

ONLINE LANGUAGE TEACHING RESOURCES: CLASSIFICATION, IMPLEMENTATION AND GUIDE

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Abstract: During the last years, the World Wide Web has gained more and more importance in the field of teaching and learning. For teachers, online resources have become indispensable in order to find appropriate activities for their lessons. Therefore, Open Discovery Space (ODS), a European project funded by the Information and Communication Technologies Policy Support Programme (ICT-PSP), has implemented a portal (ODSP) which is one of the richest online repositories providing teaching material for education. The overall goal of the ODS project is to develop and implement a web-based access point where teachers can find educational resources made by others. In this context, one central question arises: what do teachers need for an efficient use of online repositories? What kind of classification is necessary for them to efficiently search and find materials that fulfil their purposes? How can we prevent them from getting lost in cyberspace? In the context of the ODS project, a suggested taxonomy covering all domains of the school education was developed. In this paper we focus on the design of a classification for language teaching and its implementation into praxis. Furthermore, we propose a guide for teachers to actually doing so. Finally, the findings of the paper are illustrated via an example of a real-life learning scenario.

Keywords: E-Learning, Classification, Taxonomy, Language Learning, Skills, Grammar, Vocabulary, Learning Activity, Implementation, Guide

1. BACKGROUND

The Open Discovery Space¹ Portal (ODSP) is one of the richest online repositories providing teaching material for education. The overall goal of the ODS project is to develop and implement a web-based access point where teachers can find educational resources made by others. Teachers can readily use these materials in their own classes, or adapt them to better match their particular educational context and the capabilities and learning styles of their students.

To successfully develop a purpose-built portal, the users and their needs and their expectations towards such a portal are the key to establish a sustainable pan-European ODS portal of educational resources [7].

One question is central to this issue: what do teachers need in order to uptake resource-based e-learning? With this question in mind first we focus on the needs and expectations of teachers towards the ODSP.

In order to find out what teachers need for the adaptation of e-learning, stakeholders in the context of school education across Europe were invited to 92 workshops in 19 European countries. 2300 participants attended the workshops: school teachers (in-service or pre-service) of all education levels, teacher trainers, curriculum developers, and educational policy makers from

local/regional/state level, students and parents participated.

The goal of the workshops was to build an initial contact with these stakeholders, to explore their teaching praxis and raise awareness of resource based learning (RBL). At the same time the visionary workshops aimed to gain their feedback, as well as their reflections and needs for the repository. The methodology of the survey followed a holistic approach: a questionnaire with multiple-choice and with open-ended questions was filled in by teachers and interviews were conducted. The survey and its detailed results can be found in separate papers [2, 10], within this article we outline only the most significant outcomes of the needs analysis.

First of all, teachers need high quality resources. Furthermore, the pool of resources must be big enough to offer something for many. The searching mechanism for the resources is also crucial; teachers need efficient ways for searching and finding materials (reached within three clicks) from different curricula backgrounds (classification by subject, topics and level).

The last requirement means that a portal should use a Controlled Vocabulary (via IEEE LOM) in order to ensure the effectiveness of information storage and resource search. A high quality controlled vocabulary will help the user to identify and locate desired educational content easily and though save time.

In the context of the ODS project, a suggested vocabulary covering all domains of the school education was

¹ Open Discovery Space is a European project funded by the Information and Communication Technologies Policy Support Programme (ICT-PSP).

developed. In this paper we focus on the design of a vocabulary for language teaching, its implementation into praxis and propose a guide for teachers to actually doing so.

2. THEORY

In this context the design of language teaching methods include four components: learning and teaching environment, teacher, learner, and activity (including materials/resources). Resource-based learning is a view which gives prominence to the role of resources in the teaching and learning process.

The classification theory of language teaching activities determine different factors playing a role in their design and implementation: age of the learner, teaching approach, topic, form of cooperation, type of the activities, task, assessment, equipment, technical and other pre-requisites, etc. [5, 8, 13].

Further classifications exist from the technical point of view [4, 12, 14, 15], categorizing on-line activities: virtual classrooms, Hot Potatoes, WebQests, etc.

The classification theory lacks the user involvement and though remains to be the domain of experts rather than users. When teachers look for a learning activity for their teaching goal and specific target group, they want to find resources as quickly as possible, probably within three clicks [2, 10].

Considering the teachers' practice, it can be stated that practitioners search by learning activity type, topic and level, as these three factors seem to be the most informative and decisive. The rest of the factors build an additional information category (called advanced search) – but they are not a core for the first searching mechanism.

For a better understanding, these three key factors are described in the following paragraph. The most recently and commonly used guideline which describes the achievement *levels* of foreign language learners is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), containing six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. The required *topics* depend on the institutional purpose (curricula), the goal of the whole class and also each and every individual taking part in the course; and can reach from everyday life themes to complex special issues.

The last category *learning activity type* is much more demanding, as the concept of language teaching has changed radically during the last years. Whereas in former days, it was mainly characterized by written grammar and translation exercises, nowadays more skill-oriented activities are prevalent [1, 3, 6, 11]. This applies also for the context of school [9]. In the next chapter a complex classification of learning activities will be proposed.

3. CLASSIFICATION OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES

According to the “new” paradigm of language teaching, language learning activities, exercises and tasks - independent from the language - can be classified as follows (see also annex I. *Language learning classification*):

- Skills
 - o Active skills
 - Speaking
 - Writing
 - o Passive skills
 - Reading
 - Listening and watching
- Language use
 - o Grammar
 - o Vocabulary

When teaching a foreign language in class, it is essential to foster all four skills mentioned above (speaking, writing, reading, listening and watching). For this purpose, it is important to subdivide these rubrics into pre-, during- and post-activities. Young & Hofer & Harris [16] explicitly suggest this subdivision only for the passive skill of reading and the active skill of writing. However, this sub-classification makes sense for all four skills.

