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Foreign Language Learning using E-Communication Technologies in the Educational Sector

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Abstract: E-communication places new demands on language, leading to interesting variations in written language use. E-mail, chats, online discussions and SMS messages use a language marked by traits of both informal speech and formal writing, a host of text-based icons and acronyms for handling social interaction and modifications in spelling norms. **Objectives:** The purpose of this article is to provide a framework on individuals' possibilities to learn a foreign language using e-communication technologies. **Approach:** It shows the specialty literature that focuses on e-learning, with priority to e-communication. **Results:** Proper use of new technologies allows a more systematic integration of language, content and culture, and gives individuals unprecedented opportunities for autonomous learning. E-communication not only helps teachers and students to exceed linguistic, geographical and time barriers, but also to build bridges between native and foreign language programs. **Implications:** This research work is important for academics and students who use online technologies to teach or learn another language. **Value:** In this paper, we have identified that the use of new technologies consents learners to engage in forms of online communication, thus research becoming vital for success in their academic and professional pursuits.

Keywords: e-communication; language learning; informational society; education; technology

1. Introduction

Language represents a tool which allows individuals to function in the society they live in, also making available the means of relating to other cultures. Over the centuries, this was one of the main reasons why people were stimulated to learn foreign languages. In the increasingly global environment of nowadays, the need to know another language is vital in order to effectively function. Apart from exposure to the language through studying the speciality literature and grammar practice, today learners want this training to be more based on the usage of the foreign language in practical, realistic situations.

E-communication refers to the communication realized by electronic means, especially over computer networks. This type of communication has created the so-called "virtual space". Increasing the speed of giving and receiving information has categorically determined a change in the way information is experienced and perceived. Each virtual component can be understood and assumed as separated and interest worthy. Virtual space can be designed through the use of so many ways of access to

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information. At the same time, in the same place, multiple protocols can connect people to a multitude of areas: e-mail, virtual communities, video conferences, etc.

The informational society requires intensive use of information in all spheres of activity and human existence, this society starting its existence and being developed especially in the educational sector. New informational technologies are used both at an individual level and in the public institutions and organizations with a high flexibility.

2. Ways of Using E-communication Technology to Learn a Foreign Language

The technologies supporting a cognitive approach useful to learn a foreign language are the ones that consent learners to have maximum opportunity to be exposed to language in significant context and to build their own individual knowledge (Warschauer, Meskill, 2000, pp. 303-318).

E-communication can be used in order to assist interaction within and across discourse communities. One way of using this sort of technology is by using online activities to support interaction opportunities within a single class. This is possible both through computer-assisted classroom discussion and outside-of-class discussion (Warschauer, Meskill, 2000, pp. 303-318).

Real-time writing programs are used in discussions assisted by computer, basically representing the meeting of a class in a networked computer lab, where students communicate through writing rather than through talking. To be more precisely, students type in their messages and hit a key to immediately send their thoughts to the rest of the class, all the messages being listed in chronological order, with the possibility to easily scroll through the ideas and re-read them. This type of session can be saved and passed on to other students, in electronic form as well as in hard copy (Warschauer, Meskill, 2000, pp. 303-318).

Discussions outside-of-class are typically carried out by means of asynchronous tools, precisely by creating special lists that will be helpful to automatically forward learners' messages to the entire class or just a small group of students (Warschauer, Meskill, 2000, pp. 303-318). In this case, an example of technology used is the **e-mail**, which represents a modality of receiving, sending, storing, forwarding and composing postal messages by using the systems of electronic communication (Vrabie, 2014, p. 40). This method outspreads the activities carried out by students and professors in a classroom, thus providing a virtual place for meeting and communicating in native or in a foreign language outside the class doors. Due to its nature, the foreign language learners can log in and write an e-mail from their homes, a public library or even a teahouse, these possibilities of spatial comfort offering them more time to spend on creating the message and reading in another language in a communicative context (Gonglewski, Meloni, Brant, 2001).

