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Modernizing education: The challenge of the European project CoMoViWo

Carmen Perez-Sabater^{a*}, Begona Montero-Fleta^a, Penny MacDonald^a, Amparo Garcia-
Carbonell^a

^aUniversitat Politècnica de Valencia, Valencia 46022, Spain

Abstract

This article will set the theoretical background on which CoMoViWo, an ongoing European project, is based. First, the article critically analyses the concept of workplace language teaching and learning and the trends followed by current workplace language programs. A second focus of research analyses the changes that affect the literacy practices required in the new working context, which imply new ways of writing, speaking, and communicating through different media. A final consideration of the article addresses the role of English as a Lingua Franca, that is, English as a language currently used as a means of communication and interaction by speakers of different first languages.

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1. Rationale of the project and justification

Globalization, as well as the information and communication technologies that characterize the Information Age, have changed the dynamics of modern day work (Lonnblad & Vartiainen, 2012). Thus, in current increasingly multicultural workplaces and global communication networks “the nature and role of workplace language and the literacy demands of work are changing”, as suggested by Newton and Kusmiersczyk (2011: 74). These changes in working life and, hence, workplace language, have led to a demand to teach new kinds of communication skills focusing on a successful participation in the new workplace. In this context, modernizing education is a must which

*Carmen Perez-Sabater. Tel.: +0034963877000; fax: +003496387219.

E-mail address: bmontero@idm.upv.es

requires that specific strategies of a linguistic and communicative nature be taught at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with the aim of preparing students to succeed in real workplace domains. Consequently, with the purpose of helping students to be more fluent in workplace interaction, apart from core and advanced fundamental knowledge of their field, higher education students must acquire competences and attitudes that require new frameworks for learning that may enable the development of professional skills such as cooperation within and among employees and management teams, mutual understanding, negotiation and co-planning (Duff, 2005; Yates & Springall, 2010; Halvorsen, 2013; Garcia-Carbonell et al., 2014; Perez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2014). These new requirements have also been identified by a wide range of institutional directives implemented in educational environments. Among these directives that encourage workplace-based instruction, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) posited the following recommendations to teach the new competences and attitudes:

“It is important to the language learner to merit special attention to the features distinctively characteristic of a particular European society and its culture, e.g. with respect to:

- class structure of society and relations between classes;
- relations between sexes (gender, intimacy);
- relations in work situations” (Council of Europe, 2001: 102).

Likewise, the CEFR suggests that the communicative skills recommended for workplace interactions should enable students to be able to “communicate appropriately with superiors, colleagues and subordinates” (Council of Europe, 2001: 54), since far too often, the language used at work differs from that used in other contexts, according to Lehtonen & Karjalainen (2008).

Apart from the CEFR, other initiatives, such as the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training 2020 or The Higher Education Modernisation Agenda 2011, have highlighted the importance of cooperation between HEIs and enterprises to provide the workforce with adequate skills for current business life. In this regard, The Digital Agenda for Europe emphasizes the importance of possession of digital competence as well as the need to define and describe the skills and competences needed when using appropriate communication technology.

In this line of thought, Lonnblad and Vartiainen, (2012) indicate that, due to the importance of mobile work, multi-locational, remote, flexible, distributed and virtual work is growing in working contexts. There is a need for developing adequate communication literacy in multicultural environments as a part of lifelong learning. Unfortunately, in most cases, higher education does not offer enough education and training for the specific purposes of virtual and mobile work communication in multicultural environments. The curricula do not systematically include communication literacy either. The reasons for the lack of training for the specific purposes of virtual and mobile work communication in multicultural environments are various. On the one hand, teachers’ specific skills and professional competences are not always up to date. On the other hand, there is an absence of flexibility in using certain channels, and, all too often, there is lack of cooperation between HEIs and enterprises.

The project CoMoViWo (Communication in Mobile and Virtual work) was devised to fill in this gap and meet the needs of today’s information society. CoMoViWo is a project financed by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Union in Brussels within the Erasmus+ Programme, approved in August 2014. The project will try to contribute to the global competitiveness of enterprises with skilled staff and enhance sustainable development (virtual work). It will also support HEIs’ adoption of the required changes to meet the current needs of European directives. The innovative character of CoMoViWo is embedded in the combination of communication, mobile and virtual work, technology, multiculturalism and collaboration of and with enterprises.

