Supporting Learning and Teaching of Languages Using e-Learning: the importance of VLEs and the rise of students' agency

Patricia Merlin
Regent's College / London Metropolitan University

Keywords: *languages, e-learning, blended learning, VLEs, agency*

Introduction

Whether it is traditional teaching or online tuition, the understanding of how students learn is the cornerstone of designing the use of learning technologies, Laurillard (2002) argues. Furthermore, she stresses that the students' learning is the teacher's responsibility by clearly stating that the quality of learning of a student is correlated to the efficiency of the teaching. With languages, teaching consists of mediating and facilitating learning. The technology provides the perfect tools to do so and allows students to construct their own learning.

There is, however, a vast array of ever-changing tools available. For this reason, it is necessary to stipulate that the focus should be placed on the pedagogy underlying their use and not on the technology. This paper will explore the relevance of using learning technology to foster students' agency and its implications for language teaching practice.

Using e-learning to support learning and teaching languages

To understand the current learning model, it would be useful to draw a brief history of the history of Computer-Assisted Language-Learning (CALL).

CALL has evolved rapidly since its beginning in the 1960's when it started on mainframe computers within a Skinnerian behaviourist framework where "learning a language meant memorizing a body of well-choreographed responses that included frequent vocabulary items, clichés, and phrases used at appropriate moments" (Blake, 2008, 49). The main goal of language learning at the time was accuracy. Then, in the 1980s mainframe computers gave way to microcomputers which allowed teachers and learners alike a greater flexibility in designing and using online activities. Moving, consequently, from drill and practice the emphasis shifted to communicative activities with the aim of developing fluency. (Blake, 2008) Finally, with the prodigious development of the Internet and the Web 2.0 phase we are now in, the learner's situation has utterly changed. S/he has become a full actor of his/her own

learning and an online co-creator thanks to the wikis, blogs and the introduction of social networking. These sites and tools enable the learner to interact, thus the development of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) but also to be more autonomous. This is the reason why the word "agency" is used by researchers like Kern and Warschauer (2000) to describe this educational goal. "They argue that the ideal CALL activity is one that encourages the L2 learner to become an agent in the learning process" (Blake, 2008, p. 53).

In the table below, the evolution of CALL is demonstrated from a pedagogical stance.

The 3 stages of CALL

Stage	1970's – 1980's Structural CALL	1980's – 1990's Communicative CALL	21st century Integrative CALL
Technology	Mainframe	PCs	Multimedia and Internet
Teaching paradigm	Grammar translation and audio- lingual	Communicative language teaching	Content-based instruction
Views of language	Structural (a formal structural system)	Cognitive (a mentally constructed system)	Sociocognitive (developed in social interaction)
Principal use of computers	Drill and practice	Communicative exercises	Authentic discourse
Principal objective	Accuracy	Fluency	Agency

Source: Adapted from Kern and Warschauer 2000 (Blake, 2008, p. 54)

As pointed out, the current objective of CALL is "agency" but although this concept has emerged through educational literature, there is no satisfying definition of it. Luck and d'Iverno (1998) differentiate agency from autonomy since they argue that "autonomy is achieved by motivating agency" (Luck & d'Iverno, 1998, p. 254). Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, agency could be defined as the learner's ability to develop his own learning strategies and be autonomous. Self-reliance could also be used as an appropriate synonym to agency.

The purpose of online learning is, indeed, not solely for disseminating content and facilitating communication amongst students or between students and teachers as

argued by researchers like Boud and Alexander (2001). Hase and Ellis (2001) emphasise that online learning offers a "wonderful opportunity to provide learning experiences that not only develop competency but also aspects of capability such as independent learning skills, self-efficacy, creativity, working in teams" (Hase, Cairns and Malloch, 1998, Stephenson and Weil, 1992, in Hase and Ellis, 2001, p. 31). The dominant learning theory underpinning e-learning is undeniably constructivist performed individually and socially. The learner's involvement in authentic tasks, reflection, collaborative learning and dialogue certainly allows the creation of learning communities and the development of personal identities (Mayes, 2001). Interaction is, therefore, at the core of online learning but having easy access to learning materials is also indispensable. Indeed, knowing where to get information is an essential skill for any independent learner. (Hase and Ellis, 2001) This means to know how to search the web and to use electronic libraries but it also implies the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) which have enabled e-learning to make a great leap forward.

