Learner Autonomy and Technology: an Integrated Language Learning Environment

Debbie Dolan
School of Languages and International Education
University of Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT

The rate of technological progression seems to have encouraged teachers and researchers to reassess their pedagogic beliefs in an attempt to maintain their control over the learning process and the influx of authentic materials. With regard to the field of language teaching, technology seems to be demanding a re-examination of pedagogies in order to find ways of making use of current technology-related opportunities. Thus teachers and researchers have been searching for ways to legitimise their teaching practices and the design/implementation of online language learning environments. Learner autonomy is, understandably, at the forefront as its principles (respect for learner differences, learner responsibility and control) seem to be encouraged and promoted by technology. This paper will briefly present the framework of an integrated language learning environment that has attempted to acknowledge these differences and find ways of accommodating them.

1: Background

Respect for the differences between learners is a debate that has long raged in many fields of education. The field of language education is not therefore, unique. Despite this debate, language teaching pedagogy has tended to revolve around an assumption that under the right conditions and with the right pedagogy or tools, all learners can be made homogeneous and therefore can be taught prescribed sets of knowledge that will supposedly enable them to function adequately within the target language community. This mythical scenario has reinforced, and been reinforced by, a long socio-historical ideology based upon the notions of ‘language’ and ‘learning’ and has therefore seemed to encourage teachers and researchers to consider a respect for the differences as secondary to this search for the utopian ideal of homogeneity.

Technology, however, has caused this search for the ideal to be reassessed. The freedom and diversity that the Internet in particular provides has created unexpected results. Previously ‘passive’ learners, when given the opportunity to explore beyond the boundaries of the classroom, are beginning to offer strong resistance to tight technical and pedagogic controls, demanding more freedom and control over their learning and being less willing to be subjected to traditional notions of learning [1]. It would therefore seem that learner autonomy has been encouraged, but, as evidenced by current literature [2], has often been inhibited by, technology.

2: The Pedagogy

Instead of looking at technology from a view of ‘how will technology change pedagogy?’, the author began with redefining a pedagogy that did not necessarily rely upon technology. Once the pedagogy was in place, the technical structure was designed so that learners had appropriate support and could experience the target language (TL) in a variety of ways. From a language learning perspective, it is here that technical designs often fail, resulting in a lack of support for the learners and a design and course content that are highly restrictive.

The development of a language learning environment was therefore a ‘proof of concept’ attempt to enable a variety of learning processes through a number of electronic media. This way, learners could interpret the context, not solely in one way and/or from one point of view, but in a multitude of ways. This emerges from the beliefs that: something is only meaningful to us when it has been experienced in different contexts [3]; and that learners have their own current internal systems of logic (i.e. the ways in which they currently interpret the world around them) [4] which have emerged from their individually accumulated, but socio-historically influenced backgrounds.

3: Integrated Learning Environment (ILE)

The integrated learning environment (ILE) was therefore grounded on pedagogic principles and was designed to be exploratory in nature. Its focus was to
create conditions that would: enable learners to have communicative opportunities via this environment; provide a variety of structures that supported rather than dictated the learning methods and the things that mattered; and attempt to accommodate for the differences between learners. Many online environments designed for teaching English online still maintain the one-to-one teacher-student ratio for voice chat or have limited communicative practice (pronunciation drills or recorded dialogues). These methods are grounded in traditional teaching practices that see the learner as being an empty vessel into which ‘knowledge’ can be poured. Whilst these kinds of tools may be of some use, this environment selected tools that had a multitude of uses, those that could be used with a range of listening and speaking activities, or programs that provided access the TL.

The ILE was developed using a combination of opensource applications, web tools and programs that were loaded on to the students harddrive from a CD-ROM. Instead of using the WebCT frontend platform frequently found in Australian universities, the ILE Project members developed their own more dynamic and therefore less restrictive frontend in opensource (in line with its ‘flexibility’ principles). This resulted in a dynamic website that could be set-up to incorporate any number of CD-ROM programs or web tools. By using a content management program like Postnuke, the website could be updated quickly and easily by the administrator or teacher. Thus the technical framework could be tailored to suit any language and any course program – from English for Business to French Literature. However, this benefit has not, as yet, been tested under trial.

Whilst not obviously radical by design, the ILE might seem to resemble a resource management system rather than an online course structure. It must be noted, however, that the ILE was not designed to be used for purely supplementary purposes (as with many self-access centres). In fact, it was designed for interdependent rather than independent learning. The project acknowledged that learning is an internal process (individual) which needs the external world (social) for input and feedback. Thus the ILE attempted to create conditions under which learners could interact with the target language, with others and with themselves. It also required the coherent integration of pedagogy with both web-based and standalone software, and a change of roles for both the teacher (as facilitator/administrator) and the learner (self-directed).

With regard to the support structures, they consisted of 6 layers: 1. Macrosimulation [5] & voice chat (peer support); 2. Consultations (facilitator support); 3. Workshops and forums online (peers/facilitator support); 4. Reference materials (dictionaries, grammar guides, encyclopedias, thesauruses, academic skills etc.); 5. Pedagogic HELP online (This consisted of an online tutorial to suggest ways in which various components can be linked or used and reminds the learner of their previously set goals, tasks and assessment (purpose)); 6. Technical HELP online (This was available in every tool or program utilised by the environment).

4: Possible Benefits and Conclusion

To summarise, the integrated learning environment was based upon a process-enabling pedagogy which drove the design of the environment, the selection of the included tools/programs and focused on respecting the differences between learners. It did not require the teacher to be the language model or fount of all knowledge, but encouraged a supportive role of the teacher. The ILE would therefore be of considerable benefit for institutions that do not have the capability to employ native speakers or offer expensive in-country immersion tours.

The ILE promotes flexibility with regard to content—thus online learning programs do not have to remain static for 1-3 years, but can become dynamic systems which can be quickly and easily adapted to suit the language program. This would effectively reduce the amount of administrative infrastructure required due to its ability to meld the assets and resources for all programs – be they distance, on-campus, short course or customised.

This project hopes to encourage continued research in the area of integrated online language learning – where online learning features the combination of all macroskills rather than focussing solely on text-based skills – and promote the investigation of ways which might enable students to develop their own support structures as they learn the TL, rather than becoming dependent upon the educational environment.

References