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CALLing all the CALLers Worldwide

Concepción, 13-16 November 2018

Language and Technology: the creation of a CALL discipline for future English teachers

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Abstract

Teacher education in CALL is so important that now it is a subfield within CALL. Language teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to integrate technology in their classrooms. They have to be prepared to choose, use, and even refuse technology for their students. However, this area is still under construction and there are many unanswered questions. The main one is: what precisely should be taught, considering that frequently teacher trainers themselves have incomplete knowledge of CALL? In this paper, we are going to report our reflections on the creation and implementation of a CALL discipline – Language and Technology – for an English Language/ Literature course in a Brazilian university. We will explain the choices we have made regarding objectives and contents, and discuss the students' outcomes and changes we have made to the curriculum over the two first semesters. These changes were based on the analysis of the online environment data and on questionnaires collected at the beginning and end of each of the three periods we covered. To create a CALL discipline is a difficult task but one that has to be undertaken. Our objective is to share our practice and impressions so that other educators can benefit from these experiences in their own context. So this is an attempt to contribute to the field aiming that in the future we have more solid foundation for this task.

Keywords: CALL discipline; CALL Teacher education; Content.

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1. Introduction

Brazil is a country where universities are still in their infancy, and where there is a growing demand regarding teacher education. In the Federal University of Technology – Paraná (UTFPR) a new English Language/Literature teacher training program was created only three years ago.

In this paper, we will describe the creation of a specific CALL discipline – Language and Technology – integrated into the first semester of this course, and discuss our main issue: what should we teach? We will present some theoretical foundations which helped us build our reflections to develop the discipline, and then describe the context and data we used to evaluate the outcomes of the course and the consequent changes. We will finally discuss these outcomes and the challenges we still face.

2. Theoretical foundations

Although the first studies on CALL teacher education started in the 1980s (Hubbard, 2009), in general it is still not entirely adequate and effective (Arnold & Ducate, 2015). Nevertheless, a lot of research on the topic has been carried out. Studies show that preservice teacher education in CALL is sporadic and future teachers have little or no formal training (Hubbard, 2008). When it happens, some problems are: the technology used is outdated, limited, questionable and not integrated (Egbert, Paulus & Nakamichi, 2002; Kessler; 2007). Training is also predominantly acquired informally or through self- training. In Brazil the situation is not different and existing projects for teacher education in CALL are the result of individual initiatives (Paiva, 2013).

In FL teaching technological frameworks are not common. In general, materials/models that try to determine what to include in the courses are based on the personal experience of authors/researchers with technology. Authors are not sure of what exactly should be taught and to what level (Martins, 2015). One possibility is to begin with the identification of the students' previous knowledge and skills to find individual solutions to meet the needs of each context. But how could this happen? Teaching technology through technology, but there are other ways too (Reinders, 2009). What is important is that language teachers/learners operate within a set of interrelated constraints (time; limited resources, etc.) that have to be taken into consideration.

Another obstacle is the limited number of qualified professionals. To change this, courses should not be limited to formal programs and should include communities of practice, mentoring, apprenticeship, auto-didactic settings, etc.. Few studies mention the duration of courses. Hong (2009) found out that about 150 hours are necessary, but only quantity/duration is not enough; it is important to consider the quality/usefulness of the courses from the in training teachers' point of view.

3. Context and methods

UTFPR is a federal public institution located in Brazil. Fifty percent of its courses focus on the engineering areas. Nowadays, it also offers Teacher Education courses, but it still is the only University of Technology in Brazil. In 2016, the Department of Modern Languages of Curitiba Campus created a course for future English teachers. To cope with UTFPR unique technological profile, a CALL discipline is integrated into the first semester, as well as two methodology disciplines and one practical teaching discipline with some focus on technology, later in the curriculum. Some optional disciplines and research-based disciplines are also available after the 4th semester. We will present the creation of the first semester discipline and its outcomes over two semesters: 2016-1 and 2016-2.

To teach technology through technology, we decided to divide the classroom in two groups, and to have one hour of theory in a traditional classroom and two hours of practice in a laboratory each week. We made systematic use of Moodle and focused on the use of selected tools related to academic literacy and set some individual and group work to be performed. The tasks were designed from strongly pre-determined ones to gradually more open ones leading students to deal with projects of their own choice, opening the course content to subjects and achievements adapted to students' interests and abilities in ICT.

Data collection took place through the teaching process (Figure 1):

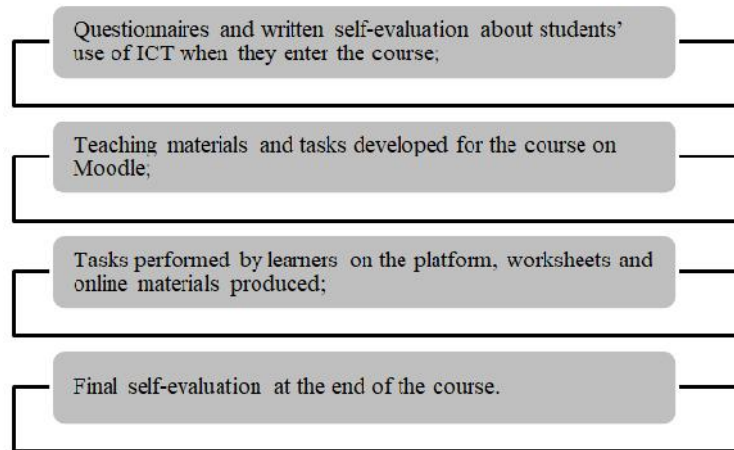


Figure 1. Data collection

We used the initial questionnaires and self-evaluations to design the course contents, and adapt the tasks to their age, their heterogeneity in EFL, their already existing communication skills with ICT, but their almost inexistent capacities to learn (or teach) using ICT.

4. Discussion

This experience showed that with our public, some milestones have to be reached to create a positive basis for ICT use in learning and hopefully in future teaching. First, using basic softwares for studying seems uninteresting for the students who master it, but necessary for the few others. Having some compulsory steps in the tasks, and more open possibilities of doing them, has been our choice to deal with their heterogeneity regarding their previous skills. Then we focused on empowering students to use their abilities to engage in learning with technology and to develop new skills or learn to use new tools according to their needs. We tried to develop critical thinking regarding ICT in language learning and teaching (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Competencies and activities developed through the course

To reach these objectives, we focused on basic abilities integrated into specific guided tasks (e.g., use of sharing tools in group work or presentation tools in projects) and made constant use of Moodle and Word during lab sessions. Then, we offered web search, curation and blogging tasks based on the concept of digital literacy. Finally, students developed research projects including technological developments or use of ICT, of their own interest.

5. Conclusions

Creating a CALL discipline is a difficult task but one that has to be undertaken. It is a never ending task. Teacher educators have to let go some usual teaching principles, and maybe not focus on content but rather on process, to make space for students to build their own technical new abilities based on their needs and interests. Teachers do not have to know everything about technology, but they have to support student-teachers in the process of facing the new.

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