13 Grammar processing through English L2 e-books: distance vs. face-to-face learning

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Abstract

For university teachers in Distance Education, e-books should be an optimum solution since they do not have the opportunity to flip through the pages of print texts together with their students in the same classroom. College students usually use criteria such as cost, efficiency and personal comfort. Working with e-textbooks can be a tough decision for them. However, we present the advantages of an e-grammar book approach to foreign language teaching, and put forward a learning-efficient way to work with e-textbooks with the purpose of improving student motivation in a distance learning context.

Keywords: distance learning, e-textbooks, English grammar, L2 acquisition, student motivation.

1.   Introduction

Many researchers assume that most adults never master a foreign grammar. Moreover, for foreign language instruction in distance contexts where learners can hardly be exposed to the second language in the natural environment and where acquisition of communicative skills is not face-to-face through the foreign language, the situation may be even more difficult.

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The aims of this paper are first of all to expose college students' textbook preferences in the context of distance learning in Spain, and, on the other hand, to take the challenge issued and show the type of e-textbooks that may be determinant in such a distance learning environment. The procedure consists firstly in summarising the pros and cons about print textbooks and e-books, and how they are influencing the acquisition of the subject under study: English grammar through learning tasks in Tourism studies. Then we will try to contrast how the affective factor and motivation exert an important influence on students when they are using the type of textbook that meets most of their preferences in the subject under study.

A mixed method is used in aiming at researching the easiest learning way which an e-textbook may offer in order to enhance the acquisition of our subject. Using a cross-sectional survey conducted with our students, we will demonstrate that the type of textbook is not the most important factor to guarantee the successful acquisition of a particular subject in distance education, but motivation and affective learning. This can serve to encourage teachers to publish their textbooks while paying attention to their students' preferences in either form. It can also have important pedagogical implications on distance education, such as increasing the offer of e-books to their students.

2.   Pros and cons
of print books and e-books

Traditionally written texts represent an ancient way to preserve knowledge. In fact, ancient books have lasted many years. So the question is whether e-books overlook this. Therefore, important information can be lost in a matter of seconds just because of a simple mistake of pressing the wrong button.

On the other hand, mistakes can be corrected and information can be updated quickly. The permanence of a written book is far beyond a standard e-book, so are their mistakes. From an affective perspective, an e-book may not give the reader the intellectual feeling that a written book can.

Textbooks are usually heavy and carrying multiple books may result in a strain on your back. With e-books, one only needs to carry one device that will house all of them. Moreover, today one can have access to cloud-based digital libraries from any electronic device (mobile phone or tablet). These digital libraries do not only offer knowledge to their academic clients but a digital platform which is an open and collaborative learning space where students can personalise their selections for study.

The textbook used in our research is *English Grammar and Learning Tasks for Tourism Studies* (Escobar-Álvarez, 2011). Students have used this textbook since early 2012, where the subject of *English II for Tourism* was launched within the Degree of Tourism at UNED. We had to wait until January 2014 for the corresponding e-book to be available for our students.

In order to conduct our research we asked our students to write an essay on the advantages and disadvantages of using the textbook or the e-book to prepare this subject. Most students turned out to prefer the textbook to the e-book, mainly because they feel they can write notes on its pages more easily that in an e-book. In what follows, we will be discussing the factors that should be considered in order to offer students a user-friendly e-book approach which enables them to process the L2 grammar in a natural way.

3. Student motivation

There is abundant literature on the scope of motivation in the learning of foreign languages. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter theory during the 1970-80s showed that "learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition [. In contrast,] low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety [… may] form a mental block that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition" (Rannut, n.d., n.p.). According to Dörnyei (2001), the teacher behaviour is a prevailing motivational tool: "[t]he teacher stimulus is diverse in that it ranges from the empathy with student-teacher attitudes that

conquer students to engross in undertakings" (p. 120). Ellis (1994), in an attempt to explore motivation, merely emphasises that the motivation allows learners to be aware of their own learning process.

In our study we assume that if our students freely write a voluntary essay showing their textbook preferences, they will also indicate their grade of motivation. In this way, we were not only measuring their personal taste with respect to their personal choices to use a textbook or an e-book, but also their motivation to be explicitly active in their own learning process. Moreover, our students were also told that their participation would have a positive impact in their final grade. As pointed out by Lin and Warschauer (2011),

> "[t]he most influential theory in the field of language learning motivation is the socio-educational model proposed by Gardner (1985). This model highlights the impact of attitudes towards (L2) communities on motivation and student achievement. […] This model also identifies two types of motivational orientation: integrative and instrumental. Integrative orientation is defined as 'a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other language group' […], while instrumental orientation pertains to the potential pragmatic gains of L2 proficiency, such as to get a better job or to pass a required examination […] Masgoret and Gardner (2003) found that there was a positive correlation between both types of orientation and achievement. Both integrative and instrumental orientation had an indirect effect on achievement through motivation" (p. 59).

