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The role of social and collaborative networks in the development of in-house multimedia language learning materials

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Abstract

The development of in-house language learning materials has been going on for many decades. In the past, it was difficult for language teachers worldwide to share their in-house materials with other teachers, and so was having access to the materials developed by others. This often produced a feeling of isolation and, very frequently, provoked a duplication of efforts and a bigger investment of time. However, thanks to the Web 2.0 teachers and practitioners worldwide can communicate with each other and share experiences and materials. While this aspect of the so-called Social Web has been successfully exploded in the past few decades, especially in the case of online communities of teachers and practitioners worldwide, the possibilities of non-dedicated social and collaborative networks have not been so attentively looked. This paper describes the development of different language learning materials as well as some of the steps taken in order to get collaboration from users of two non-dedicated websites worldwide so as to increase the quality, authenticity and variety of those in-house language learning materials. The materials are part of the English online Course and Tester developed by the CAMILLE Research Group at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), in Spain.

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1. Introduction

The development of in-house language learning materials has been going on for many decades, for different reasons, such as learner fit, flexibility, adaption to the pre-set goals in the curriculum, personalisation, etc. In the past, it was difficult for language teachers worldwide to share their in-house materials with other teachers, and so was having access to the materials developed by those teachers. This meant a sense of being isolated and, very often, a duplication of efforts and a –too often not rewarded- bigger investment of time and resources. However, thanks to the advent of the Internet and, especially, of the Web 2.0 – also known as the Social Web – teachers and practitioners from different parts of the world can communicate with each other in real time as well as share experiences and materials in a much more efficient way. This aspect of the social web has been successfully exploded in the past few decades, and a lot has been written about it. However, the possibilities of collaborative websites and social networks have not always been so attentively looked.

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Several steps were taken in order to get collaboration from users worldwide in the development of our multimedia materials so as to increase the quality, authenticity and variety of our online in-house language learning materials. It was believed not only that, as Tomlinson (2003: 1) acknowledges, "every language teacher is a materials developer" but also that the use of collaborative websites and social networks could help improve and enrich the process of materials development. The Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) materials dealt with in this paper are part of an English B2-level online course and tester developed by the CAMILLE Research Group at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) in Spain.

As St. Louis et al. (2010: 266) point out, teachers are believed to "possess the knowledge and the ability to design materials that would be more beneficial to our students than those produced by international publishing firms", since we can "carry out needs analysis for our specific group and in so doing have an accurate picture of the students' linguistic ability" and "design materials that would be socially and culturally relevant to students and be in a position to update these should their needs and interests change as these data will always be obtained from needs analysis and questionnaires" (St. Louis et al., 2010: 266).

It is indeed true that teachers know their students better and that they can update the materials they create, especially in the case of online materials. However, the valuable experience of teachers does not necessarily need to be used only in the development of in-house language learning materials by teachers working on their own. It can also be taken as a basis from which to develop these materials. In that case, the teacher would not just be a developer but also a coordinator whose duty would be to contact possible volunteers, to explain to them what to do and to provide them with the materials they need to use in order to accomplish their task. Such is the case of some of the materials produced by the CAMILLE research group. While some of these materials have been fully developed by its members, others have been planned by them and created with the help of volunteers who were contacted through different social and collaborative networks, two of which will be dealt with in this paper. This means that the teachers had to carefully plan what needed to be done and, in the case of the listening activities, write and compile the scripts that needed to be recorded, and then distribute them in different ways among the volunteers, who would then record them. An editing phase would follow in order to ensure the good quality of the recordings.

2. The social and collaborative networks used

The networks used for the purpose of getting collaboration from users worldwide were Livemocha, Librivox and Couchsurfing. Only one of these networks (Livemocha) is specifically oriented to language learning, whereas the other two are not specifically dedicated to languages learning. They are different from each other, although they share some basic features: they are free; participants do not pay or get paid for their contributions; they have a forum to share ideas as well as the possibility to send private messages; and users are very heterogeneous as far as nationality, age, gender, interests, number of contributions, time spent on the website, time belonging to the community, level of importance / trust within the community and reasons why they belong to the community are concerned. In this paper, we will focus on the two networks which were not specifically language-learning oriented: Librivox and Couchsurfing.

