Abstract

With the development of technology and the introduction of network-based language learning, the face of CALL has changed enormously. Some researchers claim there has been a paradigm shift in how languages are taught and learned. Students are now in a position to communicate with each other and to work collaboratively using authentic materials in multimodal and multi-dimensional networks. These can combine writing as well as speech and graphics.

This paper takes a closer look at Lyceum, a Web-based, real-time audio-graphic conferencing system, which has recently been introduced by the Open University for online tuition. Sociocultural and constructivist approaches are employed to examine the virtual learning environment. Through observation of online sessions and feedback from tutors and learners, the opportunities and challenges of the new media will be documented and assessed.

Introduction

This paper reports on an on-going study taking place at the Open University (OU), the largest provider of distance learning in the UK. It focuses on the observation and evaluation of online tuition, which for the first time in 2002 is being used in an OU language course. The study tries to integrate research and practice as demanded by Garrett in 1998, with the aim of seeking to demonstrate that “students learn differently” with CALL (1998: 8) [3].

From CALL to NBLT

With the development of technology and the introduction of network-based language teaching (NBLT), the face of CALL has changed enormously and some researchers even talk about a paradigm shift in how languages are taught and learned (Chun and Plass, 2000) [2]. While in the 1980s students worked individually with a computer (along the model of computer-as-tutor), in the 1990s new technologies like e-mail offered students the opportunity to communicate with each other online and to work collaboratively – even if at the beginning this was limited to one mode, that of written text chat. Today we are no longer limited to a single (written) mode but we can offer students a combination of different modes, thereby incorporating the ‘meaning potential’ of speech, writing and the visual. For as Halliday notes, different modes “impose different grids on experience” (1986: 93) [4].

The new technology allows us to combine video or audio conferencing, graphics, and text chat. It can give web access and the possibility of sharing and storing texts and images. Groups of students can thus work collectively at a distance, using authentic materials in a multimodal and multi-dimensional learning environment.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) [7] describe the opportunities and challenges of this multimodal, multi-dimensional and interactive approach as follows: “The new technologies’ emphasis on multimodality, three-dimensionality and interactivity can be seen as a return of many of the things that were lost in the transition from ‘orality’ to ‘literacy’, as a ‘secondary orality’, in other words [...] But the search for immersion, 3D virtual reality and interactivity, and the advent of ‘cyberculture’, may also signify the most profound loss of embodiment we have seen yet” (92).

Although research on NBLT is valuably informed by past work on CALL (Chapelle 2000) [1], these are new perspectives that need to be taken into account and that expand the CALL research paradigms. They are also likely to impact upon the design of NBLT tasks. What Chun and Plass (2000) [2] observe for traditional NBLT is even more true for audio-graphic conferences: “What remains relatively unexplored is the development of ‘networked multimedia’ materials” (152).

Lyceum

This paper will apply theoretical considerations to a teaching project at the OU. For the first time this year, the OU has offered a language course which delivers tutorials solely online, using a Web-based, real-time, audio-graphics conferencing system called Lyceum. It offers different modes within one medium, i.e. audio conferencing for oral interaction; graphics for writing, drawing and pasting images; text chat for informal written chat; and several different shared writing tools. It has been developed by the Knowledge Media Institute at the OU as a teaching tool and is based on sound pedagogical principles. With the help of a range of facilities which offer, for example, sub-grouping or easy turn taking, and enable participants to import and share authentic texts and images from the Web or save information, Lyceum seeks to create a rich virtual learning environment.

Virtual learning environment

Activities were developed for Lyceum in the light of sociocultural approaches to learning, i.e. learning that emphasizes social interaction (Vygotsky 1978) [10]. Thus
students work together in groups, both in scheduled sessions and in online meetings outside the scheduled sessions. A task-based approach to language is used which tries to make the students construct their own knowledge (see Rüschoff and Ritter, 2001 [9], whose theory of constructivism combines ideas from cognitive science with a social approach). With the help of authentic material, meaningful tasks were created. Thus the learners are motivated to use all three principal functions of language which have been identified by Halliday, i.e. ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday, 1993) [5]. They use language ideationally to express content, they use it interpersonally to maintain social relations (and organize their group work) and they use it textually to create situationally relevant discourse.

The students not only benefit from peer learning (both within and outside scheduled sessions), but they also have a tutor to moderate scheduled sessions, provide guidance and give feedback. Although the virtual learning environment mirrors a traditional classroom to a large extent, it requires a different approach to learning and teaching. According to Levy, “technology always makes a difference” (2000: 190) [8]. Being a multimodal environment, students can choose which mode they want to use to express something. Thus the learning environment caters more easily for different types of learners and the students generally have more choice. They also exert more control over the learning situation, and this in turn has consequences for the tutor, whose role changes (Hauck and Haezewindt, 1999) [6] from that of a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator. Certain shortcomings of the virtual environment also have to be taken into account (like lack of facial expression and gestures – contributing to what Kress and van Leeuwen call ‘loss of embodiment’).

Findings

The main focus of the Lyceum study is on students’ and tutors’ perceptions of the medium, its different modes and the tasks set. Observations of tutorials and an evaluation of tutors’ and learners’ views as communicated through questionnaires and tutor/learner diaries will be reported. It is expected that in the light of this study, the existing model of teaching and learning with Lyceum can be refined for future use. The findings should also prove useful for the implementation of other audio-graphic systems for language learning.

References