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Ensino à Distância: Desafios Pedagógicos Distance Education: Pedagogical Challenges

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org. Pedro Reis e Fátima Silva

PORTO UNIVERSIDADE FERNANDO PESSOA 2011

Acquisition of FL communication competence: use of the Sakai Drop Box as an ePortfolio

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Isabel Patim²

Abstract: Awareness of the need to acquire foreign language competence has increased, in Europe, since the implementation of the Bologna Process. On the other hand, the development of technology in educational settings has resulted in an increasing interest in Distance Education. The use of the ePortfolio in language learning as both a process and a product meets the Communicative Language Teaching approach and upholds the research question of how the virtual platform and the ePortfolio help in English language teaching and learning. This paper reports on the experience of using the Drop Box tool of the Sakai software as an ePortfolio, combined with the follow-up interviews in class, in the scope of the development of the project work, i.e. the last module of the curricular unit 'English Language'.

Key-words: CLT, Foreign Languages, Drop Box, ePortfolio, Follow-up Reports

1. Introduction

In Europe, awareness of the need to acquire foreign language competence has increased, mainly, since the implementation of the Bologna Process which embraces 47 European countries. The Commission of

the European Communities published an action plan in 2003 which included the main objectives for language learning. It states that: "Every European citizen should have meaningful communicative competence in at least two other languages in addition to his or her mother tongue" (p. 5). This

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objective has been part of the educational policies of Fernando Pessoa University (UFP) since its creation, making it the first university in Portugal to make the learning of foreign languages compulsory in all its undergraduate courses.

Language learning is an interactive process which enables learners to communicate in any personal or professional situation. The basis of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the dominant language teaching approach today, is that learning a language occurs through communication and experience, and through interaction with other participants and the instructor, thereby constructing knowledge.

On the other hand, the development of technology in educational settings has resulted in an increasing interest in Distance Education (DE), mainly in institutions of higher education. Learning and teaching has undergone a change with a new form of assessing learners' performance and progress: ePortfolios. ePortfolios place learners at the centre of their learning and, thus, allow them to manage and control their own learning process.

The ePortfolio is a combination of a process (which includes a range of activities) and a product (which is the end result of the process) involving several steps: firstly, learners specify the objectives, time schedule and learning goals; secondly, they collect and choose information; in the third step, they

reflect on and regulate their learning process through individual or collaborative tasks, and with the instructor; and, finally, they present the final product which is assessed by the instructor. The value of ePortfolios is the reflection and learning that are documented in the final presentation.

This paper reports on the first experience of using the Drop Box tool of the Sakai software as an ePortfolio. The study was carried out in two face-to-face English Language classes of first year undergraduate Nursing and Psychomotor Rehabilitation courses at UFP, a private university with headquarters in Porto, Portugal. As part of the assessment of this curricular unit, the learners have to submit a written project work, in addition to giving a face-to-face oral presentation. The four steps mentioned above are followed. To ensure that learners develop their communicative competence and produce the required written and oral texts, the instructor offers feedback on the Follow-up reports, thereby reinforcing the interaction which is of outmost importance in any educational setting, but even more in a foreign language class.

2. English language teaching methodology

Many theories about the learning and teaching of second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) have been proposed, mainly influenced by developments in the fields of psychology and linguistics. Grammar-translation was a popular methodology until

the early 20th century. It considered that second language study was a tool for literacy development and translation and for the development of the learner's logical powers. Audio-Lingualism, which became popular in the 1940s, is based on structural linguistics and behaviourism (Knight, 2001, p. 149), emphasising spoken, rather than written, language and considering that through role-play and drills, that is repetition, learners acquire the ability to speak the language well. In the 1960s, Chomsky challenged these assumptions and took the position that language is creative (not memorised) and "created by the speaker using an innate facility" (*idem*, p. 153).

