

SEARCHING FOR BRIDGES BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Life in the contemporary society and ongoing globalisation processes result in growing demands on educators, including language teachers in higher education. The frequently accentuated so-called postmethod approach to foreign language teaching gives teachers a lot of freedom and flexibility but also creates a large space for various types of challenges and dilemmas. These are related to issues ranging from the inevitability to perceive teaching in a broader educational context to the necessity to internalise the lifelong learning concept, bringing along the categories of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Besides, there is no doubt that language learning/teaching processes are to a great extent facilitated by the rapid development of ICT. This paper is aimed at explaining the authors' beliefs related to the role of the teacher in curriculum development and the level of his/her control over the content of learning within the above specified context. The central part of the paper relies on examples illustrating the teaching and research activities carried out at the Language Centre of the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic, that are powered by the efforts to use elements of e-learning for bridging the gaps between formal and informal language education.

KEYWORDS

Higher education, foreign language teaching, lifelong learning, e-learning, formal learning, informal learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The demands life in the contemporary society makes on humans are unparalleled from the point of view of the history of mankind. They are a consequence of rapid development of modern technologies, primarily information and communication, the increasing pace of globalisation tendencies and unprecedented migration and travel worldwide for work or other reasons. For most people, this results in the necessity of learning at least one foreign language. Simultaneously, the requirements on foreign language teaching in higher education throughout Europe reflect the principal goal of the European education policy, namely preparation of future experts and specialists for effective functioning on the job market. Therefore, the efforts of higher education institutions are being driven by a well-justified plan to optimise conditions for the desirable shift "from expert students to novice professionals" (Reid et al. 2011) also in the area of complex language development.

As the language that plays the role of modern lingua franca is English, top quality and efficiency are demanded in the area of English language teaching (ELT). Language teaching specialists can draw on numerous positives in current approaches to methodology in terms of what some authors call the postmethod stage (e.g. Kumaravadevelu 2008) which is characterised by a great extent of freedom and flexibility. There is no single generally accepted or prescribed "right" method, and teachers are encouraged to be inspired by whatever traditional or modern approaches in case they consider them appropriate, useful and efficient. This type of freedom and flexibility presupposes a high level of teacher cognition, confidence and autonomy, reflected experience and good decision-making skills. At the same time, it also requires a high degree of teacher awareness of a broader educational context and of the importance of the concept of lifelong learning.

Establishing effective links between formal, non-formal and informal learning within the framework of life-long learning represents one of the biggest challenges at all levels of educational systems. It is mainly

due to the fact that institutionalised formal learning, non-formal learning occurring in formal learning environments but not formally recognised (e.g. workshops, interest based courses, conferences) and informal learning of rather incidental or random nature (e.g. CEDEFOP 2001) are perceived as complementary but at the same time, they bring about very different curricular implications. For example, Smith (2000) contrasts all of the above mentioned categories in order to present the notion of curriculum as the boundary between formal and informal education, thus initially questioning the relevance of curricular theory and practice within the area of informal education but finally concluding about the necessity to conceptualise even the area of informal learning in terms of the language of curriculum (e.g. informal programmes or projects instead of formal courses at school). The importance of searching for “bridges” between formal, non-formal and informal learning within the particular educational contexts is also obvious from the perspective of addressing all domains of general aims of education, since according to Rabusicova (2008) formal learning has the highest potential in the area of cognitive development, non-formal learning in the area of the development of skills, and informal learning in the affective domain. Translated into the pedagogical discourse of language education at the tertiary level, this triad might be interpreted in terms of the complementarity of formal language courses at school, opportunities for developing language skills non-formally in an authentic or simulated working context and informal opportunities to practice a foreign language in a non-threatening context, thus building positive attitudes towards the language as a means of communication.

Besides, one should not neglect the obvious fact that the processes of learning foreign languages are nowadays to a large extent facilitated by means of ICT. The use of ICT for language teaching/learning purposes undoubtedly represents a rapidly developing area, yet it might be still useful to categorise the teacher roles according to a traditional criterion of the degree of control over the content of learning. At one end of the continuum, we may observe teachers with a high degree of control over the content of learning within formal Moodle courses, while at its other end teachers deliberately resign on their controlling role and draw on the potential of informal learning within widely used social networks, such as for example Facebook. However, searching for effective bridges between formal, non-formal and informal language learning in the area of tertiary education presupposes overcoming the above mentioned unilateral views and implies the need for a more balanced approach taking into the consideration the complexity of language development (cognition, skills and attitudes) and the need for individual learning paths.

2. BRIDGING THE GAPS BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.1 Specifying the Context

With regard to the above mentioned issues, we will present several examples of efforts carried out at the Language Centre (LC) of the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic. Many of the activities the LC staff concentrate on are related to EU-funded projects. One of them, ELPiPL or European Language Portfolio on Student’s Journey through Studies into Professional Life, was an international project involving secondary and tertiary education institutions from six EU countries and running from 2009 till 2011. It was aimed primarily at developing teaching methods and materials in cooperation with the world of work, enhancing learner autonomy and promoting plurilingualism and lifelong learning. Another project, UNICOM – Innovative and Integrated Concept of Language Training towards Quality Assurance, Excellence and Internationalisation, has been running since January 2012 and will be completed by the end of 2014. Its outcomes are expected not only to enhance the quality of learning primarily in the area of Languages for Specific or Academic Purposes (LSP, LAP) in the formal higher-education setting but also to motivate the students to increase the share of informal learning in their own education, emphasising the benefits it can yield for life-long learning.