Distance learning is a model used by a growing number of universities mainly for economic reasons and it is certainly giving access to studying to some people who would normally not be able to do so. Nevertheless, the model which, in light of my personal experience, works best for SLA is the blended learning approach which can be defined as "the integrated combination of traditional learning with web-based online approaches (drawing on the work of Harrison)" (Martin & Keith, 2005, p. 17). This approach also has the advantage of being perfectly compatible with the new higher education horizon in the UK. Although higher education represents a great cost, the concept of lifelong learning remains popular and thus motivating people to go back to studying at any point in their adult life. These two factors mean that numerous students, especially those in state universities, are in paid employment. Perhaps due to the fact that tuition is so expensive, there is generally a good attendance to classes where students are enabled to practice their speaking skills with peers and ask the lecturer for instant support and correction, a more difficult occurrence in an online environment. Students, therefore, continue to value and appreciate a face to face experience with the teacher and peers (Lorenzo, 2007). To support and enrich this face to face learning and teaching, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) can be utilised.

Be they activities within the classroom or independent learning outside teaching sessions, a VLE is the perfect tool to support learning in general and FLA in particular. Before their extensive adoption in HE, students were already working online: searching information on the Web, working with educational sites, making use of digital libraries and during the last five years, increasingly communicating on social networks, etc. Today, while their usage varies considerably between institutions and even amongst lecturers, VLEs are a common feature and have greatly improved students' lives and supported teaching. They are, assuredly, the place where course materials can be found, collaborative learning can take place and

independent studying can be produced. No need to go onto wikis, create blogs, use different websites, have countless usernames and passwords: everything can done on just one VLE.

In the classroom, a plethora of activities can be performed within a VLE. These kinds of activities make the learning and teaching more enjoyable and diverse. Using the technology also suits the students' needs and interests, especially young learners (HEA & JISC, 2009). Consequently, if the facilities and time permit it, it is always valuable for SLA to organise sessions in a computer room. Those sessions allow students to work at their own pace and to practice independently whilst being supported by the lecturer and peers alike. Moreover, if they do not finish their activity in time, they can continue it at home. It always strikes me that when students are in front of a computer, they are instantly engaged. The role of the teacher in that case is to circulate around the room in order to provide advice and support, answer questions, guide and praise.

Praising and encouraging students are an important part of the educator's role as, contrary to common belief, not all the university students regardless of their age enjoy working online (e.g.: Lorenzo, 2007). This is one of the reasons why they continue to appreciate face to face teaching. Taking them to a computer room, therefore, combines the use of technology and the comforting presence of a teacher who can help them both with the language and the technology.

Taking advantage of the technology and particularly a VLE outside the language classroom is the most common use as it offers extra practice to the students, be it listening, writing or reading, and can save class time which could be dedicated to more speaking practice. A VLE unquestionably gives students freedom to learn in their own time and certainly maximise their learning experience. The world, the media and education have gone social. The keyword is collaboration and this collaboration can take diverse forms (HEA & JISC, 2009). On a VLE, for example, students can post their creation (audio, video, text, Power Point Presentation, etc.) for public viewing. A student confided to me that she did not have time to practice her writing skills before the written test. She, therefore, went on the VLE and read the other students' posts to find and learn well written sentences she could use for her own writing production. This is a simple example of how learning occurs collaboratively and literature abounds on the fact that best learning takes place amongst peers. Furthermore, having everything in the same place is undoubtedly a great support, helping students to be organised and assisting them when they need to retrieve information. Synchronous and asynchronous communication is also another asset stated by numerous educationalists like Garrison and Anderson (2003), Kear (2011) and Mason & Rennie (2008).

Finally, new technologies match the students' way of learning by using games, online videos, blogs, wikis, etc. The time students spend either on their computer or on

their mobile phone doing all sorts of activities is very obvious. University students are curious and willing to learn and discover new technologies bound to help them in their studies or that they can reuse in a different context. Whether it is in the form of a VLE or not, online environment allows access to instruction and of other learners, and using technology unquestionably supports a lifetime of learning.

E-teaching and e-learning: from teachers and students' standpoint

Since the 1990s, the topic of students' engagement has been well researched (Zepke & Leach, 2010). It can be defined as "students' cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning" (Chapman, 2003 cited in Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 167). Yet a multifaceted concept, engagement is necessary to achieve successful studies. Amid diverse approaches to engagement, student agency and motivation have been the focus of some researchers as factors in engagement (Schuetz, 2008).

