



On-line collaborative learning communities for learning foreign languages and cultures: A case study in Greeks learning Italian as a foreign language in academic setting.

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Abstract

The aim of this article is the description of a pilot research study conducted in the faculty of the Italian Language and Literature at the University of Athens, in order to assess the impact of Web2.0 technologies, and in particular the wiki environments, in teaching a foreign language and its culture.

Internet offers technologies and means for creating an efficient and collaborative learning environment for on-line lessons. Second language acquisition research has shown that collaboration facilitates language acquisition and related cognitive development. In addition, it changes the structure of communication and social relationships developed in the classroom framework. Moreover, it allows authentic experience in learning environments, and development of students' responsibility for their own learning. Furthermore, we have noticed a positive effect in writing (advanced complexity in sentence structure) and an encouragement for enhanced production and effective linguistic feedback, via collaboration writing.

Web 2.0 applications have the dynamic to set up on-line collaborative learning communities. On the other hand, the wikis environments- the on-line cooperative implements of writing- can promise increased on-line learning, by involving the trainees in a co-creator role with the content and the structure of various lessons.

Our pilot research was conducted on first-year Greek students, via web chosen activities. These were based on the learning theories of constructivism, creative writing and multiple intelligence. Our preliminary results of the academic year 2011-2012 support fully the usefulness of the on-line collaborative environments in the courses of the foreign language and culture learning. Furthermore, these results will be evaluated quantitatively and qualitatively in regard to similar research, which was carried out in the academic year 2010-2011 at the same institution.

1. Introduction

The Web is changing by offering significant opportunities in collaboration, interaction and creative expression. The Internet offers those technologies and those resources to establish effective collaborative atmosphere for learning online courses. The Web 2.0 applications are able to set up online collaborative learning communities, while the wikis environments, the on-line cooperative implements of writing, promise increased on-line learning. As a result, the learner can be productive, creating and formatting content on the Internet with little or no previous knowledge of HTML language. The wikis were designed to help teams work together, share or build online material and interact with each other [1] especially in the case of distance learners. Wikis permit collective writing and interventions at any time including comments and contributions from all members, involving nonlinear activities and a variety of educational actions. They provide an integrated environment where people not only will share a goal, but also will become involved and create knowledge together; they will also participate in a space by co-writing and by discussing or commenting. At this point, we could say that these tools will change the users' passive role from simple consumers of the information sources and material that exist on the Web, to competent active Web literate. Furthermore, supporters of wikis highlight the ease of use, the flexibility in content development and the open philosophy that makes them a particularly useful tool to support team work [2], [3].

The use of texts in wikis environments is a "constantly dynamic situation and collaborative opportunity" [4]. Its flexibility will encourage the children, on the one hand, to participate effectively in their own cognitive development and to face complex, interdisciplinary and authentic issues. On the other hand,



they will take initiatives through a process of exploratory and self-paced learning. In particular, wikis promote intercultural relationships, contact with different attitudes, cultures and ideologies, increased self esteem [5], and motivation to learning [6].

In addition, many researchers [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11] point out the importance and necessity of collaborative learning and teamwork in general and particularly for the second acquisition language. Some of the advantages of collaborative writing are the following: contribution to the complexity of the written text, encouragement of the production of enriched and effective linguistic feedback, for themselves and their peers, as well as increased grammatical accuracy or quality of writing resulting from the exchange of views and the joint decisions, through an intense training procedure [6]. While the learners interested work in teams, they learn to speak and write in that language, they expand their language skills and make more meaningful review on the content and on the subject matter [13]. Moreover, computer- assisted language learning can cure the lack of authenticity in the classroom as such new technologies offer unprecedented viewing and exposure to authentic material from other cultures, sounds, symbols and images in a way that satisfies a wide class of students.

2. Creating Wikis for teaching Italian to Greeks

In an effort to create alternative learning environments using Web 2.0 tools for teaching Italian as a foreign language in academic settings, we began a two-year pilot program in the Faculty of Italian Language and Literature at the University of Athens, during the academic years 2010- 2011 and 2011-2012. Our aim was to assess the impact of Web2.0 technologies and in particular the wiki environments, in teaching a foreign language and its culture, through online virtual learning environments. For this reason, eight laboratory courses were designed (<http://it.web2lang-learning.wikia.com/>) [12], of which each one consisted of three or four activities. Every activity was based on three learning theories: the first one is the cognitive constructivism, the active exploration and “construction” of knowledge. The second theory is multiple intelligence, the broadening of students’ experience to approach the various subjects and objects in alternative ways, whilst the last one is the theory of creative writing, the release of writing and the students’ ability to respond creatively to whatever they see [10].

3. Questionnaire analysis

The students that participated in our study were mainly females (N=77) which represent the 84.6% of our sample. Their mean age was 22 years with SD 5,96 and minimum age 18 and maximum age 40. 16 students (17.4%) were native speakers of Italian and the rest (N=76) have an average study time of Italian as a foreign language 3.8 years with SD 2.45. The vast majority of the students own a PC (95.7%) and most of them (60.9%) have attended courses related to PC usage. The majority of them state that they use often or very often email (61.9%) and internet for information search (89.1%) and they judge their relationship with PCs and Internet as good or excellent (83.7%).

