E-LEARNING/M-LEARNING – THE NEW TREND IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: The article deals with the importance of e-learning/m-learning in acquiring a foreign language. As the amount of information that must be accumulated in school/university has increased significantly in recent years, the pupil/student nowadays is moving towards using computers as a means of information in the learning process. The article also presents the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning and some examples of online platforms that offer English courses. A new concept is introduced, namely mobile learning. M-learning is a new method, a relatively new concept in the learning process. M-learning means that learning does not only happen at a desk, nowadays students should have constant access to information no matter the place they are. The conclusion is that e-learning/m-learning cannot completely replace the classical methods of learning, but can facilitate and improve the learning process.

Keywords: e-learning, m-learning, online platform, information, resources, education

1. Preliminary considerations

The evolution of e-learning practices in recent years is associated with a tremendous increase in complexity. By associating the concept with all situations and educational contexts that use new technologies in order to improve the process, components, steps, it is obtained a broad range of activities and products that are under the sign of innovation in education in the last twenty years. Therefore, the need for epistemological clarification involves, primarily, accurately determining the type of intervention of the implemented level, categories of beneficiaries, types of results expected, the time frame in which each category of effects is likely to occur and also other qualitative and quantitative determinations in the design, development and evaluation of e-learning programmes.

In the context of theoretical and practical development of program and project assessment field, of assessment patterns multiplication, of different specialists' interest expansion in various fields to carry out evaluations, it emerged naturally, the concern for quality. In extending these concerns in the programs evaluation field, the efforts to investigate the value and merits of e-learning programs should be guided by a set of principles or "specific requirements grafted onto a unitary conception over epistemological landmarks that constitute the core of e-learning field". (Finke, Bicans, 2010:76)

Obviously, an e-learning program will be designed in a specific institutional context and to meet particular needs. In an evaluation report published in 2009 by the European Commission and OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), the authors note: "There are too few studies on complex interactions between various types of programs for information and communication technology implementation. It seems that we first need tools to assess and monitor the level of usage and the appropriate changes". (Scheuermann, Pedró, 2009: 70)

The approach to e-learning research is far from clarifying problems outlined in this ever-expanding teaching-learning-assessment form. However, in the last two decades, new information and communication technologies supported educational institutions to

focus on key aspects of learning and teaching. Educational practice indicates an increase in learning motivation in terms of using new technologies and a massive application of computer assisted education, grafted on a growing need to keep up with rapid changes in the profile of skills required by the labor market. In this context, we need a solid theoretical foundation for improving e-learning programs in progress and to develop others to meet the new challenges of the knowledge society and contemporary educational practice.

We live in the information millennium, and the presence of computer and technology in our lives is already a natural thing. Anyone has a PC more or less advanced and the interest in information technology is constantly growing. As the amount of information that must be acquired is school/college has increased significantly in recent years, the pupil/student nowadays is moving "towards using computers as a means to inform and assist in the learning process". (Adascalitei, 2007: 45) Information sources such as Internet and educational programs are becoming more useful, the number of Internet users and educational software application being on the rise. Internet is one of the main sources of information used in teaching. Consequently, the computer has become a necessity for pupils/students and teachers alike.

48% of Romanians believe they can hold a conversation in a foreign language, compared to 58% of the European average, and 31% of surveyed Romanians said they can have a conversation in English, 17% in French, 5% in German and Spanish and 3% in Russian. Almost nine out of ten EU citizens believe it is very useful to have the ability to speak foreign languages and 98% say that mastering foreign languages will be beneficial for their children's future, according to a new survey on the attitudes of EU citizens towards multilingualism and learning language. However, there is a gap between aspirations and reality in terms of the ability to speak a foreign language in practice: tests among adolescent students in 14 European countries show that only 42% are proficient in their first foreign language and only 25 % in the second language. A significant proportion, 14% for the first foreign language and 20% for the second, does not even reach the level of basic user. (http://www.ziare.com/articole/invatare+limbi+straine)

