Performance Evaluation in Foreign Language e-Learning

SUZANA CARMEN CISMAS
Department of Modern Languages and Communication
The Polytechnic University of Bucharest
313 Splaiul Independentei, sector 6, 060042, Bucharest
ROMANIA
suzanacismas@yahoo.com

Abstract: - Computers have become so widespread in schools and homes, and their uses have expanded so dramatically that most language teachers now are forced to think about the implications. Technology generates changes in foreign language teaching methodologies, far beyond the mechanical traditional exercises. The mere use of the computer is not a teaching method, but the computer forces pedagogy to think of new ways to exploit technology benefits and work around inherent limitations. In order to do so, language teaching specialists are needed for promoting a complementary relationship between computer technology and appropriate pedagogic programs. It takes time and effort to implement it, but modernization and effectiveness have never been easy tasks.

Key-Words: - evaluation, foreign language, e-learning, engineering, authentic assessment, e-portfolios, performance, grading

1 Introduction

A virtual school/university is the institution that delivers courses totally or mainly by online methods. All student services are conducted via Internet technologies. This type of school differs from the traditional school through the physical media linking administrators, professors, students.

There are various virtual school models for instruction and enrollment. Instructional models range from fully independent self-paced courses to semester based, teacher facilitated ones. Learner group sizes range widely from 25 to as many as 200 in each section. Students keep in contact with teachers and tutors, and collaborate among themselves through web communication tools provided in the course delivery platforms. In some cases, students use the phone to get support or feedback from instructors. To facilitate communication, virtual schools have implemented their own system programs to help build courses and keep student profiles. There are also training manuals to help develop such schools and courses.

Many materials are provided free of charge. Some schools also provide high quality programs, like Adobe Systems or Macromedia products. Other schools may use Corel products as a cheaper alternative. The student receives the full version of the selected program, with a limited license (one year). These programs are the key to success in virtual schools, spurring improvement each year. Many schools also provide a new computer, mainly using Windows, for all students in need of one.

Basic requirements for evaluation and course design are: a global strategy for technology-based course development and management; products easy to use and maintain, portable, replicable, scalable, immediately affordable, and long-term cost-effective; collaborative software and e-portfolios. Courses can be provided over the Internet, web pages, e-mail, television, radio, and other networked sources or media, to students of all ages and interests, who cannot access them otherwise because of distance, tight business schedule, family ties or social obligations. The personal computer opened up new possibilities for diverse and numerous courses, and for lower income groups who did not have access to higher education before, thus breaking the much debated line between exclusivity and excellence.

Students in virtual courses must do real work to get their degrees and professors preparing and teaching those courses spend real time in doing so. That is, students must meet rigorous academic criteria for their learning outcomes, and evaluations take place through programs constructed by credible academics, according to standard level criteria.

Many virtual universities are accredited in the same way as traditional universities, and operate according to the same academic standards. They can...
grant degrees that will be recognized around the world. Traditional universities offer e-courses as well, and most of them have distance education or continuing education departments.

Providing access to higher education for all students, especially adult learners, is made easier by the fact that most virtual universities have no entry requirements for their undergraduate courses. They are needed for the courses that are aimed at postgraduates or at those who work in specific jobs.

Online learning can be an isolating experience, since students spend most time working alone on course activities, writing assignments and only rarely interacting with each other through interactive video/teleconferences. Some learners do not mind it, but others find this a major obstacle in the successful completion of the courses. Course materials can include printed material, books, courses based on hypertext, audio and video cassettes, radio or TV programmes, cd-rom /software, and web sites. Support is offered to learners from the professor or from a tutor online, through e-mails, in case they have problems with the course. It is often difficult to keep the schedule required to be successful when learning on-line. That is why some virtual universities apply the same type of time management as traditional ones. Many courses operate on a timetable, which the student receives together with the course materials. These include the planned activities for each week of the course and the dates for assignments and exams.

2 Problem Formulation

The impact of computer assisted language learning in foreign language education has been modest, due to its limitations.

