Virtual learning environment and the development of Communicative competences

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Abstract

Opponents and critics of the implementation of ICT in the educational process are convinced that as a result of de personalization of lessons namely in virtual learning environment of eLearning, students’ communicative skills deteriorate and the culture of communication declines. The opponents’ arguments are based mainly on the models of teaching where the students serve just as “a supplement” in the process of transforming information. In the educational process the students reproduce and do not produce, they are the ones who get answers to questions but do not ask. We are certainly aware that this can happen in real and not just virtual learning environment and also that teaching should be based primarily on questions. Each utterance is motivated which means that everything that is said can also be meaningfully asked about: why are you saying that? Teaching, which is based on motivated utterance, can be implemented in both classical school environments as well as in the virtual one. The text focuses on the prerequisites for communicative competence development in virtual learning environment and tasks contributing to the development of communicative competence are researched. Assignments and tasks are characterized in terms of their aims and evaluated in terms of students’ interest and results of their use. The extent of the acquisition of communicative skills is related to personal development, which includes the increasingly sophisticated and versatile use of electronic support and increasing competence in the field of application of information and communication technologies.

Keywords: Virtual learning environment, communicative competences, ICT;

1. Introduction

The issue of the use of information and communication technologies in language education at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, the University of Hradec Králové is primarily connected with the implementation of a virtual learning environment – initially WebCT, now BlackBoard – and with acquisition and training of teachers and students for such teaching innovations.

Opponents and critics of the implementation of ICT in the educational process are convinced that depersonalization of tuition namely in e-Learning results in deterioration of communication skills, and in general...
decline of the culture of communication. Their arguments are based mainly on those models of teaching in which
the students are mere “complement” of the process of transferring information, they replicate rather than help to
produce the teaching process; they get answers to questions which they do not get to ask. We are certainly aware
that such tuition can occur also in real, not just virtual learning environment, and also that teaching should be based
primarily on questions. “Answering a question, however, entails grasping the sense of the question and therewith its
background motivation. As we know only too well, nothing is so difficult as when we are supposed to answer so-called
dumb questions, that is, questions that have no clear, univocal direction of meaning. It follows from this that
an assertion never contains the full content of its meaning solely in itself.” (Gadamer, 1999, p. 41). „Every assertion
is motivated“, which means that everything, which is said, can be meaningfully questioned: why are you saying
that? Teaching which is based on motivated assertions can be implemented in both the traditional school
environment and the virtual one.

2. E-Learning courses and language education

Information and communication technologies enable us to learn about a much greater range of ideas and
inspirations than could be provided by immediate experience, or than could be achieved through independent self-
educational efforts. When adequately used, ICT enable us to go beyond the previous horizons, and to settle down in
the world better and better, interconnecting our observations, findings and information with other people; to share
knowledge, understanding, hopes, and worries, too. Our constantly restless, diversified world – the space where we
create our homes as spaces for understanding – can become more familiar to us through digital representation; we
can “settle” in it and find “flat mates”, partners in dialogue or discussion, or dispute, argument; partners which we
could not encounter in real space. This aspect of the philosophical grasp of the issue of the human being and the
world plays an essential role in the formation of our own opinion on the meaning of our own activities.

A journey to a philosophical reflection upon the situation of a human in the varied world is highly individual, and
so is the journey to understanding different study programmed and subjects. Teaching, therefore, must provide a
relatively wide range of inspiration, and also – with regard to the heterogeneity of previous preparation, interests,
different level of giftedness, ability to concentrate etc. – a certain amount of basic supports, standard, essential key
elements, and a set of extra materials and references to them. The contribution to the reflection of essential acts in
our world and our lives demonstrates itself in the development of transversal reason, and in the cultivation of
relationships and communication between the representatives of various disciplines, professions, generations and
confessions.

We believe that, with regard to the tools available in virtual learning environment, it is possible not only to
achieve the same results, but under certain, specified conditions of tailor-made e-Learning courses for interested
students in academic environment the results can be further improved. The aim is to help students to become less
dependent on the teacher in their preparation, and to be able to use and apply what they learn to continue learning
independently (Edge, 1993, p. 11-12). A good teacher encourages original thinking and creativity in task fulfilment.
Virtual study environment provides a great number and variety of tasks, exercises, and topics for thought. Apart
from the compulsory section, the student chooses optional elements depending on his or her individual interest, and
at the time, which he or she finds the most convenient.

Most of the courses, which we create for language education, are designed to support in-class teaching, and they
focus on grammar and vocabulary practice, communication and the development and improvement of
communication skills.

For students on study visits and part-time students, these courses provide the opportunity of regular contact with
the teacher and fellow students. This contact disposes of a well thought out structure as far as the content and the
didactics are concerned, which is reflected not only in the presentation of the subject matter, but also in the
formulation of compulsory and optional assignments, which are then submitted also through the virtual learning
environment.

