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ICT AS THE SPRINGBOARD FOR THE CREATION OF MORE OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE PRONUNCIATION CLASS

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Introduction

One of the main concerns explored in contemporary research in education has been the ultimate purpose of learning development: whether teachers should aim at transmitting mostly content, or rather at fostering the development of certain abilities or skills. In the case of language acquisition, the debate started in the 1970s, with authors proposing new theories in response to traditional ways of teaching, such as the theory of the “Zone of Proximal Development”, ZPD (Vygostky, 1978; Wells, 1999). Over the years, these studies led to new student-need-centred methodologies, as opposed to the conventional syllabus-completion focus (Gardner, 1985; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In so doing, issues such as motivation, autonomy and scaffolding through peer support have gained ground in societies where new technologies, mostly ICT, play a most important role in education, and where the need to adapt to these changes and advances becomes essential (Rogers, 1969). In this context, educators need to be conscious of the fact that these new technologies can enhance teaching and learning, and that they foster motivation greatly (Sharma & Barret, 2007; Willis, 1998). This presentation will be aimed at shedding light on improvements on some teaching methods and techniques as an attempt to address the needs of constant technological evolution in society. We will focus on the description and analysis of some technology-mediated collaborative tasks designed to motivate and help students improve their pronunciation skills in the context of Vygotsky’s ZPD theory, and mostly employed on Social Networks or students’ Personal Learning Environments (PLEs). The analysis will be carried out from our perspective as members of the chair of Práctica de la Pronunciación at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad de Córdoba.

The Zone of Proximal Development and Collaborative Learning

Vygotsky propounded the idea of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which was defined as the distance between the actual developmental level, which is determined and measured by independent problem-solving, and the potential level of development, which is achieved by

independent problem-solving under adult supervision or in collaboration with more capable peers (1987). In a nutshell, Vygotsky's concept brought forward the importance of what learners can achieve with the aid of someone who possesses higher skills. Thus, given the prospective potential of mental development within the ZPD, learning will be greatly enhanced by fostering the emergence of the ZPD in the classroom, and by providing the scaffolding which stems from assistance by and collaboration with a more competent peer. Collaboration becomes, therefore, a central issue in learning. Therefore, activities or tasks that entail collaborative learning, which go hand in hand with Vygotsky's notion of the social construction of knowledge, need to be designed and structured or scaffolded by the teacher (Barkley, et. al., 2005), who will provide tasks which aim at fostering movements away from the cognitive "comfort zone" into instances of aided learning and higher cognitive attainment.

Scaffolding and Modelling in Pronunciation

In pronunciation training, if the teacher represents the only source of modelling and aid, the possibilities of creating ZPD opportunities are solely restricted to teacher availability. However, with the intervention of other agents, and especially with the aid of technology-mediated resources and the assistance of more capable peers in a social environment that is less threatening and more motivating for students, ZPD possibilities can be significantly enlarged. Such is the case of the use of videos where more than one acceptable model is made available, and which can become a source of scaffolding and collaborative practice in social networks like Facebook or in the students' own Personal Learning Environments (PLE).

In this context, another important question arises: What models are suitable for pronunciation modelling? In the realm of pronunciation instruction, the concern is clearly no longer related to pursuing a native-like pronunciation, especially after the emergence of theories explaining the existence of many *Englishes* (Crystal, 1997), rather than one single language to serve the purposes of pronunciation modelling. This goes in parallel with the fact that students are nowadays more exposed to such varieties of English, due to the easy access to foreign media. Given such exposure, we believe that instructors should be concerned with facilitating tools for students to explore their own possibilities when it comes to pronunciation skills, and that the focus should be placed on the attainment of *comfortable intelligibility* as a valuable and realistic pronunciation goal. Such conception of intelligibility is one which can ensure effective and efficient pronunciation and fully reveal the speaker's intention. Effectiveness in communication entails the achievement of the desired results, and efficiency

is ensures the smooth flow of communication and while not placing too high a demand on either the speaker or the listener (Kenworthy, 1996).

The presence of different agents who act as models in the classroom is of utmost importance, and therefore, the student-helpers fulfil an essential role which goes in parallel with the fact that there should be different, rather than a single, pronunciation model. Although their main role is to act as a communication “bridge” between the students and the teachers, in the case of the pronunciation class, student-helper’s aid acquires different significance. Being more advanced and experienced themselves, they are in a higher position than the learners taking the course, but they are still students, which entails that the pupils can relate to them and in turn see them as another possible, and many times more attainable, sound pronunciation model.

Suitable Environments for Opportunities of ZPD and Collaborative Learning

In times characterised by a ubiquitous presence of technology, concepts such as *Blended Learning* come into the spotlight. This approach has been described as one in which first person interaction is combined with, or rather enhanced by, distance interaction and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). As Sharma and Barret (2007) have pointed out, technology empowers learners to take a certain amount of control over their own learning process, as they can learn at their own pace and making the most of their own PLE. Besides, as Willis has proposed, “learners learn through direct experience of language in use (exposure) and through language for themselves (use).” (Willis, 1998, p. 6) A most effective way of encouraging students to experience this kind of ZPD-enhancement-oriented learning is by giving them the possibility of having the command of their own PLE through the inclusion of Virtual Learning Environments on their personal desktop. Such strategy offers the students the chance to expand their learning skills on their own, using tools which are current in their everyday life, and which are natural to them. Therefore, the learners can expand their ZPD by working progressively towards more autonomous learning.