The first difficulty is technology, both in its ability and availability. There are problems with cost and with the simple availability of technological resources such as the Internet (non-existent, in many developing countries, or the bandwidth, in general). Current computer technology has its problems as well, even if it has improved greatly over the last three decades; still, the demands posed by foreign language learning have grown ever more. The major goal is to have computers with which students can have true, human-like interaction, especially for the speaking practice, but technology is far from this point, and, if the computer cannot evaluate a learner’s speech exactly, it is of little use.

Teachers and administrators tend to think either that computers are worthless, harmful, and threatening, or that they can do far more than what they are really capable of. Reluctance on part of the teachers can come from lack of understanding and fearing technology. Even if teachers are offered training, they are still reluctant, because computer technology was limited to sciences up to the 1980s, creating both a factual and an emotional distance for language teaching. They continue to be more comfortable with textbooks because it is what they are used do, and there is the idea that the use of computers threatens traditional literacy skills since such skills are heavily tied to books. These stem in part because there is a significant generation gap between teachers (many of whom did not grow up with computers) and students (who grew up with them). Teachers may resist also because e-activities can be more difficult to evaluate than traditional exercises. There is yet another aspect: while students seem motivated by exercises like branching stories, adventures, or puzzles, these activities provide little in the way of systematic evaluation of progress. Teachers should be computer literate and trained continuously. Ideally, each foreign language department should hire an experienced computer scientist who could assist teachers. That expert should demonstrate dual expertise both in education and learning technologies.

The seemingly simple matter of sorting the numerous existing resources in order to get students ready to use computer resources is difficult and time consuming. With Internet sites alone, it can be very demanding to know where to begin, and if students are unfamiliar with the resource to be used, the teacher must take time to teach it. Also, there is lack of unified theoretical framework for designing and evaluating computer assisted language learning systems, as well as absence of conclusive empirical evidence for the pedagogical benefits of computers in language. Most teachers lack the time or training to create web-based assignments and many multimedia computer programs tend to be strong on presentation but weak as far as pedagogy and even interaction. Still, the most dangerous factor that can lead to failure is the lack of imagination in taking advantage of the flexibility of available technology.

It is crucial to teach students how to learn by themselves and develop the capacity to practice self evaluation and enhance intrinsic motivation. Tests and quizzes should be designed accordingly to encourage/enhance students’ autonomous practice.

There are many types of web-based authentic assessment in use today. The range of possibilities is sufficiently broad, enabling teachers to select from among a large number of options, in order to meet specific purposes, or in order to adapt certain approaches so as to meet instructional and student needs. Still, it is not performed so as to
provide systematic information about student learning or about instruction goals.

2.1 Oral interviews

They are extremely useful and students should be assessed regularly, especially the ones who have yet to acquire sufficient command over the language for written assessments to be appropriate. In web video/tele/conferences, students can interact orally or answer questions about a wide range of topics which might include their prior knowledge, activities, interests or preferences. The teacher/tutor may be interested either in the information collected, or in assessing the learner’s proficiency, and both can be used for instructional planning. In this type of assessment, probe questions can be asked to determine student comprehension or command over specific aspects of language. Listening regularly to students’ oral language can take place even if there is no systematic procedure for analysing oral proficiency or for recording growth in oral language over time. The advantage of this method consists in the possibility of conducting such interviews in an informal and relaxed context over successive days with each student, recording the observations on an interview log or on an interview guide, and sending immediate feedback to the student.

2.2 Story or text retelling

In it, learners read or listen to a text and then retell the main ideas or selected details. As with the other assessment activities listed here, it is authentic because it is based on or closely resembles actual interactive traditional activities. What makes it an assessment approach is the systematic collection and recording of information about the performance of individual students. Students respond orally and can be rated on how they describe the events in the story (story structure), on their response to the story or text, and on their language proficiency. Teachers or peers can also ask probe questions. All proficiency levels learners may participate in retelling: a more proficient student can read a story to a less proficient peer, who can, in his turn, retell the narration, thus enabling little proficiency students to participate in the evaluation, irrespective of their native language. Web conferencing facilities are indispensable. This method has the advantage that oral reports produced by the student can be scored on content or language components, using rubrics or rating scales, so as to clearly determine reading comprehension, reading strategies and language development.

