FOREIGN LANGUAGES STUDIED THROUGH ONLINE PRACTICES, A STEP FORWARD TO LIFELONG LEARNING

Cristina NICOLAESCU
University of Bucharest
E-mail: nicolaescu2000@yahoo.com

Abstract: My research is concisely described by exemplifying and commenting on the monitoring steps, results and conclusions in the view to expanding these practices and enhancing their effectiveness, corresponding to a growing demand. I also discuss the role of Web technologies in promoting life-long learning and streamlining knowledge management and diverse forms of applications, the factors that impinge on learning through the life course. By creating scenarios for a future use, the impact of e-learning on the educational environment is examined, with encouraging results in the sense that learners acquire new competences, in the particular field of foreign languages, pointing out the most important links between Lifelong Learning and adult education. Based on a research project on learning with technology, the results prove the positive changes in languages acquisition by practical experience for the advancement of pedagogical techniques in adult education.

Keywords: e-learning, lifelong learning, digitalization, education

I. DIGITALIZATION

My paper is a research-informed presentation of online practices in higher education, as a new pedagogic paradigm, in the information age. I would describe e-learning as a pathway for the future, not replacing the traditional forms of education, but supporting and completing them, in an interactive, collaborative manner. The Faculty I work for has designed the educational process as a combination of theoretical and practical study of foreign languages assisted by computers. This corresponds to a learning need within the space of democratic discourse and a globalizing process. The suggestions will be gathered and tested for further learning scenarios and so on, steadily promoting and implementing sustainable learning. Theoretical and practical challenges of online teaching and learning are potential drives and opportunities regarding the advancement of techniques used in the study of foreign languages. The virtual setting provided should be subject to the criteria and standards desired and established by a tutor or learners themselves. Online practices foster collaborative group work on a project or for assessment purposes. In a recent book these are shown as a successful strategy for the future: "In order to be competitive and effective, today's educational institution needs to be more knowledge and learning oriented. Therefore, to achieve the ultimate educational goal, it is essential to improve student learning processes such as individual learning, innovation, collective learning, and collaborative problem solving" [1].

There are several obvious advantages and long term benefits of digitalization contrasted with the traditional models that cannot cover all the learning needs. Digital spaces are very suitable for the study of foreign languages as long as they provide adequate tools for knowledge and skills acquisition and assessment. As anything else in education, the activity I did with my students required a minute planning based on an educational module in the curriculum for the English Practical Course. What proved to be problematic to me was to personalize the learning content to the students' interests. I constantly borne in mind the pedagogical consequences of the application I used, since my overt

intention was to give cultural relevance to my teaching and their learning, which is of a growing importance in the context of globalization. The teacher and learners are equal participants in the educational act. Obviously, a new learning environment requires changes in the actors – now acquiring also a virtual identity – and in the power relation that permeates it, limiting mentor's authority. The online learners have an increased responsibility concerning the participation in their own learning and engagement in the subject.

The teacher is a facilitator in this process and in the non-compulsory education he/she can be totally absent. The idea of self-reflective study is resumed in the discussion about lifelong learning, since I contend that this is facilitated by online learning. As a matter of fact, my demonstration is constructed around this contention and illustrated with a case study.

E-learning students should accommodate themselves first to the idea of a new mode of study during the group seminars or at home. They need a preliminary preparation in this regard, even if most of them are familiar with the use of computer programs developed or approved by the university or at least they are able to manage communication in the form of emails, discussion forums, blogs and so on. Once the technical difficulties are overcome, we can approach the learning content, establish the tasks and assessment methods.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of digitalization in the study of foreign languages