The ability to communicate in a foreign language broadens your horizons and opens new ways; it enhances the employability for a job, and for companies it can open new opportunities in the single market. At 11 years after Barcelona Declaration in 2002 of Heads of State and Government, who pleaded for teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age, Europeans are largely aware of the benefits of multilingualism. Almost three quarters (72%) agree with this objective and 77% think it should be a political priority. More than half of Europeans (53%) use the foreign languages at work and 45% believe they have achieved a better job in their own country due to linguistic competencies. However, the number of people who say they can communicate in a foreign language declined slightly, from 56% to 54%. This is also caused by the fact that Russian and German are no longer compulsory in school curricula in countries of Central and Eastern Europe. (http://www.ziare.com/articole/invatare+limbi+straine)

2. Advantages and disadvantages of e-learning

E-learning is a term that describes learning with a computer connected to Internet. E-learning is based on a virtual classroom, an instructor (tutor) who plans group activity in the virtual class. Learning by e-learning can be just as valuable as learning in traditional classroom if not more valuable. Therefore, the educational material is available on Internet, on a so-called e-learning platform. The person who wants to

learn on such a platform, goes to a specialized website, registers with the personal data and becomes a user. Subsequently, the access is made using a user name and a password.

In each virtual classroom, the student deepens one subject, each class having its students and tutor. Thus, the education offer is much richer. It can be said that e-learning is part of a new educational framework and represents a new paradigm of learning. E-learning is an organized system of education / training, a teaching approach that includes components such as: specific content, methodology, interaction, support, evaluation. This online education is continuously adapted, with emphasis both on learning, assimilating and applying. There are three generally accepted models in e-learning world, each occupying an approximately equal share in this market:

a) *independent e-learning* is the model through which the individual user download course material from the Internet or use it directly from the CD, going through it alone. It has the advantage of a very large amount of information that can be accessed in a short time, but is very rigid in terms of teacher-student communication.

b) *asynchronous e-learning* allows only one user to transmit information at a time. Such an example is the one in which the instructor may provide information to students, but students cannot interact while receiving information. The major advantage in this case is that "the student retains the facility to work on his own pace, but can also get answers to his requests in an acceptable time frame". (Canole, Oliver, 2007:23)

c) *synchronous e-learning* allows the transfer of information to any user at any time. An example is the tutor and students transferring information during the course/seminar, usually in real time. This is obviously the most powerful of all in terms of facilitation degree of communication, integrated audiovisual facilities, creating the concept of "virtual classroom".

Online education is in some way different from traditional education we are accustomed to. Once access to a computer is done, who wants to study online must be used to search on the Internet, e-mail, send and receive attachments. Writing is the main method of communication in online classes; by writing, thoughts will be expressed, ideas will be shared and questions will be asked. When the online student needs help in understanding a concept, he can ask the tutor or the virtual classmates. As in a traditional school, online student must reserve adequate time for study. While online courses offer maximum flexibility being centered on user (student), they require, from the learner, discipline and willingness to work independently.

By using these online courses, universities equip students with lifelong learning skills, offering solutions for self-directed learning and collaboration, as well as problem-solving strategies in a technological environment. The first step in designing a web course is to identify the needs of the learner and whether he should be considered as belonging to a group or as an individual. Web can be a useful tool to bring together the individual learners in virtual groups - for example, through a discussion forum. Online courses are ideal for those with a busy work schedule or for people who travel a lot. By removing spatial, temporal obstacles or imposing a learning pace, opportunities to study in large social groups are ensured, without interrupting their professional activity. This is actually the main feature that makes the system to be extremely viable for higher cycles, for lifelong learning, for vocational education and places it among the most requested types of education systems of the future.

