Correction in e-Learning Foreign Languages

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Abstract: - This approach focuses on reducing the frequency of errors in engineering students’ English, learnt and practised via web-based platforms. Mistakes and misunderstandings are often associated with emotional distress, but they are important as learning stages. Correcting them should generate encouragement, a stronger motivation for improvement and a positive attitude towards further learning, thus influencing accuracy and fluency in the long run. There are various types of correction in e-learning a foreign language: self correction, peer correction, teacher correction, delayed correction, correction groups, global correction, correction by means of rewriting and drills. Last but not least, it could be important to talk about teacher’s correctness – the over correct teacher and the teacher as a linguistic model, who are not central figures in e-learning any longer.

Key-Words: - linguistic/stylistic error, e-learning foreign languages, engineering, correction, fluency, accuracy

1 Introduction

Professors spend a lot of time tracking students’ mistakes and correcting them, but the teaching / learning activity is not restricted to this. Communication errors are just as important as mathematical or technological errors, because they generically lead to waste and danger. Didactic attitudes towards errors and students’ attitudes towards correction may be even more important if we consider the broader context of working interaction and the long-term educational objectives, as well as the standards students have to meet.

E-Learning defines all types of technology-enhanced learning, where technology supports the learning process via computers. E-learning has been defined as pedagogy empowered by digital technology. In some cases, no face-to-face interaction takes place. E-learning is used interchangeably in a wide variety of contexts. In companies, it refers to the strategies using the company network to deliver training courses to employees. In some countries, it is defined as a planned teaching/learning experience with a wide spectrum of technologies, Internet or computer-based, to reach learners. In universities, e-learning defines a specific mode to attend courses or study programmes where students rarely, if ever, have to come to face-to-face or on-campus meetings.

2 Problem Formulation:

The North American Council for Online Learning developed quality standards and they were released on the 21st of February 2008. It is thought to be a solid first step in monitoring the performance levels, content and deployment modalities of online programs. Their use could address the criticism surrounding the quality of e-learning. The new standards deal with the issues that are at the core of the controversy of such programs. What appears to be interesting indeed is the possibility that these new standards should be used to formulate professional development programs to foster quality teaching.

Virtual learning has been fighting a reputation for low quality instruction and learning and the culprits appear to be the low quality programs that have failed to achieve their goals.

2.1 Goals and benefits of e-learning

E-learning lessons are generally designed to guide students through information or to help students perform specific tasks. Information based e-learning content communicates essential data to the student. Examples include content that distributes the history or the facts related to a service, company, or product. In information-based content, there is no specific skill to be learned, but in performance-based content, the lessons build a procedural skill in which the student is expected to increase proficiency. E-learning can provide four major benefits for the organizations and individuals involved:

- Access to quality education: instructors of the highest calibre share their knowledge across borders, allowing students to attend courses across physical, political, and social boundaries. Recognized experts have the opportunity of distributing information internationally at minimum costs.
• Affordable education: e-learning can drastically reduce the costs of higher education, making it much more affordable and accessible to the public. An internet connection, a computer, and a projector would allow an entire classroom in a third world university to benefit from the knowledge of an instructor who performs at an appreciable distance.

• Convenience and flexibility to learners: in many contexts, e-learning is self-paced and the learning sessions are available 24/7. Learners are not bound to a specific day/time to physically attend classes. They can also pause at their convenience.

• Environmental impact: e-learning allows people to avoid extensive travelling, and the ensuing pollution. Taking place in a virtual environment, it also reduces paper usage.

2.2 Market
Worldwide, e-learning industry is worth over 38 billion euros, according to conservative estimates. In the European Union only about 20% of e-learning products are generated within the common market. Developments in internet and multimedia technologies are the basic enabler of e-learning, with content, technologies and services being identified as the three key sectors of this industry. E-learning captures a large proportion of learning activities both in academic and in industrial environments. Academics say that students appear to be at least as satisfied with their on-line courses as they are with traditional ones. Private institutions may become more involved with on-line courses as the cost of instituting the system decreases. Properly trained staff must be hired to work with students on-line. They must understand the content and manage computers / Internet professionally.

