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EXTENDING LANGUAGE LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: AN EVALUATION OF STUDENTS' ONLINE ACTIVITIES IN A VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

1. Introduction

Foreign language classroom pedagogy is increasingly supported with computer technologies. A growing number of teachers see the potential of technology for enhancing the attractiveness of language courses. However, technology offers more than just technical means and attractive packaging. If properly applied, its strength lies in affording opportunities to extend exposure to the target language input and to support processes known to influence second language acquisition such as noticing, feedback and comprehensible output production (Fischer 2007).

Computer technology supported teaching may take a number of forms, one of them being the delivery of course content through virtual learning environments (VLEs) or course management systems. A VLE can be defined as a web-based space, which provides learning resources and 'successfully acts as a one-stop-shop for students' (Durkee *et al.* 2009). Barr and Gillespie (2003: 69) state that a VLE can be seen as 'a tool used to facilitate the delivery of teaching and to support learning'.

A more detailed definition of a virtual learning environment is provided by Dillenbourg, Schneider and Synteta (2002) who discuss VLE features. According to these authors, a virtual learning environment is a space, which supplies information and context for social interactions. VLEs also provide learning representations in specific ways through the provision of various modes of

learning and tools. While working with VLEs learners are not merely passive recipients of knowledge but active actors constructing the context stored in the environment.

In Polish context, educational technologies, including VLEs, are entering language classrooms either as propelled by local initiatives of enthusiastic teachers, or with the support of local (e.g., Opolska e-szkoła, e-Szkoła Wielkopolska) or central governing bodies (e.g., Cyfrowa Szkoła, Szkoła 2.0.). However, the adoption of virtual learning environments, such as the popular open source platform Moodle, seems to be largely a grass root phenomenon and at this moment the author of this article is not aware of any systemic programme aimed specifically at promoting VLEs in Polish schools.

It is the provision of training opportunities that is one of the conditions for the popularization of technologies in language education. However, there are voices that technology training for in-service teachers is hardly available (e.g., Wiśła 2011). Wiśła expresses the view that Polish teachers who wish to introduce computer technologies into their classrooms suffer from the lack of equipment and are largely deprived of proper training.

Despite the plethora of initiatives designed to popularize ICT in schools there is a dearth of publications which critically evaluate field projects and disseminate their results and conclusions to audiences in educational circles. It seems that lack of such studies makes the process of making informed decisions concerning applications of digital technologies in language teaching a highly difficult task. In order to use ICT solutions effectively teachers need to be informed by pedagogical, ideally context based, considerations (Guichon and Hauck 2011).

Hence, this study grows out of two kinds of needs concerning the organization and implementation of language learning activities in a virtual learning environment. The first of them is the need to carry out a procedural investigation aimed at exploring and describing actions which take place while students engage in online tasks. The identification of such actions is the first step towards their evaluation and critical assessment against the background of the current knowledge about the processes governing second language learning.

The second one is the need to contribute to the currently modest body of evidence concerning the practices of online or blended learning and teaching in Polish schools with a view of informing and empowering teachers and school decision makers. It seems that only through such classroom level studies can we provide practitioners with a reliable pool of data on the affordances of computer technologies in language teaching as well as on the difficulties and problems related to their implementation.

More specifically, this article reports on a descriptive study, which investigated the use of Moodle-based *Matura* exam activities for a group of final grade secondary school students. One of the goals of this project was to assess

to what degree these students completed the tasks and what were the primary motivation factors which encouraged them to work with the VLE.

Additionally, the study sets out to investigate how much time the students spent while completing the tasks and interacting with the materials made available on this e-learning platform beyond the classroom as these might be considered factors potentially aiding language learning in terms of an increased exposure to the target language input.

Finally, the question of whether the students engaged in noticing errors and feedback giving while working with the Moodle based tasks was posed.

In this study two kinds of research tools were employed. The analysis of the students' logs was used to determine the frequency and time spent working in the virtual learning environment. Since the tasks were completed outside the classroom the questions concerning students-materials/tasks and student-student interactions were examined with a questionnaire filled in by the project participants.

2. Language learning with ICT

Colpaert (2004) strongly argues for a pedagogically driven approach to the application of ICT in language learning/teaching. Colpaert (2004: 85) explains the essence of this approach in the following way: 'A pedagogy-driven approach, despite the frequent misuses of the term, starts from the question: What do we need for improving the language learning and teaching?'

A corollary of this approach to perceiving the role of computer technology is designing computer assisted language learning tasks in such a way as to allow for the activation of the processes known to be conducive to second language acquisition.

