Creating a dynamic and learner-driven online environment for practising second language skills: guiding principles from second language acquisition and online education

Abstract: Scientific research clearly states that people only learn a language after long and repeated practice in a variety of contexts. In reality, however, adult migrants trying to master the language of their new country often lack opportunities to practise their language skills outside the classroom. In this paper we will discuss six guiding principles for creating a dynamic, learner-driven online environment in which adult learners can autonomously practise the performance of tasks that meet their specific language learning needs.

Résumé : Les études montrent clairement que l’appropriation d’une langue se fait par une pratique longue et répétée dans des contextes variés. Or, concrètement, les migrants adultes qui s’efforcent de maîtriser la langue de leur nouveau pays ont rarement l’occasion d’exercer leurs compétences langagières en dehors de la salle de cours. Dans cet article, nous examinons six principes directeurs pour créer un environnement en ligne dynamique, axé sur les apprenants, qui permet aux adultes de s’entraîner en autonomie à la réalisation de tâches qui répondent à leurs besoins spécifiques d’apprentissage.

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1 Introduction

Empirical research on second language acquisition (SLA) (Doughty and Long 2003; Ellis and Shintani 2014) provides clear indications that adult second language learners need extensive and repeated practice in a variety of contexts to develop second language skills. In addition, learning opportunities need to be challenging and connected with what learners want and need to be able to do with language in real life. Furthermore, adults need access to rich and extensive input in the target language and need to be provided with opportunities to produce output themselves. Finally, feedback is of paramount importance in the learning process.

These conditions should be integrated as much as possible in classroom-based instruction and in technology-mediated environments. Moreover, empirical research on the impact of online education and technology-mediated language education (Nielsen and Gonzáles-Lloret 2010) has revealed that a sense of community is essential for participants in online environments. Also, the technological application needs to be easy to access and use.

This paper will describe how the above-mentioned principles were integrated in a dynamic, learner-driven online environment in which adult learners can practise their second language skills. More specifically, the paper will present the case-study of NedBox (http://www.nedbox.be), a digital platform developed with financial support from the European Integration Fund, which aims to offer adult learners of Dutch as a second language rich online practice opportunities in a fun, non-academic way during their leisure time. As such, it aims to promote the language proficiency adult migrants need to integrate and fully participate in their new society.

2 Guidelines for a powerful, task-based online learning environment

Given the specific goal of NedBox, the general requirements of effective online course design and principles of effective instructed SLA were translated into six guidelines underpinning the design of NedBox. A further challenge was to design a user-centred environment that could address the needs and integrate the feedback of the people who were meant to use the platform. Our main aim was to develop a tool that was maximally tailored to the needs and expectations of its potential users (Schiepers et al. 2015). Below, we will present the six guidelines and discuss how they were integrated in the actual design of NedBox.
2.1 Provide adult learners with a diversified corpus of appealing and authentic online input

Adults need access to extensive authentic input in the target language, including written and spoken texts produced by native speakers. Given the diversity of the target audience (including both low- and high-educated users), a one-size-fits-all approach was unlikely to work, so the corpus of texts on which NedBox would be built had to be sufficiently diverse. Moreover, since NedBox would typically be used by adults during their leisure time, the input had to captivate learners’ interest and motivate them to learn on a voluntary basis.

To meet these conditions, NedBox was built around a diversified corpus of appealing and authentic news items. A pilot run involving a group of future users showed that working with topical, high-quality videos and newspaper articles (provided by the Flemish public broadcasting company and three leading Flemish newspapers) and using them as the starting point for meaningful tasks had great potential to attract a wide group of adult learners. Several strategies were adopted to make sure that the input was selected and offered in such a way that it would be closely related to the needs of adult learners. First of all, a varied mix of news items is selected on a weekly basis: on the one hand topical news items are selected, such as an article about the sales period at the beginning of January. In addition, the website features more timeless subjects and human interest stories, such as a video about people’s search for work, including tips for people who are applying for a job. The news items also cover different themes that were derived from research into the specific language learning needs of learners of Dutch as a second language (Van Avermaet and Gysen 2006); these themes include “work”, “children”, “social contact”, “living in Belgium”. On the homepage of NedBox (Figure 1), users can choose freely the items and themes they consider most interesting, thus customizing the input maximally to their needs.