2.3 Web-based content and pedagogical approaches
Content is a core component of e-learning and includes issues such as pedagogy and learning object re-use. Pedagogical elements are an attempt to define structures or units of educational material, for example a lesson, an assignment, a multiple choice question, a quiz, a discussion group or a case study. These units should have an independent format, so, although they may be implemented in any of the following methods, pedagogical structures would not include a textbook, a web page, a video conference or Podcast.

When beginning to create e-learning content, the pedagogical approaches need to be evaluated. Simple pedagogical approaches make it easy to create content, but lack flexibility, richness and downstream functionality.

On the other hand, complex pedagogical approaches can be difficult to set up, and slow to develop, though they have the potential to provide more engaging learning experiences for students.

Somewhere between these extremes there is an ideal pedagogy which allows a particular educator to effectively create educational materials while simultaneously providing the most engaging educational experiences for students.

The terms Online Learning or Online Education generally refer to purely web-based learning.

In cases where mobile technologies are used, the term M-learning has become more common.

E-learning, however, also has implications beyond mere technology, and refers to the actual learning that takes place using these systems. E-learning is naturally suited to distance learning and flexible learning, but can also be used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching, in which case the term blended learning is commonly used.

E-learning should mean exciting, energetic, enthusiastic, emotional, extended, excellent, and educational, in addition to electronic. E-learning can also refer to educational web sites such as those offering learning scenarios, worksheets and interactive exercises for all age students.

The term is also used extensively in the business sector where it generally refers to cost-effective online training. This broader interpretation allows for 21st century applications and brings learning and media psychology into the equation.

In higher education especially, the increasing tendency is to create a virtual learning environment which is sometimes combined with a management information system to create a managed learning environment where all aspects of a course are handled through a consistent user interface standard throughout the institution.

In addition, several universities offer online student support services, such as online advising and registration, e-counseling, online textbook purchase, student governments and student newspapers.

2.4 Web-based testing, evaluation and error correction
Distance education has long had trouble with mistake correction and testing. The delivery of testing materials is direct, which insures its availability to the student, to be read at leisure. The problem arises when the student is required to complete assignments and testing. Online courses
have had difficulty in controlling possible cheating in quizzes, tests, or examinations, because of the lack of supervised control. In a classroom situation a teacher can monitor students and visually uphold a level of integrity consistent with an institution's reputation. However, with distance education the student can be removed from supervision completely. Some institutions address integrity issues concerning testing by requiring students to take examinations in a controlled setting. Assignments have adapted by becoming larger, longer, and more thorough, so as to test for knowledge by forcing the student to research the subject and prove they have done the work. Quizzes are a popular form of testing knowledge and many courses go by the honor system regarding cheating. Even if the student is checking questions in the textbook or online, there may be an enforced time limit or the quiz may be worth so little in the overall mark that it becomes inconsequential. Exams and bigger tests may be harder to regulate. Many midterms and final examinations are held in a common location so that professors can supervise directly. When the Internet became a popular medium for distance education, many websites were founded offering secure exam software and packages to help professors manage students more effectively.

Web-based tests have results available immediately and credit is awarded on pass or fail. Learners employ various learning strategies to develop their newly acquired language or target language skills. The different kinds of errors learners produce reflect different learning strategies. For example, omission errors suggest that learners are in some way, simplifying the task by ignoring grammatical features that they are not yet ready to process. Over-generalisation and transfer errors can also be seen as evidence of learning strategies.

2.5 Computer-aided assessment and mistake correction

It is becoming increasingly common, and it is also referred to as e-assessment, ranging from automated multiple-choice tests to more sophisticated designs. With some systems, feedback can be geared towards a student's specific mistakes, or the computer can navigate the student through a series of questions adapting to what the student appears to have learned or not learned.

Throughout time, researchers have focused on learners’ errors, developing procedures for identifying, describing, explaining and evaluating them. These studies have revealed that learners’ errors are systematic and that they reflect the stage of development a student has reached. Another important finding is that learners seem to go beyond the available input, producing errors that show they actively construct rules, which guide their performance in the target language.

Subsequently, teachers have focused on exploring the regularities of foreign language acquisition by searching for sequences of such acquisition. They have found evidence to suggest that learners regularly master some grammatical features before others. However, they have soon recognised that treating foreign language acquisition as if it involved an accumulation of grammatical features misrepresents what actually occurs. Increasingly, descriptive research in foreign language learning has focused on how students acquire specific grammatical subsystems such as negatives, interrogatives, relative clauses, and verb tenses. Thus, it has been made clear that grammar features manifest obvious developmental sequences, not evident in the input to which learners are exposed. All students seem to be actively involved in shaping the way they acquire a foreign language.