Emerging from the synthesis of the engagement literature, Zepke and Leach (2010) identify ten proposals for action:

- Enhancing students' self-belief

- Enabling students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with others and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives

- Recognizing that teaching and teachers are central to engagement

- Creating an active and collaborative learning which fosters learning relationships

- Creating educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities

- Adapting to changing student expectations

- Ensuring institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds

- Investing in a variety of support services

- Enabling students to become active citizens

- Enabling students to develop their social and cultural capital

(summarised from Zepke and Leach, 2010)

Amongst all those points essential for enhancing students' engagement in general, the six first ones are totally relevant to online learning where students can feel lost, lose motivation and as a result stop using the technology. Individual and collaborative engagement is, indeed, a key issue for the e-teacher. Bringing the learners to an online environment can be easy but keeping them there can be more difficult. This is the reason why it is important to establish an online presence at

different levels. This presence can be divided in 3 categories: a cognitive presence, depicting students learning on their own and together, a teaching presence describing the teacher's input and a social presence, defining the interaction between the students in a more relaxed manner (Garrison and Anderson, 2003). In those three scenarios, the focus is placed on the link between students, the teacher and material, thus emphasising the importance of human relationship as well as course design and quality. This clearly means that the e-teacher has to develop a set of new skills to be able to support the students and foster their learning. Hence, besides knowing how to design online activities, s/he must be an e-facilitator and an e-moderator as clearly explained by Garrison and Anderson (2003).

The role of the teacher is crucial to help and encourage students. The other important aspect for students' engagement is their satisfaction. They, indeed, remain engaged if they are satisfied with their experience. Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, and Yeh in Lorenzo (2007) identify seven important factors that impact the online learners' satisfaction: computer anxiety, instructor attitude, course flexibility, course quality, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and diversity of assessment. In order to address those issues and make students satisfied and engaged, dialogue between the teacher and the students is indispensable. Thus, making them feel responsible of their own learning is an excellent way to engage them. This can be done in countless ways. It is, for example, possible to ask a volunteer to take notes summarising the content of the class and to post it online, or a wiki can be created on the VLE to host an online glossary for new vocabulary. The engagement is obviously variable and personal to each individual. The intrinsically motivated student will be very eager with this kind of activities and will have no problem participating. When it comes to the extrinsically motivated students, giving them extra marks on their tests for their online contribution surely motivate them.

To help the less technologically adept students, it is very useful to organise sessions in a computer room, facility and time permitted, at least once at the beginning of the semester to enable students to familiarise themselves with this maybe new environment. Salmon (2000) recommends five stages to implement a methodology designed to foster students' participation with the VLEs and their contribution to the online activities. Even if the chosen approach is not as standardised as Salmon, it is a way to make sure everyone knows where to find what they need and give them a taste of online activities with the aim of removing or at least lessening computer anxiety and fostering the idea that the VLE is useful and easy to use.

Outside the classroom, it is obviously less easy to make sure students engage with course material posted on line every week. A battery of active and interactive online activities, called "e-vities" is available (Salmon, 2002 ; Pavey & Garland, 2004). It can take the form of interactive web pages specially designed for SLA, e.g.: fun grammar exercises, prepared activities for listening comprehension both audio and video. It can also be blogs for collaborative writing, wikis for vocabulary learning as well as

cooperative writing, formative quizzes for checking vocabulary and knowledge acquisition, or using newer technologies like creating and sharing screencast, a voice recording software or a flashcard and exercise authoring program, just to mention a few of a wide range of online resources, most of them free. As previously mentioned, the key point with all those wonderful "e-vities" is the way they are implemented and used within the module and, thus, the role of the e-student and the e-tutor as stressed in a vast amount of e-learning literature (e.g.: Salmon, 2002, Garrison & Anderson, 2003, Mason & Rennie, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Blending face to face teaching with e-learning offers without any doubt various benefits for institutions as well as for students by offering a great flexibility in time and place of learning (Sharpe et al, 2006). According to this review of over 300 studies cases of blended e-learning undertaken for the Higher Education Academy, the students appreciated being able to access electronic resources both at home and on-campus. Nevertheless, although most students were aware of the value of the blended e-learning, some were having difficulties with the experience. Consequently, "it seems important that students understand the role of technology in their learning and the implications for their study strategies and engagement in learning activities" (Sharpe et al, 2006, p.4). It is, therefore, important that teachers "help students develop their conceptions of the learning process" (ibid) in order to make them more autonomous and responsible for their own learning, and also help them to engage with the online environment. This is a crucial point as this leads to the major issue of student engagement and the determinant role of the e-teacher.

While designing "e-vities" and using a VLE the focus must be placed on learning and how the students will engage with the online material. Learners appreciate the variety of activities and the alternative style of teaching made possible through the use of a VLE. However, "despite using technology extensively in their social and leisure lives, most learners have little idea how they could use technology innovatively in an educational context (JISC, Overview, 2009, p. 1). Students are indeed comfortable with the current technology (JISC, 2009) but they still rely on their tutor for guidance in the Web 2.0 world.
Consequently, education professionals in general and language educators in particular require training and institutional support. The teacher's role is, indeed, changing and will continue to do so with social and technological changes shaping the future of education (Sutch, 2010). Not only should s/he be a facilitator, a mentor, an advisor, a helper but also a motivator and even a compassionate teacher. In this ever changing world it is, indeed, essential to listen deeply to our students in order to meet their expectations and to accompany them on the path to a successful life.

