The Use of Smartschool as an Electronic Platform for Blended Language Learning

Gert Hurkmans and Linda Goos

Abstract—**Many electronic platform packages are intended for self-study and marketed as complete learning solutions; however, little is known about how well they work or under what conditions they should be used. This article reports on a study conducted at the Taxandria cvo Turnhout that explores the way adult learners use Smartschool – in Belgium a popular, commercially available, technology-mediated electronic learning environment. The Taxandria cvo Turnhout uses this electronic platform for more than five years in blended language learning classes for professional French. The participating adults from different Belgium companies agreed to use this program according to manufacturer's usage guidelines and to complete regular assessments to document their language proficiency throughout their sixty hours courses. The most striking finding was a significant participant attrition towards the evaluation process, which was likely due to a variety of technological difficulties as well as the lack of sufficient support for autonomous learning in the workplace. This lack of compliance with self-study suggests that despite the logistical ease of providing an electronic platform as Smartschool for blended language learning, more resource-intensive types of language training are more likely to be effective.**

Index Terms—**Computer-assisted language learning, blended learning, learner autonomy, online teaching and learning.**

I. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While commercially available, stand-alone language products are not generally found in Institutes for Adult Education (CVO's) in Belgium, there is a large population of learners currently relying on electronic platforms for blended learning. Although there is a great deal of high-quality, face-to-face language training available to some employees, there are agencies that lack capacity for in-house language training as well as the resources to send all interested parties for off-site instruction.

The Taxandria cvo Turnhout has been adopted by these agencies across the region as they attempt to find a scalable solution to make blended language training available to individuals for whom in-person instruction is impractical or impossible. This article will report the results of a two-part research study intended to explore how adult learners in professional workplaces use the electronic platform Smartschool.

In addition to the research on learner autonomy in professional workplaces, a discussion of online, computer-mediated self-study should include some of the research findings from distance language instruction, which also indicate that interaction is critical to the success of online learners. While distance learning research has largely considered instructor-mediated distance courses, some of the findings are relevant to computer-mediated self-study. For example, a "sense of community" is critical to the success of any online learner [1]-[3], and especially foreign language learners, who require an online community not only to engage them in learning but also to foster the second language acquisition (SLA) process [4]-[8]. In other words, any program intended to facilitate online foreign language acquisition must not only follow principles of effective online course design but also incorporate the elements of effective instructed SLA, including opportunities for output, interaction, and appropriate feedback, which generally require interpersonal communication [8]-[11].

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The conditions throughout the study are designed to follow the manufacturer's guidelines and to replicate the conditions under which the electronic platform is currently used throughout Belgium education order to answer the following research questions:

1) Is blended language learning with the electronic platform Smartschool an appropriate solution for employees?
2) What language gain can be expected from 0-beginners who use Smartschool according to the manufacturer's instructions?
3) Should supervisors and/or trainees be given any guidelines for blended language learning?

Based on the review of the literature on commercial electronic platforms and foreign language learning [12], the research team hypothesized that blended language learning could be appropriate for some learners. Based on the content [13], scope, and sequence described in the next section [14], the team predicted that 0-beginners would not gain much communicative competence but would master some vocabulary, and that learners with some prior language training would improve their French proficiency after using Smartschool. Finally, given the research findings from previous studies of autonomous learners, the final research hypothesis was that both supervisors and trainees would require guidelines for self-study.

III. STUDY METHODS

A. Participants

All participants in this research study were employees working for regional profit and non-profit organisations. They were recruited through announcements via e-mail and websites of professional agencies. All participants were motivated adult learners who sought out the opportunity for professional French language training and readily agreed to the language study protocols required by the institute. The learners where tested in advance and categorized in one of three levels – elementary, intermediate or advanced.

B. Materials

1) Self-study materials

The participants used the Dutch version of Smartschool and all software was accessed via the Internet. Smartschool contained specific reading and writing exercises in the context of a professional environment. The accompanying course syllabus has a combination of vocabulary and grammar drills in a variety of formats, from fill-in-the-blanks to word scrambles, and also includes exposure to scripted dialogues as well as reading and listening passages.

2) Assessments

Participants took oral achievement assessments that were administered over the phone. Because the content of Smartschool is heavily weighted toward vocabulary acquisition, and because most of the participants were 0-beginners, existing general proficiency tests were unlikely to effectively measure learner progress. Designed by teachers, the over-the-phone achievement tests were criterion-referenced and dichotomously scored assessments, which were created specifically to assess the information taught throughout the course. The tests involved asking participants to go to a website to view several picture-based prompts and then asking them to describe each image in the target language; after the description, learners were asked three specific questions about each image. Two experienced French language instructors scored the achievement tests.

3) Hardware

In addition to PCs, all participants were required to have access to a telephone to complete the assessments in a professional environment.

C. Procedures

The procedures and assignments for each level were slightly different because of the structure of the syllabus. Participants completed the pre-screening of their knowledge of French and agreed to use Smartschool for at least twenty hours during the ten weeks of the course. This protocol was established to mimic the training requirements for professional language learning at the workplace. Each week, participants were given two hours of release time from their job duties to use Smartschool at work, where they were asked to use the materials on their own. In addition, all participants agreed to attend on Tuesday morning the classroom during four hours as well as to complete the final exam.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The attrition in participation towards the evaluation process from all semesters meant that the assessment outcomes data were not 100% for all the students. There were 65 participants during the seven semesters who were enrolled in the courses and 56 have ended the program successfully (86%). In general, as they were obliged to use the electronic platform Smartschool for some tests, some students lost motivation during the course.

TABLE I: ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

#S : Students enrolled in the course
#C : Certificates awarded

Semester	Course data (60 hours)		
	Starting level of French	#S	#C
2005-2006-1	Elementary	9	9
2006-2007-1	Intermediate	9	8
2006-2007-2	Advanced	9	9
2007-2008-1	Elementary	10	8
2007-2008-2	Elementary	14	10
2008-2009-1	Elementary	7	5
2008-2009-2	Intermediate	7	7

V. CONCLUSIONS

This investigation of the use of Smartschool as a electronic platform for blended language learning by motivated employees in the workplace had one major finding: attrition in participation towards the evaluation process. Despite beginning with large *n*-sizes, a wide range of enthusiastic participants from different positions within the profit and non-profit organizations, had a outspoken negative evaluation towards the usability of the electronic platform. These results are very important; this was the first empirical study intended to establish what happens when independent learners use a commercial electronic platform in the workplace, and the lack of use suggests that this approach is not likely to be an effective approach for improving overall language proficiency in this context, especially for 0-beginners.

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