2.2 Make sure adult learners can perform meaningful tasks, tailored to their needs

Since adult learners are more motivated when they are interested in what they are learning and see a direct relationship between the instruction and their own language learning needs, each news item on NedBox forms the basis of a range of functional, real-life tasks from which the learners can choose according to their needs and level of proficiency. This creates a rich online learning environment in which practice opportunities are not restricted to traditional exer-
cises which focus mainly on formal elements of the language such as grammar and vocabulary.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate NedBox learning tasks. Figure 2 shows an article about (funny) things people lose on the bus. One of the accompanying real-life tasks consists of filling out the authentic form that passengers complete if they lose personal belongings on public transport. Figure 3 shows a video about a young job seeker, featuring a real-life task that consists of reading and assessing job vacancies. Again, the learner can navigate freely through the different types of exercises, as is further explained in 2.3.

Figure 1: Homepage NedBox
2.3 Put the learner in control, not the system

To enhance learner motivation, the website puts the learner in control of items, level of complexity and task selection. The levels of task complexity are indicated with asterisks (Figure 3) which are the equivalent of CEFR levels A1, A2.
and B1. The icons below the tasks represent the various skills – listening, reading, writing, speaking – and can also refer to vocabulary and grammar exercises. Learners select the tasks they consider useful and pleasant, thus constructing their own learning path. The learner also controls which supportive tools he wants to use when trying to cope with the tasks. These tools, which can be manipulated according to the learner’s needs and level of proficiency, include the use of subtitles while playing the video (Figure 3), looking up word explanations in the articles (Figure 2), and some useful hints users can consult before they start performing the task (Figure 3).

2.4 Provide immediate online feedback

Feedback is of paramount importance in the learning process. NedBox provides immediate feedback that targets users’ personal errors and contains suggestions for further improvement. For example, learners are automatically redirected to a specific fragment of the video which contains the answer to a comprehension question they failed to answer. Alternatively, the system provides the learner with additional information on why a particular answer was not correct, including hints about how to correct them (Figure 3). Thus the need for a tutor who provides feedback tailored to the learner is, to some extent, replaced by the sophisticated feedback options offered by NedBox.

2.5 Create task-based interaction by linking the online tasks to the real world

A sense of community is another imperative for the success and satisfaction of learners making use of online learning environments. Consequently, online second language instruction must include social spaces that learners can interact in the target language both with each other and with native speakers, through tasks that require collaboration.

To ensure that the learners on NedBox can interact with fellow users of the platform and with native speakers, the potential of social media is tapped by means of a lively Facebook community on which, for instance, written products can be posted and results of polls can be consulted. The Facebook community is also used by the designers as a channel to announce new items on the platform. These announcements are accompanied by teasing questions to provoke interaction among the target audience. Furthermore, a connection between the online and offline world is created in the tasks, by providing external links to organiza-
tions and activities that could be interesting for the learners. For instance, the above-mentioned video about the job seeker is linked to the site of the public employment service, where real job vacancies can be found. All these possibilities to interact can further be stimulated by teachers of Dutch as a second language who take up a role as ambassador of NedBox. Hints on how NedBox can be promoted in formal and non-formal educational contexts are provided through a specific link on the homepage.

2.6 Make sure the online environment is easily accessible

The group of adult learners is highly diverse, consisting of high- and low-educated learners, with high and low digital skills. Research in the field of the digital divide shows that the integration of ICT in learning can constitute an additional barrier for vulnerable groups such as lower-educated migrants (Mariën and van Audenhove 2010). Engaging in e-learning implies a high degree of self-regulation. Several studies indicate that people with limited literacy levels often lack this competence. To cope with this, the designers added additional support tools for low-educated adults with low digital skills (such as the subtitles and word explanations) and emphasize that for these learners the e-learning environment should be considered as complementary to, instead of a substitute for, existing classroom-based courses. For these groups in particular, the interface of NedBox was made as simple as possible, thus constituting an environment which is very easy and straightforward to use.

3 Conclusion

NedBox was developed on the basis of empirical research which has shown that any program intended to facilitate online SLA must not only meet the principles of effective online course design but also comply with the principles of effective instructed SLA. The key identifying features of NedBox are its wide range of appealing input that creates “enjoyable” practice opportunities during leisure time, and a user-centred design that is maximally tailored to the needs and expectations of its users. The overall satisfaction of the users during the pilot study and the high (returning) visitor numbers since the launch of the website are very encouraging in this respect. This seems to confirm the hypothesis that what motivates the learner in a face-to-face context is also of paramount importance in a digital environment. Nonetheless, continued user research will be conducted to gather feedback on the platform in use, next to specific user research
on the experiences of lower-educated learners which has to unravel if and under which conditions technology-enhanced language learning can be a lever or an extra threshold for this group of learners.

References


