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Towards Target Language Awareness of English Language Teachers - Three Stories of Teacher Education Projects

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Abstract

The process of training future teachers of English has gained a new dimension recently thanks to ubiquitous access to the Web and widespread availability of hardware and software. Even despite that, however, teacher trainers need to be looking for sound pedagogical procedures that could be implemented in teacher training sessions. The purpose of the present paper will be to show the design and implementation of "TEFL specialisation module 4" post-graduate course, aiming at expanding digital teaching skills and target language awareness of student teachers. In particular, a discussion of text-based, audio-based and video-based instructional modules will be provided.

Keywords: Teacher Training, ICT, CALL, Target Language Awareness

Introduction

Given a much greater number of English teachers being non-native than native, teacher education programmes need to address not only the question of building language proficiency of would-be teachers, but also encourage them to analyse, reflect upon and investigate the target language system. Skilful use of selected ICT applications such as self-made corpora, subtitling and audio authoring can make the process of increasing target language awareness more effective.

The paper will report upon a training project composed of three separate modules implemented in graduate English language teacher education, showing how Computer-Assisted Language Learning can result in increased target language awareness.

I. Do-it-yourself Corpora as Teaching Resources

Numerous studies report upon the effectiveness of corpus-based procedures in foreign language instruction, ranging from the use of small corpora tailored to students' needs (Aston, 1997) to promoting large corpus concordancing (Bernardini, 2000; de Schryver, 2002); improving writing performance at lower (Yoon and Hirvela, 2004; Gaskell and Cobb, 2004) and advanced levels (Chambers and O'Sullivan, 2004); grammar presentation (Hadley, 2002) and rule inferencing (St. John, 2001). An extensive body of research can be, quite naturally, found in the area of vocabulary acquisition (Cobb, 1997; Cobb, 1998) and teaching foreign language reading, not only assisted by concordancers themselves, but performed in the wider context of a resource-assisted environment, encompassing a concordancer, a dictionary, a cloze-builder, a hypertext, and a database with the interactive self-quizzing feature (Cobb et al., 2001; Horst et al., 2005). Some studies reported on the relation between corpus-consultation procedures and strategy training (Kennedy and Miceli, 2001; St. John, 2001; Chambers, 2005), indicating the need to reflect on conscious and gradual introduction of the tool in the classroom. Finally, a newer perspective represented by the increase of writing proficiency due to learner corpus self-compilation (Lee and Swales, 2006) has become the background for the design and practical implementation of "Text 2.0" instructional module as described below.

II. Audio Editing in the Process of Interactive Multimedia Development

There are various types of materials to choose from when teaching, since, according to Tomlinson (2001), materials can be defined as anything which can enhance learning (linguistic, auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic). Teaching materials may be classified according to how authentic they are (Lee 1994), with authenticity termed as "the degree to which language teaching materials have the qualities of natural speech or writing" (Dictionary of Language Teaching & Ap-

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plied Linguistics, 1992, p.27). As Lee (1994) claims, a particular audio material may exhibit either text authenticity or learner authenticity. The former is defined in terms of the origin of the materials, while the latter refers to "the learner's interaction with them, in terms of appropriate responses and positive psychological reaction" (Lee, 1994, p.323). The major focus of studies into audio editing for ELT materials development is the extent to which materials adaptation through audio manipulation will be possible without losing authentic or semi-authentic impact that a particular audio material seems to have for learners.

Numerous studies show the benefits of authentic audio materials, nowadays conceptualised as podcasts, for language instruction. Morrison (1987) shows how interesting and stimulating audio materials trigger motivation of students when used during a lesson. Furthermore, according to Matthew Peacock, authentic audio materials have a positive impact on students who learn English by increasing their concentration and making them more engaged in a particular listening task (Peacock, 1996). According to Cooker (2008), authentic multimedia materials in the form of television programs, films, and music are highly beneficial since they "allow learners to feel that they are not really involved in a serious language learning activity" (Cooker, 2008, p.111). However, little research attention has been devoted to how teachers feel about the process of audio editing and what effect this has on their language awareness.