The first of these networks, Librivox, as it is acknowledged on its website, is a project concerned with the recording of audio books by volunteers who share them with other users worldwide. The site provides access to an "extensive collection of free audio books", and its goal is "to record every book in the public domain". Apart from the book-recording projects, there are also other kinds of projects launched by different people for different purposes, usually related to the recording of audio files of different sorts. The volunteers for every project are recruited thanks to a forum in which the people responsible for a project advertise their project and the volunteers available offer their help. Since every user has a profile which provides basic information about the user (age, nationality, languages spoken, place of residence) it is also possible to contact potential volunteers by means of private messages sent to users with particular characteristics. In the case of the *InGenio FCE Online Course & Tester*, the basic requirements where: male and female individuals of different ages, native or native-like speakers of English with the widest possible variety of accents. Many people were recruited and became "readers" for this project thanks to both the forum and the private messages that were sent to them. These materials were implemented through the *InGenio*

Platform, a multilingual online authoring tool and content manager devoted to language learning in the context of higher education, consisting of a platform with a web-based database offering different language courses and resources for languages such as English, Spanish, Catalan, and Czech (Gimeno-Sanz et al., 2010).

The next network used was Couchsurfing, which is, generally speaking, a "worldwide network connecting travellers with members of local communities, who offer free accommodation and/or advice" (www.couchsurfing.org). Although Couchsurfing started as a hospitality exchange network and website which developed Web 2.0 social tools like the forums, news, wikis with information about the different places, and searching engines to get in touch with people locally and globally. Even though Couchsurfing started as a non-profit organisation, with volunteers worldwide helping to make it bigger and better year after year, a controversial decision was announced in August 2011 by Fenton: Couchsurfing would cease to be a "non-profit organisation" to become a "certified B Corporation", meaning that it would become a business, against the will of many of its users. Nonetheless, the collaboration dealt with in this paper took place while CS was still a non-profit organisation, used for different reasons ranging from cultural and linguistic exchange, friendship, and learning experiences to petitions of help of different kinds. In the case of the *FCE Online Course & Tester*, a petition of help was sent through the CS forum, explaining what the project consisted in and the profile of the volunteers needed. Over 100 people living in Valencia who read the post offered their disinterested help. Among those, four people with different accents were asked to come to the studios at the UPV and record different monologues and dialogues.

3. The use of in-house materials

In spite of the growing number of didactic materials, online and printed, commercial or free, available to students and teachers nowadays, many teachers choose to use their own in-house teaching materials for their lessons (Tomlinson, 2003). One of the reasons why teachers prefer to use their own materials is that they know their students better than a publishing house and therefore can adapt their materials to the needs, preferences, learning styles and interests of their students. Also, while commercial learning materials tend to be very politically correct, avoiding sensitive or controversial topics and idealising reality (St. Louis et al, 2010), in-house materials can deal with a great variety of topics that are connected to the students' reality. In fact, many textbooks portrait an idealised world where everything is peace and harmony, safe and clean, avoiding more realistic and polemic topics that, ironically, could be more appealing for students for those very same reasons. Realistic and controversial topics are more likely to engage students because topics such as sex, drugs, crime, war, religion, politics, history and other taboo ones have more to do with the students' worries and interests. It is believed that, if students were given the opportunity to deal with those topics, there would be more chances to attract their attention and to make them use their cognitive abilities in order to deal with those topics in depth and in a critical way (Duarte & Escobar, 2008) therefore rendering learning long-lasting and meaningful (Tomlinson, 1998).

To the general advantages concerning the use of in-house language learning materials mentioned above there are some other additional advantages brought about when the members of different collaborative and social networks contribute to the process of development of those materials. Among those: the realism of the materials; the variety (of people, ages, accents, cultures, experiences, backgrounds); the time, effort and cost efficiency; the possibility to update the materials easily; the double-checking of the materials; and the suggestions for improvement.

The first one of these additional advantages, the realism of the materials, derives partly from the fact that the volunteers from the collaborative and social networks dealt with in this paper are native speakers of English with different accents and countries of origin, as well as with different backgrounds and experiences, which are a reflection of the globalised world we are living in. This is also likely to be connected to the previous or future experiences of the students outside the classroom, since they will be likely to encounter English-speaking people with a great variety of accents and countries of origin, as well as different backgrounds and experiences. This is an important difference between these in-house materials and many commercial materials in which one variety of English is promoted whereas the other varieties are scarce or not present at all. Another factor that contributes to the realism is the fact that the texts and the pieces of information used deal with the current situation and have often been adapted from texts and articles belonging to real-life media of different kinds.

The variety is very much connected to the previous point, the realism, since these materials are a reflection of nowadays' mixed, multicultural and multi-linguistic societies. In addition to being a reflection of reality which could help students to be better prepared to communicate with people from very different backgrounds in English, this is also a way to raise the students' cultural awareness, which in turn can contribute towards a more successful kind of communication, not just linguistically but also culturally. It has been said that ICT have contributed to the supremacy of the English language (Warschauer, 2001), but this point should be clarified. While it is true that ICT have made English omnipresent and essential in this field, the kind of English that has the supremacy is not an homogenous, standardised one; but a very varied language when it comes to accent, vocabulary, cultural perceptions it reflects and level of accuracy. Among the four aspects concerning variety that have just been mentioned, the first three are fulfilled thanks to the collaboration of Internet-users, whereas the last aspect, accuracy, has been systematically monitored to ensure the good quality of the materials. The reason why the level of accuracy was kept at its highest at all times is that, this being English learning materials, students should be taught the right way to say things, even if the reality of ICT is not so. Given that most speakers of English worldwide are not native speakers of the language, the "reality" of ICT tends to show a lower level of accuracy and fluency than the materials. In this case, it could be argued that one of these aspects of reality had to be left out in order to ensure the good quality of the materials.

