Use of a Virtual Learning Environment as Support to face-to-face English Classes: a Case Study Focused on The Student Perception

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a case study, from a methodological bases research in both qualitative and quantitative ones, which was used the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) WiZiQ in an English course in the city of Rio de Janeiro as support to face-to-face English classes. The research instruments used to collect data were questionnaires with open and closed questions administered before and after the use of the VLE. The answers given by students responded satisfactorily to all questions of research, confirming the intention to perform it. The results indicated that the VLE searched, as a representation of the virtual classroom can be a motivator to help in the face-to-face teaching-learning process, but not enough to attract students to take English courses exclusively online.

Keywords: Virtual Learning Environment, students, English teaching-learning.

Introduction

In today's technological and education environment, the Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) are presented as potentially useful resources in the teaching and learning of English, that’s because they provide interaction and interactivity tools which involve attitudinal change in relation to the educational environment. Such change is required, according Cortella (2003), by the emergence (in the sense of
emerging and speed) of new educational paradigms. Thus, the author draws attention to the need to review and point out new ways of doing and thinking.

This way, the present study aims to present the results of using the VLE WiZiQ (www.wiziq.com), under the focus of interaction and interactivity, used as support to the face-to-face English learning to a group of ten students aged between 16 and 26 years of two classes of basic level of an English course in the city of Rio de Janeiro in April 2010.

Research

The general objective of this research was to observe and analyze some of the elements contained in the perspectives of students about learning with the support of the WiZiQ VLE. We conducted a case study based on research instruments aligned to the paradigms of quantitative and qualitative ones, with data collection to analysis by questionnaires and observation. To achieve this goal, we propose the following study questions: (a) How occurred the communication and interaction processes on WiZiQ VLE? (b) What are the prospects of the students before the use of the VLE and what impressions after using it?

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

Review of the concept of AVA

Discussing about the spread of the term VLE, Okada and Santos (2003:2) call attention to the fact that this environment is used by "educators, communicators, computer technicians and many other individuals and groups / individuals," in other words, by professionals from various fields. That's why discussing the definition of VLE is important, because, as Haguenauer et. al. (2009:02) emphasize, currently there is some lack of clarity in the definition of this term and some other ones that are
generally related to it, what exactly might be due to the fact that it is used in different knowledge fields.

In an attempt to define VLE, some authors engage in a work of reviewing of the term, describing what each of its components indicates. For example, Pequeno et al. (2001:01) provides a definition for each of the three words: virtual, learning and environment. Okada and Santos (2003:02), in this same effort, initially approach the concept of virtual suggested by Levy (1996), for which the virtual is the same as potential, in order to later state that "environment is a meaning fruitful virtual space where humans beings and technical objects interact one to the others, empowering, thus, the development of knowledge, afterwards learning "(ibid.). They understand, therefore, that any environment is a virtual learning environment (2003:3).

**Interaction and interactivity AVA**

Some authors in the technology in education field show that one of the benefits of using VLE is the possibility of interaction that it offers. For example, Haguenauer and Victorino (2008), when discuss the evaluation in distance education supported by virtual environments, argue that a VLEA is "an interaction space that supports the construction, insertion and exchange of information by participants, aiming at knowledge social building"(2008:04). Kenski, following the same line of argument says that virtual environments "are able to conduct various forms of information exchange and sharing of ideas and experiences" (2009:3).

Thus, it is observed that both Kenski (2009), and Haguenauer and Victorino (2008) presented the interaction as one of the beneficial use of a VLE. Haguenauer still argues that in this environment, the teacher's role and the student one change. In this "flexible" study area, the teacher becomes the "mediator of activities" and students get more “active" compared to the traditional teaching (Haguenauer, 2008:1).

Since the interaction and interactivity are important factors in this context, we consider important to analyze and discuss these concepts in virtual environments.
Silva (1998:1) broaches these two concepts separately. He states that "the concept of interaction comes from a long time, but the concept of interactivity is recent." According to the author, though many people use both terms without distinction, interactivity overflows the concept of interaction, because this one is in every relationship between humans and between man and machine, as that one refers to the participation and intervention. In this sense, when watching TV, for example, there is interaction, but there is not necessarily interactive, because the viewer does not have full possibility to interfere, or recreate the programming. Observing how the issue takes place in a classroom, Silva believes that can only occur interaction, but there is also the possibility of interactivity, when the student participates in some way, reconfigures the classroom (SILVA, 1998:1-2). In this perspective, we could also cite the example of a website, where information is static and in where there is interaction, but no interactivity; but in a portal containing tools such as chats or forums, for example, there is not only the interaction, but also interactivity as well, since there is possibility of participation and intervention.