III. Subtitled Videos in Language Instruction

Adapting videos by adding subtitles is becoming a more and more popular topic among language practitioners due to easy access to subtitled TV series online and great flexibility of this medium for teaching. There have been several studies investigating the effect of subtitles/captions on increased language proficiency, mainly in the areas of receptive skills and vocabulary acquisition (Baltova, 1999; Çakır, 2006; Danan, 1992, 2004; Garza, 1991; Markham, 1993, 1999; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992). Subtitling proves to be a potentially useful teaching procedure especially in vocabulary instruction and development of learners' listening and reading comprehension skills. According to Koskinen et al., teaching with captioned videos leads to notable improvement of the participants' incidental vocabulary knowledge (cited in Yüksel & Tanrıverdi, 2009), while for Gajek (2008) the use of captioned video materials is an important way to extend learners' exposure to foreign language input, at the same time exerting a high level of involvement.

Guillory (1998: 89) demonstrated that "the keyword captions group outperformed the no text group and that the full text captions group outperformed the keyword captions group". According to Bird and Williams (2002), arousing the listeners' phonological visualization of aural cues proves to be another benefit of captions/subtitles in visual materials. Moreover, Karakas and Saricoban (2012) confirm the significant relationship between watching subtitled cartoons and vocabulary development, while Danan (2004, p. 67) claims that audiovisual materials enhanced with captions or subtitles improve the listening comprehension skills of second/foreign language learners, enhance language comprehension and lead to greater depth of processing.

However, there are also certain limitations of subtitling videos as an instructional procedure. Most of all, as Winke, Gass and Sydorenko (2010, p. 67) pinpoint, it is difficult to generalize the findings of the previous studies on subtitling for at least two reasons: "First, several studies did not group subjects by proficiency levels; second, the types of tests used to measure the effects of language learners' processing of captions varied widely". Similarly, Danan (2004) reports that many language teachers fear that subtitles distract learners' attention, especially that of lower-level learners, from the actual spoken language to the written text and create a sense of laziness on the part of students (Taylor, 2005). Finally, captioning videos is a procedure that demands a certain amount of digital literacy, translation competence and awareness of audiovisual standards, which are rarely included in teacher training programmes. Hence there arises a need to reflect on how to implement video subtitling into a teacher training programme.

IV. The study Aim and Context

The aim of the present study was to observe the practical implementation of building target language awareness and digital teaching skills of a group of post-graduate student teachers, participating in a 30-hour training course 'TEFL specialisation module 4' at a major Polish private university.

The course was subdivided into three smaller modules, namely, "Text 2.0" (do-it-yourself corpora), "Audio 2.0" (podcasting and audio editing) and "Video 2.0" (video subtitling). Each of the modules proceeded according to the action research cycle model, starting with planning, followed by action, observation and reflection. The findings from one phase were used to improve the instructional procedure in the other. Data collection techniques involved learning diaries, analysis of learner products and informal evaluative interviews.

The participants were a group of post-graduate students of English, heading towards their M.A. degrees in foreign language teaching, with 16 females and 6 males taking part in the course. Instruction was spread over the whole year and two separate courses ("Corpora in language teaching" and "Information Technology in language teaching") were offered once a fortnight.

Tale 1 – self-made corpora in materials developmentIt

has been pointed out by numerous researchers that Data-Driven Learning and corpus consultation are the learning procedures that are much less straightforward to acquire and implement in one's own learning toolkit than it is the case with online dictionary look-up or mindmap authoring, for instance. Hence, the researcher took great care to reflect upon how the process of corpus implementation was going to be conducted. In specific, it was interesting to observe whether trainees' language proficiency and digital literacy would grow throughout the project, as well as to what extent

