LEARNING TASKS AND FEEDBACK IN COMPUTER-ASSISTED EDUCATIONAL SITUATIONS. NEW CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS AS 21ST CENTURY PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract: *Today, the professional in the education system is proactive, open to innovation, anchored in the technological, pedagogical and academic actualities, available to collaborating and sharing with colleagues. New environments, tools and ideas are emerging from enhanced and open education practices, and a series of new skills, both pedagogical and technological, are constantly brought up-front as a key enabler or integrator for the assembly of the new roles and tasks of today's education practitioner. The paper approaches the changes of the technological and pedagogical frameworks, focusing on two basic elements of education practice: the learning task and the feedback, in the light of a computer-assisted language learning situation.*
The focus is on specific computer-assisted language learning situations and learning materials that aim at fostering the development of language in use. Communication skills in different communication contexts are developed through practice, rather than considering language as a formal system of signs and rules. The use of language in real communicative situations should be the main goal of the second language learning, a more valuable goal than the ability to decode the language spontaneously. In this respect, the paper aims to present technological and pedagogical aspects concerning Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Intelligent Computer Assisted Language Learning (ICALL), in order to help teachers to better seize the opportunities offered by technology-enhanced learning systems. The added value of the use of technology in language learning depends on teachers' abilities to create appropriate learning materials and to integrate them in the second language class.

Keywords: *language learning, learning task, feed-back*

I.   COMPETENCES PROFILE OF THE SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHER

During the last decade, the technological development, the access to high speed Internet and the rapidly increasing number of home computers have changed the way students communicate, interact, learn and play. The effort made by education professionals to adapt the learning activities to the students' learning needs and characteristics entails the concern for the appropriate use of the online learning environment in education.

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has double justification: on the one side, the appropriate use of technology in the teaching/ learning activity can facilitate the development of the students' digital competences; on the other side, the suitable technology can foster the second language acquisition. On the long term, the effective use of technology by students/ graduates in needed not only for communication purposes, but also for learning and for increasing the employment opportunities.

The arising question is: How to design and implement a successful CALL activity? Teaching practice has shown that being a good teacher in a face-to-face teaching activity is not enough for performing an efficient online teaching activity. According to Hampel and Stickler [3], online teaching involves skills that are different from those needed on traditional teaching. Moreover, the needed skills are different from those required for online teaching of other subjects. Both researchers and practitioners consider that more attention should be paid to training teachers for this new learning environment. In their opinion, the learning materials won't have the expected impact, if they are not adequately valued in terms of psychological and pedagogical principles.

Campton L. K. L. proposed a framework of the online language teaching skills, as a reference document for designing teacher training programs. According to him, the online language skills should be divided in the following categories: technology in online language teaching; pedagogy of online language teaching; evaluation of online language teaching. The competences included in each category are described considering three levels of expertise: novice, proficient and expert.

1. Technology skills. The main technological skills required to the novice language teacher are: "to identify the differences between asynchronous and synchronous technologies; to use the computer-mediated communication technologies in language class; to identify and compare features in similar software (e.g. Yahoo Messenger versus Skype or webCT versus Moodle.)" [2].

The proficient language teachers should prove: "the ability to carefully select suitable technology to match the online language task; the ability to find the available software and make an informed decision based on pros and cons; the ability to deal with limitations of the chosen software and provide solutions to overcome the limitations; the ability to draw on software's existing features to facilitate the language learning process" [2].

The expert language teacher is able to:
- "creatively use and adapt existing technologies for online language learning tasks" [2]. Arguing this idea, Campton stated that not all the software was created for language learning. The appropriate selection and use of the software implies various competences on turning to account the pedagogical potential of the technology, and improving the software features.
- "construct dynamic and interactive webpages that can enhance online language learning activities as well as the delivery of content" [2].

2. Pedagogy skills. At novice level, according to Campton (2009) the focus should be on the acquisition of the language learning theories, online language assessment strategies, and online language learning curriculum design. At the proficient level, the language teachers should be able to adapt the language learning theories and to select the appropriate software. At the expert level, the emphasis should be on creativity within knowledge and application.

3. Evaluation skills should be analysed from the following perspectives: the education software, the language learning task and the learners' performance. At novice level, the language teachers should acquire knowledge of CALL evaluation. The proficient teacher should be able to use the knowledge for evaluating the CALL activity, while the expert teachers have the "ability to quickly appreciate the impact of the learning outcomes using his extensive knowledge on the evaluation process" [2].

II. ICE3 – A TEACHING EXPERIENCE BASED ON AN ICT-ENHANCED TUTORING SYSTEM

The analysis of the learning process was undertaken within the ICE3 project – "Integrating CALL in Early Education Environments", co-funded by the European Commission in the framework of Lifelong Learning Programme. Aimed at teachers of a second language (English, German or Spanish) in primary or secondary schools, the project aims to extend the use of virtual learning environment in language learning by promoting computer-assisted learning of foreign languages and intelligent computer-assisted language learning in schools, including primary education.

The main activities of the project, now in its second cycle, are: training second language (L2) teachers to use a software tool with automatic correction (AutoTutor) in order to create learning materials as well as for their use in teaching activities; Evaluating the potential pedagogical value of

software integrating intelligent automatic correction tools used for practice and communication in a foreign language.