Today, the dominant methodology is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which views language learning as learning, through interaction, to "communicate successfully in the target language in real situations" (*idem*, p. 155) with the use of authentic materials. According to Power and Shrestha (2010, p. 62), "language is viewed, not as an abstract system of rules, but as a tool to achieve a range of social purposes" leading to communicative competence in which learners are able to use and understand messages within specific contexts.

Richards (2006) explains that CLT involves a set of principles establishing the "goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom" (p.

3). This is achieved through the appropriate use of language in various contexts, for a wide range of purposes and functions, and depending on the participants. Furthermore, learners' communicative competence is reflected in their ability to produce and understand written and oral texts, whether in conversations, interviews, narratives or reports. Thus, language competence is a result of an interweaving of aspects of language and skills into real communication.

As the focus is on assisting learners to do in the classroom what they will need to do outside, the materials should reflect the outside world. CLT has been influenced by Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Vygotsky's socio-cultural approach as both consider that language can only be understood in real-life settings which have been shaped by social and cultural aspects. Language considers how a text is structured and its social and cultural context. According to Knight (2001, p. 163), this is based on "Vygotskian notions of the social intractional nature of communication and learning".

A CLT classroom implies different roles for participants:

- teachers are active facilitators of learning between all the participants (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). They set up the activities that learners may encounter in real life situations and then stand back observing and monitoring the learners' performance, only actively participating

in order to advise and guide learners in the communication process.

- according to Richards (2006), learners must be active participants in activities because this is a “cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning” (p. 5). Thus, they have to understand the importance of “listening to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rather than relying on the teacher for a model” (*idem*). For activities to be successful, learners need to be much more responsible for their own learning.

Thus, CLT, a learner-centred approach, implies that while teachers are facilitators, monitors and, often, referees of the learning process, learners acquire autonomy and responsibility for their own learning. This is achieved through interactive activities in pairs, groups or plenum.

Being a fluency-focused approach, CLT requires learners to carry out tasks through the use of language, not the analysis of the language. Richards (2006, p. 14) refers that fluency requires speakers to engage in meaningful interaction and be able to maintain comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in their communicative competence. Hence, activities must be structured to ensure that learners negotiate meaning, use communication strategies, correct misunderstandings, and avoid communication breakdowns.

By emphasising sensitivity to learner differences and variation in language use, learners’ initiatives and interaction play a major role in language acquisition. CLT views language learning as learning to communicate through interaction in the target language and the use of authentic and meaningful texts. This concept of autonomous, learner-centred learning is a fundamental aim of the Bologna Process.

3. Bologna Process and foreign languages competence

The Bologna Process aims to harmonise the structure of higher education cycles in the European context with “the development of a coherent and cohesive European Higher Education Area by 2010” (Preamble to the Berlin Communiqué, 2003). This will be attained by following a number of specific policy initiatives including: quality assurance and cooperation, adoption of a system of easily comparable degrees, promotion of mobility and lifelong learning, student-centred learning and promotion of the European dimension in Higher Education.

The Bologna Process, following the EU’s language policy, “promotes multilingualism and aims for a situation in which every EU citizen can speak at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue” (EU language policy, 2009).

Academic mobility within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) requires both

learners and teachers to have a wide range of communicative skills in order to be able to perform certain tasks in a foreign language.

These include:

- the access to specialised material,
- the participation in mobility programmes,
- the participation in international projects,
- the use of professional and socialising communication skills, for example, in academic presentations and conferences.

Thus, foreign language learning is an economically valuable activity in the preparation of students for the labour market in a global economy and due to the increasing mobility among workers.

4. The UFPUV project

Fernando Pessoa University (UFP) has the motto 'nova et nove' – teach what is new in a new way. Since the onset, this private university has been innovative in several fields, in Portugal, including the teaching of foreign languages. Every course at UFP has at least one semester – most have two – of English and a semester – or two – of another foreign language.

Aiming at enabling the development of communication skills in at least two foreign languages in addition to the mother tongue, these language courses (English, French, Spanish or German) are also regarded, by the learners, as tools that will help to access to specialised material, participate in mobility

programmes, international projects, and international conferences.

