OPTIMIZATION IN NELABORATING AND (RE)USING LEARNING OJECTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING BASED ON THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH*

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Mônica Camara

Instituto a Vez do Mestre – Universidade Cândido Mendes

mg.camara@terra.com.br

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Abstract

This study aims at discussing and analyzing the efficiency of an educational resource which, along with the entrance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education, was given a new name: Learning Objects (LOs).

Despite having as its main focus the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) based on the Communicative Approach (CA), the aspects of LO to be discussed are certainly relevant to all knowledge fields, as its basic principles may be applied to pedagogy in a general way.

The following aspects will be approached: the history of language teaching (especially the English language) and how methodologies led to the birth of the Communicative Approach; the entrance of technological tools in education and, starting with the advent of ICTs combined with an increase in Distance Learning, how a new concept emerged: Learning Objects. Throughout studies based on the mentioned bibliography about such objects and the ideologies which permeate them, as well as field research, an analysis of the real efficiency of Los will be traced. Practical and institutional solutions will be proposed so that students and teachers might profit the most from the potential that this resource may offer.

Key Words: learning objects, methodology, English language

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language has been From the Industrial Revolution to globalization English has become the main focus of such learning. Studies about language acquisition combined with different lines of thought led to methodologies, having the CA nowadays become the one adopted in nearly all the world. Base don its own principles concerning the learning process, each methodology developed specific materials and activities, always trying to insert technological resources in their practice. More clearly seen with Skinner's theories in the 1950's, technology became part of teaching models. The advance of ICTs in the 1990's acquires unquestionable influence on pedagogical practices in all knowledge fields. One of ICTs most important consequences is its entrance in Distance Learning, leading to the concept of Learning Objects. Expecting that ICTs would bring fast solutions to the teaching/learning process, Los became the main focus of studies among researchers. Several studies were carried out, most of them about technical aspects of Los. However, as pointed by Moran (2000, p.12), "if teaching depended only on technology we would have found the best solutions long ago". The question is: how efficient are such objects? How van they be attached to an innovative pedagogical view?

Despite discussions concerning the importance of interactivity in LOs, studies in the area aim at mapping them in relation to their standardization and storing. But technology is not education in itself: it is a tool for applying LOs. We decided to develop this project based on the belief that if we study only technology and not what we do with it we will be underestimating essential aspects of education: methodology, teacher's roles and their training.

2. English Language Teaching and the Communicative Approach

English Language Teaching (ELT) has gone through uncountable changes. Since the beginning of the XIX century methods emerged and disappeared, always leaving some kind of heritage to the upcoming theories. More than any other knowledge area ELT has been thought, studied and evaluated, leading to changes in its practice all over the world. The XX century was stage for the emerging of new lines of thought in all areas. Psychology,

pedagogy and linguistics are to be considered the most important ones in language teaching. From methodologies such as the Grammar-Translation Method and the Direct Method, ELT went through the Series Method and the audio-lingual one. The CA emerged in the 1990's, affirming that it was not necessary to create a new methodology, but to formulate an approach in which concepts and techniques could be integrated.

Based on humanistic principles rather than behaviorist ones, the CA believes that language acquisition takes place throughout effective communication. Parting from memorization techniques, it preaches that we use language to communicate intentions, which we expect to have some kind of effect on those who listen to us. It represents a complete change in ELT, since it has moved the focus from the teacher to the student, who have now to be active rather than having a passive or receptive role in the learning process. It turns the teacher into a facilitator instead of an explanation or knowledge provider. The learner is the main focus of the process, along with their needs and expectations, considering each one as a unique individual and therefore exploring their own abilities and potentialities.

3. Defining, Analyzing and Evaluating Learning Objects

Na always present topic in studies about the use of technology in education, the concept of LOs has imposed a difficult task concerning its definition and evaluation. The entrance of ICTs in DL led to a fast increase in this educational genre, having the Internet and virtual learning environments as educational mediators. Such increase also led to a concern about the way in which teaching materials dealt with contents. It is the arousal of the necessity of creating a methodology related to the creation and management of these materials, since the conceiving, to the use, storage and re-use. "If an e-learning course used to be considered as a unique and inseparable structure, the aim now is to have teaching materials which are complete and independent, created for the needs of a course (…) but having the possibility of being re-used in other situations". (BALBINO, 2007, pp.1-2) There comes the terminology: Learning Objects.

As studies about LOs are recent, a universal definition can not yet be found. The only consensus that seems to exist is that they must be independent

from the courses they are inserted in and easy to store and re-use. The first formal definition was given by the IEEE-LTSC association in 1998 and says that “an LO is defined as a unique entity, digital or non-digital, which might be used, re-used or referred to whilst teaching through technological basis”. (BALBINO, 2007, p.4) This definition was extremely vague, allowing any activity base don a technological resource to be considered as an LO. In 2007 MEC published as definition “any digital resource that may be re-used for education support” (p.20) and “auxiliary tools in the learning process and contents which are available on the Internet (p.95)”. After having worried about defining Los, the discussion turned to its standardization and storage. In efforts to do so there are SCORM and IMS. But it was the IEEE proposal, LOM, which was more widely accepted and is the mostly used pattern. By creating repositories that relate LOs to register systems, LOM aims at facilitating locating and finding them, so that they might be re-used or combined to learning units “previously planned by teachers or organized (...) upon specific needs”. (MEC-SEED, 2007, p.83) Despite their different operational concepts, the objective of the three systems is to store LOs.

