Do-It-Our-Way or Do-It-Yourself? 
ESP Learner Control in Personal Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Providing learner control opportunities, such as making individual choices and using preferred learning styles, is a difficult task in the tertiary ESP classroom. Curricular courses can be supplemented with integrative CALL experiences in Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) to overcome classroom constraints. ESP course design in these environments should, however, focus on key aspects which allow learners greater degrees of control. The current study investigates whether content sequencing, pace of learning and access to learning support can be designed to facilitate higher learner control, and whether learners take advantage of these options. For this purpose, it analyses the design of an ESP course implemented in a PLE for pre-intermediate ESP learners studying at a university in Italy. A preliminary investigation on participants’ learning styles and navigation behaviour confirms that students chose to exercise high control over content sequencing, pace of learning and access to learning support, thanks to the design options allowed.

Keywords: Learner Control, ESP Course Design, PLEs, Learner-centredness, Integrative CALL

INTRODUCTION

As the design of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is grounded in the learner-centred paradigm (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998), fostering learner autonomy appears to be a central issue. The concept of autonomy has sparked considerable controversy, witnessed by the innumerable definitions found in the relevant literature. As an example, Holec (1981: 3) defines learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. Benson (2001: 47), however, describes it as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning, largely because the construct of ‘control’ appears to be more open to investigation than the constructs of ‘charge’ or ‘responsibility’.” In this article, Benson’s definition is adopted as the primary aim is to investigate ESP course design, which can facilitate greater learner control in new integrative CALL environments.

Although ESP acknowledges the learner as the key agent in the learning process, traditional practices have relied on the lecture-based model in Higher Education (HE), on the grammar-translation method and/or have focused solely on developing reading skills (Plastina, 2013). Formal education has confined the learner to the role of passive recipient, and often und-
estimated or overlooked the role of the ESP teacher as designer (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). Personalised learning in the ESP classroom has been hard to implement due to time constraints, rigid curricula, large groups of learners and, perhaps, even due to the limited technological resources available in the past. The main drawback of formal ESP teaching is the adoption of the same methodology, i.e., the one-size-fits-all approach, for all learners alike, disregarding the basic principles of autonomous learning (McLoughlin & Lee, 2009a).

This paper suggests combining an integrative CALL approach with non-formal education to overcome the restrictions of the ESP classroom in targeting learner control. On the one hand, integrative CALL approaches can provide opportunities for a sustainable development of learner autonomy in ESP, especially where flexible language learning systems are devised to counterbalance the constraints of the HE lecture-based model (Chatteau & Zumbihla, 2012) and the one-size-fits-all approach. On the other, the importance of non-formal education has been acknowledged by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe as the need to reinforce formal educational systems which cannot respond alone to the rapid technological changes in society (Recommendation 1437, par. 2, 2000). For the purpose of this study, non-formal education refers to the design of an ESP course and its implementation which take place within the learners’ educational institution to reinforce learner control in a curricular course (UNESCO, 1997). In combining an integrative CALL approach with non-formal education, it is, however, crucial to consider some major issues concerning both aspects. First, an integrative CALL approach, which fosters learner control, cannot be adopted in current course management systems frequently used in language learning pedagogy. Similar practices tend to conform to the lecture hall metaphor as they “[...] regard the system as a convenient add-on to an existing course, thus using new technology for substitution rather than transformation of the learning process” (Jager, 2004: 43). Second, these “locked-down, do-it-your-way platforms” only reinforce centralised control, which is exerted for the delivery of pre-packaged materials (Siemens, 2004a). In other words, they inhibit the integrative CALL potential of placing the control of learning in the hands of the learners (Siemens, 2004b). Third, these systems only allow designers to adopt the one-size-fits-all approach, so that courses may be used in other learning contexts to save time and effort. This can seriously hinder learner autonomy as technology use in one context/locked down institutional system cannot readily be transferred wholly to another (Egbert, Akasha, Huff & Lee, 2011).

In the current Web 2.0 era, the concept of Pedagogy 2.0 (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010) has emerged to counterbalance the constraints imposed on learners by these centralised systems. Pedagogy 2.0 deconstructs the lecture-based model by placing greater emphasis on social learning and less prescriptive approaches which enable tertiary students to engage in participatory, personalised and productive learning processes (McLoughlin & Lee, 2009b). Pedagogy 2.0 can thus be seen to conceptually redefine traditional language teaching practices in order to enhance the sustainable development of ESP, as well as new literacy and self-management skills, which tertiary learners need for future professional purposes.

The recent development of Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) appears to be a practical implementation of Pedagogy 2.0 principles. PLEs are, in fact, fully-fledged 21st-century learning environments, which encourage learners to control and manage their own learning processes (van Harmelen, 2008). Without sound course design, however, a PLE is simply “a loose collection of tools” (Laakконен, 2011: 17) for learning organisation. In other words, it is the design of courses in PLEs which provides new opportunities for moving away from the traditional ESP approach. Nevertheless, tertiary ESP teachers may feel threatened by these relatively new environments. Perhaps due to the lack of suitable training, time pressure, inadequate support and/or preference for the traditional lecture model,
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