2.3 Writing samples

As part of instruction, students are often asked to generate writing samples to meet a number of different purposes. These may include expressive or narrative writing (a personal experience, a story, a poem), expository or informative writing (writing to explain or clarify a concept or process, often within a clearly defined content area), persuasive reports (to convince another person of a particular viewpoint), or combinations of such distinct purposes. Students can also be asked to write in various genres, such as a letter (be it formal or informal), a diary entry, an essay, a newspaper report or a research paper (which requires particular use of reference materials, critical judgement and quotations). Students may produce the writing on demand in a fixed period of time or may be given the time to generate it after completing some reading on a certain topic, discussing the sources and the contents with peers and then editing and revising a draft of the product. Teachers often have their own criteria in judging student writing and in assigning grades. Therefore grades will tend to vary from teacher to teacher unless they are based on specific performance criteria. The evaluation procedures include the use of scoring rubrics for both holistic and analytic scoring in specific domains of writing such as vocabulary, composition, style, sentence construction and mechanics (logic and layout of arguments, text organisers).

With all students, self-evaluation of writing promotes a reflective approach to learning, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of effective writing processes, and that would be one of the major advantages of this assessment technique.

2.4 Exhibitions and projects

They are particularly enjoyed by students, who show interest towards such activities and spend a lot of effort for completing and proudly presenting their achievements. A virtual exhibition can include displays or models of objects required by an instructional setting, role plays, simulations, artistic creations, videotaped segments, charts, graphs, tables, etc. A project may be conducted individually or in small groups in web-based environments and it is often presented through an oral or written report (video conference, discussion boards, and forums). Projects and exhibitions presented orally can be reviewed by a group of judges with the task of rating the content, its organisation and the language used. Students are often asked to develop a presentation on a particular historical period, on a cultural trend or on a technical device, insisting on the generation of drawings and written products appropriate to the topic. This approach may be particularly effective when learners are taught to communicate step-by-step procedures or project descriptions which are
supported by diagrams or realia. The most important advantage of this assessment modality is the fact that peers and teachers can observe both oral and written products and, above all, thinking skills.

For writing samples, exhibitions and projects, students can work from home or they can benefit from the facilities of language learning centres. In most of them, learners access materials and manage their learning independently, but have access to staff for help. Many self-access centres are heavy users of technology and an increasing number of them now offer opportunities for online self-access learning. Some centres have developed novel ways of supporting language learning beyond the traditional context by developing software to monitor students' self-directed learning and by offering online support from teachers/tutors.

2.5 Experiments and demonstrations

Web-conferencing facilities and, maybe, laboratory setting are required. Experiments and demonstrations can be conducted by learners in various fields of science, and such actions can take place either using actual materials or just illustrating the functions (e.g. electrical or optical mechanisms). The experiment or demonstration is presented through an oral or written report, which describes the steps and materials necessary to reproduce the experiment, and any hypotheses that were tested, methods of observation used, or conclusions drawn. Students can be rated on their understanding of the concepts, on explanations of scientific methods and on the language used in presentations. Therefore the advantages would be on the one hand that students perform actual actions, completing experiments or demonstrating the use of certain materials, and on the other hand that their thinking skills are made obvious and are clearly improved by real activities.

2.6 Constructed response item e-tests

It is a type of performance assessment in which students read or review hypertext materials and then answer online to a series of open-ended questions that involve comprehension and demand higher-order thinking. The assessment often focuses on how students apply information, rather than on how much they recall. The student might produce a graphic depiction of the substance and organisation of the readings (a semantic map), a brief comment on one or two key points in the readings, or an extended essay discussing or evaluating the text. Thus students are able to respond in a variety of distinct ways, appropriate to their level of English proficiency. Constructed response items can be used in all content areas. In the case of mathematics and sciences, these types of questions are often used to ask learners how they solved a problem or reached a conclusion. This type of assessment is authentic because it dwells on the particular kinds of thinking and reasoning skills which students use, because it presents problems or questions that are typical of this type of instruction, and because it encourages students to apply their knowledge to real life settings. The advantage is that student produced written reports can be promptly scored on thinking skills and on information, and feedback is e-mailed for quick implementation of remedial practice.

