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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LANGUAGE USED IN E-LEARNING COURSES

Abstract. The notion of language in e-Learning is still not very clear from a technical as well as semantic point of view. In the era of Information Technology, it is more and more important to unify the principles of language used and its semantic meaning to be more simple and precise when taking into consideration online educational courses. During the last years, e-Learning courses have begun to be popular around the world as during an internet era, we tend to find consolidated information sources on internet rather than in traditional courses which require our physical presence. The crucial issue which makes an e-Learning course function is the language used to transmit all the information to the students in a clear and effective manner. For such language to be considered effective, it is necessary to adjust it to the general standards adopted in an international environment. The notion of a language used in e-Learning also faces some problems as it should be so concise as to be accessible for everybody regardless of gender, nationality, and intellectual level. It is hard to standardise its principles, thus over the years many scientists have tried to unify the top requirements a perfect e-Learning course should have. Nowadays, most of the population should stop considering e-Learning as an alternative form of education and focus on developing new models and structures for education and learning that fully exploit the opportunities of today's digital revolution. With a laptop, a mobile device and Wi-Fi, you can manage your own e-Learning course, and take courses yourself, at any time and place, in any language. A typical model of an e-Learning course is based on guided self-study with a linear progression through modules consisting of recorded lectures, course literature, written assignments and multiple-choice self-tests. Technology has got an even better solution which consists of standardising the learning process and adopting it to a commonly known level of difficulty which might be expected when considering its use by an average person.

Keywords: language, e-Learning, online courses.

Introduction

It is our intent to show all the aspects of the language used in e-Learning. Clear communication is critical when designing an e-Learning course because what is presented is not always received by the learner the way it

is intended to be. In a virtual environment, there are several reasons why learners perceive information in different ways. It depends on their cultural background, age, and intellectual level, however also on the techniques and language used in the online course.

When creating an e-Learning course it might be difficult to have control of the perception issues; however, one can remedy some of the confusion. Namely, besides good communication channels and clear goals, good perception of the ideas given by an e-Learning course depends on its design factors and the structure of its language in all its aspects. In e-Learning projects, the media category (i.e. computers) is already selected, but media types such as text, image, audio, video, and animation remain as variables. This study seeks to investigate the problems and challenges of the effectiveness of the language used in e-Learning courses.

What is e-Learning?

The definition of e-Learning is nowadays difficult to standardise as it is a relatively new term in the world of computer-delivered training and education. Although e-Learning has become a hot topic in training and education organisations around the globe, there are considerable variants in opinion about just what it is (Fallon C., Brown S., 2003). The definition of e-Learning can be stated as the use of network and multimedia technologies to improve the quality of learning by enabling access to knowledge and remote resources for the development of K-society (Barbosa H., Garcia F., 2006). Furthermore, Welsh et al., (2003) define e-Learning as the use of computer network technology, primarily over or through the internet to deliver information and instructions to individuals. E-Learning is also defined in relationship to certain characteristics (Servage, 2005). The characteristics most commonly found, and this under different forms or under different typology such as the one of Piccoli et al. 2001, Abram 2003 and IDC 2004 are: time, place, space technology, interaction and control. The challenge in e-Learning, as in any learning program, is to build lessons in ways that are compatible with human learning processes (Clark R.C., Mayer R.E., 2011).

What is the language of e-Learning?

The e-Learning course is a kind of network which consists of technological and social factors. The technological networks of e-Learning are increasingly sub-networks with the Web. A course or programme of study

is established as a relatively private network for interactions from which a member of the network may depart to and return from the Web to find information and resources or to communicate with others outside of the course (Bullen M., Jane D.P., 2007). The social nature of e-Learning activity may be celebrated and encouraged as a means of allowing a transition from face to face interactions to e-Learning interactions and through **a shared language**, enabling us to “create and acknowledge meaning as we engage in discourse and fulfill social obligations that are characterized as moral activities” (Herda, 1999) or social action. Our study focusses on the notion of “a shared language”, which is the first step to creating an interaction between the e-Learning creator and its receiver.