In October 2004, UFP started using Sakai, an open-source Collaboration and Learning Environment (CLE) software, on an experimental basis. Since then, this elearning platform, called UFPUV (Virtual University of Fernando Pessoa University) has become increasingly popular and useful for both instructors and learners, for all courses.

The figures of active sites, according to the Platform Manager, have risen from 150 in the academic year of 2004/2005 to 1244 in 2009/2010.

4.1. Foreign languages and the UFPUV

The platform is mainly used to post documents and multimedia which consolidate and enhance face-to-face teaching and learning. However, instructors also use it to receive assignments, and communicate with learners in the chatroom. This tool enables synchronous learner/learner and instructor/learner communication and is of great importance in the assessment of learners in foreign languages as it allows them to practise two skills: writing and reading. This occurs as a result of the regular participation not only in the chatroom but also in the forum in which topics are presented by the instructor. Learners then post their ideas and comment on their colleagues'.

A third skill that can be practised is listening through the listening activities placed by

the instructors or the access to internet sites. A further tool that is frequently used is the Drop Box as instructors and learners may share documents which are visible only to that learner and the instructor. The documents which can be seen by all the learners are placed in the 'Resources' of the UFPUV. Despite the inexistence of many of the functionalities of an ePortfolio, we consider it an ePortfolio due to the fact that it is a digital means of containing learner's information and reflections which allow the instructor to assess the learning process.

However, we will further report on how the module 'Project work' combines both the use of the virtual platform with an ePortfolio and the development of those four skills in English language teaching and learning.

4.2. The ePortfolio

An ePortfolio is an electronic portfolio of acquired learning, including knowledge, skills and competences, through formal and informal learning. It may be both a learning and an assessment tool, as well as a record of achievement. By focusing on what students can do, rather than what they cannot, it is more inherently motivational than standardised tests.

The increasing interest of all sectors of education in DE has resulted in the spread of ePortfolios and, thus, several definitions have been put forward, reflecting the diversity of practice and associated technologies.

The following two definitions illustrate most clearly the use of ePortfolios for the purpose of this paper. Firstly, according to the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (2003), an ePortfolio is

a collection of authentic and diverse evidence, drawn from a larger archive representing what a person or organization has learned over time on which the person or organization has reflected, and designed for presentation to one or more audiences for a particular rhetorical purpose

The second definition describes an ePortfolio as a "highly personalised, customizable, web-based information management system, which allows students to demonstrate individual and collaborative growth, achievement and learning over time" (LDP, 2003-4, p. 3). Thus, the usefulness of an ePortfolio in educational settings lies in the fact that it provides evidence of learners' learning performance and progress, and their reflection on their own work. Furthermore, it can be used for assessment purposes.

According to Palloff and Pratt (2009), ePortfolios may be followed by presentations which reflect the accumulated learning in this process. Prior to this presentation, the work in the ePortfolios may be reviewed and discussed with the instructor, thus ensuring a more accurate presentation. This statement is particularly pertinent to frame the project work as an ePortfolio that promotes not only reading and writing, but also listening and speaking, once the ePortfolios are reviewed

and discussed several times, through the follow-up interviews and with the help of the Research Reports.

Among the different types of portfolios, whether digital or paper, there is a Development Portfolio (Kicken et al, 2009) which records a learner's progress reports and reflections in addition to assessing the learner's process and knowledge. This enables the instructor to have access to the learner's achievement and improvement in a certain area of study and over a certain period of time (a school year, a semester, a course) as it contains the work that the learner deems as the best examples of his/her learning process. Thus, an ePortfolio "documents a student's skill development and its information can be used for promoting further development of the skill" (Kicken et al, 2009, p. 454).