Primo (2001:8) also presents other considerations on interaction in virtual environment. He states that there is in this context at least two types of interaction: one called of mutual and another one of reactive. According to the author, mutual interaction "would be characterized by interdependent relationships and negotiation processes, where each interacting takes part of the inventive construction of the interaction" (PRIMO, 2001:8). Under this point of view, the mutual interaction can be considered that one which to occurs among users in a creative and processual way. The author still broaches the impossibility of predicting what will occur during this process (ibid.).

Still quoting Primo, we observed that reactive interaction, in turn, “is linear, bounded by deterministic relations of stimulus-response "(PRIMO, 2001:8). That is, in interactions of this type there is no space for use of creativity or inventively. Thus, "if the same action would be taken a second time, the effect would be the same" (ibid.).
In the VLE analyzed in this paper, it can occur both the interaction and interactivity process, since it has tools such as chats and forums. Thus, the users, it means, students can participate and intervene in the environment they are learning through interactions with other users, who may be their classmates or other ones, with course material and the teacher (Anderson, 2003:130).

The same environment also provides mutual interaction, in the vision of Primo (2001:8), because of the established relationships between users contribute to a unique participation, enabling a range of results at the end of the process. Approach, this way, the views of Silva (1998) and the concept of interactivity on Primo (2001) about mutual interaction. There is no reactive interaction in this environment, since the teacher does not use features that make the student to act in accordance with the principle of stimulus-response.

AVA WiZiQ: a brief description

The WiZiQ (Figure 1) can generate public or private virtual classrooms, created by any registered person, whose access to other participants will be only allowed from an invitation of the moderator (teacher or creator). Lessons can be recorded, so that the content is revised and for participants who are not synchronous can watch it on another occasion.

The classroom environment on WiZiQ provides tools for interaction and interactivity for users. Among them are the slides that are available from the teacher’s uploads; the whiteboard (on both the students can write comments), sound and video that can be used by both students and teachers. All these tools are controlled by the moderator who provides or blocks permission to students interact with the materials or with colleagues. However, there is a tool that does not need permission from the moderator to occur interactivity between the participants: the chat.
Analysis and results

To each of the 10 students who participated of the research, were given a questionnaire before using the WiZiQ VLE and another after it. The results of the first questionnaire indicated that 80% had never attended classes through the Internet, 10% had already participated in courses with the support of New Information Technologies and Communication (NTIC), 10% of distance courses, and 90% had never participated of virtual classrooms. About the expectations of the classes, students were concerned not only with the content but also with the teaching-learning process, believing that such classes could be funnier, interesting and practical. In the second questionnaire, students highlighted advantages, like the fact of not having to move to the course and mentioned the fact that they can query and search concomitant to the class.

About interaction and interactivity, the students were divergent. While some equated the resources of interaction and interactivity of the VLE with face-to-face classroom attendance, the majority declared itself negatively in relation to the interactive process, judging the face-to-face irreplaceable and drawing attention to the fact of the lack of quality and technical vulnerability of Internet connections, and believed...
there is a difference between virtual and face-to-face interaction and interactivity. Although there is divergence of opinion about interaction and interactivity, they felt encouraged by the audiovisual tools available, and especially with the fact that they could participate and intervene in the process.

What called most attention was the fact that most students, when asked about the AVA before using it, believed that it could be possible to learn only with virtual classes. However, when questioned about it after the use of the VLE, was unanimous and forceful in saying they would like to participate in other virtual classes, but they would not attend a course entirely at distance.

About the cost of this research, we consider only the time to class planning and research, which includes creation of the students’ registers and application of the questionnaires, because the register and the creation and use of the classrooms are free. The WiZiQ allows you to record free up to three classes, above this number is necessary to pay the amount of $49.95 (forty-nine dollars and ninety-five cents) that enables the recording of unlimited classes within the period of one year, and which can be sold on site.

Two aspects of the virtual classroom are different from traditional ones. First, the fact of lectures can be recorded, made them asynchronous; in addition to that, students were able to interact through chat without disrupting the teacher’s class and colleagues who wanted to hear it him.

Final Considerations

As happened in other studies, as in experiments reported in an article of Kenski et al (2009) and Franco’s dissertation (2010), we observed positive results in the use of VLE, in which students felt motivated to learn in the VLE. Nevertheless, we must take into account that these results were observed in a certain context. Thus, these results are interim, because nothing guarantees them in the same or similar contexts.
Bibliography


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