A new approach to learning that sees 21-st century discourses as part of the fabric of learning, mediated by electronic means of communication, requires a new ‘language’ – or, in our preferred term, a new set of discourses. We mean here more than a vocabulary or a set of technical terms that describe the field (Haythornthwaite C., Andrews R., 2011).

In order to better understand the content of this article, we shall focus now on the definition of the notion of “*language of e-Learning*”. The simplest definition which surely came to mind as a first thought is the set of transmission and communication methods used in e-Learning courses. However, from the scientific point of view, we shall analyse this notion more in depth, basing our explanation on already existing definitions. Edward Sapir (1921) defined language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. B. Bloch and G. Trager (1942) stated that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates. Consequently, E. Bruce Goldstein (2008) defines language as a system of communication using sounds or symbols that enables us to express our feelings, thoughts, ideas, and experiences. This last definition is more precise when it comes to our analysis.

After reviewing the meanings of both notions “language” and “e-Learning” separately, we may conclude that “language in e-Learning” is a method of communication using sounds or symbols used in the network which enables transfer of skills and knowledge by using electronic media, educational technology, and information and communication technologies (ICT) in education to anybody at anytime and anywhere. Consequently, besides the language issue which is a core aspect of this paper, a language of e-Learning also includes the way you transmit information to a user, for example by using bold letters, eye-catching figurative elements, colors etc.

We will now analyse a strict aspect of the language in e-Learning; that is, the wording used to transmit the information. The first question to which we shall find an answer is how is the language in e-Learning perceived by the multinational public? In order to make it less technical, we should bring a practical situation where we have two people who want to communicate with each other; one speaks German, the other one Spanish. For them to communicate, they need to find a common language. A common language allows them to use words that they can communicate and understand (encoding and decoding). In order for an e-Learning language to be effective, a simple process of encoding and decoding should be performed.

The next step in our analysis is the language in which the e-Learning platform is run. First of all, it depends on the country where the interested person is located. For example, a person located in Poland would like to attend an e-Learning course in Polish. However, this means that his own search criteria are limited, since the majority of Internet content is in English language (Edmundson A., 2007). According to the “*User language preferences online*”, an analytical report from 2011, English was by far the most frequently used language, other than respondents’ own, when going online: 48% of Internet users in the EU mentioned using English for reading or watching content on the Internet and 29% said the same for writing on the Internet. When looking at the frequency of using English on the Internet, it was noted that those who used this language occasionally outnumbered those who used it frequently or all the time. As we may notice it applies also to e-Learning courses. Most e-Learning platforms are run in English.

For example, the United Nations currently uses five official languages: English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese, and an estimated 85% of international organizations which are also providers of e-Learning courses, have English as at least one of their official languages (French comes next with less than 50%).

In developing an online learning program, language is still another important consideration. Although English is the language used in pre-college and university teaching, for many students English is their second, third, or even fourth language. In Vanuatu, for example, there are three official languages English, French, and Bislama. In addition, there are 113 indigenous languages that are still actively spoken. All of the university member countries are multilingual, which must be carefully considered in developing online courses. Therefore, online teachers must be alert that teaching materials are written at the appropriate level to accommodate the cultural diversity (Hussin, 2007; Rutherford and Kerr, 2008).

Language and culture are closely intertwined. Young people quickly adopt “universal” chat and SMS-codes and communicate globally. But how acquainted are teachers with these codes? And if they are not, how efficient are chat and other communication modes in e-Learning? What if English is the most predominant language in e-learning? For students, there are clear disadvantages in learning in a language other than English if they must collaborate with native English speakers. Part of the meaning of emotions might be filtered out due to a language gap. Bates (1999) compares the disadvantages of non-English speakers with a fictional scenario. What if China becomes the predominant economic power in this century? If so, Mandarin would become the predominant language of the Internet. Native English speakers would have to learn Mandarin if they were interested in participating in international programs (Hansson H., van de Bunt-Kokhuis S., 2004).