Research has pointed out another aspect as well: learners use their linguistic sources in predictable ways. The use of specific grammatical forms has been shown to vary according to the linguistic context, the situational context (who the learner is addressing), and the psycholinguistic context (whether the learner has an opportunity to plan).

3 Problem Solution

With the rapid expansion of virtual universities over the past ten years, questions remain about accreditation, assessment, and reputation for quality. Not all virtual universities are created equal. Accreditation, by a governing body, is needed to assure students that the online institute possesses certified online instructors who have the expertise and educational qualifications to design and carry out the curriculum. Assessment needs to be closely monitored in any institution, but especially in virtual universities. Without assessment, there would be no measure to determine levels of current knowledge or whether the learning objective was accomplished. Reputation for quality is important because employers will be more likely to hire a student who got the degree online from an accredited university with a good name, than from one with a bad image. Respondents in polls on online degrees will rate a Stanford degree the same, (earned online or on-campus), because they recognize the name of the institution granting the degree.
3.1 Categories of mistakes in e-learning foreign languages

Mistakes may be generated by the influence of the mother tongue, by misunderstanding the rule and by lack of concentration. According to the level of knowledge, linguistic mistakes are divided into:

- Slips, which a student can self-correct.
- Errors corrected by peers, but not by the student on his own; here the linguistic meaning is clear and shows that only one specific learner is not yet familiar with the grammar rule required.
- Attempts, where students have no idea how to structure what they want to say, as the meaning is too difficult for their present level of knowledge.
- The students’ native language is one of the sources of error. This influence is a negative transfer. However, in some cases, the mother tongue can facilitate foreign language acquisition. Native language transfer can also result in avoidance. Finally, mother tongue transfer may be reflected in the overuse of some forms. Over the time, many comparisons mother tongue/ target language have been carried out using contrastive analysis, and the resulting list of differences has been used for deciding on the content of teaching materials.
- The learner’s stage of development has also been found to influence mother tongue transfer. This is clearly evident in the way students acquire speech acts like requests, apologies and refusals.
- The starting point is not the native language and learners do not proceed by replacing mother tongue rules with foreign language rules. They construct their own interim rules within the framework of cross-linguistic influences.

3.2 Correction strategies for e-learning

There are many modalities of correction, all aimed at creating a more active and responsible attitude in the learner’s mind.

- Teacher correction means that the teacher has to provide more help and not give the correct form immediately. He has to focus the student’s attention on the place where the mistakes occur. Some teachers encourage their students, while others do not get involved in praising or criticising them.
- Self correction is used for slips and it seems very efficient, because it is easier to remember.
- Peer correction is used for errors and has certain advantages: both learners are involved in listening to and thinking about the language; the teacher gets important information about the students’ abilities; students learn from each other, becoming less dependent on the support; and, last but not least, students cooperate, providing constructive criticism.
- Delayed correction means making a list of the mistakes heard or found in the written pieces. Later on, such examples of typical mistakes will appear on a discussion board, allowing the students to correct them and explain the reasons. It is a good chance for providing new language input or for reinforcing certain grammar rules.
- The use of observers is very profitable. One student in the group assumes such a role, writing down all the mistakes that occur in conversations during the learning sessions. Once the activity is finished, students negotiate over the correct versions, asking for support when they have doubts.
- The most important thing in correcting students is not interrupting them. Feedback is given only at the end of the whole dialogue or viewpoint presentation.
- Mistakes develop as an intrinsic part of learning and they are not to be hunted for or corrected immediately. They provide a reflection of the learning steps the student masters gradually.
- Only the important mistakes should be corrected, namely the ones that lead to misunderstandings. As for the others, students themselves should be encouraged and involved in the process of correcting and improving.
- Many errors are in fact signals that the students are successfully learning the language. The role of correction is not just to point out the differences as compared to standard English. It would be too discouraging. On the contrary, it should support language growth by appreciating the learning steps. If all errors are corrected, students become very careful so as not to say things that might be incorrect. It diminishes the amount of speaking and the students will have very little opportunity to experiment with the language and to work out new and better ways of saying things. Correction must be a way of giving information and feedback to the students supporting their learning, communication, and self-expression efforts.
- Connection with fluency and accuracy: the key issue is not to correct all the bits of non-standard English students produce. Instead, focus should be on learners improving all their skills, aiming at clear meaning and fluency. Accuracy is needed, of course, but the reaction should target the content of what students say instead of the mere form. Successful communication depends on levels of accuracy. A lot of examinations are based on producing accurate language. Therefore, the main task is to help students progress through fluency towards accuracy.
• Correction is a way of reminding students of the forms of standard English. It should never be criticism or punishment, because no teaching technique helps the students more than the feeling that all support is given to them, in order to accomplish the tasks.