2. CoMOViWo research questions

As in the project carried out by Taillefer (2007), CoMoViWo will contribute to both European and extra-European campaigns to connect language learning in higher education to the wider professional context. It aims at modernizing education and training for mobile/virtual communication at HEIs, vocational institutions and enterprises in Europe to meet the language needs of virtual/mobile work. Moreover, by building virtual learning

communities, CoMoViWo will create a common field of dialogue for enterprises, students, and teachers and will make cooperation in learning new skills and competences possible.

The project is going to answer the following research questions:

- What is the CEFR level of communication literacy needed when communicating in multicultural and virtual/mobile work environment?
- What kind of literacy training should we offer to students and enterprises?
- What skills do the teachers need to be able to prepare the students for virtual/ mobile communication in working life?
- What are the forms of sustainable collaboration between working life and HEIs?

As pointed out by Cowling (2007), unfortunately many institutions often rely on a textbook as the sole syllabus in EFL. This eliminates the requirement of a time consuming and often expensive syllabus design process, and frequently ignores the specific learning needs of the target students. CoMoViWo, therefore, aims to find out the CEFR of communication literacy needed in business life. In addition, the project focuses on exploring the kind of literacy training needed by enterprises and students, regarding content, communication technology, learning methods, and consequently the skills teachers need to be able to prepare students for virtual communication in working life.

Finally, the project aims at developing materials to fulfil the needs of language learners in specific fields with the creation of intensive workplace language modules for learning English as a Lingua Franca, and Spanish at the workplace, as the final outcome of the project.

In the following sections, we will develop the underlying background concepts from which CoMoViWo stems: workplace language teaching and learning, the virtual workplace and English as a lingua franca

3. Workplace language teaching and learning

One aspect that needs to be fully developed is what we mean by workplace language and the new challenges with which English language teaching and learning are faced these days. Traditionally, as Newton and Kusmierczyk (2011) posit, workplace language has focused merely on the formal registers of particular professions and the specialized vocabulary needed, usually within the field of English for Specific Purposes. At present, by contrast, Newton and Kusmierczyk (2011) indicate that recent research on workplace language has emphasized the need to teach and learn the language of routine workplace interactions; language learning is seen now within its social setting and its dedicated communities of practice.

An interesting issue concerning workplace language and communication is the discrepancies highlighted by e.g., Lam et al. (2013), between naturally-occurring workplace discourse and the language learning for the workplace offered in ELT textbooks. These discrepancies make Lam et al. claim there is an urgent need for an exhaustive examination of workplace interactions *in situ*, that is, where they are actually made.

On the other hand, the new globalized labour market has focused attention on other issues regarding workplace language and communication such as interculturality or multilingualism. As Lam et al. (2013: 69) put it, “workplace communication is no longer confined to a single geographical region but often extends beyond countries and continents and involves participants from different national cultures and sub-cultures, at times communicating in more than one language, which presents further challenges to employees’ linguistic command and cultural sensitivity”.

In sum, Newton and Kusmierczyk (2011) have identified the following trends in current workplace language programs:

1. Teaching and learning employability skills. These skills, which are not specific to a particular industry (Yates, 2008), may include basic skills such as numeracy, literacy and using technology, communication and people skills, thinking skills such as learning to learn and problem-solving, and personal skills and attributes like responsibility, flexibility and time management (Yates, 2008). Therefore, English requirements are also based on

other skills apart from language proficiency. These include skills such as sociopragmatic competences and ability to communicate in different settings.

