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Cultural-based Learning Objects framework in Greek Diaspora

Πολιτιστικά Μαθησιακά Άτμητα στην Ελληνική Διασπορά

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a theoretical framework of the implications of cultural-based learning by using new technologies in the U.K. Greek and Greek/Cypriot Diaspora. A description of the present situation for the Greek language classes in community schools is provided. The proposed framework and the theories of cultural-based learning and blended learning, on and off line, will be described in accordance to the present environment. It will also be described our attempt to design and construct a cultural-based learning object.

KEYWORDS: *Learning Objects, Blended Learning, Greek Language in Diaspora*

INTRODUCTION

There is a continuing effort to maintain and support the Greek language and culture from the Greek and Cypriot Ministries of Education in the Diaspora the last 150 years (St Sofia Church Archive). Despite the fact that several attempts were made to support these efforts, the continuing and radical changes in the educational environment especially in the recent years [have left](#) these efforts inactive. In the turn of the new millennium, the problems seem to remain the same: the way schools operate, the practical problems such as the infrastructure and the lack of proper educational materials, the teaching methods, and teachers' training and professional status as well as the absence of a coherent educational policy for Greek Diaspora. Introducing changes in the way schools operate and developing infrastructure seems to be unfeasible under the specific circumstances. As such, we introduce a cultural-based approach aided by the new technologies by taking into account the real conditions of the educational environment.

ASPECTS OF TEACHING GREEK LANGUAGE IN DIASPORA

The following presentation is mainly referred to Greek-Cypriot pupils who live in the UK and to a lesser extent to those of Greek origin who come from Greece. The main reason for adopting such an approach is formed by the fact that Greek-Cypriot pupils are the majority in the particular environment. However, any attempt to distinguish their needs has to be justified by evidence based on a systematic research which has not been available so far.

Greek Language: *Second or Foreign?*

According to Fengyan (2002), and Sifakis et al (2003), second language learning refers to a non-native language, learnt and used within the target language environment where the native speakers abound. Foreign language learning is referred to a non-native language which is learnt and used with reference to a speech community outside (Fengyan, 2002; Sifakis et al 2003). From the above definitions we could not consider Greek language learning either as a foreign or as a second one. This is due to three reasons:

- (i) Greek and Greek/Cypriot pupils have heard some Greek words from their childhood, or they, in a better case, use some of them in their speech. So, there are different levels of Greek language acquisition depended mainly on how often the language is used at home.
- (ii) The majority of pupils do not really use the Greek language in their community because English language is tied to their everyday life.
- (iii) Greek language learning refers to a community, the Greek and Greek-Cypriot one, outside the dominant English one.

Thus, learning Greek language takes place into the gray zone between the two, foreign and second. That is why we will use both the terms ‘second/foreign’ language when referring to teaching and learning Greek language in the U.K.

Problems in Teaching Greek Language in the U.K.

The problems that are referred to teaching and learning Greek language in the U.K. are: (i) the different levels of language acquisition regarding to the different generations of Greek and Greek-Cypriot immigrants; (ii) the fact that English as the dominant language prevails in use from the time pupils begin schooling; (iii) the preference to the use of English language is allocated to its role for an upward social mobility; and (iv) the fact that Cypriot dialect contradicts to the ‘standard’ Modern Greek language which is taught in Greek Language Classes (GLC).

Teaching and Learning Environment

Apart from the impediments that refer to the Greek language maintenance, there are some more that concern the teaching and learning in GLC¹. These emanate from the specific educational context: (i) the operation of GLC; (ii) teachers’ training and professional status; and (iii) educational policy.

The identification of the aforementioned problems is significant in order to design a framework towards the most beneficial solutions. Cultural-based and blended learning are two new theoretical approaches in teaching Greek as second/foreign language. Cultural-based learning supports the teaching of second/foreign language as a communication tool in accordance to the particular cultural content in which the target language exists. Blended learning supports the use of the Internet while keeps the educational environment in the classroom as it is.