In studies concerning the support which LOs may offer to teaching, researchers point flexibility, updating easiness and inter-operability as their main advantages. These studies, however, focus on technical aspects of LOs rather than pedagogical ones. Important dimensions of education such as autonomy, cooperation, *metacognition*, affects and desires have been neglected. (RAMOS e SANTOS, 2006) We may then conclude that despite the insertion of ICTs in education, LOs which effectively profit from all characteristics of these tools are still rare. According to Moran the classes are still traditional; technological resources are “a varnish (cover) of modernity, used more to highlight content rather than provoking new educational challenges”. (2004, p.2) Therefore, for an LO to be really effective, we must consider the interaction between teacher/student, student/student and student/content. Moreover, it is essential that Los are evaluated by the target audience so that possible problems might be detected and corrected.

4. Learning Objects in English Language Teaching

The use of technological resources in ELT refers to the beginning of the XX century, when movies, slides and records joined course books. Language laboratories were introduced in the 1950's, seen as THE solution to all teaching problems. These laboratories, however, had a limited use. From the 1970's on more resources have been introduced and, adapted to new technologies, are still used nowadays. Activities using mass media emerged, generally as a complement to grammatical and lexical contents. The enthusiasm with the new tools and resources, however, once more led technology to be seen as a solution in itself, neglecting pedagogical aspects of its use.

Computers came to stage in the 1980's and, in language teaching, gave birth to CALL (*Computer Assisted Language Learning*). However, not every single computer-based activity can be considered as an LO, as they must be independent from specific courses and easy to be re-used. Despite the scarce references to LOs in ELT, authors somewhat agree about their elaboration and use, especially concerning the purposes and aims, students' language level as well as their social and cultural beliefs. Moreover, Los must establish connections between students' background experience and the contents presented. Regardless the influence of Skinner and the audio-lingual method, the CA has shown effort in order to apply these characteristics as well as its basic principles when elaborating Los. Aiming at the evaluation of such effort, a survey was done with students and teachers in a language school in Rio de Janeiro.

Questioned about LOs in handout format, only one student prioritized formatting to content. All students declared that the activities are of great value in the practice and internalization of the target language. Invited to suggest activities they mentioned film snippets, conversation, songs and online research. These comments reinforce the reason this study was taken: the importance of pedagogical aspects of Los. Asked about what makes them decide to use a handout teachers answered: diversifying, boosting and contextualizing contents, by trying to use activities which are related to the target language as well as to students' needs. When contrasting *formatting* x *content* and *pedagogical aims* x *students' interests*, most teachers said that both aspects have the same importance: "they must go hand in hand" in order to promote efficiency in the learning process. They also affirmed that the CA

principles are the most important aspect to have in mind when choosing and elaborating activities. As for Interactive Whiteboard Activities, the topics (themes) of activities were considered as important by both students and teachers. Asked to contrast the relevance between *design* and *content*, the latter was considered as more important by the majority (unanimously among students): the pedagogical aim is more relevant than formatting. Teachers made comments about the necessity of open, interactive and creative activities. One teacher mentioned the need of having time to be available to prepare materials, but also pointed that if we devote appropriate care and attention to the materials we prepare, we will be saving time in the future and improve the quality of learning.

Scholars such as Marco Silva and José Manuel Moran mention the importance of interactivity in LOs as well as the role of the teacher as an agent of knowledge building. Researches done in this project show that there are teachers who are aware of these necessities and are able to apply them in their teaching practice. We believe that the challenge is to invest on the training of practitioners who are actually capable of integrating technology, methodology and activities: the Learning Objects.

5. Integrating Technology, Methodology and Learning Objects

ICTs permeate the simplest moments of our everyday routine. The school, therefore is also part of it, using the computer as a managing or instructional tool. But its use in this area deserves special view, different from that which we have concerning its use in commercial or business environments, as “we must consider pedagogical issues which may not be available to digital mapping, due to its high level of subjectivity”. (MARQUES NETO, 2006, p.55) There are two ways of viewing computers in the educational process: as interaction with contents of a certain field or as a supporting tool to the teaching/learning process. In the former approach, computers and educational soft wares are a means of conveying knowledge about a certain topic. In the latter, “the computer is not anymore a tool that teaches the learner, but the one through which he does and develops something”. (MARQUES NETO, 2006, p.59) The entrance of computers in education brought with it two views: technophobia and technophillia. Despite the fact that “both views impute to

machines the aspect that is actually related to humans", (CORREA, 2006, p.45) it is each individual who determines how to use such tool. Therefore, technological innovations do not mean pedagogical innovations. Passing on information is not enough in order for learning to take place, it is necessary that this information is mediated. These thoughts lead us to reflecting about the teacher's role and the paradigms which influence the choice and use of technological tool in the teaching practice.

