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Teaching less widely used languages with qualitative multimedia resources

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show some information regarding the use of qualitative multimedia resources that are available for such teaching staff who teaches less widely used and taught languages at different levels. Nowadays, the information and communication technology is present in all life aspects. In the Internet Era, the educational system should not ignore the new multimedia resources. This category includes the computer, representing the ultimate tool that offers a new dimension for the learning and teaching activity. The computer has been mainly associated to the Internet, a giant library and a source of information for all domains. As teachers of foreign languages, we consider that Internet represents a tool allowing for many possibilities of didactic use. The main objective for using Internet is to develop the skills for communication, for oral and written message.

Keywords: less widely used languages; qualitative multimedia resources; educational technologies; communication skills

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present some information regarding the use of qualitative multimedia resources that are available for such teaching staff who teaches less widely used and taught languages at different levels. Nowadays, the information and communication technology is present in all life aspects. In the Internet Era, the educational system should not ignore the new multimedia resources. This category includes the computer, representing the ultimate tool that offers a new dimension for the learning and teaching activity. The computer has been mainly associated to the Internet, a giant library and a source of information for all domains. As teachers

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of foreign languages, we consider that Internet represents a tool allowing for many possibilities of didactic use. The main objective for using Internet is to develop the skills for communication, for oral and written message.

The digital era represents a benchmark for teachers. At the same time we are aware of the fact that no matter what kind of technology might have access to our classroom, nothing will ever substitute a good teacher. The recipe for a successful teaching consists in that combination of good teaching and advancing technology that can create a revolution in learning, where students are prepared not only to learn, but also to create, to communicate, to connect and collaborate with people all over the world. Nowadays, educational technologies available to us bring the best opportunity for students, empowering them for their own future, for becoming successful in life. Integration of the Internet in the classroom can be achieved under different matters. The huge amount of on-line exercises is a means of exploiting the electronic documents. These exercises are used just like any other classic exercises, except for the fact that they are self-correcting. The students can work by themselves and re-do these exercises as many times as they want. The self-correcting nature allows for the removal of any judgment-feeling and releases the learning process of the burden and constraints of performance. On-line exercises may be operated in addition to the conventional teaching methods, but they may become an example themselves for the systematic re-use of vocabulary and grammar.

2. Present educational challenges for teachers of less widely used languages

2.1. Language technology and educational options for the 21st century

According to a UNESCO report on multilingualism, languages are an essential medium for the enjoyment of fundamental rights, such as political expression, education and participation in society (Directorate General of the UNESCO, 2007)

Internet offers a wide variety of applications for language teaching and language technology, such as language data, which represents a key resource for both teachers and students when analysing and collecting information about a natural language. One of the most commonly used web methods and application is the search of a word, phrase or larger texts in the target language. Each language has its particularities and that is why search involves a lot of complex language technology. For example, Romanian has the ț, ș, ă, i, â letters which on the Internet appear in a Romanian search as t, s, a, i, a, and it takes a lot of time and work to match them correctly. On the other hand, for other less widely used and taught languages, with the help of Google search engine, which offers spelling correction for misspelled words and incorporates basic semantic search capabilities that can improve search accuracy by analysing the meaning of terms in the search query context (Perez, 2009) we can use the automatic web translator to automatically translate web content pages from one language to another. Some European funded projects that deal with the Romanian language technology for educational purposes and facilitates the search and translation of language content available on the Internet which are worth mentioning the following: See-ERA.net (Machine Translation Systems for Balkan Languages), ATLAS (Applied Technologies for Content Management Systems Using Natural Language), BALKANET (which built a network of aligned wordnets for Balkan languages) There are also some national projects that represent valuable sources for Internet Romanian language technology and applications: e-DTLR (The Romanian Thesaurus Dictionary in electronic form), STAR (A System for Machine Translation for Romanian).

The resources available on the Internet represent a means of acquiring knowledge by means of original documents. Submission of original documents represents a motivating factor not only for the student, but also for the teacher who can keep in touch with the culture of the respective foreign language. This learning matter is important due to the fact that it reduces and fights against the stereotypes. The resources that are easier to be used and integrated into this study are on-line exercises, grammar-based or lexical exercises. Other types of resources that may be easily used are: learning websites that offer activities and exercises grouped around certain topics, as well as those websites offering genuine, real and original documents and content (images and texts). An
advantage of the Internet means the opportunity to find audio and video documents that can be downloaded or operated "directly", insisting on some parts or portions thereof. An extra help provided in this case is the fact that such documents can be run over and over as many times as deemed necessary. There are various websites that offer audio and visual documents (such as the Romanian website www.b1.ro – a mass media channel broadcasting live on the Internet and also recording and keeping a huge amount of authentic documents on the website), that allow for carrying out activities such as oral message understanding. Some other radio and TV stations offer websites approaching real life subjects. The students can listen to the information online and the teacher offers comprehension exercises and oral comprehension exercises based on some topics shown by way of example on TV or radio news. Thanks to the Internet, the language studied becomes a real and vivid language for communication.

2.2. Didactic values in teaching methods and strategies: qualitative dynamics

Learning is a dynamic and individual process. A teacher must seize the rhythm and efficiency of this process, must always analyse and compare the results, and also adjust the teaching methods in order to quickly reach higher standards from a qualitative point of view. It is essential to be aware of the learning dynamics, according to the intellectual abilities, educational needs, as well as interests and goals each learner has. This is a matter which depends on the teacher’s authority, responsibility and personality. We find these even more important when foreign language learning is involved, especially in order to reach the required competence and performance parameters.

Ioan Neacsu, a Romanian professor, researcher in the pedagogical and educational field, notices that all the subsumed learning processes "lead to education"(Neacsu, 1990), or in other words, "to train means to effectively apply knowledge, experiences and skills of pedagogical, psychological, logical, physiological, ethical and psychosocial nature for the organization of an environment liable to generate learning." (Neacsu, 1990).