The objectives of e-learning system:
- increase in the training level of students;
- implementing a system of distance learning using the Internet;
- increased efficiency of staff training and recruitment, in terms of costs;

- raising awareness of target firms regarding the need for continuous training and the benefits of e-learning solutions;
- increased capacity of trained people to adapt to market needs.
- providing quality resources necessary for continuing education, training and personal development of students, young graduates, businesses, educators and generally any Internet user;
- the creation of an efficient platform, based on interoperability standards, available for corporations, education and training institutions and individual authors to publish online courses;
- establishing design standards, infrastructure, security, teaching design, support and interaction in virtual environments, methods in distance training, sharing resources, online testing.

Advantages of e-learning

E-learning market follows the trend of training market, being a basic component of this. Supply and demand for this type of learning product increases, being a direct connection with the evolution of learning need of employees and organizations. "E-learning is often preferred to classical training sessions, due to its ability to easily mold on the employee and the organization's profile", (Moise, 2008: 67) but also because of its accessibility, managing to overcome spatial and temporal barriers. E-learning includes a wide range of electronic learning alternatives: multimedia CDs, online courses (web-based), audio conference (video), chat, podcasting, blogs, computer simulations and tests. Usually, an e-learning solution combines two or more variants, depending on the customer profile and requirements. There are clear advantages of e-learning. Here are some of them:

- *attractive packaging*: Trainer's lack of ability to capture the audience can be successfully substituted for "packaging" the attractive electronic learning solutions. When successfully combined, the sound, image and movement can capture the attention of the student presenting information intuitively and ensuring their easy assimilation. Sometimes the attractive "package" is presented and interpreted by the trainer, thereby increasing the efficiency of conveyed message.
- *reduced costs*: Educational software and e-learning solutions are not cheap. However, their costs are lower than those implied by a classical learning session because expenses with trainers, renting premises for courses, students movement are eliminated. In some cases, depending on the technical solution adopted, time can be categorized as cost reduction: the employee will not miss a few days from work, but will "lose a few hours daily to learn online or offline, on the computer". (Holmes, Gardner, 2006:75)
- *individualization of the learning process*: Each individual has his own pace of assimilation and relies on a particular type of memory in the learning process (auditory or visual). Some students have a better performance during the weekend, others in the early morning hours. Last but not least, not all employees of a company have the same learning needs, and contracting a classical training package for some people is unrealistic in terms of cost-benefit balance. E-learning can address these needs by creating learning solutions appropriate to individual profile of each student.
- *mobility:* E-learning offers the opportunity to access the content of educational material from anywhere, using personal computer. For example, employees in different locations at high distances from each other, do not have to be physically present in the conference hall to hear an expert in their field. You can watch live, online, or download an audio-video file to open it later.

Disadvantages and obstacles of online courses

Protesters of e-learning process claim that the classical method (individual or in classroom) is more effective and that e-learning could even be a disadvantage because it tends to eliminate human factors of learning (interaction with the tutor), a key variable in the process of information assimilation. Here are some disadvantages:

- high cost of technical equipment and software (studies indicate that training online course is more expensive than the traditional one; the building team of a course being made up of persons specialized in web design and instructional design);
- the course can be effective when the computer provision is appropriate, when Internet connections are fast;
- time required to prepare and facilitate an online course is much higher than for traditional courses;
- changes in mentality, expanding managerial vision and decisive action to support the penetration of information and communication technologies in schools all over the country, in all subjects and at all levels of education; this is a long-term perspective, sustained by the political will and the participants agreement;
- reducing the ability of verbal expression, accompanied by a loss of the capacity to argument-present-counter-argument, paradoxically even if "technique and technology have opened new ways and provided new tools and techniques for interpersonal communication"; (Wang, 2007:290)
- access to an appropriate computer can be a problem for students;
- information can vary in terms of quality and accuracy, so guidance is needed.

Comparing the advantages/disadvantages we come to the conclusion that this method of learning is useful, attractive, but one cannot say that it will come to replace traditional educational methods. Online courses come to improve the level of knowledge of those who use them, gives them the opportunity to obtain certificates more or less valuable, and it is a positive component of the information that can be found on the Internet.