2.7 Teacher/tutor observations

They are valuable starting points for further development and improvement. Teachers/tutors observe students’ focus on tasks, their responses to different types of assignments, or their interactions with peers while working cooperatively toward a goal. All spontaneous events and planned e-activities can be the subject of such observations. Especially with planned e-activities, teachers can observe students’ use of academic language and higher-order thinking skills in task oriented discussions with their peers. Most teachers/tutors observe daily student interactions to ensure that learners are on task and working productively. In order to turn observations into assessments, they must be systematically recorded over time, so as to note changes in student performance and should be summarised in personal e-mailed notes, ready to be communicated to the student, or to the other teachers, if it is beneficial for the learner. With English language learners, this type of observation is particularly important, because we need to document what these students can do, and build on existing areas of strength, in addition to noting their response to various instructional or curricular approaches. The advantage of this assessment technique is that it takes little time. Teachers should bear in mind that observations are recorded with anecdotal details or on rating scales.

2.8 e-Portfolios

They are collections of students’ virtual or actual work that are used to document progress on instructional goals, and their main purpose is to improve communication in order to meet educational targets. Teachers are faced with difficulties when informing learners/employers/families on scholar achievements because abstract numbers and grades do not seem immediately connected with real work and touchable results. Therefore, many teachers/tutors choose to supplement feedback, test scores
and marks with portfolios containing samples of students’ work throughout time. E-portfolios are unique, however, in that they enable the teacher to put all information together into a coherent picture of a student’s development, comparing a learner with peers while they work individually or in a team. The overall design and the careful planning of e-portfolios enable a balanced view on the students. The aim of this assessment technique is to provide an illustration of learners’ status at the beginning of instruction and provide documentation on their progress through instruction and post-test. However diverse and colourful they may be, portfolios will never consist of a mere chronological collection of random work samples. In order to design effective e-portfolios, the following procedures are useful: examine the instructional goals in the curriculum guide and identify the types of information that can illustrate students’ status and growth; plan e-testing strategies that will enable a pertinent demonstration of learners’ progress; develop a form of e-portfolio assessment; enter data and work samples into the e-portfolios; compare students’ pre-e-test and post-e-test performance and assess development; last but not least, write a feedback summary of students’ status and growth. Many teachers use the e-portfolio as an instructional tool by encouraging learners to help with the selection of materials to be included. Moreover, many encourage students to evaluate their own progress during a course using the work samples collected. Without this kind of reflection and without self-assessment an e-portfolio does not reach its aim of being a highly individualised and integrative method of work and evaluation. The advantages of e-portfolios consist in the fact that they integrate information from a large number of sources, they give an overall picture of student performance and learning, and they require strong student involvement and commitment.

3 Problem Solution
The focus shifts from acquiring and displaying knowledge to developing learner autonomy through varying degrees of self-directed learning, as opposed to (or as a complement to) traditional learning, over a long period of time.

Repeated exposure to material used to be considered beneficial, even essential, so computers were thought to be ideal in learning, as the machines did not get bored or impatient with learners and the computer could present material to the student as his/her own pace and even adapt the drills to the level of the student. Hence, computer assisted language learning programs present a stimulus to which the learner provides a response. At first, both could be done only through text. The computer would analyze errors and give feedback. More sophisticated programs would react to students’ mistakes by branching to help screens and remedial activities. Technology enhanced learning has the goal to provide socio-technical innovations (also improving efficiency and cost effectiveness) for e-learning practices, regarding individuals and organizations, independent of time, place and pace.