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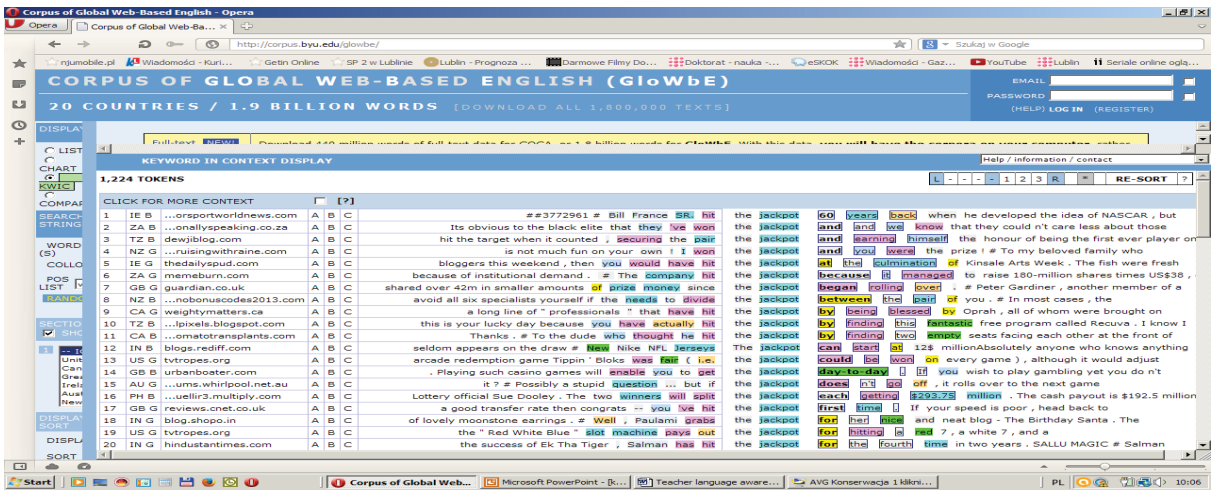

Figure 1. *A sample learning task based on GloWbE.*

initial assumptions or misconceptions about Data-Driven Learning would be upheld upon completion of self-compiled corpora.

Throughout the course of the study it was assumed that the participants would be taken through the stages of concordancing, corpus compilation, quiz authoring and meta-reflection. The rationale behind such a model was that too often ICT teacher training relies solely on technology tutorials, without ample opportunity for didactic implementation and meta-reflection. Therefore, interspersing trainers-as-learners and trainers-as-teachers stages was supposed to enhance the training experience and help trainees integrate the promoted procedures into their personal skillset.

Stage 1 – learning with corpora (trainees as learners)

In this stage participants gained a first-hand experience of learning with corpora by doing corpus-based language tasks. A series of activities helped them see the opportunities and limitations of using online corpora as opposed to Web dictionaries. At the same time, searching strategies within such renowned corpora as British National Corpus, Corpus of Contemporary American English or Corpus of Global Web-based English were practised and refined.

Stage 2 – meta-reflection (trainees as analysts)

In this stage participants were encouraged to reflect on the corpus-assisted learning experience, using a learning diary to record their observations on suitability of concordancing procedures, as well as opportunities and limitations of selected corpora. At the same time, they used a forum to propose authored DDL activities.

Stage 3 – source retrieval (trainees as corpus compilers)

Stage 3 was devoted to practising the procedures of corpus compilation within the selected learning environments (TextSTAT and AntConc). Trainees' knowledge of how to use advanced searching procedures and search engine syntax to retrieve electronic documents was elicited and expanded upon. Finally, participants were supposed to design, collect text materials, and, if necessary, edit or convert document files.

Stage 4 – hypothesis building (trainees as language investigators)

As it turned out early in the project, ample understanding of what corpus linguistics can be useful for is necessary in order to formulate hypotheses and research problems to be solved. Few trainees actually had developed language learning hypotheses prior to that stage. At that point, inspecting learning diaries of other students in the project helped to see the necessary scope and breadth of the linguistic problems.

Stage 5 – peer assessment (trainees as reflective practitioners)

Evaluating the potential of self-made corpus compilation in individual learning diaries summed up the whole module. Trainees were encouraged to confront their knowledge and skills before the self-made concordancing project and afterwards.