Advantages		Disadvantages	
For teachers	For learners	For teachers	For learners
- providing guidance to sources of knowledge across multiple-media - ensuring a social and cultural dimension of teaching - developing both common and individualized tasks - developing their own professional competences - giving sustainability to the students' learning environment - modernizing the teaching strategies - encouraging in the students all forms of learning through online practices - working with a method that favors creativity, flexibility and objectivity of assessment (possibly from a multidisciplinary point of view) - assessing students in various ways for all the four major skills	- using the advances of the web-based technologies - assuming the responsibility of their own learning - assuring their self-improvement at all levels - enhancing creativity of their work in a flexible type of learning - updating their abilities, qualifications, knowledge - contributing to the process of knowledge construction - taking more control of their learning by using computational resources - participating actively in the exploration of the state-of-the-art techniques and in the establishment of the educational content - having access to new learning methods and multimedia means	- changing the pedagogical stances may have unwanted consequences without a thorough preparation of students - dealing with unequal knowledge levels of their students - encountering some difficulties in forming multidisciplinary teams (of teachers) for assessment purposes	- may be reluctant to experiential learning - may fear the challenge if not feeling secure - may not have enough technical skills or willingness to interact with the rest of the team - may not be motivated enough for the tasks - may not be prepared to assume the responsibility of their own learning

1.1. eLearning

Literature abounds in ideas about the common ground of various learning methods: "In spite of the different objectives and objects of user-led activities (from software design through knowledge management to creative collaboration), it is nonetheless possible to discern an increasingly sophisticated set of common principles which govern many such environments" [2]. Computer is a very suitable means for learning, particularly when studying foreign languages, as it generally requires a multimedia environment, almost impossible to create through traditional methods. The use of information systems is rewarding, stimulating and motivating. It is apparent that technology-mediated learning promotes the learning of a foreign language through interaction. eLearners can communicate in the target language by doing authentic tasks concordant with their interests. Thus, language is adapted to their needs, starting to build the foundation of a subsequent specialization of vocabulary and structures and getting used to assuming learning outside the classroom. Students must also be able to apply the key conceptual frameworks of the course to a relevant issue of their choosing which meaningfully extends the scope of the course material. These skills will be applied through seminar discussions and through independent critical analysis in oral presentations and written course assignments. The seminar meetings will consist of some framing lectures by the mentor and discussion involving students and mentor. I expect every student to take part in making the discussions focused, analytical, and relevant to the readings or subject matter of the particular topic the seminar has. This paper is meant to reflect students' comprehension of some of the course issues. Their papers must have an original argument and to develop this argumentation by a good analysis with a solid support to the main construction of the theme. They can always come and discuss with me if they are uncertain about what these elements are.

Part of the development students undergo in the course is learning how to do research. The papers written for this seminar are opportunities for developing language skills. The small size of groups mean that I can work with students individually to clarify and give feedback on their writing and analytical skills as demonstrated in their writing. The course aims to involve students in interdisciplinary thinking which would help them to position themselves theoretically and methodologically in regards with their actual research projects. Academic activities should be carried out by students at their own personal pace because self-directed learning promotes an independent kind of learning, allowing students to develop attitudes, abilities and values that can help them be better at using languages in realistic situations.

Such self-study activities that will result into a final paper include:
- Studying articles and reading material
- Examining links and databases
- Reviewing contents of the recommended Websites
- Preparing the exams
- Analyzing and reviewing the practiced structures and language functions focus on
- Completing homework assignments (project, portfolio, essay based on grammatical structures)

Collaborative learning is regarded as a socialization experience and practice that oriented to getting students to undertake an active role in their study time through interaction with the professor and their fellow students that can be with them or at a distance. Collaborative activities may include the following: problem solving, case solving, sharing finds, exchanging opinions and ideas, carrying out projects, discussing, reviewing and debating with their peers.

Learning Outcomes:
After passing the course, students should be able to:
- understand and discuss critically the ideas in a reading material
- extract the useful information and drawing conclusions in an original manner
- become proficient in using basic strategies of e-learning
- may alternate individual learning with collaborative learning

1.2. eTeaching

The teacher/mentor is a specialist in the field and can facilitate learning and support students during the entire educational process, fulfilling a series of activities:

I. Establishes the learning objectives/ outcomes after discussing them with the students, to make sure all of them understand what they aim to achieve and in what time frame

II. Specifies the expected acquisitions: knowledge (facts), understanding (concepts), skills and attitudes/values. They should be explained in details, according to the lesson's ultimate purpose.

