Chapter VII
Learning Objects:
Projects, Potentials, and Pitfalls

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the field of digital objects and repositories. It introduces the concepts of digital objects and repositories, their purposes, and their abilities to develop a coherent understanding of their nature and function. It continues by identifying and describing a number of generic and language-specific repositories. Examples of language objects are given to illustrate potentials and pitfalls. The review and dissemination of knowledge about these innovative resources assists educators in embracing new portals for teaching and learning languages with the most recent technologies. How they are being used and how this might fit into the future of language education is outlined to capitalize on their potential while avoiding the pitfalls. It is argued that showcasing repositories, promoting leading practice among language educators, and advocating high-quality digital resources prevents the further marginalization of language education in online environments. The main issue of standardization and neutrality are outlined, and the tension of value-free learning objects vs. the values embedded in the cultural aspects integral to language teaching and learning are explored. The chapter concludes with future research opportunities on learning objects, specifically in relation to the field of language acquisition to ensure adequate design and thus worthwhile use of future digital resources.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is a reference for practitioners and researchers interested in learning objects, and their potential and application in the field of language education. The principal goal of this chapter is a general introduction to learning objects: their definition, current trends, and future directions in the field. The more specific objectives include an understanding of the basic terms, an outline of the current discussion on their various abilities, the main issues in creating and reusing learning

objects, specific examples and applications, a discussion on the contradictions of value-free content and cultural values, and suggestions for future research.

The intention of this chapter is to stimulate original approaches, to introduce innovative resources, to encourage leading-edge practice in order to utilize the potential, and to pave the way for future research. It is argued that there is a marginalization of languages in online environments and that familiarity with digital learning objects and their active usage is needed to counteract this trend. Also, it is hypothesized that advocacy is required to ensure high content quality, cultural appropriateness, and relevance in the development of future learning objects.

The main section of the chapter covers the conceptualization, standardization, and application of learning objects and repositories. It introduces and promotes learning objects and repositories to raise awareness and interest. A definition of key terms and the clarification of main concepts are followed by an identification of commonalities and differences in the variety of digital resource offerings and how this relates to integration into existing language acquisition programs. A ready-made collection of relevant, quality digital repositories is presented to facilitate use and to build a community of practitioners.

The contradictions of the striving for *value freeness* of digital resources is explored and contrasted with the realities of *value richness* in culturally based languages.

The gap in the literature on discussions of the lack and future incorporation of cultural aspects in language learning objects is uncovered. It identifies potential implications for practitioners interested in the development of additional digital objects and highlights the need for research in that area. By identifying disparities and distinct approaches to the design of learning objects for language education, the importance of considerations for future development of new digital resources is emphasized.

Overall, the chapter aims to add to existing knowledge about learning objects within the specific context of language education by outlining definitions, explanations of abilities, relevant applications and models, considerations for the development of new digital resources, and future research opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Over the last few years, there has been an explosion of digital resources, namely learning objects and repositories. Currently, more than 65.8 million learning objects and 511 million digital repository references[1] are readily available through Web-based applications. They are either commercially provided or through the efforts of universities and funded projects of governments around the world.

Previously, each online course had been mostly designed as a whole and thus in undividable units, with some providing modular subsections.

Current e-learning practice is moving away from developing whole modules or courses towards producing the resources that form the components of these blocks of learning (Wharrad & Leeder, 2003). These blocks of learning are packaged as learning objects, which can be easily downloaded, modified, repurposed, and used on CD, DVD, or other electronic environments such as intranets and learning management systems (i.e., WebCT™ and Blackboard). The distinctive feature of learning objects is the fact that they can be used either independently as a standalone activity or part of a larger unit of work. The latter can be achieved through assembly of several learning objects to form a cluster of activities or incorporation of a learning object into an already existing course. It is this flexibility in addition to a number of other "-abilities" that comprise the superiority of learning objects over traditional online delivery (McGreal, 2004).

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