certain answer to the question 'Which of the mentioned approaches in the dichotomies is superior, or is there any superiority between them?', the general tendency is to value the first approach in each dichotomy more than the latter. Actually, this is a kind of "chicken from the egg, or egg from the chicken" issue. As it is illustrated on the left square, the modern approach to education puts the teacher, subject, and content in the centre, and needs mostly formal and traditional settings, and positivistic and quantitative procedures and results. On the other side, the postmodern approach to education sees the learner, individual, and needs/interests

in the centre, while regarding informal and technology/computer based learning (T/CBL) environments, and naturalistic and qualitative processes and results.

The understanding of education in our "digital" age might have become actually as in the square on the right in Figure 1, especially from the learners' point of view if not from the teachers'. The discussion of 'formal' versus 'informal' and 'individual' versus 'social' learning have been hot topics within the educational environments (Wong and Looi, 2010). The 'anyone, any time, anywhere learning' as well as 'lifelong learning' and 'distance learning' concepts have been emphasised and underlined, almost at any platform related to education (Gu et al., 2011; Sharples, 2000; Patten et al., 2006). So, it is possible to postulate that education is witnessing a transitional shift away from the modern educational system towards the postmodern.

2.1. The new generation learners, their abilities, education, and teachers

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have gained enormous power and acceleration since 1980s, so that a serious gap has been created and is being widened each passing day between the generation of the last 30 years and the generation that was born prior to this time. Prensky (2003) reported that the amount of time the youth spends by using computers in today's world is estimated at 10,000 hours (just by playing computer games) by the time they are 21, and that the brains of the children are changing to accommodate the new technologies with which they spend huge time. When this finding is considered closely, it would not be naïve to comment that the new generation learners have already accomplished the first step in becoming autonomous and lifelong learners. Web 2.0 platforms and other information sources on the Internet provide enormous learning environments that cannot be avoided, and what is more, each day they are consulted and used by many individuals throughout the world. Almost any computer user is able to download and upload documents, pictures, programs, etc., to set up these or to embed and use them in other applications. In short, any basic skill and information is possessed and actively practiced by the youth. Moreover, it is obvious that they would be willing to carry their education on digital platforms, in which case they will need instructors who will guide and assist them.

2.1.1. The new age FL learners

Actually, the existing FL websites on the Internet and the number of the distance education programmes are obvious indicators that there is not only need for these but also they are favoured by the learners. Today, FL learners can easily go on the Internet and read passages in the target language, do exercises of any kind, take quizzes and tests, practice the target language in online chatting sites, listen to news, songs, and videos, etc. There are also many kinds of software that help them to carry out synchronous conversations such as Skype, and many other audio and video messengers (e.g. *MSN*, *Yahoo*, and *ICQ*). Moreover, the hot innovation and trend on the virtual world is *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Wikis*, and forums where individuals share (read, write, listen, and watch). So, besides the traditional and formal FL learning settings, learners who spend much time on the Internet and computers have every opportunity to benefit from the online tools and contents. Nevertheless, not all learners are aware of or made ready every opportunity and learning setting. So, it should be suggested that although the new age learners actually can be autonomous; teachers, instructors, or authorities that are responsible for the educational policies need to be aware of the technical and practical information about every opportunity and setting to inform learners about these, while also providing guidance and education on how to use these. Autonomous learners might need and benefit, for instance, from rubrics that would be prepared for the learners of different intelligence types and proficiency levels.

2.2. The contents and procedures for online FL learning

At the point, where online FL learning is going to be applied and carried out, there is need to remember that the learner should be the one to decide about the process rather than the teacher, and also it should be comprehended that the individual needs and interests come before the subject and contents. So, the main philosophical principle should be that 'rather than teach the FL, help learners to learn it" in the way they request it. In the following a

suggestion about how to achieve this, in parallel with the abilities and tendencies of the new generation learners, is going to be presented.

2.2.1. An example for blended online FL learning process

If it is agreed that the digital learning environments are favoured and useful, instructors should search for ways to move their courses on the digital platforms. One way to create a digital learning environment is to register a domain name and to find a place to host it. While these initial steps can be taken by the help of professional companies, it is possible to realise it through the companies that provide free services on the Internet. Once the website is set and activated, it becomes ready for broadcasting educational materials and providing learners with online courses.