Gass (2005) lists these basic conditions for second language acquisition. They include: input (positive and negative), intake, output and opportunities for interaction. In the context of computer assisted communication intake can take on the form of providing students with electronic materials or access to student or teacher generated contents. Of special importance here is output, the role of which was argued to be not only the effect of learning but also a factor which affects it (e.g., Swain 1995). The above stated principles are reinforced by Chapelle (1998) who postulates that CALL should draw on SLA knowledge, i.e.: learners need to be provided with input whose characteristics need to be made salient, opportunities to produce output, opportunities to notice errors and correct them and tasks that induce interaction/negotiation.

Also, online learning can be claimed to extend the exposure and interaction with the target language since it can take place "anytime anywhere" (Szypuła-

-Sajon 2008; Becta 2010). This concept encompasses both classroom and beyond the classroom learning as with computer technology, for example with virtual learning environments, tasks and materials can be designed conveniently for online access either with desktop computers, laptops or mobile devices.

Also, another advantage of language learning with computer technology is that “learners can take a more active part in their education“ (Expanding Horizons: Digital Learning Platforms, 2010). Students act as recipients of pedagogical materials uploaded by the tutor but also they are creators of artefacts and interactions constructed between the course participants.

These affordances point to the conclusion that much value of online learning lies in its potential to create spaces for interaction and communication (e.g., Conole and Dyke 2004; Comas-Quinn 2011) also in the target language. Prime examples of spaces where these affordances can be experienced include popular social networks (Facebook or Twitter) and websites aimed at facilitating encounters between those interested in learning foreign languages such as busuu.com or italki.com. In formal education such spaces can be construed with VLEs specially dedicated for the dialogue between the actors in the educational process: students, teachers and parents (e.g., Comas-Quinn, de los Arcos and Mardomingo 2012).

Crucially, online tasks may provide important feedback from teachers but also from peers (Comas-Quinn 2011). Vurdien (2011) demonstrated how students generated feedback to the written work uploaded to a blog. Most of his project’s participants enjoyed the opportunity to give and receive comments from their classmates. The written work and the accompanying feedback task triggered genuine interaction between the students with exchanges exhibiting negotiation of meaning, peer and self-correction.

Vurdien’s study, as well as others’ (e.g., Flatley 2005), stress the fact that publishing online requires students to pay more attention to the quality of their output. The deciding factor is the fact of publishing to a real audience, often consisting of peers or classmates. This induces greater motivation and more careful attention while editing and selecting linguistic expressions.

Despite the relative abundance of international research which bears witness to the ways in which learners work with computer technology, in Polish context studies which depict what and how much students do online while completing language learning tasks are sorely lacking. While current Polish literature covering the topic abounds in suggestions concerning the use of particular technological tools and types of tasks (e.g., the special issue of *Języki Obce w Szkole* vol. 3(11), Krajka 2007, Pawlak, Derenowski and Wolski 2009; Pawlak and Wolski 2011) empirical studies, which investigate the actual use, seem to be few and far between.

One of the notable exceptions is Kruk (2009) who describes an interesting ICT-based language teaching initiative. His students created their own exer-

cises with the Internet and published them for their peers. The author notes that this mode of learning encouraged autonomous behaviours, increased the students' motivation and encouraged some collaborative efforts while working on the tasks. However, even this interesting study failed to probe into details of students' online activity.

Taken together, the arguments presented above clearly point to the need of attempting a closer examination of activities that learners are involved in when completing online tasks.

3. The study

The study investigated the process of completing seven oral and written types of *Matura* exam tasks, namely: picture description, providing information, picture-cued discussion and letter writing. The project spanned the period of approximately six weeks: from the publication of the tasks on the Moodle platform through the completion phase and finally to its assessment. Written and oral *Matura* exam tasks were uniformly completed in writing. Despite its obvious limitations and shortcomings for practicing speaking skills this mode of the tasks completion can be claimed to have at least one important advantage. In contrast to the oral form, written texts lend themselves easily to a more detailed analysis and feedback.

30 final year secondary school students were to complete these tasks in the VLE, however due to absences 25 students were finally involved in completing these online activities. The main pedagogical goal of the project was to provide the learners with extra practice before their English language *Matura* exam. The practice was also intended to serve the teacher as a source of information on his students' command of English vocabulary and grammar as well as on their understanding of the exam requirements and exam taking strategies.

The tasks were published using the forum functionality of the Moodle platform which allowed the learners to upload their work as well as read and comment on the contributions produced by others. The teacher announced the tasks as obligatory and subject to formal assessment.

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How much time do they devote to interacting with the materials?
2. What do students do when they complete and browse through the online tasks? And specifically:
 - What resources do they use to complete the tasks?
 - Do they read their colleagues' work?
 - Do they give feedback?
 - Do they receive feedback?