The distinctive feature of the AutoTutor software is the automatic verification of the accuracy of the response. Thus, it determines whether the student's reply can be considered acceptable, in terms of content as well as from the grammatical point of view, for the proposed task. This extended functionality is based on advanced tools for natural language processing (NLP).

The evaluation research methodology comprised both quantitative and qualitative methods – desk research, questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews with second language teachers and technical experts, observation of the teachers' and students' activity on the ICE3 e-learning platform. Quantitative and qualitative data included: student's personal data (age, gender, mother tongue, country, etc.), learner's profile (language learning preferences, learning motivation, learning needs, computer use on language learning and other activities, etc.), learner's satisfaction on CALL, indicators of achievement of the objectives, teachers' opinions on the benefits of using the automatic correction tools during lessons. The investigated population included Romanian and Spanish learners who study English as a foreign language, at different levels (A2, B1, B2), and their school teachers.

Starting from the data published in the research report, we shall highlight some aspects regarding the way to formulate the students' learning tasks and feed-back in CALL and ICALL activities.

A successful online teaching activity depends on the learning tasks. According to Chapelle (2001), the following criteria should be considered on the evaluation of the CALL task appropriateness:

Table 1. Evaluation criteria of the CALL task appropriateness [1]

Criterion	Description
Language learning potential	The degree of opportunity present for beneficial focus on form
Meaning focus	The extent to which learners' attention is directed toward the meaning of the language
Learner fit	The amount of opportunity for engagement with language under appropriate conditions given learner characteristics
Authenticity	The degree of correspondence between the learning activity and target language activities of interest to learners out of the classroom
Positive impact	The positive effects of the CALL activity on those who participate in it
Practicality	The adequacy of resources to support the use of the CALL activity

With reference to the evaluation criteria proposed by Chapelle, we will synthetically present, based on the research report, the data on students' learning experience and the teaching experience of the teachers taking part in the project.

1. Language learning potential. The drill and practice software tools are usually subordinated to the goals related to the use of grammar in written communication. The online learning environment has, however, allowed the development of complex tasks, covering - beyond grammar practice - oral or written message understanding, synthesizing information, selecting the necessary data to formulate the correct response, building the statement through the correct application of spelling and punctuation rules. Teachers used the creative potential of technology to teach various communication skills, such as reading, listening and writing. For completing a learning task, the student had to read a text/ listen to a message in the foreign language/ process a multimedia message, and write the answer.

The tasks created with the automatic correction tools allow students to work in their own pace. Moreover, the student can read / listen to the message as often as necessary to understand it.

The anxiety and hyper-excitability that usually accompanies the teaching / assessment face-to-face experiences guided by the teacher is diminished in the student-computer or student-content interactions.

2. Meaning focus. Learning materials aim at fostering the development of language, using it in real communicative situations, rather than language as formal system of signs and rules. To compensate for the lack of the support given by teachers in face-to-face activities, online learning tasks should be clearly formulated and include, if necessary, a sample solution.

3. Learner fit. Work tasks were adapted and appropriate to the characteristics of the students. Special attention was given to the development of students' digital skills, as this could be an empowering or a disadvantage factor of learning in any school discipline.

4. Authenticity. The learning tasks were relevant to the learning objectives. Topics of communication in the foreign language were chosen by teachers taking into account the learning interests of the students. For the tasks where the main purpose was not new vocabulary practice, teachers have used themes concerning general knowledge, skills taught in other disciplines or connected teaching English to knowledge of British culture and other cultures.

5. Positive impact. The main benefits of learners' participation on CALL activity are: increased interest in the practice of certain communication skills in foreign languages; the facilitation of identifying their own needs and preferences of L2 learning; increased students' interest in CALL activities.

6. Practicality. In order to support learning activities and to help students in solving tasks, some teachers have offered students additional materials on the eLearning platform.

The feedback introduced by the teacher when creating practice software can guide students in formulating the response and encourage them to go on working to complete the task.

AutoTutor integrates two software tools (the AutoTutor Activity Creation Kit and Player Activity the AutoTutor) that have a common NLP (natural language processing) services infrastructure. In the process of creating educational software to be used during lessons, teachers have introduced feedback messages, taking into consideration the possible errors in formulating responses.

Common mistakes encountered by teachers in students' work, over time, were also important milestones for creating intelligent feed-back. Feed-back role was not limited to the validation or invalidation of the given response, in terms of form and content. The aim was to guide and support the student in writing the correct answer by providing clues.

From a technical standpoint, the feedback is done in two stages: general checking – spell and grammar checking and exercise specific checking – content matching, customized feedback, exercise-specific error checking, general content evaluation.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Teachers' awareness of the fact that language is a communication tool, not just a system of grammar, phonological and lexical rules, creates the prerequisites of organizing learning situations adapted to students' learning needs and interests. In formulating the learning tasks, teachers should aim to develop higher order cognitive abilities.

In order to organize a successful learning activity, the use of corresponding resources and online tools is required. Despite the fact that online socialization facilitates the development of the communication competences, learning tasks that stimulates interpersonal interactions are not always appropriate for the learning situations. In these cases, the emphasis is transferred to content, delivery method, learning task and feed-back. Personal reflection and learner-content interactions are also fostered.

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