• Currently, there are two fairly successful applications of automatic speech recognition where the computer understands the spoken words of the learner. The first is pronunciation training. Learners read sentences on the screen and the computer gives feedback as to the accuracy of the utterance, usually in the form of visual sound waves. The second is software where the learner speaks commands for the computer to perform. However, speakers in these programs are limited to predetermined texts so that the computer can process them.

• Computers can give a new role to teaching materials. Without computers, students cannot really influence the linear progression of the class content, but computers can adapt to the student. Adapting to the student usually means that the student controls the pace of the learning but also means that students can make choices in what and how to learn, skipping unnecessary items or doing remedial work on difficult concepts or on their own mistakes. Such control makes students feel more competent in their learning and more responsible towards it. Students tend to prefer exercises where they have control over content, such as branching stories, adventures, puzzles or logic problems. With these, the computer has the role of providing attractive context for the use of language rather than directly providing the language the student needs. On such a basis, errors become fewer and less significant.

• Authenticity in language learning means the opportunity to interact in one or more of the four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) by using or producing texts meant for an audience in the target language, not the classroom. With real communication acts, rather than teacher-contrived ones, students feel empowered and less afraid to contact others. Students believe they learn faster and better with computer-mediated communication. Also, students learn more about culture in such an environment. In networked computer environments, students have a conscious feeling of being members of a real community. In situations where all are learners of a foreign language, there is also a feeling of equality. In these situations students are less stressed and more confident in a language learning situation, in part because surface errors do not matter so much. This works best with discussion forums and chats, as there is immediate feedback, but e-mail exchanges have also been shown to provide most of the same benefits in motivation and student affect.

4. Conclusion

There are many skills that students who decide to study through virtual universities need in order to be successful. Some of these include:

• Mastering software tools
• Developing new study habits
• Knowledge about accessing on-line academic resources
• Confidence to do well. Students who lack self-confidence often have poor learning skills and may develop considerable anxiety
• Students need to be highly motivated and able to learn on their own without much direction
• Excellent time management skills are needed to ensure that they complete the work when it is due
• Ability to ask for help. Services for students often include tutorials between student-tutor, and student-student, help desks, counselling and advising plus technical support. However, just providing these services does not guarantee success.

Use of computer technology in classrooms is generally reported to improve self-image and mastery of basic skills, more student-centered learning and engagement in the learning process, more active processing resulting in higher-order thinking skills and better recall. Students gain confidence in directing their own learning and improve their critical thinking skills. Mistakes are learning steps that lead not only to mastering the language skills or to acquiring another culture, but also to the shaping of a new personal identity. This, together with the notion of social identity, are central for the future development of language learners, who will manifest complex, multiple and contradictory social identities. The acquisition of the target language is successful when students are able to construct a new self that enables them to impose their right to be heard and thus become the subject of the discourse. This is true for both language and non-language classrooms. It requires intellectual and emotional investment and their efforts will increase the value of their cultural capital. Successful learners are those who reflect critically on how they engage with native speakers and who are prepared to challenge the accepted social order by constructing and asserting social identities of their own choice.
One advantage of cyberschools is that a person does not have to travel to a real classroom to learn. Another advantage is that online learning creates the opportunity for integrating digital media into the curriculum in an interactive format making teaching and learning more student centered.

Disadvantages include that a person must be self motivated to learn, as learning cannot be enforced via the internet. Lack of socialization is often quoted, but recent anecdotal evidence indicate that, socialization may be different, but it still exists.

Online learning has become an increasingly attractive choice for many students, becoming widespread.

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