In Search of the State of Language Learning Online in Europe

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Abstract

Language education currently benefits greatly from the Internet and other new technologies in that it allows instant sharing of materials and ideas. Both the learners and the teachers gain instant access to a variety of options suitable to their level of L2 practice. The focus here is to describe the initial stage of a larger research plan that aims at examining the state of freely accessible websites for language learning in thirty-three languages used in Europe and that from a user (learner) point of view. In this first stage, Content Analysis was used in order to find out in which categories the language learning websites have commonality. It is important to come up with a valid set of categories in order to carry out a further in-depth analysis planned for the second stage of the research. The initial results advocate thirteen different categories and indicate that crowdsourcing is not involved in any of them. This suggests that this method of sharing and creating language learning content and other information seems to be popular throughout commercial online courses, such as *Babel, Busuu, and Duolingo*. The free online language learning courses usually do not include such a feature.

Keywords: Content Analysis, Crowdsourcing, Language Learning Online

1. Introduction

One of the currently applied trends in L2 education is the implementation of technology from various perspectives of use. The application of computers and smart mobile devices has played a key role for the last couple of decades. In this context, the computer assisted language-learning (CALL) approach has brought about many positives, such as creating a stress-free learning environment; supporting the development of various learning strategies, e.g. individual learning; enabling the learning outside of the traditional classroom; providing instant feedback; monitoring learners' progress; and promoting exploratory and global learning (Coghlan 2014; Dina and Ciornei 2013; Egbert et al. 2002; Pokrivčáková et al. 2014). Similarly the use of current tools and technologies in L2 education can have similarly a very positive impact on both, the learners and the teachers. The Internet has also become relevant in the context of CALL as more and more technical tools support the online mode as opposed to the offline method. Moreover, access to social networks that offer a wide variety of free L2 resources that are being crowdsourced, e.g. YouTube and Wikipedia, has become more relevant today than ever before. The reason for that may be the ease of use, a huge amount of available data shared by others, and instant availability. Following Jiang's et al. (2018) definition, today with the use of technology and Internet, Crowdsourcing for Education (CfE) represents a type of online activity in which an educator, or an educational organization, proposes to help with learning or teaching of a group of individuals via a flexible open call.

The present paper focuses on an existing content analysis of existing language learning resources found online. The analysis is conducted from a user (learner) point of view and includes various websites or platforms in the teaching of thirty-three languages from thirty-eight countries in Europe that are currently being represented in the COST Action enetCollect (Lyding et al., 2018). Similar research has not yet been conducted. The most recent research similar to this was conducted by Bárcena et al. (2015) and concerns the use of mobile language learning (MALL) in formal and non-formal education.

They analyse the use of various recent applications and practices in blended learning amongst educators but do not focus on crowdsourcing. As a result, and without further conclusion based on their analysis, they only recommend using such tools in order to motivate others to incorporate such techniques and technology in their L2 practices. More recently, Kukushka-Hulme and Viberg (2017) similarly focused on MALL in the context of collaborative language learning. In their qualitative review of online publications of a five-year span between 2012 -2016, they conclude that such technologies may help learners to become exposed to shared materials about authentic local discourse and that done in a global collaborative manner online. The authors use the term *collaborative work* rather than *crowdsourcing*, even though some features described refer rather to the latter term. Social context is very important in L2 learning, especially with the reference to the exposure and use of the target language. The use of technology and related tools in language learning does not only depend on their availability and accessibility but also on the digital skills of both teachers and learners. Collaborative work within specific classroom tasks, or crowdsourcing activities incorporated within available online tools or learner activities in MALL can be beneficial, however, according to Kukushka-Hulme and Viberg (2017), there are still gaps in how mobile learning should be designed. The above-related research represents only a short review of relevant studies; other studies related to websites or platforms could not be found at present.

2. Methodology

The first step of this research refers to defining the language learning resources online. The term L2 websites has been preferred to platforms for reasons presented in the results section. When browsing the Internet, the initial search was based on L2 websites that offer teaching of those languages belonging to the member states of the Action. All research including typing keywords into the online browser Google Chrome was conducted in the English language, as it was a practical way of putting ourselves in the shoes of a general L2 learner searching for websites to learn various European languages.

It also allowed us to give more or less an equal chance to all websites to appear in the search. A link and the name of website was copied and pasted into an Excel sheet. As an example for the Dutch language, these keywords were used: 'learn Dutch online' or 'learning Dutch online' or 'Dutch language online' and those results that included relevant links were collected. The entire procedure took place in the form of a desktop research carried out between 17 and 31 August 2018.

Content Analysis was chosen as the research tool suitable for analysing online websites with free L2 content. This method offers many benefits for the investigator but the most relevant feature is the competence to reduce written data (Cohen et al., 2011). This means that any surveyed material/content is reduced so that it is manageable in smaller portions. Similarly, Krippendorff (2004, p. 42) states: "The ability to process large volumes of text in content analysis is paid for by the explicitness of the method's procedures, which, if clearly stated, can be applied repeatedly, by many coders or by computer software." The method of Content Analysis lessens the data by classification of words and texts into much fewer categories. When carrying out a qualitative data analysis, as is the case in this research, it is important to specify the coding based on the response of the collected data. This feature is defined by Cohen et al. (2011) as "the ascription of a category label to a piece of data, that is either decided in advance or in response to the data that have been collected" (p. 559). For this reason no other pre-defined labelling system from other research was used because we aimed at originality of this study which should offer practical categories for labelling and coding.