Abrami and Barrett (2005) present the advantages of ePortfolios according to the Quebec Education Programme (QEP), in which the learners:

- are involved in their learning process
- have the opportunity to reflect on procedures, strategies and objectives in order to improve their strengths and correct their weaknesses
- increase their ability to self-evaluate
- are able to make their own choices

In addition, ePortfolios are used to

- promote feedback during the learning process
- encourage interactive processes among learners and teachers
- show learner progress
- assess learner competences

The use of the Virtual Platform and of the ePortfolio has been not only a useful instrument in the foreign language teaching and learning processes, but also a means of promoting the communicative language teaching methodology for learners and instructors, as will be described in the case-study presented in this paper.

5. The Project Work

The Project Work is one of the modules of the syllabus of the English Language courses and, for the purpose of this paper, it frames the research question of how the Virtual Platform and the ePortfolio help in English language teaching and learning. More than focusing on the reason why those two tools are used, as both are contemporary phenomenon that set real-life contexts, we describe the way those tools are accessed, by both learners and instructors, in the development of the Project work.

This module aims to develop students' linguistic and communicative skills, with the objective of attaining effective communication, to foster reflective and critical skills through independent learning and self-management and to encourage

research and analysis. It is summarised in the syllabus of the curricular unit as follows:

- 3. Project work
 - 3.1. The language of science
 - 3.2. Drafting the research project (groups)
 - 3.2.1. Themes and bibliographic research
 - 3.2.1.1. Health related topics
 - 3.2.1.2. Drafting text and preparing presentation
 - 3.3. Presentation of the project work

A presentation of the module is made to the students taking into account the timeline of the project, as well as materials to support it, tools, stages and tasks, by using the UFPUV. At this moment, this platform is used as a repository of materials, but its potentialities are further explored during the draft of the project work, as described in the work plan shown in Table 1, in Appendix I.

There is an important item missing in this description of the planning of this module, as each assignment is given a date (for activities in class) or deadline on the UFPUV that is agreed with the learners the moment the module is presented in class. Fulfilling these deadlines is also automatically registered in the virtual space, to be later confirmed, if necessary. This agreement on deadlines for assignments, as well as the dates for presentation of the research work in class, promotes responsibility and self-study.

The Research Reports (one per group), essential for the follow-up interviews, are dropped in the UFPUV by one single member of the group of learners. However, at the moment of the Follow-up, the instructor identifies eventual differences in the overload of work done by each member of the group. The general structure of the Research Reports fits the different tasks reported throughout the development of the project work. Figure 1 in Appendix II presents the structure of the Research Report.

This form of the Research Report is made available to the learners in a software format that can later be filled in in a word-processor and then be dropped at the UFPUV box.

In this module learners continually discuss with the instructor each stage of the development of the research work in the moments called 'Follow-up', which are supported by research reports and/ documents dropped by the each group of learners in the UFPUV and that thus constitutes the ePortfolio. The follow-up of each activity assigned to the research aims at helping the learners to complete each stage of this final project.

The procedures for assessing the project work and all the activities it involves, consider sources of evidence, like the documents dropped at UFPUV, research progress reports, the interviews of the follow-ups and corresponding records, direct observation of the development of skills in the language

learning process, as well as the final text of the project and of the presentation of the project work in class. Further analysis of data, like the frequency and the time each learner spends working in the UFPUV, could be added to the self-assessment of the learning process of English language and the use of the Virtual Platform and of the ePortfolio in this scope.

6. Conclusion

As Richards (2006) explains, CLT methodology for L2 and FL learning involves not only the how, focusing on materials and activities, but also the agents of learning: the roles of learners and instructors. With this research project, instructors assist learners in developing communicative competence by assessing both the ability to produce and to understand written and oral texts.

The choice of theme and the development of the project work itself reflect the learners' needs outside the classroom: carrying out research on a specific topic or specialty and be supervised in different academic works both reflect real-life settings.

The role of the instructor is to advise learners, as stated by Richards (2006, p. 5), as they must be active participants in the activities. In the same way, this project work promotes collaborative and cooperative learning among learners: they discuss in the group all the tasks and follow-ups, as well as the presentation in class, which requires the participation of all elements of the group.

