From Learning Objects to Language Learning Objects: Communicative Language Teaching Principles in CALL Material

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ABSTRACT

Learning Objects (LOs) have increasingly become of interest to users and researchers of Information and Communication Technologies (Wiley, 2002; Gibson, 2002; Leffa, 2006). There are several definitions, an ample discussion and criticism in relation to what can be considered a LO. Leffa (2006) indicates the state of the art of LOs and points to the lack of theoretical support in the production of such resources. Therefore, since more attention has been paid to technological aspects than to pedagogical ones in the development of LOs, the authors consider it necessary to have a theoretical basis that supports the design of such objects and makes them congruent to the learning of foreign languages (FL) with an emphasis on communication. Hence, this paper proposes a definition of Language Learning Objects (LLOs) that attend to the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (Canale & Swain, 1980; Ellis, 1999, 2005; Paiva, 2009) and Pedagogical and Design Usability (Vetromille-Castro, 2003).

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Computer Assistant Language Learning, Instructional Materials, Language Learning Objects, Learning Objects, Theoretical Neutrality

INTRODUCTION

The number of authorized institutions for the offer of distance higher education courses and programs is increasing impressively, especially in Brazil. According to data from Brazil’s Ministry of Education – MEC, between 2004 and 2007, this growth nearly reached 55%. More precisely, this increase represents 257 accredited Higher Education Institutions with authorized courses. Throughout the same period, the number of students in this modality went from just over 300,000 to nearly 1,000,000 (972,826, representing an increase of 213.8%).

Along the same lines, the access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has been made easier through the natu-
eral changes in modern societies in relation to Internet. There have been several social initiatives, such as government policies that equip schools, the reduction in computer prices and the proliferation of services such as those of LAN gaming centers and cyber cafés.

In Brazil, one of the main reasons for the proliferation of distance higher education courses is the lack of an offer of such courses in towns in the interior of the country. According to ABED (Brazilian Association of Distance Education), 2.64 million Brazilian citizens took online courses in 2008. Brazil’s Ministry of Education (MEC) has implemented initiatives for the development and use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in basic education, specially via COGETEC (General Coordination of Education Technology).

Still in Brazil, when we look at higher education, we can find initiatives such as the Open University of Brazil (UAB) – which started in 2006 and is managed by MEC and CAPES (a research funding organization) – and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as a whole. UAB provided people with the possibility of access to higher education programs, free of charge. Only to mention one educational/professional area, UAB offers 51 online undergraduate mother/foreign language teaching courses all over the country (Capes, 2010). Both UAB and CALL as a whole illustrate how distance education is growing in a developing country, and such growth not only justifies the data presented on the number of students in this form of teaching, but also demands quality instructional materials, suitable for digital/distance contexts. With the growth of CALL, the need for more and more research into the field of online language learning becomes urgent, as well as the resulting production of material to attend to the new developing paradigms.

To some extent, what has happened in Brazil in recent years illustrates the kind of social change the world has gone through and that inevitably brings about a series of implications in each and every aspect of society, including education. Thus, pedagogical practices in language teaching in general and in foreign language (FL)/second language (L2) teaching in particular have gone through changes and transformations too, and, at this moment in the development of CALL, it is essential that researchers and teachers have comprehensive knowledge on learning in virtual environments, both in terms of FL/L2 teaching methodology and instructional/CALL material development. Concerning the latter, due to increased possibilities of autonomous learning that ICT tools have provided individuals with, one can try and start studying any subject matter – including foreign languages – without the formal help of a teacher, only by searching and finding instructional materials on the Internet. Similarly, users of different languages can assist and “teach” one another their own mother tongue by suggesting activities they find on the World Wide Web, as in tandem learning contexts. Also, teachers who cannot develop their own instructional/CALL materials but have or want to use ICT resources in their courses – be it for their own desire or be it from institutional pressure – can use search engines and find learning activities. Such (online/offline) digital materials and activities are labelled as learning objects (LOs). It is essential to highlight, however, that we do not believe or support the idea of “technological panacea”, or, as Bax (2011, p. 3) posits, “exaggerated ‘awe’” at new technology’s potential, but we see ICT tools as real and present possibilities in educational contexts.

Thus, one can notice that LOs are well implemented in the education technology scene, in several different areas. We can explain the special appeal for these tools in education technology since they represent media that students of the 21st Century – described by Veen and Vrakking (2006) as homo zappiens and by Prensky (2001) as digital natives – are accustomed to and feel comfortable with. Taking this fact into consideration may mean that tasks with LOs are potentially rich and motivating for such students, since they provide a “familiar” environment for the learning process.

However, while the access to LOs has been increasingly widespread on the Internet, CD and DVD content, potentially augmenting
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