Chapter 10
Theoretical and Practical Issues in Designing a Blended e-Learning Course of English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this chapter is to provide an outline of the main theoretical issues in the field of Self-Regulated Learning which have inspired the design and implementation of a blended learning course of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the University of Salerno. In particular, the first part of the chapter focuses on some key concepts concerning meaningful learning, self-regulated learning, as well as e-learning in academic settings, as basic components to achieve cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). The second part of the chapter is devoted to the description of the sequencing and progression of our syllabus design in line with the principles/guidelines for “good teaching practices for using Technology Mediated Instruction (TMI)”.

INTRODUCTION
The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.
- Marcel Proust

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61692-901-5.ch010

Online education, either delivered as part of blended educational models (part online, part face-to-face) or as full distance learning, has become increasingly widespread in different learning domains including academic contexts (Barone & Calabrese, 2005). In this chapter, we will report
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on an educational experience concerning an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) course that is intended as a contribution to investigating the role of self-regulated learning in a computer-assisted language learning context. We will first provide a brief review of studies which have investigated the cognitive factors involved in the acquisition of a foreign language in relation to the development of meaningful learning and self-regulated learning, in order to outline the theoretical framework underpinning the whole paper. We will then deal with the overall features of a blended course, describing in more detail the online EFL component. This experience is part of a broader e-learning program designed by a team of technologists of the eLearning_Lab of the Faculty of Education, University of Salerno (www.eformazione.unisa.it) and delivered by a group of professors from various academic areas (Italian Literature, Art and Design, Music, Philosophy and so on).

THEORETICAL ISSUES

Aspects of Adult Second Language Acquisition

Among the vast amount of studies on first and second language acquisition, two important paradigms have proved to be particularly influential within Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory. The first is based on cognitive theories derived from psychology and linguistics, while the second is influenced by socio-cultural theories. The cognitive paradigm mainly focuses on the mental processes occurring during language development and acquisition, whereas socio-cultural theorists see language acquisition as contextualized within a social and a cultural contexts. Both theoretical positions can help examine the process of learning and teaching online (Lamy & Hampel, 2007, p. 19) and provide useful hints for distance education designers.

SLA theory gained great impetus from Krashen’s (1985) theoretical assumptions built around the central idea of “comprehensible input” for the development of a second language. Thus, the major function of the SL classroom is to provide learners with input for acquisition by setting up meaningful and communicative activities. As a matter of fact, the development of pragmatic competence can actually be achieved through exposure to real language in particular contexts of use. The communicative issue in SLA leads to a further aspect of SLA theory which is characterized by the so called “social turn” influenced by the rediscovery of Vygotsky’s constructivist view of learning (1978). In language research, Vygotsky’s concept of the “zone of proximal development” proved to be particularly influential in the domain of L2 teaching and learning and gave rise to important tenets in the field of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) as well: the idea of scaffolding (Faiella, 2005) as the educator/instructor’s supporting action that is adapted to the learner’s needs (Faiella, 2005), and the more recent concepts of “collaborative dialogue” and “instructional conversation”. As a matter of fact, the combination of the input-interaction-output model and the “social turn” view has produced an integrated model that can be applied to both face-to-face communication and virtual interaction (Lamy, Hampel, 2007, p. 20); the only difference is that the latter is accomplished through what appears on the screen and other technological devices, e.g., mouse and keyboard (Clarke, 2008, p. 14).

In order to understand Second Language Acquisition (SLA) processes in instructed conditions within CMC environments, it is important to determine whether SLA processes in adult learners are essentially the same as or different from those involved in child first language acquisition and, if different, how so (Doughty, 2003, p. 275). Given the evident differences in outcomes, a logical inference is that child language acquisition and adult SLA involve different types of processing.