Thus, the set of tasks given to the groups, which leads to the final work, promotes autonomy and responsibility in their own learning process.

The tasks carried out by the learners require mostly the use of language instead of the analysis of language itself, aiming at interaction and communication, no matter the specific language limitations of each learner of the group. We believe sensitivity to differences among the learners concerning language competence/level promotes autonomy and responsibility of learners in the learning process.

How do these guidelines of the project work meet the aims of the Bologna process? The student-centred learning, the promotion of mobility in European countries and the cooperation between institutions are three factors that, from our point of view, foreground the aims of the work project. Through the language learning process and the activities and tasks assigned for the project work, the learners will develop research skills that they will encounter in real-life situations.

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Appendix I

Table 1: Project Work: Planning

ACTIVITIES	TOOLS	DOCUMENTS	ASSIGNMENT	SKILLS
3. Project work Introduction to the project work: aims and methodology. Selecting work groups.	In class Platform ePortfolio	Project Work: Planning	Discussion	Speaking Listening Reading Writing
3.1. The language of science Vocabulary exercises. Discussing terminology. Searching an article online.	In class Platform ePortfolio	Worksheet	Research	Speaking Listening Reading Writing
3.2. Drafting the research project 3.2.1. Themes and bibliographic research 3.2.1.1. Health related topics	In class Self-study Platform ePortfolio	Research Report 1 (RR1)	Research: select theme and bibliography. Drop RR1 in UFPUV box.	Speaking Listening Reading Writing
FOLLOW-UP RR1 (groups)	In class Platform ePortfolio	After supervision of reports dropped at UFPUV, the instructor discusses with the group of learners the RR, which may have to be corrected and resent.		Speaking Listening Reading Writing
3.2.1.2. Drafting text and preparing presentation Part 1: structure, contents, bibliography of the project work.	In class Self-study Platform ePortfolio	RR2	Research: define structure, contents and bibliography. Drop RR2 in UFPUV box.	Speaking Listening Reading Writing
FOLLOW-UP RR2 (groups)	In class Platform ePortfolio	After supervision of reports dropped at UFPUV, the instructor discusses with the group of learners the RR, which may have to be corrected and resent.		Speaking Listening Reading Writing
3.2.1.2. Drafting text and preparing presentation Part 2: draft of the body of the text of the project work.	In class Self-study Platform ePortfolio	RR3	Research: draft body of text. Drop RR3 with the draft of the text in UFPUV box.	Speaking Listening Reading Writing
FOLLOW-UP RR3 (groups)	In class Platform ePortfolio	After supervision of report and draft of the text dropped at UFPUV, the instructor discusses it with the group of learners. The follow-up of the draft of the body of the text is usually repeated for correction of a second version of the draft, after corrections are made.		Speaking Listening Reading Writing
3.2.1.2. Drafting text and preparing presentation Part 3: draft of the presentation of the project work.	In class Self-study Platform ePortfolio	RR4	Research: draft text for presentation of the project work in class. Drop RR4 with the draft of presentation in UFPUV box.	Speaking Listening Reading Writing

ACTIVITIES	TOOLS	DOCUMENTS	ASSIGNMENT	SKILLS
FOLLOW-UP RR4 (groups)	In class Platform ePortfolio	After supervision of report and draft of the text for presentation in class dropped at UFPUV, the instructor discusses it with the group of learners.		Speaking Listening Reading Writing
3.3. Presentation of the project work.	In class Platform ePortfolio	Presentations	Drop presentation in UFPUV box. Presentation of project work. Discussing presentation with the other learners.	Speaking Listening Reading Writing

Appendix II

Figure 1: Form of the Research Report

Name(s): _____ Group no.: _____
Undergraduate course: _____ Year: _____
Research report no.: _____ Task no.: _____ Date: _____
1. Activities completed
2. Activities planned
3. Main difficulties
4. Students' Notes