According to the paradigm transformation in language teaching theory *language use activities* (grammar and vocabulary) should be embedded in the activities of the skills. Here they build a separate element – as users are used to search materials with keywords grammar and vocabulary. Anyway they should be linked to the specific skill they refer to and in a later stage they could be completely integrated to the used skill.

At the beginning of a learning scenario, knowledge should always be activated or generated in some way, e.g. by brainstorming, researching, etc. This means that students can activate their prior knowledge or research a new topic before they start with the during-activity. This helps them in terms of focus and comprehension [16].

After the during-activity, a post-activity can involve a reflection on the during-activity, e.g. students can discuss what has been dealt with in the during-activity with their peers, share content with other students, perform their finished work in class, etc. [16].

4. IMPLEMENTATION TO PRAXIS

Broadly summarized, the classification of language learning activities presented in chapter 3 classifies language teaching and learning resources according to the two language-use activity types (grammar, vocabulary) and to the four skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening / watching) –. The skills are subdivided into pre-, during- and post-activities. Consequently, also a language learning scenario should always contain a pre-activity (where knowledge that is going to be needed in the during-activity is generated or activated), a during-

activity (the main part of the scenario) and a post-activity (where students can reflect on what has been dealt with in the during-activity).

This approach is also used in praxis. Here for the main reference has been chosen the resource site of the British Council (<http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org>). The example learning scenario presented in this paper is called “The Fridge”. It is about a man who sends a Facebook friendship invitation to a woman who he met in a restaurant. However, before accepting his invitation, she first wants to get to know him better. Therefore, he invites her for dinner to his place and cooks lasagna for her.

This learning scenario involves a pre-, a during- and a post-activity. In the pre-activity, vocabulary that is used in the during-activity, i.e. the film, is dealt with – words have to be matched with definitions. In the during-activity, the student watches a short film (the man who invites a woman for dinner tells the whole story outlined above). It is possible to have a look at the transcript of the film at any time during the whole learning scenario.

In the post-activity, the student has to put given sentences in the correct order so that they describe the story presented in the film. Afterwards he/she has to indicate if given sentences about the film are true or false. Finally, the recipe of the lasagna the man has cooked is given. There is also a forum where people can discuss the film, the recipe, etc.

This learning scenario was chosen as an example because it illustrates how important it is to offer students a pre-activity (e.g. vocabulary exercise), a during-activity (e.g. watching a film) and a post-activity (e.g. putting sentences in the correct order, true-false-exercise, discussion, etc.).

Furthermore, this learning scenario is especially suitable for learning purposes as it is not a stand-alone activity, but it is real-life-oriented because a recipe is given that can actually be tried by the students and because the discussion forum allows students to exchange their experience with the lasagna, the film, etc. Moreover, Facebook and getting to know new people, which represents the starting point of the during-activity, is a very important part of young people’s life. This makes it especially interesting for them to complete the learning scenario.

5. E-GUIDE

For the purpose of teaching or learning a foreign language, using the Internet appropriately has become indispensable as this approach has – among others – the following advantages:

- The interaction between students is enhanced by means of forums, etc. – this fosters communication in the foreign language
- Individual learning styles and paces can be accounted for – each student can take as much

time as he or she needs for completing the learning scenario

- Students can complete learning scenarios wherever and whenever they want
- The Internet offers high-quality materials that are up to date

During the last years, online resources have gained more and more importance in the field of teaching and learning. For teachers, this concept has become essential in order to offer appropriate activities for their lessons. However, given the mass of language teaching and learning resources that can be found in the Internet nowadays, it is often difficult to find appropriate materials, which should be real-life-oriented, up-to-date, authentic and informative.

The learning scenario “The Fridge”, which was described in chapter 4, meets all these criteria. It is real-life-oriented, up-to-date and authentic as it deals with getting to know new friends and adding them in Facebook – this is an essential part of young people’s life and attracts the students’ attention. Furthermore, it is informative as it presents a lasagna recipe at the end of the learning scenario that can be tried by the students.

“The Fridge” also shows how different learning styles and paces can be coped with as students can take as much time as they need for completing the scenario, and moreover, it is possible to have a look at the transcript of the film at any time. This supports self-controlled learning and students’ autonomy and enhances the learning intensity.

Furthermore, this learning scenario is especially suitable for language teaching and learning purposes as

- the acquisition of content-oriented knowledge is supported – students have to deal with vocabulary that is used in the film
- learning processes and knowledge construction are focussed on – students have to match words and definitions themselves
- it is functional and user-oriented, i.e. the learning scenario presents a useful result - here, the lasagna recipe is given
- it fosters personal reflection – in the discussion forum, students can discuss the film, the recipe, etc.

It is challenging to use online resources appropriately for language teaching and learning purposes. In doing so, it is essential to be target-oriented, i.e. to focus on what should be achieved. At the same time, materials should be interesting and real-life-oriented for learners – this makes it easier for them to stay focussed. The criteria mentioned in this chapter help to bear this in mind.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper described the outcomes of the ODS needs analysis carried out with 1175 participants from 19 European countries, ranging from teachers in primary or secondary schools to teacher trainers, curriculum

developers, educational policy makers, students and informal learners. According to the main findings of the needs analysis, teachers have to be prevented from getting overwhelmed by the mass of resources that can be found in the World Wide Web. It is crucial to support them to find exactly what they need for their purposes.

First, recent research on the classification of resources has been described and, second, a language learning taxonomy has been outlined that can be used for structuring language teaching resources. The classification of activities and its implementation to praxis presented in this article can help teachers not to get lost in cyberspace. Furthermore, the outcomes of the paper were illustrated via a real-life learning activity.

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