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CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

Language learning, especially second language mastery, is characterized by students or individuals' motivation to learn a language or through academic, job, and career choice obligations. For the most part global and multinational corporations operate using English or in some cases home language of the parent organization.

However, with English referred to as the Internet or commerce language it is gaining more wide appeal and thus, increased numbers of individuals are increasingly learning English in addition to their indigenous language. The majority of the learning is taken place via World Wide Web and the Internet along with structured information communication technology dedicated toward such language learning.

The need to learn additional language is also increasing due to migration that accompanies globalization. As people migrate from one society to another, there is an increasing need to learn the language and the culture of the host societies, which is also a pre-requisite for adaptation and social capital building along with wider socio cultural participation – the need to look beyond one's own group or culture. Not with standing the increased availability of computer enhanced or enabled language learning, there exist some challenges with language learning and ICTs. One impediment in particular is the ability to offer a certain group from the home country information in the dominant language to assist members in establishing and maintaining relations.

Specifically, the learning of foreign language is believed to be targeted at the right brain learning modality of visualization and memorization compared to left brain (i.e., analytic and argumentation skills) required by online content (Kawachi, 1999). The limited English proficiency is also attributed to how the students use Internet predominantly for information and reading; they also use the Internet for offline translation, and for games and other entertainment (Kawachi, 1999). The language barrier is also seen as a hindrance to the rapid adoption of e-learning and information communication technologies. Therefore, the language barrier has

resulted in an increased call for native-language content development for local companies who are not willing to adopt English. More importantly, language barriers lead to other issues such as national and cultural pride that affect other communication interactions in the online collaborative environment.

Another area where attention must be directed is in the specific usage of ICT in fostering teaching strategies. For instance, students from cultures that possess a high power distance structure expect teachers to be the source of authority and to provide information and direction for how material is learned. However, if care is not taken, the benefits of ICTs, primarily targeted at having students take direct control of how they learn, may be contrary to how students come to understand their role in the learning process. This fact, in particular, also affects the ICT language learning environment, for if care is not taken, students may display reluctance and unwillingness to complete the course of study. Therefore, more research needs to be directed at the level of resistance and frustrations that students experience as they engage in language learning over ICTs.

Having access to such information would inform teachers, and the academic community, as to best course of action to foster language learning using ICTs.

Another drawback to foreign language e-learning is that in the absence of study abroad programs, the average student may not have the opportunity to interact with a native speaker, except for their instructor and/or an international visitor they may encounter. Hence, in order to develop cultural sensitivity, ICTs must facilitate foreign language course work that provides a cultural foundation for the target language, incorporating examples of cultural artifacts and excerpts of native speakers' conversation. This will help learners anticipate as many idiosyncratic contextual uses of the language as possible and increase their ability to communicate with native speakers. This foundation increases intercultural competence and creates an opportunity for cultural sensitivity to develop.

Furthermore, language differences, in general create misunderstandings in virtual teams based on different assumptions, sometimes fueling ongoing conflicts among people. For instance, Roebuck and Britt offer an instance of email confusion

in which a participant remarked that a meeting with a client will be «superclassic,» which a colleague from the home office interpreted as «pleasant,» however the intended meaning was competitive.

The language difficulties identified above indicate that lack of proficiencies in language creates major problems in organizations and in the global world at large. At the same time, the difficulty points to culture as a key factor in language acquisition and proficiency. The fact that one or more team members must speak in a foreign or second language has the tendency to impede interaction and overall team performance. Communication barriers become even more severe in an electronic context with ICTs. For example, it is difficult to fully participate in a teleconference when one does not speak the language fluently. As a result, a team may lose vital ideas and information or take a wrong direction. Language, in essence, often creates unintended consequences in ICT environments.

Similarly, it has been shown that different language backgrounds create different degrees of difficulty for learners. Brown and Iwashita found in their study of student performance from different language background that students who were native speakers of English and other languages experience different levels of difficulty in computer adaptive grammar tests. To such an end, it is offered that students learning a language would find the target language easier provided that the target language is similar to the primary or first language. Otherwise learners are bound to experience difficulties when both languages are different from one another. There are three factors to be considered from the findings. First, is the degree of congruence between the original language and the target language. Second, is the zero contrast that effects acquisition of articles and inflection morphology (tone) in target language learning.