2.2 Examples of Bridges between Formal and Informal Learning in Higher Education

2.2.1 ELPiPL Blogging

Using portfolio assignments generally represents a significant innovation of language teaching courses, mainly in terms of the development of learner autonomy. Within the ELPiPL project, this aim was pursued not only by means of the tasks from the printed portfolio brochures but also with the help of the social networking platform NING. For this particular purpose, the NING platform was available only for authorised users after an invitation by the NING administrator of the project. The blogging part of the ELPiPL project in the Czech educational context proved that even lower-level students (A2) were able to formulate successfully blog posts mainly of a reflective nature (e.g. personal stories “How I started learning foreign languages”, “Why I find learning foreign languages important”) and that they demonstrated a high-level of peer support by means of commenting positively on the accomplishments of the others, thus building positive attitudes towards the use of social networking for one’s own language learning purposes.

2.2.2 Progress Test

An example of an effective bridge between formal and informal learning is Progress Test administered as described below. Following this particular procedure, the test had a dual function: (a) an e-learning/testing tool in the formal setting of an LSP course in higher education, b) a tool supporting learning from home or another informal setting.

This test was used with a total of 48 students of English for IT. They had to take the test twice within four months. The test was always active for a specified period of time and the students could choose when and where to take it. They were asked to write a short comment on their results, including a note on the difference in their two scores, and encouraged to include other comments. The purpose of this assignment was twofold. First of all, the test was intended to provide the students with feedback on their progress in English; this information was also important for the teacher. Secondly, the test results and student comments provided the teacher with data for content analysis focused on finding answers to the following questions: (1) How many students made progress? (2) What reasons do the students provide for their progress/decline? (3) Can an assignment of this type have an influence on the students’ self-assessment and motivation?

As this paper does not provide enough space for a detailed data analysis, let us summarise the most important results. This preliminary research will be further extended and the full results will be published later. The answer to question (1) is displayed in figure 1 below.

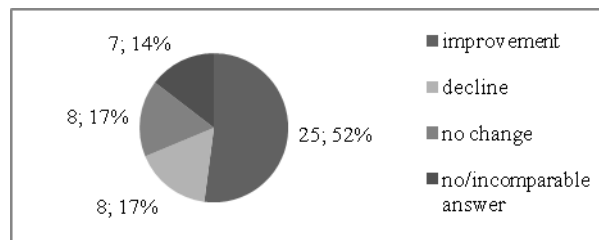


Figure 1. Progress Test – improvement

A coding technique was used for the analysis of the students’ open comments, which provided data of qualitative character. The most relevant answers to question (2) can be summarised as follows: The most frequented reasons the students gave for their improvement was that Test 02 had seemed easier to them. Some said they had been lucky, a few claimed they had been studying hard. Several students gave watching films in English as a reason for their improvement, a small number said they had had better class attendance.

Although the students were not asked to comment specifically on their learning processes or motivation, the analysis of their open comments yielded a definitively positive answer to question (3). Several students said that having seen their scores, they wanted to improve their English. Some of them expressed (dis)satisfaction with their results, which showed the tests and the assignment had given them an opportunity for self-assessment and self-reflection.

2.2.3 Internet Forums

Another example of a bridge between formal and informal learning is a web-based assignment. The students of a B1 course of English for IT were assigned the following task: Visit an internet forum on (an) operating system(s) and write replies to two different posts. The teacher found inspiration for this type of assignment at an interview she had carried out with an expert working in the IT business within her research incorporating the analysis of the communicative needs in English for future graduates of the IT programme. Among other tips, the interviewee advised to visit internet forums on specific topics to get acquainted with the language IT experts use to communicate about issues related to their profession. In this context, internet forums can be considered informal learning settings as they represent platforms on which not only experts from practice, but also students exchange their expertise, experience and ideas in real-life communication outside the education system. Apart from this, the students' posts contributed to the bank of the most frequented errors that could be analysed and worked with in classes.

2.2.4 Online Games as an Extension of Formal Language Training

Undoubtedly, the internet represents an enormous space for spontaneous formation of professionally-related groups (see above the IT forums) but also of the communities whose members share the ultimate goal of "mere" game-playing. As one of the components of formal language courses is training in presentation skills in order to prepare the future professionals for the task of giving well-targeted and persuasive work-related presentations, one of the model performances was given also by the teacher. This model presentation was carried out with dual aims: demonstrating particular language and non-linguistic means for giving a business presentation, and at the same time inviting the students to join an online game where they would practise English with their teacher after the end of the formal language course and within the specific community of players. In 2012, the unique context of the European football championship was taken advantage of, and the students were invited to play the so called fantasy football together with their teacher.

3. CONCLUSION

The assignment and activities presented above support learning theory suggesting that learning is promoted or enhanced when students are actively involved in the learning, when assignments reflect real-life contexts and experiences and when critical thinking or deep learning is promoted through applied and reflective activities (Smart and Cappel 2006). From this perspective, it is definitely worth to search for and analyse potential bridges between formal and informal language learning systematically and on a long-term basis.

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