As for the time, effort and cost efficiency, these elements could be illustrated with the account of one of the experiences of the project leaders who found the volunteers to participate in the project, concerning the recordings of different texts to be used in the *InGenio Online FCE Course & Tester*. While many native and native-like English-speaking people from the aforementioned networks contributed to the project by sending over their recordings, some of the other native speakers of English from the UPV were contacted and asked to come to the studios of the UPV for the recordings. It took much longer for the people from the UPV to get their recordings done than to the ones contacted through the internet, for different reasons: an appointment was needed, which meant that the project leaders and the volunteers had to agree to meet at a particular time that suited both; and then the schedules of the technician had to be checked in order to make sure that the appointment was possible on the chosen day and time – and, when it was not, a new appointment was needed-; the participants had to get to one particular location regardless of how far they were living or working; and the technicians as well as the project leaders had to be present at all times during the recording process. Whereas those participants from the online communities did not need to move to another location nor to agree on a particular day and time to do the recordings and therefore they could record whenever they wanted to; they could record themselves comfortably in their homes without the help of a technician; and neither the technician nor the project leaders needed (nor could) be present at the moment of the recording.

This experience also contributes towards the development of a sense of community among teachers and in students. The teachers do not feel anymore that they have to do everything by themselves without assistance or that their efforts are not rewarded, because when volunteers from the online communities offer their help, the effort-reward equation is much more balanced. Indeed, very satisfactory results are obtained with less effort. In addition, the teacher does not feel lonely or frustrated anymore, because they know they can count on the help of a huge number of volunteers worldwide. As for students, they also feel more confident and satisfied when they see that not only their teacher but also so many people worldwide care for them and are ready to offer them their help to learn English without asking for anything in return. This in turn is likely to trigger better attitudes towards the speakers of that language and also towards their culture, and they can even develop a sense of belonging to that community in a broad sense. Moreover, the materials produced by these volunteers with the guidance of the project leaders, and materials can be updated easily, since these communities are a stable source of volunteers willing to participate in these kinds of projects. In this way, all participants involved in the learning process (the institution, the students and, especially, the teachers) can be relieved to think that they can update the materials anytime with little effort, just by explaining the project to new volunteers and by telling them what needs to be done.

Finally, another positive factor deriving from the participations of native English-speaking volunteers from different online communities is that they are willing to point out any mistakes that they might encounter and that gives the designers and developers the possibility to correct those mistakes before the materials are actually implemented. In the same way, volunteers also enrich and improve the materials developing process by giving their comments and suggestions for improvement, be them related to the content (for example, making it more "native-

like"), the layout, etc. The fact that most volunteers are not language specialists but just native speakers might be extremely positive in those cases where the priority is providing real-life (informal) situations and texts.

4. Concluding remarks

Over the last decade, the Web 2.0 has provided language teachers and practitioners with many opportunities to improve the teaching-learning process thanks to the fact that this Social Web is an ideal channel to share teaching materials with other teachers while having access to the materials developed by others, thus creating online communities of teachers. This has also helped to reduce the feeling of isolation among those teachers, as well as the unnecessary duplication of efforts and the consequent time waste. This paper explores the possibilities to take a step forward through the use of non-dedicated social and collaborative networks.

The use of these social and collaborative networks can contribute towards the development of in-house language learning materials by increasing the quality, authenticity and variety of those materials, as well as providing other additional advantages discussed in this paper: providing a greater variety of topics that are connected to the students' reality thus enhancing the students' use of their cognitive abilities in order to deal with those topics in depth and in a critical way; raising the students' cultural and linguistic awareness; rendering the developmental process more time, effort and cost- efficient; contributing towards the development of a sense of community among teachers and in students; and providing developers and users with the possibility to correct, update and to adapt the materials easily. *InGenio FCE Online Course & Tester*, the English B2-level online in-house materials developed by the CAMILLE Research Group at the UPV in Spain, can be considered as good examples of how language learning in-house materials can be improved and enriched by means of the contribution of English-speaking volunteers worldwide from different social and collaborative networks. This experience opens the way to similar experiences with other social and collaborative networks which can be successfully exploited for materials development.

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