CULTURAL-BASED AND BLENDED LEARNING

Norm-based Learning VS Cultural-based Learning

Norm-based Learning

Modern Greek language learning in the UK seems to be based on a ‘norm-based’ approach. Norm-based learning approach is a rigid procedure because the target language (in our case Modern Greek) is learnt through specific linguistic rules that help learners to acquire an understanding of the

¹ According to the Greek Ministry of Education, by 1996 there were 523 GLC in the UK and 5.890 students attending them (in Georgoyiannis, 1999:83-4).

grammar and structure of the language (Sifakis et al, 2003). However, by teaching only structural, grammatical and spelling rules in such a way is ignored that language is an instrument for communication. As an alternative approach, we could adopt the ‘cultural-based’ one because pupils would be able to connect the linguistic rules by using real situations of the target language use.

Cultural-based Learning

The cultural-based approach sees language as an instrument for communication among people and at the same time it shields learners from the negative effects of norm-based approach such as boredom, disinterest, and repulsion (Sifakis et al, 2003). According to Krasner (1999), linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of second/foreign language.

Relationship between Culture and Language

Culture and language are inseparable. So, language learning and cultural learning cannot take place independent of each other (Fengyan, 2002, and Byram 1994). For Kramsch (1993) the purpose of second or/and foreign language learning is a way of making cultural statements as well as learning a new way of communication. Moreover, Byram (1994) states that only if the cultural context is understood can the target language be thoroughly comprehensive. On the other hand, as language embodies the values and meanings of a culture and is the most visible and available expression of a particular culture, it signals people’s cultural identity (Byram, 1989 and Brown, 1987). Due to the fact that language reflects the cultural values of a society, language learners need to know particular patterns of speaking behaviour, such as the use of formal or informal types of answers/questions, associated with cultural behaviour that are appropriate in the community of the target language. They also need to be aware of the differences between the language patterns in the different communities they belong, and the ways they are perceived by the members of the Greek and English language communities.

Incorporating Culture into Second/Foreign Language Learning

According to Hammerly (1982), a cultural-based second/foreign language learning can cover three areas by giving: a) information about native speakers’ society; history and geography of their country; b) information about attitudes, values, etc; and c) information about artistic and literary accomplishments. However, when teaching second/foreign language two things need to be taken into account: a) the topic areas to be included in the curriculum, and b) the learners’ and/or the native speakers’ perspective. According to Fengyan (2002) both perspectives are important for the decision making because the first recognises pupils’ needs and the second informs the curriculum about how native speakers perceive certain sites, historical events, etc. A cultural-based learning could include teaching aspects about places, individual persons’ way of life, history, institutions, art, music, literature (Sterm, 1993). Cultural activities and objectives carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans can enrich the teaching content (Peterson et al, 2003). Teaching the target language by using authentic materials¹ and sources from the native community might help students to engage their language studies with authentic cultural as well as linguistic experiences. As regards to sources, artefacts could be used as well as films, museums, photographs, and literature.

Blended Learning - Cultural –Based Learning Objects

Blended learning design extends the GLC standard learning, by incorporating synchronous and asynchronous learning methods (Lambropoulos, 2003):

¹ According to Fengyan (2002) authentic materials are these that are taken from real life without being adapted such as radio/ T V programs, magazines newspapers, maps of cities, postcards, train/bus tickets, etc. These can give learners some insights about native speakers daily life.

- In synchronous learning teachers and students have in common the element of time. Synchronous learning refers to a learning in which both students and teachers have simultaneous interactions either by being in the same classroom or by using the same online interface (e.g. Netmeeting, chat etc).

- Asynchronous learning (Berge & Collins, 1993; Steiner, 1996) is a learning exchange between the learners and the teacher or between learners themselves, which takes place independently of time and space. It refers to open and distance learning (ODL) when both students and teachers do not have an indirect interaction with each other by using communicative tools such as emails, bulletin boards, online learning materials, etc.