Certainly, the exploration of communication opportunities within the didactics and pedagogies of education has only just begun. We are only in the starting phase of adopting tailor-made media languages for specific groups of learners. More often, a teacher follows his intuition on what is the most appropriate way of communicating with a digital audience. This stage of “*learning by doing*” was described by Castells (2003). Castells shows that the Internet is a communication medium with its own logic and its own language. It is not limited to one culture. Communication on the Internet is related to free expression in all its various forms. The emergence of a new communication pattern can be observed, or if you like a new culture. According to Castells, there are a variety of processes at stake, such as integration (combining artistic forms and technology into a hybrid form of expression), interactivity (the ability of the user to manipulate her experience of media directly) and emmersion (the experience of entering the simulation of a three-dimensional environment). Because of these processes, people live in a world and culture of “real virtuality”. This environment is virtual because it is constructed digitally. It is real because it is our fundamental reality, the material basis in which we live and link to others (Hansson H., van de Bunt-Kokhuis S., 2004).

E-Learning is adopting its structure to the recent changes and commonly used information and communication technologies (ICT). Furthermore, its language should be adopted to the newly created “e-language” where abbreviations and acronyms are necessary in chat and SMS communication to be effective. Here is raised the question whether all the content information receivers perceive the codes in the way it is intended to be transferred? Certainly, it depends on the age, culture and intellectual

level of the receiver. Let's compare internet users located in the United States and Africa. As it is commonly known, in the United States it is very popular to use abbreviations and code-based messages. On the other hand, in Africa, first of all English is not so common a language as in other continents. Furthermore, if so, the average English level of an average content receiver is A2. Thus, the level of understanding between the compared countries when it comes to abbreviations and codes used in the text part of an online content is extremely different and may cause confusion. In e-Learning communication structure, e-mail is a blend of spoken and written language, but in fact all text-based communication modes are slower than speech. It is expected that speech and images will play a much larger role in the future of e-Learning communication. This surely makes an e-Learning course more interesting and facilitates the information by a visual perception of the content which one of the learning methods focusing on associating the visual objects with a specific information. Furthermore, the media mix in e-Learning is an intricate issue, when tools, programs, and bandwidth enable virtually all types of media in a digital course. The pressure to master these techniques and "act" in these channels is enormous on teachers. Required teacher skills to facilitate effective e-Learning would include abilities to select appropriate media and to master these media both technically and in terms of content and communication.

Schools and society at large should be more aware of the filtering effects of the Internet related to the change within languages for communication and as a medium of instruction. The whole society could benefit from a more integrated approach and certainly further exploration is necessary on the evolution of human language groups (Hansson H., van de Bunt-Kokhuis S., 2004). These efforts may lead to the emergence of a common language as described in part by Rosenberg (2004).

What are the factors which make the language used in e-Learning effective?

In order to be effective, the language used in e-Learning courses must fulfil a set of crucial requirements. How would the content of an e-Learning be perceived if the presenters would speak too fast or mispronounce words? Or if the background would have too many graphics coming in and out of each scene, the fonts used for text displays were too big, or their colours would contrast poorly against the backdrop? Great content requires great design, great visualization, and a little bit of editing master skills and imagination. When it comes to e-Learning, content means everything. Even

though e-Learning technology, structure, presentation and effective assessment methods are key factors for a successful e-Learning course and an enriching learner's experience, if e-Learning content is not masterfully designed, all the rest will not fulfil the role of its design. Let us concentrate on the factors which make the language used in e-Learning effective, which are crucial in the context of the present article.