Also consultations and discussions and confrontations of opinions can take place here. The communicative “a
priori” is reflected in the more and more precise treatment of the courses, in which the students can find not only all
the necessary items of the content of the subject, references to primary and secondary study materials and other
information source, but also glossaries, sets of tasks (differentiated according to the level of difficulty, according to the students’ interests and needs), essay assignments and samples, PowerPoint presentations made the students’ predecessors as well as their fellow students. Tools for communication, teamwork, shared workspace, etc. are also available. Students themselves contribute to the course with their work, their communication activity. Virtual learning environment is accessible at any time, from any workstation, it allows individual pace, and can provide inspiration and intellectual challenges, which appeal to university students. To make our pedagogical efforts adequate we need to know the following information:

1. Who are our students (age, gender, social background, job)?
2. What do the students bring with them into class (motivation, attitudes, values, previous education, knowledge, interests)?
3. What do the students need (different reasons for studying)? (Adapted from Harmera, 1991, p. 262-265).

Both written communication and practice of speaking skills from phonetics, through lexicology, grammar, stylistics in the foreign language, also focus on the development of competences in the mother tongue. We cultivate speech, speaking skills in the area of human coexistence, which is a specific community of university students and a teacher in both traditional and virtual learning environments. “Hence language is the real medium of human being, if we only see it in the realm that it alone fills out, the realm of human being-together, the realm of common understanding, of ever-replenished common agreement – a realm as indispensable to human life as the air we breathe. As Aristotle said, man is truly the being who has language. For we should let everything human be spoken to us.” (Gadamer, 1991, p. 29).

3. Approaches to formulation of tasks and exercises developing communication skills

The learning process implies cooperation; students appreciate diversity – mainly of communicative competences - not only cognitive, but also emotional, value, and social components should be developed. Many scholars (e.g. František Koukolík in this country) in their books and articles deal with the reduction of the concept of teaching in our scientist civilization.

In the 19th century it was found out that for most people it is the cerebral cortex of the left-brain hemisphere, which plays an important part in the process of speaking, or hearing.

Due to the cross-brain functions, the left hemisphere is also competent to control the right hand.

The fact that the left side of the cerebral cortex plays such an important role in most people – hearing, speaking, and the control of right hand functions – was also interpreted in the sense that the left side should be dominating. Overestimation of the left hemisphere was partly reinforced by the development in the sciences of the spirit. The left side of the brain is also associated with analytical, “logical” thinking, which we tended and often tend to prefer. Our concept of the world is of analytical-mechanistic nature. …This way of thinking results assumed that in our effort to give a rational and scientifically objective explanation to everything. It is a pedagogical absurdity, when a landscape with blooming flowers, meadows, trees, streams, and all creatures crawling and flying around, changes in textbook “topographic spaces”… (Koukolík, 1995).

Teaching still mostly focuses on the left cerebral hemisphere, which provides analyses, labels, descriptions, “is in charge of” abstract-logical thinking. The right hemisphere, which provides syntheses, understands wholes, uncovers meaning, “is in charge of” emotional and intuitive processes, on the other hand is usually neglected or completely ignored.

In the virtual learning environment we therefore also focus on using interaction of a variety of abstract and experimental, verbal and visual, analytical and holistic, rational and intuitive approaches, both scientific and artistic impulses – especially those from visual arts, literature, drama, and music. Components of factual, subject matter content (topics), which are logically arranged, may be reflected in mutual coexistence, simultaneously taking into account the content’s axiological, ethical, emotional, and aesthetical context and connections. In the students’ activity, it is desirable to encourage their imagination and creativity. The idea is not to bring about an a priori destruction of the knowledge of facts, but to prevent the students from reducing their studies to mere reproductive encyclopedias, and to teach them look up information, apply it, and be creative.
Which exercises, which tasks have proved successful, and have been evaluated as interesting in eLearning courses? The overview below is based on the course feedback assigned to the Travel & Tourism Management students with extended language teaching in 2007 – 2011 (118 assignments were analyzed).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise, task</th>
<th>Number of assignments giving positive evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity exercises: promptness in language</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>promptness in association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>promptness in thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matching titles to pictures.</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises developing imagination (concentration exercises, exercises</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practising free associations and their capturing through language)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mind maps creation.</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing a story based on a given picture.</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collage of interests.</td>
<td>76</td>
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<tr>
<td>Text interpretation.</td>
<td>71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formulation of questions about given texts.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises practising argumentation FOR and AGAINST the author and his / her statements.</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation of presentations.</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing essays.</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking exercises based on given outlines.</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phenomenological description of a picture.</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inter-semiotic translation.</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pictogram creation and interpretation.</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagram interpretation.</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plurality of truths and variety of speech modes exercises.</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvisation exercises.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although this was not a representative sample of students, some significant motifs and topics for thought can be clearly identified.

4. Conclusion

Both students and teachers should be giving enough thought to which exercises and tasks are relevant for developing communication skills. In the overview above we can identify a high level of personal absorption on one hand, and a high level of original, creative efforts on the other hand, which confirms the presumption that teaching cannot be reduced to cognitive parameters only. Where we use virtual learning environment in language teaching, we can say that the level of the acquisition of communication skills is related to further personality development. Such development includes not only social and pro-social competences, but also skills in using electronic support tools more and more efficiently, increasing competences in applying information and communication technologies.

References