4.   Grammar and its benefits for autonomous learning

Grammar may be defined as the linguistic system of a language. Traditionally, grammar was associated to rules which dictated what one should say or write to speak a language well. However this perspective is no longer followed by more current grammar approaches to L2 teaching. Many recent grammar accounts pay attention to how the linguistic system of a particular language is acquired and

used. Clearly, one can learn a foreign language in a more natural way by looking at how sounds or words are combined and how sentences are formed by native speakers from birth.

As for L2 use, any adult learner can realise that practice is key to performance. Since adult learners do not start from scratch because they have already acquired their first language, they may try – to no avail – to target the foreign language with their own L1 grammar. For some teachers, negative feedback is always required to acquire the target-like linguistic system. Others adopt a more eclectic method and claim that a natural grammar approach along with a task oriented performance results in a more natural way to use the L2 successfully. To do so, an active, autonomous attitude to language learning is clearly required. Following Escobar-Álvarez (2011),

> "it is clear that the explicit study of some constructions that form the grammar of the target language can support the learning of such a language in a quicker and more efficient way. In this sense, it's important to think of grammar as something that can help, like any tool, rather than something that has to be memorised. When one understands the grammar (or the particular constructions) of a language, one can immediately apply this explicit knowledge to other related linguistic facts without having to ask a teacher or look in a book, which is also essential, for example, in a case of self-study" (p. 14).

User-friendly e-books allow learners to work in a natural environment and in an autonomous way. For example, an e-grammar book can tell when a mistake is made and which grammar point needs revising, whenever and wherever learners are. Practice is therefore guaranteed.

5.   Dealing with example generation tasks

An e-book should provide a comprehensive treatment of the examples used in teaching and learning grammar in the foreign language. It should focus on

learner generated examples, a teaching strategy of asking L2 learners to construct their own examples in the L2 language under given constraints. Clearly, learner generated examples in the L2 serve as a powerful pedagogical tool for enhancing the learning of grammar at a variety of levels. Likewise, the resources provided would result in a motivating introduction to the study of the L2 grammar. As argued above, grammar points should not just be part of a comprehensive grammatical syllabus, but intended to revise and consolidate what the student already knows and will need to know for succeeding in a particular learning task.

Obviously, descriptive rules are often forgotten and what more importantly, they do not really help to raise the students' level of accuracy to perform well in the writing and speaking part of the exam. One of the goals of the learning tasks contained in a good grammar e-book is to develop, improve and practice the knowledge of English grammar required for the practice of all language skills.

It is well-known that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) or Task-Based Instruction (TBI) attempts to make students do meaningful tasks using the target language, cf. Long (1991), Ellis (2003), Gass and Selinker (2008), among many others. Nowadays, interdisciplinarity and 'task-based approach' are the terms appearing in the new curricula of L2 teaching across the board since there is a general need to teach languages with a topic-content. According to the grammatical approach outlined so far, Escobar-Álvarez 's (2011) e-textbook puts forward learning tasks that are related to a topic-content in the Tourism industry. The way to develop such tasks implies:

- understanding each task, i.e. reading through the input material and seeing what is required by it;

- selecting ideas, i.e. deciding what specific information is needed from the input material but taking care to avoid 'lifting' phrases from the texts;

- making notes, i.e. highlighting who the target reader or audience for the writing task is and what register is most appropriate;

- planning a final answer, i.e. deciding on the outline for the task, how to structure it, thinking about paragraphs and using some linking devices.

6. Conclusion

In considering learning from tasks in the context of foreign language grammar, the self-study approach of an e-book, like the one we discuss here, seems to be on the right track. First, students are active in their own learning process by having a key to all tasks. In addition, the grammar constructions include 'worked examples', that is, explicit solutions to activities provided in real professional texts, which may be highlighted thanks to the specific techniques provided by e-readers or electronic libraries. In either way, students generate examples which mirror their conceptions of grammar involved in all example generation tasks. In this way, students will process all grammatical rules by themselves in a very effective way, since it provides a 'window' into a learner's mind.

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