- Do they notice their own and other students' mistakes?
- Do they attempt to correct these mistakes?

In order to obtain answers to the above research questions I examined the students' activity logs, the process of tasks completion within the VLE and asked them to fill in a questionnaire which inquired about their activity (the exact time spent while working with Moodle, error noticing and the use of facilitating resources). The questionnaire was used in order to assess the students' motivation for completing the online tasks. The quantitative and qualitative data are presented below.

4. Results

The presentation of the results needs to begin with the observation that most of the students completed at least some of the assigned work. A closer analysis of the exercises showed that 83.3% of the learners (25/30) completed at least one online task. Table 1 below summarizes these results.

Table 1. Tasks completion rates

Task	Per cent
1. Information providing	73.30
2. Picture description	70.00
3. Pictured-cued discussion	66.70
4. Listing advantages and disadvantages: a written comparison	56.70
5. Description of a place: a writing task	60.00
6. and 7. Short letter writing	33.30

(Own source)

As can be seen, the completion rate for the various tasks ranged from 73% for the first task to 33% for the last task. Clearly, those tasks placed at the top of the page were completed by the highest number of learners. The completion ratio dropped once the students moved from one exercise to another.

The next analysis focussed on the time the study participants spent working with the tasks. This parameter was measured with the questionnaire in which the students were asked to estimate the number of hours they spent working with the tasks within the four range options presented below (Table 2).

Table 2. Time spent on the tasks (questionnaire data n = 20)

Time	Frequency	Per cent
Less than 1 hr.	3	14.3
1-2 hrs.	5	23.8
2-3 hrs.	7	33.3
3 hrs. or more	6	28.6

(Own source)

Most students spent between 2 and 3 hours working with the tasks. However, the second most numerous group declared to have invested 3 or more hours into the tasks. 3 students put in less than one hour.

Another measurement concerned the actual number of the days when they visited and interacted with the project materials as well as with the work of their classmates. The data (Table 3) come from the analysis of the activity logs available in Moodle.

Table 3. The days (no. of dates) visiting Moodle while completing the tasks and interacting with the materials (n = 25)

Data	Days
Mean	5.52
Median	5.00
Minimum	1
Maximum	14
SD	3.09

(Own source)

On average, within the project duration, the students visited the VLE on 5 separate days. However, the data show considerable differences between the individuals and their activity within the VLE. As can be seen in Table 3 some students visited the website as often as on 14 days while others paid a short visit on a single day only.

Another set of questions concerned the actions undertaken by the learners while completing the tasks. The students were asked what resources they used while tackling the online tasks. The questionnaire data revealed that the students mostly used print resources but almost half of them used online resources, too. Table 4 summarizes these results.

Table 4. Assisting resources used by the students (questionnaire data, n = 20)

Resource	Per cent
Print resources (coursebooks, dictionaries)	76.3
Online resources (dictionaries, translators)	47.6
Other person's help	14.4
All the above mentioned resources	4.8

(Own source)

Since one of the most important affordances of technology is the opportunity for learning in the social context the study asked the question whether the students accessed the texts wrote by their colleagues. The VLE based activities were arranged in such a way as to enable access and feedback from peers. The questionnaire data revealed that 80% (16/20) of the students declared that they had read contributions provided by their classmates. Over a third (38.1%) noticed their own errors and a third (33.3%) errors made by others while 9.5% spotted their own and others' errors. Despite noticing the errors only 3 learners (14.3%) declared that they had applied corrections to their own work.

Additionally, the study asked the students about their motivation for completing the Moodle tasks. Table 5 presents the students' responses.

Table 5. Factors motivating the learners to complete the activities in the VLE

Factor	Per cent
Exam practice	85
Teacher pressure	40
Online form of the tasks	25

(Own source)

As could be expected, most of the final grade students defined their primary source of motivation as the need to engage in exam practice. The second most important factor was the teacher's encouragement who announced the task as mandatory. It is also interesting to note that for a quarter of the students the online form of the tasks was an incentive for completing the activities. Most of the students (75%) were motivated enough to conclude that they would be willing to do more of such activities in the future while 25% expressed the opposite opinion.

5. Discussion

The fact that most students completed at least some of the online tasks attests to the potential usefulness of the VLE as a tool which can support language learning. The study results show that the students spent a considerable amount of their time outside the classroom interacting with the materials as well as with their own and their classmates' work.