3. Preliminary Results

The process revealed that there are several types of online language learning resources that can be categorised as follows: a) online L2 learning platforms that offer multiple languages; b) online websites that usually focus on one language; c) YouTube courses; d) various mobile applications, e) software; f) games; g) private online lessons; h) Skype L2 instructions (usually paid), or other tools similar to Skype; and i) online dictionaries with or without L2 explanations. Based on the initial results of various categories, it was clear that due to time and work constraints, only one particular category could have been analysed in depth, i.e. L2 websites. Despite the fact that some online L2 platforms, e.g. *Babbel, Busuu, and Duolingo,* offered teaching more than one language, i.e. they had uniformity in the types of tasks and the learner could choose from variety of languages, these were not included in our analysis because they had a freemium access which allowed initial free use of some lessons or tasks but further on a premium was requested for use. The research thus proceeded with the analysis of L2 websites. Such websites offer a large number of tasks and additional activities to enhance the learners' language skills. It was therefore necessary to categorise these tasks according to certain criteria. As mentioned above, when analysing content, the features, or labels, for each category need to be established from the analysis itself. Consequently, further categories were added when the content of each website was thoroughly analysed. As a result, the following thirteen categories of generic CALL resources were created: 1) country; 2) official language(s); 3) provider; 4) link; 5) layout/design; 6) skills; 7) focus; 8) task typology; 9) language of instruction; 10) levels; 11) access; 12) crowdsourcing element, and 13) additional information. These categories have been found based on the research of the collected data.

The first category labelled as 'country' refers to each country that is a member of the Action. Included are: Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, FYR Macedonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom. The second category labelled as 'language' represents the official language(s) spoken in each country. Seven of the surveyed countries have more than one official language (Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta and Switzerland) and therefore these languages were ascribed to this country but the online websites were analyzed only once per language. The third category refers to those responsible for the websites and their content, whether it is a private person, an organization or an educational facility. Some of these providers at the time of the survey allowed completely free entrance into the tasks, some offered the first few lessons or classes to work with for free but later required the user to register or buy a membership. Partial results have already shown that the majority of these were run by educational organisations and university projects. In four cases (Bosnian, Finish, German, Hungarian language) the learning resources were designed by a private person. For Latvian, Lithuanian and Maltese languages no proper online sites were found. The fourth category was designed to save the links of individual websites and so to prove the evidence of the analyzed content. Some countries/languages had more websites that provided various learning tasks and access to online content for both language learners and teachers. Still others had no free websites for educational purposes or had paid private offers. The fifth category marked as the 'layout' or 'design' was purposed to look at the structure of the online platforms. In particular it was to examine how the language content was divided, i.e. whether it was introduced in categories, chapters, courses, levels, lessons, modules, sections or smaller units. The analysis has revealed that the most common format of task structuring were lessons and sections. The sixth category was based on which of the L2 skills: speaking, writing, listening, reading, was chosen by the website for the most practice. Nearly all websites in this analysis focused on the practice of listening, reading and writing. Only two cases incorporated the practise of speaking skills. The seventh category labelled as 'focus' was oriented toward the pedagogical aim of language activities, such as grammar, translation, vocabulary, pronunciation, culture. Here, it has been spotted that the leading position represents the practice of vocabulary, followed by grammar and pronunciation. The eighth category represents the typology of tasks, such as fill in, fill in the blanks, match, listen and repeat, read, read aloud, repeat, select, speak aloud, translate, word order, write what you hear and so forth. From the data it is evident that the most frequently applied task was the filling of gaps.

The ninth category was labelled as the language of instruction. English was the main language of use. Some sites also offered the target language as the tool for

instruction as well as for practicing the exercises. In sixteen cases the online language websites offered more than one language of instruction. The tenth category created within the content analysis was marked as level in order to find out whether it was for beginners or advanced learners. Some of these sites provided classification according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment,* specifically levels detected usually referred to A1, A2, B1. There were also cases that offered difficulty of tasks by levels, such as beginner, elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The eleventh category was labelled as 'access', which helped to categorise free access to websites. Over 83% of all included learning resources were of free access. The rest of them had some minor requirements for use. The twelfth category was added based on the aim of this research, i.e. to find out whether some of the websites use a crowdsourcing element. In regard to this the survey has demonstrated that the crowdsourcing features were not enabled within the content of inspected language websites from the user's point of view. The last, thirteenth, category refers to the analysis of the content and is labelled as 'additional information'. Here, the researcher could add remarks regarding additional material or bonuses offered by websites. These categories were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. The preliminary results are presented in the next chapter.

4. Concluding Remarks and Future Work

The present paper has discussed an ongoing effort to find the state of language learning websites in thirty-eight countries in Europe. This research forms the initial part of a larger work in progress, which aims at two objectives, 1) to analyse the free L2 European websites to detect common categories and whether they include some form of crowdsourcing, and 2) an in-depth analysis of each category. This article concludes the first objective. Crowdsourcing has not been found in any of the analysed free online resources. This suggests that there is a difference between free and freemium (commercial) online resources, i.e. paid or partially paid L2 platforms are likely to include crowdsourcing. Further work suggests a second coder, i.e. another researcher conducting the same research and comparing results in order to double-check the classification of categories, and possibly expand the list and to carry on a deeper analysis of each category. After completing the second stage, we will be able to further describe the attributes of free L2 learning websites in Europe by providing examples and an overview of content analysis based on the thirteen categories described in this article.

5. Acknowledgements

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