Clear and concise

The use of appropriate language is a tricky matter because the meaning of words is relative and situational. In other words, words can be interpreted in different ways by different people in different situations. For this reason, it is important to choose language which is as precise and clear as possible. The more precise and clear one's use of language becomes, the fewer the number of possible interpretations for a message. It is very important to use more interactivity, animation, and video. This can be a bunch of information, lists, and statistics thrown in a blender and produced for the screen with defined clear learning objectives that are overt and simple to interpret (ideally, no more than 5 learning objectives per course). The assessments must be interactive and engaging, and must clearly focus on the objective. By a strict construction of the objectives, it will be much easier to access information as it is needed. It is no longer necessary to accumulate stacks of books. Many new knowledge management systems automatically link to regulations, historical information, new developments, and so forth making accessibility to resources faster and easier. The many search engines available allow learners to find just about anything they need by searching through world resources and hitting targeted sites based on selected key words (Mantyla K., 2001) that learners can readily assimilate. In view of this it is desirable if an e-Learning course has a key words system linked to another source, by which we can have access to further information which clarifies information not directly mentioned in the course. Furthermore, unfamiliar terms should be described and then used consistently throughout.

Free of grammatical or spelling errors

The content of an e-Learning course should be free of grammatical or spelling errors with correct capitalization and punctuation. The correctness and quality of the information available online creates trust and credibility in the mind of a viewer. When a grammatical or spelling error occurs,

whether in the content of an article published online or in the headlines of an e-Learning course, the receiver of this content will automatically have concerns about the credibility of the source. In this situation, the visual content will look simply unprofessional. Most learners create their overall opinion on the quality of an e-Learning course based on their first impressions, and their initial thoughts may determine the fate of an e-Learning course. Therefore, a small spelling error could affect the whole design of an e-Learning course despite the quality of its content.

Appropriate tone of the language

The tone of the language used should be consistent and appropriate. In some languages, words and grammar are used to convey different level of politeness. In an online learning environment, the usage of informal language may cause uncomfortable feelings for non-native English speakers (Edmundson A., 2007). Furthermore, the language of e-Learning should be easy to perceive for the users of different cultural backgrounds. Language and culture are interrelated. In preparing an online learning environment for learners with different cultural backgrounds, simple sentences should be used and slang should be avoided.

As mentioned before, English is considered as the main language in which online courses are run. Thus, in order to serve a worldwide audience, it is necessary to use ‘global English’; that is, English written in such a way that it can easily be understood by non-native speakers, as well as native speakers from diverse parts of the planet. (Edmundson A., 2007).

If an online course has a possibility for students to exchange their ideas, it is important to establish a chat environment, discussion forums that discourage idioms and slang. (Edmundson A., 2007). In “Standard for Online Content Authors” Rachel McAlpine (2005) emphasises conciseness as a key to clarity. She recommends that writers aim to limit sentences to a maximum of 21 words and paragraphs to 65 words. It is easier and less tiring to read sentences with fewer words as reader comprehension improves.

Furthermore, we should also mention, that each e-Learning course should be specifically designed for the people to whom such a course is directed. If an online course is dedicated to a limited public, the language should be adjusted to the learners’ knowledge in the area. As an example, we could bring the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) observatory e-Learning programmes, where each course is adjusted to users’ knowledge level. On their website, it reads: “As each of us have different

learning needs, our courses are structured per levels of IP knowledge and intensity” (<https://euipo.europa.eu/knowledge/>).

Well designed

Every use of language on the internet will display features that do not correspond to the features identifying that use in traditional speech or writing. Written language must be graphically translated so that its content appears clearly on screen and can be easily accessed and navigated (Crystal D., 2011). It is crucial to determine how the materials will be prepared, so that the learner can make sense of it (encoding) and determine what obstacles exist that might prevent proper understanding (decoding).

Before you can design e-Learning content for people, you must know enough about them to choose the types of learning experience to best teach them (Horton W., 2012). This refers also to the language used in a specific course. With regards to this aspect of e-Learning, we should mention two capacities and traits which according to William Horton (2012) are among the most important:

- *Communication skills*: How well can they read, listen, speak and write in the planned language for the course?
- *Background knowledge and experience*: What do potential learners already know about the subject? Do they know the basic principles, vocabulary, and taxonomy of the field?

In a figurative sense, you are “trying to speak” to the learner. The course needs to be in a “language that the learner speaks”. Moreover, the language used must be clear and descriptive (without being verbose).

We argue that the differences in nature between spoken and written communication are, in fact, a key to understanding the effective use of computer-mediated communication and, specifically e-Learning and communities of inquiry (Garrison, 2003).