III. Indicates/recommends the equipment and other resources, physical or virtual tools (hardware, software) or course book) will be specified. Generally, a combination may be beneficial, The resources should be thoroughly described, for the students to know where to look for the needed information (hints).

IV. Explains the assessment methods (feedback and/or evidence); these should be clear and apparently objective (starting from peer commentary/review to evaluation by an interdisciplinary team of teachers). The emphasis will be on the formative goals attainment (qualitative method) rather than on gathering information (quantitative method). If students work correctly, appropriating the techniques specific to e-learning, they have completed the first stage to lifelong learning, particularly when they are aware of the tremendous benefits for their future life as professionals, irrespective of specialization.

Besides the traditional face-to-face stance, the teacher/mentor can communicate to the students through the following means: interactive forums on the technological platform, e-mail, instant messages, telephone and so on. The course content is provided online in way that enables students to study over the Internet. It always stimulates research and information queries by using digital libraries, websites and other databases. In this case the course design may offer flexibility so that students can learn in their own rhythm. The education model centers on the use of advanced teaching techniques that help students to learn collaboratively through problem solving and case analysis, as well as e-project/e-portfolio design.

II. IN PREPARATION OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Lifelong learning has to accommodate a variety of types of learners who differ from many points of view: age, learning styles and experiences, preferences, ability to work in teams, among others. To be more effective, lifelong learning scenarios require the establishment and integration of innovative methods, procedures and tools into well-defined processes, aiming at causing customized and educational results of a high quality, capable of better engaging both students and teachers in an active learning process. Self-directed learning plays an important role from this perspective, providing means for teachers from different areas, working on multi-disciplinary teams that may be geographically dispersed or not, also cooperating and sharing data or information regarding the modules being developed. At the very end, the scenario envisioned is undoubtedly to evolve collaborative work in collaborative learning, by broadening the learning opportunities. Thus they involve learners actively in their own knowledge process of construction and reconstruction. In this case, the developers should explore the collaborative work on educational modules and the implications they may have on lifelong learning scenarios, providing guidelines and creating mechanisms to collaboratively develop and use them. Also, as part of this process, developers/mentors focus on issues of content modeling, on the purpose of determining the relevant issues of the knowledge domain and also the concepts structure and to correlate the required information. This results into an application of ideas in an educational module for the software testing domain. The module has to be firstly evaluated and generally, quality and flexibility it provides should be assessed. The concept of lifelong learning is a reaction to the need for a global education, able to cross the cultural and social borders internationally in order to prepare learners for the professions they practice. The bottom-line idea is to explore the collaborative development of educational modules and its implications for the lifelong learning. Educational modules may correspond to very concise units of study that have a theoretical and practical content; it can be delivered to learners by various technological and computational means: "The growing importance of Lifelong Learning must be seen against the background of profound changes, reflected in all aspects of our living environment. These changes concern the global environment, but also our personal, economic, social, cultural and political

environments. Lifelong Learning is a 'must' in the real-life context of the Knowledge Society and covers "all purposeful learning from the cradle to the grave" of very diverse groups of learners. The Lifelong Learning environment has specific characteristics and is strongly supported by Information and Communication Technology. Sustainability of the learning environment is a critical issue. The growing demand for Lifelong Learning will force educational institutions to change" [3].

2.1. Online Scenario for Learning and Assessment

The methodological approach of my research, informed by educational material and qualitative studies that are available in this area, is Evidence Based Practice. Central to the research is how theory may be put into practice more efficiently, in the sense of making the best decisions by a critical examination of evidence in consultation with the other members of the teaching staff. This explorative process results in descriptive data gathered and interpreted based on inductive logic. The top levels of evidence can be reached in practice by trials and systematic reviews, according to a number of stages:

1. Preliminary activities through systematic means: At this stage the teacher needs to determine the appropriateness of using the proposed databases to achieve the course/seminar goals.

