Online mind maps for language learning : Assisted Risk-Taking

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to contribute to a theoretical framework for analysing combined digital literacy and language learning, going towards a better understanding of this combination for enhanced teaching and learning. The context is digital literacy and English as a Foreign Language teaching at university. The students are confronted with a task of online mind map creation on a controversial topic combined with the creation of a slide-show presentation and an oral presentation. Through the use of online mind maps we explore the concepts of Assisted Linguistic Risk-Taking and Assisted Risk-Taking tools. We define the concepts of linguistic pressure, linguistic risk-taking and linguistic expectancy which is connected to noticing.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to contribute to a theoretical framework for analysing combined digital literacy and language learning, going towards a better understanding of this combination for enhanced teaching and learning. The context is digital literacy and English as a Foreign Language teaching at university. Through the use of online mind maps we explore the concept of Assisted Linguistic Risk-Taking and Assisted Risk-Taking tools.

2. Method

From a theoretical point of view, we integrate the framework of Network-Based Language Teaching (NBLT) (Warschauer & Kern 2000) and Content Integrated Language Learning (CLIL) (Vlachos 2009). We look at the combina tion of CLIL, NBLT and mind tools.

From a practical point of view, our analysis deals with digital literacy sessions in English for second year students in the English department at university. The language is not evaluated during these sessions. The evaluation only takes into account the digital skills. The use of online mind maps is combined with keyword searching on the Internet about a controversial topic, thus implying written comprehension and written production, the search for relevant keywords involving reading result pages and websites. The task also implies the creation of a slide-show and an oral presentation. Tag clouds, semantic clustering, knowledge structuring and knowledge sharing are all combined through this practice. From a motivation point of view, several aspects are taken into account such as the controversial nature of the chosen topic, the use of an online tool, but also the fact that online mind map generators are knowledge sharing tools.

We consider that ICT sessions in the target language can relieve linguistic pressure (Rémon 2005), by giving the students the opportunity to use the language as a tool. We define linguistic pressure as the pressure triggered by the linguistic objectives when the language is not a tool but a goal in itself, which is also necessary. Linguistic anxiety is the anxiety triggered by this pressure. We introduce a distinction between Language Use and Language Learning, and study these sessions from a linguistic empowerment point of view.

The perfection of the language skills is not a prerequisite for use in this context. Error analysis in students' written productions allows to look at errors as signs of linguistic risk-taking. We define linguistic risk-taking as the fact of going beyond the boundaries of mastered knowledge empowered by linguistic confidence, as opposed to staying within these boundaries, using only well-known structures and vocabulary.

Along this line, we introduce the concept of Assisted Risk-Taking, online mind maps being considered as an Assisted Risk-Taking (ART) tool. Such a tool allows the learner to integrate a new element within a frame, thus making this element less unexpected because if the element is unknown, its position within a certain web of concepts is outlined. The learner has a vision of an area of knowledge even before filling in the gaps.

Along this line, Reiser (2004, p. 275) defines the "scaffolding metaphor" : "as applied to software, scaffolding refers to cases in which the tool changes the task in some way so that learners can accomplish tasks that would otherwise be out of their reach.", implying "a delicate negotiation between providing support and continuing to engage learners actively in the process". We introduce the log transport metaphor which is similar in that it illustrates the use of elements that have been met before to explore unmastered knowledge.

Linguistic expectancy can thus be defined as the expectancy of a linguistic element triggered by its position within a web as for example in a mind map. A student creating a mind map about "polar bear extinction" encounters the word "poaching" which was unknown but expected within the semantic web which is mastered in the first language, thus helping focusing on the knowledge gap. A similar example is a student working on "world hunger" and encounters the expression "starvation death" which is not part of a student usual vocabulary, but is expected within the mind map in the part called "consequences", along with "causes", "means to eradicate it" and "nmbers". This lexical expectancy can be articulated with Schmidt's noticing theory according to which (1990) only input that is noticed becomes available for intake.

3. Conclusions

We suggest the concept of Assisted Risk-Taking tools as a new concept allowing a better analysis of combined language and digital literacy teaching. Within the theoretical framework presented above, our aim is to analyse

students' productions, i.e. mind maps and the corresponding slide-show and oral presentation. Error analysis can give us insight as to the linguistic risk-taking involved, keeping in mind, with Chun and Plass (2000, p. 167), that "cognitive overload resulting from the medium can hinder the language acquisition processes for certain learners".

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