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Literature Review of Robert J. Blake's

"The Use of Technology for Second Language Distance Learning"

Introduction

In 1840, Englishman Isaac Pitman offered the world's first official distance learning course – a correspondence course in shorthand. Thus began the First Generation of distance learning (DL) – courses that exchanged printed material via postal services (Sumner 273-74). Soon schools in Europe were offering correspondence courses in modern languages. By the 1960s the Second Generation of DL had arrived. This phase added broadcast media and videocassettes to the DL options (276). We are now experiencing the Third Generation – one in which DL is increasing dramatically because of advances in computer and internet technology (277). In 2002 there were 1.6 million post-secondary students taking at least one online class. By 2012 this number had climbed to 7.1 million (Allen & Seaman 33). In his article "The Use of Technology for Second Language Distance Learning" Robert J. Blake examines the state of DL technology and how this technology can best be incorporated into second language distance learning.

Review

Blake begins his article by reviewing some of the main points of a 1991 review of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) by Garrett. Garrett had urged that computers should be fully integrated into the language curriculum rather than being limited to routine tasks

such as teaching vocabulary. Garrett was suggesting a learner-centered environment, rather than a teacher-centered one (Blake 822). In the decades since Garrett's review, the Internet (and social media in particular) has become widely used in second language acquisition. This interactive approach is known as computer-mediated communication (CMC). Because of these recent advances, more educators are seriously considering using DL for all or part of their language coursework. Both Garrett and Blake are clear that the methods of delivery should not be the focus when considering technology. Rather, sound lesson plans and teaching practices should remain the basis when developing a language curriculum (823).

DL can be either synchronous (where the learner must participate at a specified time) or asynchronous (where the learner can participate at a time of his choice) (Blake 824). The most accepted form of DL remains synchronous videoconferencing, where a live lecture is delivered remotely. However, even today, the videoconferencing experience is hampered by audio/video delays and other technical problems (825). The use of both synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) such as on-line chat and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) such as discussion boards is increasing (824).

Since today's students spend a lot of time in social media, some students might participate more freely in CMC exercises than in the often more-stressful climate of a face-to-face (F2F) classroom (Blake 826). Some faculty, however, are resistant to DL because of the time needed to learn the new technologies and the failure of some students to practice the self-discipline required in DL (824). Currently, very few large universities offer DL courses in language learning (824-25).

In second language learning the DL technologies were originally used for grammar and vocabulary drills. However newer technologies include more advanced audio and video features

allowing students to engage more fully with native language speakers in other countries and cultures. In one type of learning experience, learners from two countries who are studying each other's language are put together (ex. A US student studying French would be matched with a French student studying English). These interactions are called *telecollaborations.* This can help in both improving pronunciation and increasing cultural awareness (provided that students are given adequate instruction regarding giving helpful feedback) (Blake 827).

Work on the more traditional CALL applications is continuing. Intelligent CALL (iCALL) attempts to use artificial intelligence to provide more advanced interactions with students. iCALL tailors each student's learning experience based on the student's responses to earlier questions. Because developing these complex iCALL tools requires so much time, only three of these programs existed at the time this article was published. Blake points out the potential of iCALL, using the example of e-*Tutor* for German as a success (Blake 828-29).

Blake then provides a discussion of the difficulties associated with evaluating the effectiveness of DL approaches in language learning. The number and variety of DL tools is one factor that makes evaluation difficult. Differences in teacher and student attitudes and styles make comparisons difficult. Also, it is quite likely that the students opting to take DL courses differ from students in F2F classrooms (DL students tend to be older, for example) (Blake 829).

Adequate teacher training is essential in DL. Teachers are faced with challenges such as learning how to apply technology to learning standards and how to use new e-tools to provide lesson content. Teachers should change their teaching methods to take full advantage of all the learning tools, rather than just exchanging their F2F practices with a DL version. Teachers must also expect that today's students will have high expectations due to their fluency with social media and other Web activities (Blake 830-31).

In conclusion, Blake states that no matter what technological advances are used in DL, the basic pedagogical concerns will always stay the same. He refers back to Garrett's research and agrees that authenticity, interactivity, learner-centeredness, expert guidance and a focus on the learning process must guide the development of any curriculum. Blake encourages teachers to move away from their traditional F2F methods when exploring DL and be willing to fully incorporate the multiple DL tools and technologies available to best produce a learner-centered environment (Blake 831-32).