There are a number of reasons for using blended learning for second language teaching because it:

- accommodates various learning styles
- supports learning through the use of more than one senses (multi-sensory delivery)
- strengthens all components of the educational process
- encourages learners' involvement in the learning process through self-expression
- improves students' critical thinking
- develops co-operative learning communication skills via interaction
- facilitates social self-organised learning online (see chapter 3.4.1)
- increases students' and teachers' motivation

Learning Objects (LOs)

LOs Construction: 'Learning Objects' (LOs), (Boyle, 2003), are reusable components in knowledge databases that provide flexibility in virtual learning environments for reusability, generativity, adaptability and scalability. The Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) (2000) gives a *standard* definition of LO: it is modelled as the smallest stand-alone and meaningful component of a course that is interoperable, modular, and discoverable. The suggested principles are: cohesion, minimised de-coupling, and motivation and interdisciplinarity. For designing and constructing LOs teachers need to: (i) identify the common mistakes; (ii) find ways of helping the students to understand and correct their mistakes; and (iii) develop LOs basic indexation.

LOs Indexation: Indexation as well as the identification of growth points in the process for self-evaluation are difficult parts when deciding the LOs' design. The suggested sequences of indexation in this paper are based mainly on the grammar and structure of Modern Greek language as well as a cultural one. As such, LOs are searchable in a horizontal and vertical arrangement. LOs are the one-goal directed learning activities e.g. feminine, plural, nominative case. *Learning Clusters* (LCs) define a specific knowledge sub-domain e.g. cases in nouns. *Learning Sets* (LSs) refer to the main domain e.g. the feminine nouns. *Learning Units* (LUs) describe the overall domain e.g. the nouns. Cultural indexation is suggested to take place following the cultural traditions in alphabetical order.

LOs Packaging: LOs packaging is the final and equally important step of the procedure because users can find the LOs that are interested in by using keywords. Educational learning objects metadata approaches (EMD or LOM) can provide the best up-to-date wrappers. LOM generation achieved by using XML ARIADNE's Silo MetaData editor as it is based on the international up-to-date standardisation initiatives.

LOs Delivery: LOs delivery can happen in three ways:

- (i) The Internet, preferably integrated in learning management systems.
- (ii) Mobile devices such as palms and mobile phones.
- (iii) CD-ROMs

For online delivery integrated in learning management systems, Zaphiris et al (2003) presented two crucial impediments regarding to online Greek language learning: (i) problems with the use of Greek fonts and (ii) lack of technical support. Online interactions in learning communities increase the feeling of co-presence with other Greek origin students and help them to identify themselves in the Greek community.

Cultural-based learning objects (CLOs)

Regarding to the previous theories of cultural-based and blended learning, the designing of LOs can be enriched by information about the target culture. Grammatical and structural phenomena can be presented by using artefacts, music, films, and everything that refers to the way that people of the target language live their lives. For example, students can be presented with and be given background information about art objects (jewelry, crafts, embroideries, paintings, etc.) in a particular cultural context. As a next step teacher can ask students to find information about the art object/objects in question (Peterson, 2003). It is students' responsibility now to conduct a research by using the clues were given and submit their understanding in the online discussion group relevant to the specific CLO. The findings of their research can be presented in the class for example in the form of a written summary and identified CLOs, and/or by making an oral presentation in the classroom about the cultural relevance of the art object/objects. According to Peterson (2003), these activities can serve for expanding the discussion about larger cultural, historical, and linguistic factors that tie with the art object /objects.