A very used technology for communicating online is **YouTube**, considered in 2014 the third element on a top of 100 tools for learning¹. This website can truly be helpful for learning a foreign language because it provides a forum for learners to connect, inform other people and get themselves informed, acting as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small. When watching YouTube channels, learners also have the possibility to make comments on certain videos, thus giving feedback, expressing their personal opinions, make friends and maybe share stories. We can see, by a simple click, that many courses in other language than ours are available on this platform, therefore learning a new language should not be that difficult, YouTube providing all the

¹ According to a global ranking accomplished by the Centre for Learning and Performance Technologies (C4LPT), <http://c4lpt.co.uk/top100tools/>, accessed on February 19, 2015.

necessary needed in order to get learners interested and remain this way throughout the whole duration of the course.

Another e-communication technology useful for learning a foreign language is **Moodle** (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) which, in the last 8 years, has kept its place amongst the first 15 online learning platforms in the world. This is a freeware platform, based on an open source¹, with a Course Management System (CMS), also known as a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The platform's basic principle is social constructivism, this involving collaborative learning, based on projects and individual and group tasks. Therefore, learning becomes effective when the teacher builds a learning material for the students to interact with and gain experience in order to understand. In this context, the student is part of a learning community, being put in the position to understand what to do, explain to others and work in teams (Avramescu, 2014).

Video conferences are also an important tool for learning a new language, representing a live connection between learners in different locations with the purpose of communication, generally involving audio and often text and video. This modality of e-communicating offers a transmission of static images and text between two locations. It can also provide a broadcast of full-motion video images and high-quality audio between multiple locations. A video conference can be seen as a phone call with pictures, indicators suggesting that someday this will be the primary mode of distance communication (Rouse, 2007).

An enormous collection of informational resources from all over the world is offered by the **World Wide Web**. Most webpages are written directly in English or have translation possibilities, but there are also used other "international" languages, such as French, German, Spanish, Italian etc. A socio-cognitive approach is sustained by accessing these online pages in educational and language learning purposes, thus students being determined to participate in discussions that spread their area beyond the classroom, their appropriate communities and/or their language textbooks. Webpages can be used by learners, as authentic sources of information, for researching studies on culture and events or even for collecting material which they will present in class projects and presentations. Students can also publish their work in a foreign language on the WWW, thus allowing themselves to be read by native speakers, teachers and specialty experts in the fields studied. Other relevant examples in this case are: teachers creating online newsletters or magazines produced by their students; professors helping their students contribute to international online journals; learners working in collaboration with foreign students, creating international working-teams and publishing their projects on the web (Warschauer, Meskill, 2000, pp. 303-318).

3. The Impact of E-communication Technology on Written Language

Computer technology has turned out to be a fundamental tool in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, which students fully use as an advantage. Nowadays, the Internet has very high implications on learning the English language, it being considered as the most important linguistic environment. We chose to give as example the English language, because it is considered an universal language, being the most widely-spoken in the world, especially for the reason that it is being used in new globalized media and commerce, thus the number of English speakers is constantly growing all over the world (Atef Odeh AbuSa'aleek, 2013, p. 7).

¹ A source that allows any person to contribute to the platform's development or improvement.

Language has always been in a constant change but, as a result of the communication technology's development, recently its change has speeded up, leading to remarkable variations in the usage of the written language (Hamzah, Ghorbani, Abdullah, 2009, p. 75). To give the most simple and relevant example of today's informational society, we can mention the abbreviated language used because of the technical restrictions and limitations of SMS as a communication modality. A common background amongst close friends and family members is another reason to explain the use of syntactic and lexical short forms to save energy, time and space (Atef Odeh AbuSa'aleek, 2013, p. 8).

The language of e-mail and SMS messages is linked to acronyms and changes in spelling norms, thus it being an informal system of communication. A new framework for the writing process has been provided as a consequence of the electronic age, engaging mainly university students in writing using electronic devices. In this case, it is important for both teachers and students to find the perfect ways of adapting the media in order to make their personal opinions understood (Hamzah, Ghorbani, Abdullah, 2009, p. 76).

As stated before, we can see that e-mail and SMS are maybe the most used tools of communication. However, this should not be a reason to not make use – as in any other way of communicating – of conciseness, precision and consideration of tone and manner of writing. If a user omits important aspects – such as: thanks, greetings, punctuation, capitalization and well used grammar – just to save a few moments, this reflects more a human problem rather than a technological one. The positive aspect of the e-communication technology's impact on written language is, though, the creativity which has led to a diminution of space, effort, time and cost (Hamzah, Ghorbani, Abdullah, 2009, p. 79).