3.1 Grading
Generally, grading is controlled by the teachers. There are 4 main types of assignments. Assessments are the most common, and include students uploading files, usually created using word processors or spreadsheets. Worksheets are also common, and can consist of multiple choice, matching, short answer, and other questions. Most questions from worksheets are auto graded by the computer, but if a response is needed for any question, the teacher must manually grade that portion of the assignment. Discussions are common too. They usually have a very small grade value, and usually do not appear in the assignments section of the course, where work is submitted and scores are checked. The final type of assessment is exams. They usually count for a large part of the student's grade, and are usually taken at the end of modules, or at mid-term, or at the end of a class. The scoring system is generally the same as any public school system in the United States. In most schools a letter grade of A is accomplished when a student's number grade is between 90 and 100 percent. A score of 80 to 89 percent will earn a B, and so on. An F is the lowest score you can earn, and encompasses scores of 50 percent or below in most cases.

To evaluate instruction, however, teachers need to summarise the group’s achievement data that were gathered using alternative assessment modalities. Group performance data are gathered according to the following steps: create a summary table that includes the points earned by all students; set a standard for the minimum percentage acceptable; calculate the percentage earned by the group for each learning component; identify the subcomponents with less than admissible percentage; evaluate instruction and adjust the instructional schedule for the subcomponents where the students did not meet the standards. Besides summarizing a group’s achievement in one test as depicted above, the teacher should evaluate the group’s progress across several work samples. The demands for the technical quality of assessments focus on their reliability and validity.
Reliability is the consistency of the assessment in producing the same score on different testing occasions or with different raters. The most important types of validity are content validity, or the match between the content of the assessment and the content of instruction, and consequential validity, or the use of assessment for instructional planning and improvement.

3.2 Communicative language e-learning

In the communicative approach, the focus is on using the language rather than on analysing it, so grammar teaching is implicit. Its merits consist in originality and flexibility in student language output. Useful software in this phase provides skill practice but not in a drill format, for example, paced reading, text reconstruction and language games. Computers provide context for students to use the language. However, there is criticism stating that the computer is used for more marginal rather than central aims of language teaching. Skills such as reading and listening are taught in a compartmentalized way, even if not in a drill fashion. The next step is integrating the teaching of language skills into tasks or projects, to provide direction and coherence, using multimedia technology and computer-mediated communication. From resource object, the computer becomes a medium for extending education beyond the classroom and for reorganizing instruction, favoring a learner-centered explorative approach, where students are encouraged to try different possible solutions to a problem.

3.3 Computer translations

In recent years, there has been much work in the area of machine translation, speech synthesis, and speech analysis. The basic goal is to teach computers to generate and comprehend acceptable sentences, for purposes of translation and direct communication with computers where the computer understands and generates natural language. A very simple example of computers understanding natural language in relation to second language learning is vocabulary drill exercises. The computer prompts the learner with a word on either the L1 or target language and the student responds with the corresponding word. The computer “understands” the input word by comparing it with a stored answer and gives feedback to the user. Cloze tests work on a similar principle, where the computer compares the words/phrases provided by the learner to a database of correct answers.

3.2 Computer supported collaborative learning

It is one of the most promising innovations to improve teaching and learning with the help of information and communication technology. It refers to instructional methods whereby students are encouraged/required to work together on learning tasks. It is different from the traditional direct transfer model where instructors are the distributors of knowledge and skills.

4 Conclusion

What most of these approaches have in common is taking the central focus away from the teacher as conveyor of knowledge to giving students learning experiences that are as realistic as possible where they play a central role. Most modern language learning theories stress the importance of teacher guidance rather than control, giving students control over what they do, how fast they do it and even the ability to find and correct their own mistakes. Also, these approaches tend to emphasize fluency over accuracy, to allow students to take risks in using more student-centered activities, and to cooperate, rather than compete.

The computer provides opportunity for students to be less dependent on a teacher and have more freedom to experiment on their own with natural language in natural or semi-natural settings.

References:
7. Swales, T., Record of Personal Achievement, Schools Council, 1989