EXAMPLE OF CLOS

We present an example of a CLO that refers to the agreement between adjectives and nouns in the neutral, first case, singular and is titled 'The garland for the 1st of May'. The suggested level is for year four in GLC. The *Learning Subject* is the Greek Grammar. The *Learning Unit* refers to the 'adjectives'. The *Learning Set* is about the agreement between nouns and adjectives. According to Tsolakis (2000:144), adjectives agree with nouns in gender, singular or plural and case. The *Learning Cluster* refers to the agreement between neutral nouns and adjectives. The *Learning Object* is about the agreement between the neutral nouns and adjectives in the nominative singular case. The CLO is tied with a particular tradition, which is common in Greece and Cyprus. Greek people celebrate spring's coming by making garlands from flowers on the 1st of May and they hang them at the front doors of their homes. The students are shown a painting by Apostolos Gerasis (1886-1983) which is attached to a simple relevant text about the tradition and the examined grammatical phenomenon. The activities the students will be engaged with could be (i) garland making in the class, (ii) searching for relevant information from the Internet, (iii) presenting the outcomes of their research in the class, (iv) assessment exercises, and (v) participation in discussion forums for feedback.

Technical Issues on Building Multimedia CLOs

All mediums can be used to create LOs and specifically CLOs as soon as it is one-goal-directed activity in relation to specific grammatical and structural rules. LOs should be arranged in a pre-defined indexation and metadata should be attached to any previous indexation. We prefer XML programming language for the metadata because of its future use in mobile applications and

intelligence systems. Silo is able to attach XML metadata in any kind of files e.g. ppt, doc, jpg, gif, html, avi, wav, simulation etc as it is based on the top of SOAP (Simple Object Access Protocol).

Building interesting CLOs is a matter of a great importance. Instead of having to deal with one parameter as with all LOs produced up to now, we are dealing with two, the cultural and the grammatical and structural phenomena. As such, the use of interacting properties with text, image and sound might be a better solution. As such, a multimedia CLO, technically speaking, needs an html environment to be integrated. The properties that we have to consider are the language (use more than one languages) and the design i.e. the size, the navigation bar, the spaces for the information and the amount of information used, the maximum amount of CLOs in a learning cluster, the colours and the interactive elements. As such we suggest: (i) the size should be the maximum of 720X420 pixels for all monitors; (ii) the navigation bar might be better to appear at the bottom in order not to let the mouse cross over the CLO; (iii) information should be located either at the bottom or/and on the right panel as well as the buttons for the interactivity. Information in our opinion should be as limited as possible because of the technical restrictions. The developer is the one who decides in each case what kind of information is required; (iv) the maximum amount of CLOs in a learning object and cluster is suggested to be eight for both; (v) the colours are not supposed to distract or to interfere with the CLOs but to create a pleasant environment; (vi) interactive elements could provide the learner with immediate feedback as well as with explanation and instructions; (vii) a button for more information on the web regarding the cultural phenomenon; (viii) a button for the discussion forum regarding the grammatical phenomenon; (ix) a dictionary and (x) a close window button.

Figure 1. Cultural-based Learning Object
CLO DESIGN:

An example for designing a multimedia CLO is here made with Macromedia FlashMX

ARIADNE METADATA: The National Greek School Network was not part of ARIADNE at the time we were writing the paper. As such, the metadata for the document (SWF file) are inserted in English language. After uploading the file, there are options that are important to be filled: general information of the file, Semantics, Pedagogical and technical data. ARIADNE application makes the file searchable using vertical and horizontal search.

Teachers are able to create CLOs on their own, since many teachers produce educational material for their own teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

The initial idea for this particular proposal was that there should be a better way for teaching and learning Greek language in GLCs than the traditional one. Moreover, we think that blended cultural –based learning could provide solutions for increasing interest in teaching and learning Greek language. The main aim of using cultural-based learning objects is to introduce students in the target culture, the Greek one, as well as teaching grammatical and structural phenomena of the Greek language in a way that they could enhance their interest in learning it. The suggested proposal might need further development since it is the first attempt to construct cultural learning objects for teaching Greek as second/foreign language. For the design and construction of CLOs it is firstly needed an inquiry into students' needs and common difficulties in learning the Greek language and secondly a cooperation and collaboration of researchers, teachers, linguists, curriculum developers, artists, and multimedia designers in order to produce high quality CLOs.

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