Discussion

As Blake states throughout his article, successful implementation of DL depends very much on the efforts of the teacher to select the appropriate tools that will help to accomplish the desired learning outcomes. Goertler provides a detailed list of the various CMC tools that are available along with the recommended uses for each (Goertler 76). Like Blake, she stresses that "the pedagogy and not the technology drives the activity" (75). One tool addressed in detail by Goertler that is mentioned only in passing by Blake is the course management systems (CMS), a central location for class announcements, discussion forums and class content. These systems are the most common CMC technology being used in foreign language instruction (77).

Goertler has applied a variety of CMC tools including CMS (Goertler 78), chats (78), blogs (79) and audio dropboxes (81) in her German classes at Michigan State University. She finds that her efforts have been quite successful. She notes in particular, that while some students are comfortable in F2F interactions, others are less outgoing and are actually able to participate more fully in online communications (83). This supports Blake's observation that there are differences in the audiences that choose DL over F2F learning.

Blake notes that the attitude of instructors and students is critical when using technology in language learning. This is the focus of research by Wiebe and Kabata. They conducted a study of Japanese learners using a combination of F2F and DL at the University of Alberta. Three technologies were used: WebCt (a CMS), CALL materials, and an audio tool called Wimba (Wiebe & Kabata 224). Instructors and students completed surveys about the use of the technologies. Survey results showed that all the instructors believed that the technologies were effective tools, but only 66% of the students did (Wiebe & Kabata 227). 36% of the students felt that the instructors were using technology to decrease their class preparation time, but none of the instructors said this was the case (Wiebe & Kabata 227).

One problem that the researchers found was that students did not feel that the instructors had adequately explained the goals of using the technology; i.e. they had explained how to use the technology, but they failed to explain why they were incorporating the tool and how the student could benefit from it (Wiebe & Kabata 227-28). Another problem found was that students did not spend sufficient time using the assigned technology (230). This is consistent with Blake's finding that faculty find that some students lack self-discipline for DL. To overcome these problems, the authors suggest that instructors must devote more time to explaining the connections between the pedagogy and the selected technologies and also to strongly encourage their students to use the technology more frequently (230).

While the previous studies described in this paper emphasize technology, Russell and Curtis focus on another important factor in language DL– the size of the class. Russell and Curtis note that decisions about DL are often based on financial considerations. "Administrators and departments often make decisions about class size based on fiscal and budgetary constraints rather than on best practices in blended and/or online learning" (Russell & Curtis 1). Their study

focused on two online Spanish classes at a large university – one capped at 125 students and the other capped at 25 students. At the end of the term students were asked questions about the online experience. Students in the smaller class were much more satisfied with the experience. For example, all of the respondents from the small class indicated that they would consider taking an online class in the future. But 15 students in the large class (28.3% of respondents) stated that they would not (Russell & Curtis 7). When asked about online homework activities, all the respondents in the small class gave them a positive rating, yet less than half of the respondents in the large class did so (8). These results indicate that "students in the large-scale course did not feel that there was enough teacher presence to support their online language learning" (10). The teacher of the large-scale course also indicated dissatisfaction stating that "she could not support students' language learning sufficiently because most of her time was taken up by administrative tasks such as answering students' emails and administering make-up exams" (11).

Conclusion

Blake gives a comprehensive overview of the technology that is available for second language distance learners. While detailing the innovative features of these tools he concedes that there is little research that quantifies their effectiveness (Blake 829). Goertler provides an in-depth description of her own experience with several of these tools. By using a variety of technologies to achieve specific pedagogic outcomes, her students were actively engaged in the experience of learning German. I think that additional controlled research studies should scientifically compare the effectiveness of the DL tools. Language teachers need guidance in best practices of DL.

Although the title of Blake's article indicates that the topic is technology, he actually focuses a lot on teacher training and teacher and student attitudes. Wiebe and Kabata's study illustrates that teachers must understand the technology and clearly communicate to their students not only *how* the technology is used but *why*. I think follow-up research should study the impact of better teacher-student communication on the attitudes of students toward technologies. Wiebe and Kabata also found that students did not spend adequate time using the tools. This is a troubling finding. Studies should be done to determine how to motivate students to devote sufficient time to their distance learning activities.

The Russell and Curtis study on class size is very timely, as educational institutions struggle in times of decreased funding. Researchers should perform studies to determine the optimal class sizes for different languages and ability levels. Academic and administrative leaders should then work together to compose classes that are academically sound and financially feasible.

We have come a long way from the early correspondence courses of the 1800s. Second Language Learning is one discipline that is enthusiastic about the technological advances that are now available. But educators must always focus first on the learning objectives and only then carefully examine all the available technologies and apply them in the optimal ways to achieve their pedagogical goals.

Works Cited

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