For example, speakers who have no articles in their language were found to take longer in learning definiteness and indefiniteness in English language. Third, is the constraint in linguistic markedness, which consists of the complexity or infrequent use of certain features of a language (Larsen-Freeman & Long).

That is when a certain feature is more pronounced in the target language than the

primary language, learners would experience increased difficulty. For instance, speakers who do not distinguish between plural and singular will take longer to learn English where such a distinguishing feature is present (Brown & Iwashita). These are a few examples in which culture affects language learning, given that a key component of language is culturally rooted.

Perhaps, the greatest challenge to language learning via ICTs and other computer environments is the cultural appropriateness. That is, it is not suffice to learn phrases and words in a particular language; rather, it is critical in order to be effective to understand the contextual use of the language phrases and terminologies to facilitate cross-cultural communication appropriateness. For instance, it has been noted even within the same language that there are slight variations depending on nations and cultural context. The general differences can be found in the idiomatic expressions and other sayings that differentiate nations and cultures. Furthermore, students taking online courses are said to be at a major disadvantage when the courses involve online discussion and collaboration in the absence of visual cues, gestures, mastery of the of language (Bates).

At the same time, students' primary or native language influence how students or learners judge appropriate communication which may not necessarily align with the language of instruction, hence, influencing appropriateness.

Language learning and second language acquisition cannot be complete without close attention to how ICTs are used to foster knowledge. Studies of language learning and ICTs are either quantitative or qualitative in nature (D'Haenens).

Quantitative studies primarily focus on analyzing the effects of demographic variables on language learning as well as types of ICTs and communication media accessibility. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, look at culturally specific features like identity, and cultural participation that rarely examine the use of media itself. There is a need to blend both of these methodologies to get a better understanding of ICTs in language learning. The evaluation mechanisms for language learning needs to move away from mere lexical test or word association, synonyms, and antonyms where emphasis is on vocabulary instead of spoken competence.

It is essential to understand the implications of digital divide in language learning. Some scientists believe that studies in computer-enhanced language learning needs to understand the conditions that enhance ICTs suitability and those that impede them in language learning environment. Furthermore, this tendency requires researchers and scholars alike to understand the difference between technology «have nots» and technology «want nots» (in the context of language learning and e-learning in general).

Along this line, certain questions are worthy of investigations. For example, «To what extent is the increased ICTs influencing language learning? To what extent is the lack of affordable technology in certain regions of the world isolating students from those parts of the world and further putting them behind?» Answers to these questions would assist in separating learners who fall behind based on environmental factors from those who willingly chose to participate in technology use while also understanding that ownership of ICT tools does not transfer to actual usage (D'Haenens). There is an increasing need to pay specific attention to social networking as a way to evaluate ICTs or at the least explore it for language learning.

The popularity of «Facebook» and other social networking forum among students for social interconnectivity makes it a rich environment to be mined for e-learning and language learning research especially in the age of globalization and the need to be global citizen. Some authors anticipate the trend in the future for e-learning and specifically language learning to be moving in the direction of social networking given the increased interest among students to have fun while they learn especially in the western culture that stresses constructivist ideals of putting students in the control of their learning. Also, increase in bandwidth may foster applications of computer accessible video-conferencing, which can be explored as additional avenues for enhancing synchronous ICT language learning.

Another area for future development in language learning is the need to incorporate artificial intelligence into ICTs or websites, to the extent that learners can use them as a personal coach. Of course, the strength of such agents will be significantly determined by the complexity of programming to incorporate robust

scenarios that will facilitate contextual and cultural appropriateness of lexical knowledge.

It is important for future studies to explore the specific role of teachers in language learning especially those planning on telecollaborative language teaching where multiple cultures are involved. O'Dowd stresses the importance of the need for teachers to be trained in online intercultural interaction before engaging learners; the need for teachers to be aware of different types of intercultural misunderstandings that may occur; emphasis on appropriate selection of ICT tools for a course or different aspects of a course is also important. Attending to these protocols would allow learners and teachers to develop language skills but more importantly, intercultural communication competence that is essential to application of the language knowledge.

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