

Chapter XIX

The Use of the CMC Tool Amanda for the Teaching of English

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ABSTRACT

This chapter belongs to the context of the computer-mediated communication (CMC) for language teaching and learning. Since the introduction of this new communication method, new paths for the teaching and learning of languages have been opened. In this research, virtual discussions in the English language about polemical topics were carried out through the use of the AMANDA program. This program features artificial intelligence principles in the discussion coordination, diminishing the tutor's workload in the task of coordinating the discussions. The goal of this research was to observe the contributions of the CMC tool for the learning of English by the participating students. In total, 83 upper-intermediate English level students took part. The analyses and final considerations concentrate on the evaluation of the program used as well as the positive and negative aspects observed during this research for the teaching/learning of the English language.

INTRODUCTION

The extensive development of communication media in the last decade, most notably of computer-mediated communication (CMC), has led to

the emergence of new alternatives in education in general and language teaching in particular. For Berge and Collins (1995), “the term computer-mediated communication (CMC) signifies the ways in which telecommunication technologies

have merged with computers and computer networks to give us new tools to support teaching and learning.” Many language teachers took advantage of these technologies to complement their teaching methods. However, the true effectiveness of CMC in language teaching/learning should always be the subject of scrutiny, because the use of a computer or any other technological resource is not in itself able to improve the quality of language teaching. Each specific learning situation must be looked at in a critical light and described and evaluated in relation to specific social contexts. Nevertheless, in general terms, Internet-based CMC represents a powerful tool that facilitates communication between foreign-language learners and people throughout the world at any time. The new horizons that have opened up for learners offer them many opportunities as they allow easier and more frequent authentic communication in the target language with native speakers of that language.

COMPUTER-SUPPORTED COLLABORATIVE LEARNING (CSCL) AND COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING (CALL)

With advances in communication and interaction technologies and the growing use of such technologies in an educational context, new perspectives for the practice of collaborative learning have opened up. The Internet and the ease of communication associated with it allow students and teachers to learn together and create knowledge without the need for them to be in the same place at the same time. This kind of learning is called computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) and can be defined as an educational strategy that uses computing resources (the Internet, among others) as mediators of knowledge construction between two or more individuals by means of discussions, information exchange, and problem solving.

According to Gros, Guerra, and Sánchez (2005):

[T]he term computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) was first used by Koschmann (1996), who defined this environment as a research space based on three theories: neo-Piagetian conflict theory, the historical-cultural theory and social practice theory. Subsequently, Koschmann (1999) was to add to these the theories of Dewey and Bakhtin as further important points of reference. In recent years, interest in computer-supported collaborative learning has grown (Koschmann 1996). For many teachers and researchers, CSCL appears to be one of the most promising tools for bringing about change in teaching-learning practices.

Language teaching in particular has benefited from this new type of learning. Some studies in this field emphasize new language acquisition in a socially mediated learning environment where learners become involved in authentic communication with other learners, and activities involving linguistics and repetition are relegated to the background. According to Stevik (1980) and Brown (1994), exercises to improve students’ grammatical and syntactical abilities, which supposedly enable them to develop efficient communication, are no longer the main aim of a foreign-language class. Rather, the main aim now is for learners to engage in significant, motivating communication using the language they are learning, as this is the best way to become fluent in the language in question and is more easily achieved with the use of technological resources.

Technological resources include the Internet, which allows bridges to be built to the world outside the classroom. The great ease with which documents in the target language can be accessed in foreign sites and the opportunities for communicating with members of the culture that the learner wishes to be part of using chat, messaging, and e-mail programs are all efficient ways to gain

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