2. Content analysis and synthesis: the teacher needs to: (a) identify the necessary cognitive skills to achieve the overall goal of course; (b) break large tasks into their related smaller components, thus getting simpler one and the decomposition will continue until no more possible; (c) synthesize models, therefore the constituent skills can be recombined into the activities that people usually do in the real world.

3. Design practice and information presentation: the teacher needs to identify the practice and guidelines necessary for each of the tasks.

4. Learning object selection: the teacher needs to: (a) review the learning objects made available in the data repositories; (b) create new and complex learning objects.

5. Sequencing the learning object: the teacher needs to sequence the educational resources depending on cognitive complexity.

6. Possible conclusions for improvement: Now the teacher has finished the instructional design and the development of learning situation and then he/she starts a process of improvement, which should become an ongoing activity. Formative and summative evaluations can be developed to ensure quality improvement. Educational modules require the establishment and integration of innovative methods, tools and procedures into systematic processes aiming at producing customized, reliable and high-quality products. The development of such modules can involve teachers from different domains, and they can share data and information for the project. Hence, teachers should consider the adoption of means and tools, which can be used as part of the educational module for its process of development and improvement. Thus, all project information is made available in order to guarantee the efficient management of this module's development. The learning scenario is basically outlined as a sequence of activities (e.g. a project work, final paper) including data and information about what everybody (students and teachers/mentors) does at each stage. The way in which activities address learning objectives and the means of delivery should be consistent with the chosen approach: "Depending on how faculty members utilize the features, LMSs [Learning Management Systems] provide both advantages and disadvantages to students. The major benefits to students include access to content they may not have gotten otherwise; easy access to course information (syllabi, grades, announcements); formative assessment opportunities; and anytime/anyplace learning opportunities" [4].

III. CONCLUSIONS

The idea of self-learning is more crucial for lifelong education than in traditional teaching, where the interactions between teachers and students, and among students provide permanent motivation. The students' success in online education depends a lot on self-motivation. The problems generated by the separation in space and time require a differentiated attention. Normally, the

problems caused by the separation of any kind can be easily overcome through personal simultaneous communication systems among the students, tutors/teachers. Interaction strategies in this context are essential and relevant: monitors/teachers provide prompt answers; they act in a synchronous way and motivate students for the course goal. Many students sometimes encounter difficulties in coping with the autonomous demands in their learning, or maybe with time management, with planning and self-direction required by autonomous online learning. Generally, online education will succeed when it involves an active interaction between mentors and students, between students and the learning environment, and of course among the students themselves. The capacity of information technology to overcome all temporal and spatial limits and constraints meets the need to learn at a time, in a place and at a pace established by individual requirements rather than by any formal structures. This paper examined the extent to which electronic environments designed specifically for this type of learning for foreign languages should be assessed according to the same criteria and standards that we usually use in appraising face-to-face teaching. Academic designed web-site are meant to enable flexibility for both students and teachers at all levels, avoiding all restrictions and providing accessibility to knowledge domain supports. Usage patterns seem to indicate an increasing preference for websites even in the less experienced learners/beginners. They results show a major difference in today's student perceptions of content, quality, autonomy than before. Conjugation with other priority areas such as quality assurance in education has led to a theoretical substantiation, psychological and a thorough pedagogical training for all transferable skills, maybe rethinking teaching and learning strategies for the critical evaluation of the entire education system. The purpose at all times is to improve the quality of human capital in education firstly by developing mentors' skills of using modern technology, digital tools as efficiently as possible in teaching and of assessing better the standards language proficiency, as this is the future: "Behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism are the three broad learning theories most often used in the design of adult instructional environments. These theories, however, were developed in a time when learning was not influenced by information and communication technology. Over the years, digital technologies have grown and revolutionized how we live, think, communicate, and learn. As education moves forward into the digital age researchers must remain critical of implications ahead"[5].

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