3. Online English platforms

Online platforms represent one of the best solutions in acquiring a foreign language. Here are some examples of sites that offer English or business English courses:

➤ www.englishlink.com/en-us/courses/business-english-courses.aspx
➤ www.talkenglish.com/Speaking/listBusiness.aspx
➤ www.businessenglishpod.com/
➤ www.better-english.com/exerciselist.html
➤ www.oxfordtefl.com/specialised-courses/teaching-business-english/
➤ www.businessenglishonline.net/courses
➤ www.macmillanpracticeonline.com/
➤ www.business-english.com/
➤ www.english-online.org.uk/biz3/bizbhome.htm
➤ www.englishtown.com/online/business-english.aspx
➤ www.workplace-english-training.com/
➤ www.english-test.net/esl/business-english-lessons.html

❖ *http://deepenglish.com/courses/method/*

Nowadays more than 80% of the internet data is in English and to be part of this reality you need to know English. The world is more and more connected. You need to

use English at work, in meetings, negotiations, business trips and you shall also have the ability to communicate with business partners, customers, foreign friends.

This platform offers a free English course based on listening and speaking and the slogan is: "Free English Course – Transform Yourself Into a Fluent English Speaker". The first step is to watch a video and if you can understand it, that means that you are suitable for this platform. The second step is to register for free. After registering, Deep English starts to send you free lessons by email every day for 7 days (day 1 – a general background, day 2 – listening lessons, day 3 – speaking lessons, day 4 – building confidence while speaking English, day 5 – active listening lessons, day 6 – speaking lessons, repetition in order to build fluency, day 7 – using English). Deep English is a one week course and you can choose to learn your own way, faster or slower.

The audio lessons are stories about real people, leaders, heroes and also about habits of successful people. The lessons are very interactive and use 2000 of the most commonly English words. The fluency course contains 18 hours of listening and also the full text for each lesson. You can also have access to the True Story Launch pages where there are further resources, ask questions and communicate with the course creators and other learners. As the course is audio, you are able to improve your English fluency while performing other things or tasks.

❖   *http://www.englishtown.com/online/home.aspx*

"If the question is: What is the best and quickest way to master English? There's only one answer: Englishtown. At Englishtown we know that learning a new language takes a huge commitment. That's why we go all out to give you handy study tools, vibrant lessons and expert teachers to get the results you want. Fast". (http://www.englishtown.com/online/)

The platform gives you the opportunity to study where you want (you just need a computer), how you want and also with whom you want (in a group or one-on-one). You can learn grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, you can listen different materials and practice no matter your level in English. At the end of any level you get a university-certified diploma, that proves your international standard. First you should create an account and you have 30 days full access to the Englishtown Online school.

The main benefits are: enrollment test, progress feedback; online learning tools; interactive activities; group lessons starting every hour you choose; conversational classes with only 5 students; business English courses; TOEFL, TOEIC courses; certified diploma at the end of every level; the courses are available on iPhone and iPad. Studying at Englishtown gives you access to countless resources, lessons, study tools and teachers. This online school allows you to learn 50% faster than with traditional methods.

Before starting learning you have to take a 20 minute test in order to see the level in English. Once the test is finished, you are helped to make up a study plan, according to your own needs and objectives. The plan will guide the learners to one of the 16 English levels. The test is focused on grammar, listening and reading. "Each lesson starts with a real-life situation simulated by native English-speaking actors. These mini-movies introduce new vocabulary and grammar naturally. Once you see how the language is used in real life, you are ready for the next step". (http://www.englishtown.com/online/) Your writing tasks are checked by the native English speaking teachers, who tell every learner what they did well and what they have to improve. You can also communicate with other learners in a virtual group and practice pronunciation and vocabulary in a pressure-free environment. Another important issue is the fact that you can choose from the database a private teacher and topic from a diverse menu of options and discuss about it.