When analyzing the language design, it should be extremely important to use the correct font sizes and colors which should be totally visible. Many students will remember more easily the content if it is associated with some eye-catching distinctive colors.

Furthermore, it is good to add some multimedia elements into text-based materials to enhance their effectiveness. Supporting text-based materials with visuals has a positive influence on the student’s performance (Seghayer, 2001). Moreover, in order to lead a student directly to the objective and in order to underline what is really important with regards to

the referenced subject, it is desirable that a text-based content is supported by a figurative eye-catching element which indicates the importance of the issue at question (i.e. a figurative color exclamation mark).

Language in traditional learning and in e-Learning courses – a comparative study

Currently, in the era of Information Technology, the number of e-Learning courses is growing rapidly. Most people prefer home-based studying rather than a traditional one. However, one question comes out: is the language used in e-Learning courses precise enough and well-constructed to give learners all the necessary information as a traditional course would? Six students of German, Serbian, Kosovan, American, Trinidad and Tobago, and Spanish nationality were invited to participate in a questionnaire survey. The selection of nationalities was random and aimed to gather personal views of people from different cultural backgrounds. Based on the questionnaire, there are three assessed aspects, namely:

- peoples' preference between online and traditional language courses,
- the problems they see in the language of an online learning vs. traditional learning, and,
- what should be changed and challenged in the structure of online learning and traditional learning.

The answers to the first question are shown in the following diagram in the form of percentage calculation:

Nationality	e-Learning	Traditional learning
German	70%	30%
Serbian	40%	60%
Kosovan	20%	80%
American	90%	10%
Trinidad and Tobago	90%	10%
Spanish	80%	20%

After reviewing the above results, we shall move towards the answers to the second question, strictly related to the first one. Let us analyze step by step all the answers gathered from all the participants. As we can see above, the German participant of our survey in 70% prefers an e-Learning

course and in 30% a traditional course. What is the reason behind that? In Germany, there are plenty of e-Learning courses held in both English or German. Germany plays an important role in international Business and thus many e-Learning providers tend to create online learning courses in German. However, still, as most e-Learning courses are run in English, there are some specific subjects where traditional learning is a must.

The Serbian participant stated that he prefers e-Learning courses only in 40%. As Serbia is outside the European Union, on the national level, studying through online courses is still not very popular. The first problem is language, as most e-Learning courses are held in advanced English, where at least B2 level is needed in order to accurately follow the content. On the other hand, in traditional learning, all the materials are available in Serbian, and there is the possibility of interactive participation with the teacher based on question and answers exchange, which in e-Learning courses is sometimes limited, as an online course tends to gather some standard questions and answers. Our survey participant from Kosovo significantly prefers traditional learning, as here the first issue is internet access which is split along socio-economic lines. The participants from the United States of America and Trinidad and Tobago, where the first official language is English, prefer an e-Learning solution. Finally, the Spanish participant also prefers the e-Learning course; however, as he mentioned, *“there is still a need to get further, to seek for perfection, for a new language which will be more accessible to the public from different cultural and ethnical backgrounds”*. The participants pointed out that the information which is usually presented in an online course is probably already available in a book or on a website. Thus, a good e-Learning course should go beyond just presenting information. It needs to be an active learning tool with entertaining visualization. The language used must be precise, however at the same time should include all the information the relevant students need to control the field of study. This is the main problem they have seen in many online courses which very often lack the most important information.

Conclusions

Nowadays, the Internet is the most common source of information. This refers to online education as well, as people more and more tend to choose online learning programs rather than a traditional one. Our intention was to analyze all the aspects of the language used in e-Learning courses from

a visual as well as a semantic point of view. In order for such a language to be effective it must be clear and concise, free of grammatical and spelling errors, appropriate and well designed. Furthermore, based on our survey held among people of different nationalities, four out of six prefer an e-Learning solution rather than traditional learning. During the survey, we could understand that the most common problem when assessing the effectiveness of the language used in e-Learning course is its structure, and the dominant position of the English language, in which most online courses are run.

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