Another most salient advantage of the use of PLEs and VLEs is the development of collaborative skills. It is evident that VLEs help increase the interaction between educators and learners outside the classroom, but they also provide the opportunity to interact with fellow students, which greatly contributes to collaborative learning. As mentioned above, for the purposes of this project, Facebook was exploited as a VLE. The choice of such tool was not made at random, as it was a fact that the participants were more than familiar with this tool, and also because they already interacted among themselves using this social network. The

student-helpers had created a closed group on Facebook with the purpose of incorporating external consultation into the development of their role as part of the teaching team.

Methodology

The current report is based on students' production collected via the Facebook-originated VLE and on feedback collected via a Google Form based on their own taking part in the tasks proposed on the Facebook group. Students were requested to briefly expose a personal appraisal of their experience as participants, focusing on aspects such as: usefulness of the tasks provided in relation to the demands of the course, possible improvements with their involvement as active students, and personal appreciation of the tasks.

Participants

We carried out this study with a group of students from the first year of the English courses of studies at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. Although 62 students enrolled in this course in this group at the beginning of the year, the number of students regularly attending Pronunciation Practice classes was on average 40. The topics are generally presented and practised actively during class time; and one of the key exercises in the syllabus is the phonetic dictation. In this kind of exercise, the instructor reads a passage out loud and the students write down the dictation using phonetic symbols. Therefore, for this activity there is the need of the presence of the pronunciation model, that is the instructors, and thus the amount of practice is generally reduced to class time. In this sense, virtual activities allow students to gain access to extra training in their PLEs.

Tasks

The focus of this group was mainly on the development of dictation skills, which is one of the least practiced in class, due to time restrictions. As discussed above, this particular activity requires the physical presence of the instructor, which generated the challenge of thinking of a form of adapting it for a virtual environment. The outcome was recorded videos of dictation passages. The footage showed a frame of the instructors' mouths reading a passage for transcription in three stages, as is the case in classroom situations: first, a general non-stop reading from beginning to end, for students to get a general panorama of the passage; second, a chunk-by-chunk, slow reading, repeating each utterance twice, for students to transcribe; and third, another run-on reading, for control.

The videos were uploaded onto the group and the participants were given a two- to three-day period for completing the task and uploading their own work, or else sending it privately to the instructors' message inbox. After this period, the key to the exercise was uploaded, for students to assess themselves and ask for any clarifications in case they had any queries about each specific task.

Virtual Resources

All the members of the chair, including student-helpers, took part in the video-recording sessions, under the close supervision of the head teacher. The reading out was adequately paused and physical modelling was ensured by a focus on the face while filming, so that speaker intention via non-verbal communication clues was also revealed. If mistakes had been originally made by the speaker involved in reading, these were not erased but improved by some kind of friendly teacher intervention, which reinforced the concept of the necessity of scaffolding and guidance, while such guidance was carried out in a certainly non-threatening manner.

Data collection and analysis

Of the total number of 30 students who took part, 28 of them completed the activities and gave the tutors their feedback on the experience. The assessments were varied both in length and in the answers provided – some of the answers were short but accurate, while some others were detailed and more extended. Even though the number might seem rather reduced, we believe that it is representative of the active student population, seeing as the number of regular attendees in the group is 40.

Some of the results were as follows:

- By analysing the progression in their production, virtually all of the students showed a considerable improvement in the dictation skills. The number of mistakes per passage transcription diminished significantly, and the inaccuracies became less repetitive.
- Around 92% of the students declared in their reports that these activities helped them make up for the lack of classroom practice, and this, in turn, aided to their keeping up with the demands of the subject.

- Nearly 40% of the participants expressed the benefit that after interacting among their peers and student-helpers outside the classroom, they became more confident when actively participating in the forthcoming lessons.
- In total, almost 86% of the reports conveyed that they had found the activities appealing and rather interesting, and even fun, which kept them motivated to continue working, apart from the usefulness in terms of skill-development.

Concluding remarks

Broadly speaking, we can conclude that the current report attests to the fact that the use of VLEs can help improve ZPD, as the students have the possibility of gradually progressing from their comfort zone, with the teacher's guidance, to work towards a more autonomous learning. In turn, availability of video resources, which provide not only oral but also visual stimuli of proficient, though varied, model speakers, can be added to the reservoir of digital materials students can actively use, and provide guided scaffolding to maximise the emergence of ZPD and opportunities for collaborative learning. As can be derived from what the participants themselves pointed out, this progression towards collaborative though autonomous learning – since the learning process can be self-regulated in terms of timing and pacing – carried out via on their own PLEs boosts their confidence and motivates them to behave as active parties in the teaching/learning process.

The fact that the learners are exposed to more than one pronunciation model helps create a more comfortable atmosphere for them, and the pressure is eased, as they can see that they have a broader range of models to follow. Furthermore, the feeling of certainty that there are more achievable or realistic goals and models, who speak a *comfortably intelligible* variety of English (Kenworthy, 1996), helps them be more at ease with themselves and their own performance. The variety offered in the materials available to the students also helps make a statement about the validity of English as an International Language, which is very much in keeping with present-day global tendencies (McKay, 2002). This flexibility is enhanced, in turn, by the absence of the teacher-figure in their PLEs.

We believe that virtual activities of this kind, which are every time more pursuable due to technological advances, will continue to provide opportunities for higher levels of performance as students, moving away from their comfort zone into the acquisition of sounder pronunciation skills through the guidance of a more able peer, take their initial steps towards proficient pronunciation acquisition in a teacher-training programmes at university level.

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