The platform gives you the opportunity to become proficient in business English and prepare you for a future career: "Let your Business English skills be what sets you apart from the crowd. Englishtown will equip you to be flawlessly fluent and crisply confident in any workplace scenario". (http://www.englishtown.com/online/) You learn to lead negotiations, how to speak in a business environment, to conduct meetings, to interact with clients, to give presentations. The course also contains case studies so that the learner should be exposed to real life scenarios. The business module starts with telephone skills up to an advanced language. The module covers different fields such as: English for Insurance, English Banking and Finance, English for the Oil and Gas Industry, English for Logistics, English for Aviation, English for Travel, English for IT, Medical English and English for the Hospitality Industry. There are also tests for TOEIC and TOEFL, because these are the most trusted methods of assessment for companies.

4. Mobile learning – ubiquitous computing

Digital literacy has become one of the core competencies of the XXI century. Without the ability to use mass-media effectively and responsibly, labor market opportunities are very low. Today, over 250 million Europeans regularly use the Internet. E-learning, m-learning (mobile learning) are concepts that entered teachers' vocabulary too. M-learning is a new method of learning, a relatively new concept in the learning field. The concept of m-learning is derived from the term e-learning. Quoting Apple experts, "*learning no longer happens only at a desk. Students now expect constant access to information, no matter where they are. Which is exactly why more and more faculties are using iTunes U to distribute digital lessons to their students*". (http://www.apple.com/education/mobile-learning)

Young people seek information anywhere and mobility is an attribute of modern life. Therefore, we talk about mobile learning/teaching anywhere and anytime; this is called ubiquitous computing. Mobile devices, mobile phones, tablets, Pocket PC, i-Pod's, notebooks, smart phones support this kind of learning. It is perhaps the largest collection of free educational media resources available online for students, teachers and those interested. Many prestigious universities share their educational resources in this way. *"iTunes U, part of the iTunes Store, is possibly the world's greatest collection of free educational media available to students, teachers, and lifelong learners. With over 100,000 educational audio and video files available, iTunes U has quickly become the engine for the mobile learning movement. It puts the power of the iTunes Store in the hands of qualifying universities so they can distribute their educational media to their students or to the world".* (http://www.apple.com/education/mobile-learning)

Students can carry in their pocket an entire library of materials, lessons and games. Apps are changing the way teachers teach and the way students learn. You can find apps for every subject and for every stage of learning. Students can download books on their iPhone or iPod. With iTunes U for iPhone and iPod touch, a university professor can put all the materials and assignments from his course in the students' pockets. The iTunes U courses "can include all the items you would use in a traditional course: a syllabus, handouts, quizzes, and so on. And they can include your own video and audio lectures, as well as interactive elements such as content and links from the Internet, iBookstore, App Store, and iTunes Store. You can create iTunes U courses via an easy-to-use, browser-based tool from Apple, then use the same tool to distribute your courses directly to your students". (http://www.apple.com/education/mobile-learning)

The apps can help students learn English at any level: reading, writing, grammar skills, listening and speaking.

5. Conclusions

There will certainly be an increased dynamism in the field of educational software and teaching techniques using the computer. Perhaps, most schools/universities will benefit, in the future, of equipment and necessary resources for e-learning. We can be sure, however, that technology will not turn back, nor teaching methods and the demand in e-learning programs and educational software will sky-rocket.

Therefore, e-learning is addressed to all those who want to learn, regardless of age or education. E-learning is thus an option of lifelong learning in the information society. Traditional teachers could become future tutors, providing virtual classroom management. The tutor plans group activity in the virtual classroom, raise aspects of the lesson in discussion forums, provide ancillary resources for understanding, comments on topics, indicates where each class member must insist. Of course tutor' new activity is paid according to performance. Performance is given by the class audience; this time students are free to enrol in one course or another, and are free to leave the course if it is ineffective.

Transmission of information, learning in an open, professional system, continuously supported by special pedagogical methods and techniques becomes a commodity that can be bought. Even if e-learning cannot completely replace traditional learning methods, it can facilitate learning or even provide more effective solutions. Its success depends on the quality of the solution adopted and, of course, the degree of students' motivation.

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