For another Romanian researcher in the field of education, learning appears as "a set of new results produced by procedural activity and refers to knowledge, skills, concepts, ways of thinking, attitudes and behaviours." (Iucu, 2001).

Professor Ioan Neacsu distinguishes the general learning process from the learning process, the latter representing “a set of formative-informative activities, designed, organized, conducted and evaluated directly or indirectly by the teacher, with progressive developments in terms of efficiency of significant and relatively noticeable changes in cognitive, action, socio-emotional and emotional-affective behaviour”( Neacsu, 1999). At the same time, with Neacsu we can find a classification of a multi-factorial type, which includes a minimum of ten elements that are to be considered in order to ensure the best parameters for the development of a school learning process: the student, the teacher, the family, the school, the group of students, the civil society, the level of the educational technologies, the context / environment and educational relationships. (Neacsu, 1999).

As far as the learning methods are concerned, meaning the techniques and strategies used by teachers in the classroom, we find significant the principles Slama Cazacu distinguishes ever since 1973, as being fundamental in the learning process, with particular reference to foreign language learning; she defines one method as "dynamic" (Slama –Cazacu, 1973), involving role play inspired from real life situations, as well as contexts with interesting and useful topics, which can eventually be interpreted and commented right along. Another method which results from the one previously mentioned, is the method of dialogue, and the last, but not least refers to error correction.

Nevertheless, no matter which language learning theory we bring into question, all of them lead to the same directions to follow: first comes the process and then comes the result or the product.
2.3. Exploration and identification of present language learning tendencies

The new technologies represented by the personal computers and by the Internet offer student autonomy by individualizing learning, allowing for diversification of activities and of the working pace. Thus, the learning process gets a new dimension, whose base is represented by the cooperation and knowledge exchange. The success of teaching and learning less widely taught languages mainly results from: an efficient access to the latest information and knowledge, the most advanced presentation forms, knowledge assimilation and evaluation; qualitative multimedia resources; allowing a differentiated access to a wide range of students and informal learners; addressing the many different categories of wide and permanent professional learning; using some tools such as: web platforms, communication systems, knowledge management.

Using educational technology and multimedia qualitative resources represents a modern training method that makes the difference. As far as the impact of using educational technology, as part of the language learning process is concerned regarding less used and taught languages, Romanian has been part of several projects promoting language learning by means of electronic tools and Internet based resources. Teachers and students alike familiarize themselves with the e-learning environment, which represents a learning environment with a continuously increasing individual and organizational performance oriented disposition.

An example of a successful online language learning community is eTwinning.net, where a lot of pre-university teachers and many schools have joined in, as part of their social, didactic and also extra-curricular activities.

Currently, some qualitative Websites are available with resources which teachers may use by way of example in multimedia presentations, such as those created with Corel Presentations and Microsoft Power Point. In addition to this kind of website, there are some specialized search engines for resources, such as www.findsounds.com, provided teachers need to join them to their didactic material as such, but also tools and resources, software, e – programmes that allow teachers to use them in order to create their own content if, for instance, they want to do a power point presentation as an introduction for an interactive activity.

3. Qualitative multimedia resources and information for educational purposes

How can we find and select the qualitative multimedia resources?

Not all the multimedia resources are available for free or are copy-left and that is why most of the multimedia resources require monthly subscription and may also be copyrighted.

Nevertheless, there has been a tremendous effort and a large work load that has lead to some results such as those presented on some European supported project websites: www.languages.dk, www.webhead.info, www.languagebox.eprint.org, www.linguinet-worldwide.org, www.visl.sdu.dk, and there is still plenty of work to do, in order not only to find and select (because the area for LWUTL is limited), but also to offer such multimedia resources.

On the website www.linguistlist.org, for instance, there is a list of the websites available on the internet, which can be found by searching on the most used search engines, such as GOOGLE, being available for different purposes: dictionaries, which are predominant, but they are mainly important for translators, while teachers need more diversified and attractive e-tools to make a qualitative learning process out of language learning, from a pedagogical point of view, as well as interesting and rewarding for students’ interests.

Sustainable information can be found on some dedicated websites which promote informal learning of less used, less taught and less spread languages. Thus, online communities are created and a social network for e-learning, including multimedia resources and learning materials for less spread languages learning.

Practice has proven that the target groups that are willing to take part in and integrate into these communities both socially and educationally, become more confident in language learning, if they interact with each other or if
their peer is a native speaker. That is why one of the most used methods for students is e-Tandem learning and peer system, or blended learning.

4. Conclusions

A conclusion we can draw is that we are aware of the fact that using computers for educational purposes may improve the learning process. Students who use computer assisted learning need less time for the learning process than the students using only the teachers’ instructions.

As we have previously mentioned, integrating computer during language learning classes allows students to be in touch with real and genuine documents that reflect culture and language in an authentic manner. Getting in contact with the social reality of the target language represents a motivational factor. It is not only about learning a language from a handbook, but also a language used and taught with a communicative purpose. Thus, the computer provides an active character to the didactic activity. For instance, it has been noticed a lower rate of spelling errors in a computer drafted text, even though the auto-correct function had not been activated – this aspect was explained by the fact that, during typing a text on the computer, a reflection on language is generated, which is less important and less visible while writing on a piece of paper. On the other hand, using on-line exercises, no matter how methodical they are, they offer the learning process a playful character and improve progress.

All the above-mentioned represents, for the knowledge society, from a psychological point of view, a step forward towards sustainable educational and social development of the future generations whose lives interfere socially, educationally and culturally with the computers, with the on-line and virtual interaction and exchange of information.

References