The second step is to decide on the programme and content to be introduced. In our case, lets assume that the programme is intended to focus on improving the 'reading' and 'writing' skills, and the content is to deal with English as a FL. The so called modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment (*MOODLE*) is a free platform that provides quite professional, flexible and rich opportunities where online courses can be organised and presented (see Brandl, 2005 for details). What we need to do is to download MOODLE software from its website, and install it in our website. Later on, the courses can be easily created where each week will be displayed with all the materials, exercises, and tasks that will be included by the instructors (see Figure 2).
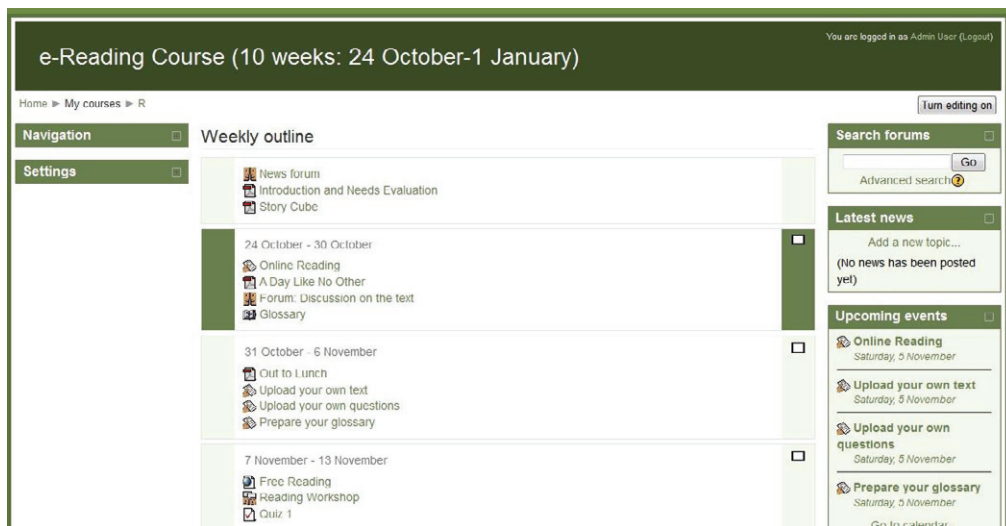

Figure 2. The weekly appearance of an exemplar reading course on MOODLE

As it might be observed in Figure 2, each week of the course, and the exercises, which can be created by the *HotPotatoes* software or MOODLE embedded facility, and tasks are displayed so that learners can do anything that they would do in a traditional course, and even more than that such as searching and reading passages of their own choice and interest from among hundreds of texts on the Internet, or searching for additional information and reading about the places, people, things, etc. that they read in the initial text. They also have the chance to quickly look up the meanings of the unknown words in online dictionaries and to listen to their pronunciation. Note that these are just some of the advantages and opportunities of the digital environments among all others.

For the writing part of the course, the online virtual reality 3D-chatting-game *Second Life* (see Figure 3) provides an enjoyable and interesting option for the FL learners (see Salmon, 2009 for details). They can meet many individuals from all over the world who are there for chatting. So, this setting makes the writing activity more authentic and natural when compared to the artificial writing tasks urged in the traditional courses. Moreover,

learners find the opportunity both to improve their FL writing skills and to exchange information with others about the things they read in the texts.

Figure 3. Scenes from Second Life

3. Conclusions

Besides the numerous advantages of the digital educational settings, maybe the most considerable one is that they provide rich and equal lifelong learning opportunities for anyone regardless of age, gender, or any other factor. Moreover, it enables instructors to reach not only students in the formal platforms but also their parents in informal platforms such as MOODLE. And, software such as Second Life and HotPotatoes seem promising for education, but it is certain that much progress is needed both on the software development part, and on the training of teachers related to showing them how to incorporate these software in their courses and how to move their work on the digital environments. However, first and foremost it should be underlined that the educational philosophies need to be revised closely in parallel with the current learner profiles, technological innovations, and conditions of our era.

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