2. Teaching and learning social, interactional talk. This second trend refers to the focus on the nature and roles of informal, interpersonal workplace communication. Basically, this language teaching trend suggests that in order to perform successfully at the workplace, learners need to manage social aspects of interaction at work, which mainly involve informal, oral communication. Particularly interesting is the sociopragmatic dimension of talk at work, especially for learners of a second language. The learning of sociopragmatic instruction is approached by identifying pragmatic devices in interactions and role plays (Perez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2014). Emphasis on request speech acts is necessary in this trend since they are risky to perform and ubiquitous in the workplace.
3. Teaching and learning for intercultural and critical language awareness. This trend emphasizes the role of intercultural and critical language awareness in workplace language learning. These language teaching programs involve a reflective, awareness raising pedagogy, which promotes the shift from teaching normative discourse patterns towards encouraging sensitivity to communication patterns in specific workplace settings. Guo (2009) recommends that employment preparation programs should focus more on the language required in the workplace instead of on what they narrowly call 'linguistic training'.
4. Teaching and learning for employment interviews. This trend basically focuses on identifying the discursive requirements of the job interview and the problems that have arisen in non-natives or migrants performance in job interviews. Most of the teaching in this trend is based on observing authentic models of employment interviews which learners are expected to imitate. Power relations are also a fundamental aspect of teaching interview skills (Perez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2014).

These are the four tendencies described by Newton & Kusmierczyk (2011) in their literature review of current practices in teaching second languages for the workplace. Let us now observe in detail an important factor in CoMoViWo: the most relevant characteristics of virtual work.

4. The virtual workplace

As commented on in the introduction, globalization and the incorporation of the Internet and digital literacies into the labour market have changed "the contemporary world of work" (Jones & Hafner, 2012: 175), where the borders between the virtual and the real, and between the distant and the proximate, are increasingly blurred (Collier, 2007). Jones and Hafner (2012) have highlighted the five most relevant changes that affect the literacy practices required in the new world of work:

1. The shift from manufacturing work to 'knowledge work';
2. The distribution of work over large geographical distances;
3. The increasing importance of working from home;
4. The shift from traditional vertical hierarchies to self-managing teams; and
5. The rise of the nomadic worker which weakens the relationship between employers and employees.

Technologies such as document sharing platforms, forum, instant messaging, teleconferencing, email, and social networking, for instance, blogs, Facebook, Twitter or Wikis, make possible and support practices including virtual teamwork, telecommunicating and "anytime anywhere work" (Jones and Hafner, 2012). Hence, research on workplace language for the virtual work will have to take into consideration these new features that characterize the current virtual workplace and the new practices. In Newton and Kusmierczyk's (2011) opinion, this may imply new ways of writing, speaking, and communicating through different media. For instance, factors such as intertextuality, that is, the integration of different texts from other sources within a new text are now important in language learning for the workplace (Duff, 2005). In this context, CoMoViWo will try to devise new materials adapted to the new learning environment for the virtual workplace.

5. English as a lingua franca

In the context of our study, a final relevant factor of mobile language and communication for the workplace is the fact that English is the language used in online communication among non-native speakers (Duff, 2005). Over the last decade, an important focus of debate on the English language has been its use as a lingua franca (ELF) (Seidlhofer, 2001). House (2013: 58) defines ELF as “English used in a specific context characterized by an enormous functional and formal variability and a multiplicity of voices”. Accordingly, English as a lingua franca (ELF) is currently used as a means of communication by speakers of different first languages in interactions in which a variety of national, regional, local, and individual cultural identities may be involved (Hulmbauer et al., 2008). These new trends should distinctly affect the teaching of ELF in educational institutions but, scholars like, for example, Seidlhofer (2001), see EFL as a conceptual gap in the discourse of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Alongside the lingua franca perspective, Business English as a lingua franca (BELF) deals with the nature, use and role of the English language in business communication in internationally operating organizations (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013). But, notwithstanding their importance in current workplace communication, ELF and BELF have not been fully incorporated into educational settings yet. To meet the current needs, the project CoMoViWo will try to address the use of EFL and BELF in new international business settings in a globalized virtual world where naturally-occurring interactions take place.

6. Implications

Investigating the language used in the workplace, particularly in virtual and multicultural settings, the communication needs of the users, and the teaching and learning implications will be the major endeavour of the European project CoMoViWo. This article has briefly outlined the objectives of the project, now in its initial stadium. Let us start the ball rolling and see what this exciting challenge brings us to successfully improve professional competence in today’s business environments.

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