Among several educational views, the constructivist and behavioral ones are the most mentioned ones. A strong influence of the behaviorist methodology is still present in education nowadays, despite the fact that most teachers consider themselves as constructivists. Whilst using technological resources we reproduce "the same attitudes, the same educational paradigm through which we were trained". (CORREA, 2006, p.46) We believe that changing the technological support is not enough if the is not a change in our educational practice. What is needed is an actual link between technology and education.

Based on Paulo Freire's and Pierre Levy's criticism to education, Marco Silva affirms that the educational pragmatics in the classroom is still the speaking of the teacher. Silva invites educators to link interactive communication and education, without any gap between utterance and reception of information. He also talks about the trivialization of the term interactivity and of education, once a number of institutions use technology simply as marketing. Considering the learner as a new spectator, Silva affirms that, despite the emerging of interactivity, the school is not in tune with it, due to the fact that teachers still think in a linear way of passing on information, thus parting utterance from reception.

Among discussions concerning educational ideologies and paradigms one character is always mentioned as responsible for the transformation or maintenance of traditional educational practices: the teacher. His role is discussed in both face to face and DL educational fields, and to him responsibilities concerning changes in education are assigned. But is this teacher prepared to do so? Is the insertion of technology in education an actual part of teachers' training?

Despite focusing discussions on the role of the teacher, Marco Silva says that the challenges directed to him are, in fact, challenges to the educational system, as it is only by changing educational policies it will be possible to change teachers' training, thus enabling him to act as expected. Masetto mentions the appreciation of contents instead of methodology in the majority of teacher's training courses, where the pedagogical disciplines are merely prerequisites for obtaining a teaching qualification. Martyn Wild points three failures in the training of teachers to use technology: a purpose failure (the fact that it is mandatory) and a failure in methodology, or the lack of worrying from those who plan teacher's training courses" (WILD, 1996, apud CARNEIRO, 2005, p.6), leading to an absence of links between technology and the educational process. The consequence is a third failure: the lack of meaning in the proposed activities.

Our intention is not relieving the teacher from responsibilities in his own practice, once personality, opinions and beliefs influence any practitioner's practice. "Technology helps us to do what we already do or wish. If we are open people, it helps us to enlarge communication; if we are not, it helps us to install more control. If we have innovative ideas, they facilitate change." (MORAN, 2000, pp.27-28) Our aim is to show that using technological resources or discussing teachers' performance is not enough. Discussions in a larger scope must happen, so that a real transformation in the educational system may be achieved. We believe that, to make this change possible, it must first take place in teacher's training courses.

Studies discuss semantic differences between the terms interaction and interactivity. The CA understands by interactivity the act of communicating, working in groups, with mutual effects among all individuals involved, adopting the term interaction pattern to define the ways through which interactivity might happen (how teachers and students may interact). We believe that, in order to be effective in facilitating learning, it is essential that Los promote interactivity and provide opportunities of different interaction patterns while being used. Believing that communicating is uttering and receiving information, the CA aims at enabling learners in the achievement of such abilities, which happen in "real life". Teachers from all educational fields should have it in mind in their practice. If students question why they should be learning something it is because they

can not see or feel the practical usage of contents. The teacher, alone and on his own, can not change the pedagogical model adopted by most institutions, but he may plant seeds of transformations which will establish links between action and reflection, theory and practice, thus turning contents and information into “columns” to knowledge building.

6. Conclusion

Despite most educators embrace the principles preached by constructivism, it has not yet been possible to firmly establish a pedagogy which is effectively in consonance with this approach. It would not be different in the use of technology, which has also brought a new concept: LOs. New resources, new terms, new students: new doubts and fears for the “old” teacher. How to adapt to so many innovations? The entrance of ICTs in education, along with the emerging of LOs, has generated in scholars a complete “Piagetian” imbalance, leading them to develop studies and research. Nevertheless, we believe that more is needed: we must test, innovate, change, dare.

Education deals with what is human. Students and teachers look for quality, efficiency and time optimizing. We are living in a new era, when every minute makes a difference in our everyday activities. Elaborating Los might be time-consuming, but their re-using has the opposite effect. The syllabus in language teaching somewhat follows the same pattern, with little variations among materials. Pre-established contents are mandatory, allowing activities which are independent from course books. By joining the choice of such contents to classical topics and themes (easily accepted by the majority of learners), we may elaborate activities which might be re-used in several situations. Moreover, we may turn the basic structure of the activity into an instructional design pattern and thus easy to adapt to different learners’ profiles.

Technology is any tool which facilitates the relationship with the environment as well as behavior acquisition of any individual. And we all are this “individual”: educators, teachers, coordinators, managers, politicians, governors. And we all long for high quality education. We agree that it is educators’ job to properly use such tools in order to improve the learning process. However, in order for this to happen, we need a conjoint effort from all society sectors, especially from those who are responsible for the educational

system and teachers' training, so that we may rely on practitioners capable of elaborating, testing, using and evaluating LOs which, having the student as its main focus, lead to a real and effective contribution for the development of all learners.

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