4. Promises and Problems of E-communication for Learning a Foreign Language

E-communication is important in learning a foreign language, the ability to communicate being accepted as the key objective of the language learning process. Studies and activities realized in classrooms and laboratories using online technologies point out the fact that electronic communication makes available a secure, uninhibited, highly motivating and interactive learning environment. As other benefits of using this type of technology, we can mention the learner's participation which, in this case, could be more active and impartial, an environment more dynamic and centered on the student and also the development and improvement of competences from a general intercultural communicative point of view (Averianova, 2012, p. 15).

The problems, in this case, appear from the tendency of some foreign language learners to compress their writing as much as they don't make themselves understood anymore and also to use online dialogue in communicative situations considered inappropriate. On one hand, students can develop a desire of imitating the conversational behavior of the online community in order to be accepted by it. By doing this, they exaggerate with the abbreviated writing, usage of emoticons and thus make visible their ignorance regarding syntax and orthography. This can eventually lead to non-understandability, misunderstanding and even disruption of communication. Another problem can be caused when students use informal contractions, non-standard abbreviations and emoticons in academic writing, while corresponding with professors or other formal settings (Averianova, 2012, p. 16).

The existence of these problems regarding the learning of a foreign language by using the means of e-communication points out the fact that there should be developed a sort of literacy required for network communication, especially for the use of second-language learners. This would be helpful in order to make the students understand what is acceptable and also what is expected of them, as members of a virtual communication space (Averianova, 2012, p. 16).

5. Why Use E-communication to the Detriment of Face-to-Face Courses? Advantages and Disadvantages

E-communication supports information exchange across large distances and in a big number of formats, but disadvantages start from the security problems, arriving to a lack of access and possible misunderstood messages. This type of communication offers learners many new modalities of transmitting ideas and information (Di Blas, Cantoni, 2006, pp. 163-190).

Synchronous communication, such as telephone or web conferencing, can be achieved when individuals are available at the same time for this activity. Conversely, asynchronous communications (for example: e-mail, texting, social media) consent learners to access information at different time periods, but this way it takes longer for every person to get on the same page (Di Blas, Cantoni, 2006, pp. 163-190).

Additionally to the different advantages and disadvantages of synchronicity, e-communication involves more general strengths and weaknesses. Electronic media are widely diverse, this meaning that the environment can and should be made so that it matches the message. When only text works well for a message, it can be sent by e-mail, but if a message requires that individuals see each other, online conferences are more proper. E-communication covers the entire world without costing much more than Internet service and a computer (Di Blas, Cantoni, 2006, pp. 163-190).

When using electronic communication, security is required in order to prevent viruses and other malevolent software, but even a good virus protection system may not prevent problems caused by spam or phishing e-mails, in which the reader clicks on a link or provides private information. For the reason that human communication implicates more than words, readers can misunderstand e-mails and text messages.

6. Conclusions

E-communication has become a certain thing in daily life, its relation to foreign language learning being natural and facilitative. In order to achieve successful language teaching, professors must review their thinking and language lessons planning in order to incorporate the new capabilities available daily on the virtual environment. Students also need to develop or improve the skills required in order to well function within a society mainly driven by electronic communication.

There is a clear need of substantial investment and commitment of time, energy and training skills that the educational sector, with its professors, must meet. Dealing with e-communication technologies in other languages than the native one turns into the need of foreign language teachers to beneficiate of training and technical support in comparison to the teachers who function in those particular languages, especially in English language. Various additional support activities can be provided by the community of instructors who interchange information on virtual space, via e-mail discussion lists, announcement boards and the WWW.

The problems of access to e-communication in the foreign language curricula and its implementation basically emerge in professional discourses and ways of development. We must, however, not understand from this article that online technologies are the best solution for language learning. Using e-communication brings no guaranteed results if the learners do not involve themselves in the process

of learning, if they do not grant it the attention needed and if they want to just finish rapidly the course. This process is also time consuming and it must be taken seriously.

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