Even though the instructional procedure described above proved to be successful in the sense that all trainees managed to complete the course and present a similar product, not all of them adopted the new technology to the same extent. In fact, the study corroborated the theory put forward by Rogers (1983), which posits that the rate of technology adoption varies across participants and clear adopter categories such as Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and Laggards can be isolated (Anderson, Varnhagen and Campbell, 1998). According to Rogers (1983), adoption of innovation occurs inevitably but what distinguishes individual adopters from one another is the rate of that adoption.

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Tale 2 – from Text-to-Speech synthesis to podcasting

The module of "Audio 2.0" encompassed practising a variety of skills involved in using audio materials for language teaching purposes. First of all, the issues of finding and retrieving audio materials were addressed. Even though it might be expected that modern Internet users should be quite versatile and skilled at searching the Web for a specific type of materials, it was quite an illumination for most trainees to learn advanced searching methods such as using search engines to find files of a particular file extension only (e.g., mp3) or only within a selected domain. During the second class of the module the difference between downloadable audio and streaming audio was made clear and trainees were specifically instructed in how to use a selected audio recording program (here, Audacity, http://audacity.sourceforge.net) to record streaming audio. Afterwards, editing audio materials for the purposes of adapting authentic L2 materials to suit the capability of target learners was given ample attention, with the following operations specifically practised:

• highlighting, cutting out, pasting, duplicating audio selection;

• changing tempo and pitch of audio selection;

• inserting silences and other special effects;

• recording audio from multiple sources (microphone, line);

• using multiple tracks and mixing them into a complete audio file.

An important part of this class was also a tutorial in copyright regulations, so that trainees were made aware of how audio editing operations violate the copyright of the downloaded or streamed audio file and what precautions need to be taken in order not to infringe upon the copyright law.

The final part of the 3-class module was devoted to selected applications of Audio 2.0, such as Text-to-Speech synthesis, podcasting, blog-to-podcast or PowerPoint-to-podcast conversion and the like. Trainees practised multiple ways of authoring, publicising authored materials and embedding them in a foreign language lesson.

As was evidenced by the learning diaries written after the module, even though trainees were generally well aware of how to download and play audio on the computer as well as on their mobile phones, it came as a novelty to find out about multiple ways of audio authoring. At the same time, addressing such important pedagogical implications as copyright infringement and lesson design proved to increase trainees' teaching skills. In terms of target language awareness, activities devoted to using Text-to-Speech online demos turned out to be most relevant – trainees purposefully used different accents of English (e.g., Welsh English or American English) as well as male/female/child voices for the same texts to make the learning experience even more challenging. Some trainees combined the capacities of audio recording software and Text-to-Speech demos, by writing a script first, then having TTS voices read selected lines, recording these lines and mixing them together, so that a fairly fluent dialogue was produced. This seemed to be the most sophisticated form of digital materials development, highly welcome in any Computer-Assisted Language Learning classroom.

Tale 3 – using subtitled videos to adapt authentic materials

Subtitling as a method of preparing digital teaching materials for in-class use was also implemented in a 3-session scheme with the group of post-graduate student teachers. As Gajek (2008) points, captioned videos are suitable for incidental learning of vocabulary at all levels of language proficiency, as lower-level learners will concentrate more on the contents of subtitles, since they will find it difficult to aurally grasp authentic exchanges. Thus, it was posited that a highly proficient group of student teachers conducting classes at all possible levels (primary, secondary and tertiary) will find the procedure useful enough.

In particular, the procedure of adapting video materials with subtitling encompassed the following steps:

1. Preparation:

• arranging captioning software (e.g., free-of-charge downloadable solutions such as Subtitle Workshop, http://www.urusoft.net/products.php?cat=sw&lang=1, or SubEdit-Player, http://www.subedit.com.pl/) or online solutions (dotSUB, http://dotsub.com/, Amara, http://www.amara.org);

• arranging videoplaying software (AllPlayer, Media Player Classic, Real Alternative);

• installing necessary codecs to make sure the captioned file will be seamlessly played;

• downloading the very file for captioning or getting the link of an online video.

2. Translating:

• introducing captions;

• synchronising captions;

• editing work and checking the translation against subtitling standards.