References

Alexander, S. and Boud D. (2001) Learners still learn from experience when online, in Teaching and Learning Online, edited by John Stephenson, Routledge Falmer, UK

Blake, R. (2008) Brave New Digital Classroom Technology and Foreign Language Learning, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., USA

Brown, D. (2007), Principles of Language Learning and Teaching, 5th edition, Pearson Education, NY

Carpenter C. & Murphey T. (2007) Finding Agency in Language Learning Histories, Proceedings of the Independent Learning Association 2007 Japan Conference: Exploring theory, enhancing practice autonomy across the disciplines. Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

Chapelle C. (2001) Computer applications in second language acquisition: Foundations for teaching, testing, and research, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Ellis, R. (2003) Task-based Language Learning and Teaching, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, pp. 156–157

Garrison D. R. and Anderson T. (2003) E-learning in the 21st Century, A framework for research and practice, Routledge Farmer, New York

Hase, S. and Ellis, A. (2001) Problems with online learning are systemic, not technical, in Teaching and Learning Online, edited by John Stephenson, Routledge Falmer, UK

HEA & JISC (2009), Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World, Report of an independent Committee of Inquiry into the impact on higher education of students' widespread use of Web 2.0 technologies. Available from: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/heweb20rptv1.pdf [19-02-12]

JISC Executive (2009) e-Learning Pedagogy programme, HEFCE. Available from https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2 [19-02-12]

JISC (2009) A guide to embedding the learner voice, Responding to learners, Overview, HEFCE

JISC (2009) A guide for practitioners, Responding to learners, Guide 2, HEFCE

Kern and Warschauer (2000) Literacy and Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Laurillard D. (2002) Rethinking University Teaching, RoutledgeFalmer, London and New York

Long M. (1991) Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective, ed. Claire Kramsch and Ralph Ginsberg, 39-42, Amsterdam

Lorenzo G. (2007) A Research review about online learning: are students satisfied? why do some succeed and others fail? what contributes to higher retention rates and positive learning outcomes? Educational Pathways (EdPath), October Vol. 6, Issue 9. Available from http://www.edpath.com/2007/1007/100701.htm [9 January 2012]

Luck M. & d'Iverno M (1998) A Formal Framework for Agency and Autonomy, Proceedings of the First International Conference on Multiagent Systems, the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AAAI)

Martin O. & Keith T. (2005) Can 'Blended Learning' Be Redeemed?, E-Learning and Digital Media, 2(1), 17-26. Available from http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/elea.2005.2.1.17 [15/03/12]

Mason R. & Rennie F. (2008), E-Learning and Social Networking Handbook, Resources for Higher Education, Routledge, New York, USA and Oxon, UK

Mayes, T. (2001), Learning technology and learning relationships, in Teaching and Learning Online, edited by John Stephenson, Routledge Falmer, UK

Pavey, G. & Garland S.W. (2004) The integration and implementation of a range of 'e-vities' to enhance students' interaction and learning, Innovations in Education and Training International, 41 (3) 305-315

Race, P. (2011) Getting students engaged, Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education

Russel, D. (2002) Looking beyond the interface: Activity theory and distributed learning, in M. Lea and K. Nicoll (eds) Distributed learning. Social and cultural approaches to practice, London, Routledge Falmer

Salmon, G. (2002) E-vities: the key to active online learning, Kogan Page, London

Schuetz, P. (2008) A theory-driven model of community college student engagement, Community College Journal of Research and Practice 32: 305-24

Sharpe R., Benfield, G., Roberts G., Francis R. (2006) The undergraduate experience of blended e-learning: a review of UK literature and practice, The Higher Education Academy

Sutch D. (2010), Education futures, teachers and technology, Beyond Current Horizons (BCH) programme, Futurelab, UK. Available from www.futurelab.or.uk/resources [20-02-12]

Zepke, N. & Leach L. (2010). Improving student engagement: Ten proposals for action, Active Learning in Higher Education, SAGE, pp.167-176

Biographical note

Patricia Merlin has been sharing her teaching practice for several years between two institutions. She indeed teaches French at the European Business School in the Languages and Cross-Cultural Studies department in the Business and Management faculty at Regent's College. She also enjoys lecturing at the Open Language Programme and the European Languages Service within the Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Languages and Education at London Metropolitan University.

Emails: merlinp@regents.ac.uk & pmerlin@londonmet.ac.uk