In the questionnaire given before the beginning of the lab courses we tried to evaluate the student’s beliefs about the usefulness of the new technologies to the learning process of a foreign language and their impact on the familiarity of the foreign culture. Our students believe that PCs are powerful learning tools that have the power to transform a boring lesson to a pleasant learning experience (95.5%) and provide them with motives to research further issues raised during the course (96.6%). They also strongly believe that PCs facilitate lesson’s comprehension (92.2%) and foster creativeness (84.7%).

The majority of our sample ranked as the two most important contributions of the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) the promotion of group work (92.2%) and the increase in the interest on the lesson (90.2%). They also pointed out that CALL can also provide timely information (89%) and help them develop additional computer skills along the linguistic ones (86%).

In the initial questionnaire there were also some questions regarding the familiarity of the students with virtual museums and online cultural resources. Despite their overall highly positive attitude towards new technologies in foreign language learning in their majority they haven’t visited virtual museums (73.9%) or communicated with them via email (95.6%). In a number of related questions we tried to investigate the impact of different elements of a museum’s web design to the perceived museum’s overall image. In particular we found that our students rate in a 0-10 scale as the most important aspects of a web site the front page (M=8.33, SD=2) and the virtual tour (M=7.77, SD=2.2). The most important aspects of a museum’s web page are the content quality (M=8.38, SD=1.97) and the ease of finding content (M=8.16, SD=2.09). We also tried to investigate what functionalities they expect to



find in a virtual museum. The most expected content was images ($M=7.79$, $SD=2.2$) followed by video ($M=7.38$, $SD=2.29$), virtual tours ($M=6.72$, $SD=2.2$) and educational games ($M=6.5$, $SD=2.1$).

After the completion of the lab lessons we administered a follow-up questionnaire in order to assess the overall satisfaction of our sample from the wiki-based learning experience. The most highly appreciated aspect of the lessons were the familiarization with culture elements from specific places of Italy (22%) and the interaction with multimedia elements of web pages (22%). To a lesser extent our students valued the vocabulary learning (15.9%) and the familiarity with the Internet (10.9%). We also investigated our sample's preference regarding the services provided by the web sites of different museums that have the chance to interact during lessons. Most of them rate in a 0-10 scale as the most important services, both on-line educational services ($M=7.56$, $SD=2.34$) and virtual tours ($M=7.56$, $SD=2.48$). They also believe that provision of information regarding the real visit of the museum is very important ($M=7.14$, $SD=2.52$) as well as the information related to the collections that each museum possesses ($M=6.98$, $SD=2$).

Our students assessed their overall learning experience very positively. Using a 1 to 6 scale they stated that in the future they would try in to select a lesson involving PCs and Internet usage ($M=5.48$, $SD=1.02$). They believe that Internet usage should be fully integrated to every aspect of the educational system ($M=5.48$, $SD=0.97$) since they feel familiar with it ($M=5.47$, $SD=1$). They love to use web for educational aims ($M=5.43$, $SD=1.07$) and they believe that the activities they were engaged during the lab lessons were appropriate for increasing the knowledge of both Italian language and culture ($M=5.34$, $SD=1$). In addition they think that other university courses should rely on internet ($M=5.32$, $SD=1.06$) and the information gained during lab lessons could be exploited outside the specific educational setting ($M=5.22$, $SD=0.96$).

Finally there were some questions regarding the influence of the group work to the fulfillment of the educational aims of the course. Using again a 1 to 6 scale our students stated that the most useful aspect of group work in Internet related educational activities were the exchange of ideas, opinions and information among the team's members ($M=5.45$, $SD=0.94$). They were satisfied by the collaboration developed during the lab lessons stating that they were both satisfied by the help provided by the team members ($M=5.37$, $SD=1.06$) and the help offered to the group ($M=5.35$, $SD=0.995$). To a lesser extent they believe that wiki interfaces were easy to learn ($M=4.93$, $SD=1.1$) and it was easy to teach other team's members with lack of computational skills to use Internet ($M=4.69$, $SD=1.18$).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, by observing first-year Greek students and online group activities, we point out that computer-assisted language learning has favor the course comprehension and the creative written expression, familiarizing them with elements of Italian culture. In this way they acquired a more competent active Web literate role. Moreover, the ease of use of the wikis and their "open" philosophy, that support team work and facilitate the content development, can also evolve additional computer skills. Through the online activities, the students had the opportunity to choose what to learn. Moreover, they were interested in and encouraged their partner's progress. While at the same time, they increased the knowledge of both Italian language and culture. In fact, the collaborative learning offered them more interactive motives in the target language, whilst it converted the linguistic and cultural education to social multidimensional experience.

5. References

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