3. Embedding in a lesson:

• selecting viewing purposes;

• designing viewing tasks;

• adding pre- and post-viewing sequences;

• making classroom worksheets.

4. Publishing and promoting:

• using *Amara/DotSUB* internal account;

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• making a dedicated *YouTube* channel;

• uploading links to videos and subtitle files to the class Learning Management System (e.g., Moodle);

• sending links/invitations for download.

The purpose of the instructional module was to evaluate the readiness of language teachers to tap into the instructional opportunities opened up by the simultaneous existence of the visual, auditory and textual channel of perception. During the first session trainees were guided through the ways of operating a selected piece of subtitling software (here, Media Subtitler), loading videos, adding and synchronising captions, until the fully prepared movie file was produced. In a subsequent session, trainees were exposed to a greater number of options opened up by the use of subtitles, both in terms of language combinations and text formatting patterns (see Gajek, 2008):

• L2 audio + L2 subtitles – listening and reading skills are activated simultaneously to reinforce verbal and graphical representation of language.

• L1 audio + L2 subtitles – foreign language reading as well as mediation skills are developed.

• L2 audio + L1 subtitles – listening comprehension is enhanced while giving learners support in making out the meaning for themselves.

• L2 audio + L3 subtitles – integrating foreign language experiences leads to greater awareness of multiculturalism and plurilingualism of the modern world.

It was particularly interesting to see how student teachers made better and better use of less usual text patterns, at the same time opening up a whole set of video-viewing techniques (Krajka, 2013):

• displaying full-text subtitles;

• showing only partial subtitles (e.g., only selected problem words);

• displaying gapped subtitles (with key words to be reconstructed);

• highlighting particular words/parts of speech with bold/colour;

• displaying subtitle lines in the wrong order;

• manipulating display times of subtitles.

The final part of the module was devoted to presenting how digitally processed materials would be incorporated in a language lesson. Here, what was particularly important was to assess how student teachers formulated aims and objectives, how they added while-viewing tasks, how they designed pre- and post-viewing activities to enhance the learning experience. It turned out that special attention needs to be devoted to what viewing purposes correspond to what subtitling modes. For instance, a frequent misconception that learners can view the video, even a subtitled one, with no clear task and get comprehension questions afterwards, had to be clearly exposed and corrected. Moreover, it turned out trainees did not give ample importance to the pre-viewing stage, adding a customary “Discussion” task before the video. A need for shorter, better-focused and more teacher-guided schemata activation and vocabulary building tasks was shown in lesson plan evaluations. The final area of lesson plans which showed a need for improvement was the integration of a viewing stage with the subsequent part of the lesson. In other words, trainees need to become aware that a subtitled video is a useful device to improve noticing of selected language items, which could be later exploited in either controlled or free practice tasks.

V. Conclusions

Training language teachers for the use of tools and procedures of Computer-Assisted Language Learning is a process which very often turns into computer-based tutorials at the expense of developing the skills of teaching with technology. With computer classes mainly run by IT specialists rather than language instructors, educating teachers in the use of computers for learning often lacks the necessary pedagogical focus. The major finding of the present study was a clear necessity to balance computer tutorials and pedagogical tasks – so that such areas as planning lessons, formulating objectives, adapting text, audio and video materials are not neglected in a teacher training program.

Another issue that was explored throughout the study was the perception of innovation by participants. The extent to which particular topics, procedures or tools are perceived as ‘innovative’ is always relative, with varying degrees of digital literacy determining the extent to which participants internalise particular technologies. As it surfaced in participants’ learning diaries, even though the course topics were straightforward and familiar (Text, Audio and Video), the Web 2.0 programs selected for practice as well as pedagogical tasks made the whole training experience worthwhile. Thus, it can be concluded that a successful training course can take the familiar as the starting point, making sure throughout the process trainees are guided from the known to the unknown.

As the research of Rogers (1983) shows, no teacher training course can reasonably expect virtually all participants to adopt particular technologies for their teaching, and there are always both laggards and enthusiastic innovators. However, taking the precautions described above can make the rate of technology adoption higher, increasing the chance for teachers to assist learning with modern digital tools.

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