However, the analysis of the activity logs and the questionnaire data lead to the conclusion the students' level of effort and commitment varied. While some of the learners put in much effort and visited the website frequently others invested little time and effort. This can be explained by the fact that even though the tasks were announced as mandatory the teacher awarded grades only to those students who completed most of the tasks; there were no negative consequences for those who failed to complete some or most of the assignments. This way of dealing with assessment was probably the cause of uneven participation. Therefore, one of the pedagogical conclusions is that in order to increase the level of participation online tasks need to be made not only mandatory but also subject to assessment which should concern all students regardless of their commitment level.

However, even with a carefully planned scheme encompassing the evaluation of all students' efforts, it would be probably unrealistic to expect full participation. Previous literature suggests the "rule of the thirds" (Mason 1989) which states that in online learning a third of learners contribute actively, another third occasionally and the remaining third will hardly contribute with any work. These caveats notwithstanding, Comas-Quinn, de los Arcos and Mardomingo (2012) remark that "those learners who are not active contributors may still derive learning benefits from reading the contributions of others."

The learning gains derived from the project are to be considered not only within the quantitative perspective but also within the qualitative one. While working on the online tasks on their home computers the students interacted not just with the materials but also with the texts produced by their peers. These took the form of comparing their work with the work of others and in some cases led to error noticing and sometimes to error correction. Therefore, this mode of processing language tasks is qualitatively different from traditional homework exercises which are most often completed individually.

The study also showed that online learning creates conditions for learning in a social context. However, in this project this potential remained relatively underused. Event though the students read the contributions by their peers and noticed errors they were not explicitly encouraged to process language in this way. As a result, only a third of the cohort did so. Also, when preparing the tasks only a handful used the help of other persons. This suggests that the

students do not fully realize the potential of collaboration. Therefore, if we are to maximize the potential of learning with computer technologies then special training needs to be devoted to developing collaboration skills, error correction, feedback and consequently to the application of collaborative efforts into the final products.

Another finding concerns the use of supporting resources while completing online tasks. The study showed that the students used a number of both online and print resources thus developing their language learning strategies and autonomous skills. The print resources were more frequently used which was not surprising given the fact that most of the exam study materials are available in this form. However, approximately a half of the students also used electronic dictionaries and other language learning tools which points to a growing importance of such materials for language learning within this group of learners.

However, related to this is one important caveat concerning the use of online translators by students. This was a complaint raised by some learners who criticized their colleagues' unfair strategy of machine translating tasks set by the teacher. To what extent this strategy can be considered solely in negative terms remains unclear at this point. On the one hand, the use of online translators remains a controversial issue raising moral and pedagogical objections (McCarthy 2004). On the other, if properly used as a springboard leading to output processing and modification (Niño 2008) machine translation (e.g. with Google Translate) may support language learning.

When organizing and implementing VLE based activities teachers need to be aware of the novelty-wearing-off effect of online activities which was also visible in this project. The study results demonstrate that the first activities enjoyed a much higher level of completion than the ones at the bottom of the page. One possible explanation of this is that initially students were intrigued by the novel form of the tasks but with time their enthusiasm wore off. Therefore, a potential solution could consist of applying the strategy of setting learning tasks in small doses and subsequently assessing and evaluating the effects of students' work before assigning further tasks.

On the whole, it could be concluded that the online exercises were considered motivating for the learners. Most of this motivation was clearly task oriented since the students were willing to invest their time and effort into activities which offered them exam practice opportunities. Yet, a quarter of the students expressed the opinion that they were directly motivated by the online form of the tasks. This is an interesting result which points to the conclusion that at least for some students technology based pedagogical solutions offer an additional incentive for language learning.

6. Limitations and suggestions for further research

While this study described some of the actions that language learners engage in while working with a VLE, admittedly, the rough evaluation tools used here limit the range of the data which could shed light on what learners do when studying a foreign language with computer technology. More accurate tools, such as tracking software, would enable collecting more accurate evidence of students' online activities.

Another worthwhile idea would be to examine whether students' individual profiles affect their use of the VLE. Since the study found large differences between the intensity and frequency with which individuals used the learning environment it would be interesting to see whether proficiency levels or other individual factors influence the ways in which students use such an online environment.

7. Conclusions

This study offered a much needed attempt to describe learners' actions taken when completing tasks in a Moodle-based virtual learning environment.

The results suggest that engaging in such online activities influences language learning quantitatively and qualitatively. The sheer amount of time invested in learning was extended since the students spent their own time beyond the classroom while working with the tasks and resources. The increased effort manifested itself in using both print and online study resources.

There is also evidence that at least some students benefitted from social learning opportunities since they learnt from one another while noticing their own and others' errors. This is an important advantage over the traditional homework tasks which are usually completed individually.

While the study revealed considerable differences between individual commitments and the amount of the work invested, with more consistent training and an improved pedagogical design, VLE based tasks have the potential to engage students in useful processing of the target language.

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