



Developing digital literacy in online grammar teaching and learning

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Abstract

The rise of network use as a global phenomenon entices language teachers and learners to modify acquisition patterns towards an increasingly learner centered approach, with grammar learning partly taking place outside the classroom. In this paper we present a digital literacy project which investigates the potential of audiovisual learning and teaching (L&T) resources for the acquisition of grammatical knowledge and understanding in mother tongue and foreign language education. We focus on evaluation literacy, the cognitive and social skills that determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use evaluative information in ways that contribute to achieving learning goals (adapted from Rogers, Kelly & McCoy 2019). To achieve this aim, we first administered two questionnaires to 28 linguists and EFL teachers to establish and adapt existing evaluation criteria for the selection of grammar resources. Second, we applied these evaluation criteria to 345 existing online audiovisual grammar videos. This resulted in illustrations of evaluation literacy, as well as ready-to-use information on such resources for both learners and teachers. This information includes learner level for both native and non-native speakers, previous knowledge required to benefit from the resources (e.g. terminology), and accessibility. Third, we developed concrete examples of learning activities which blend online instruction with face-to-face communication. This approach is expected to help learners generalize through use rather than memorizing, and thereby transform them from passive listeners to active learners. The concrete examples of L&T will furthermore function as a framework for further discussion about digital pedagogy i.e. ways of approaching digital L&T tools from a critical pedagogical perspective.

Keywords: learner-centred approaches, digital literacy, grammar

1. Introduction

Jarvis et al. (2010) describe freely available online grammar tutorials as ‘anytime, anywhere’ learning materials. Audiovisual online grammar learning and teaching materials (henceforth AVOGL&TMs) are often favoured over print resources by digital natives as a way of engaging in explicit and self-initiated grammar learning. In this project we address the conundrum that online grammars are, on the one hand, used daily or at least regularly by 22% of foreign language learners (Trinder 2017) while, on the other hand, facing increasing criticism (Jarvis 2010). We believe that this criticism can be traced back to a lack of learning management systems that enhance users’ capacity to collate, access and critically respond to AVOGL&TMs (Jisc 2018). A learning management system – like the one outlined in this paper – is seen as a prerequisite for individuals to take control over their learning process (Koulouris 2009). This information literacy project is designed to a) help independent learners make informed decisions about the quality and content of AVOGL&TMs, and b) encourage teachers to make use of the proposed criteria to review and analyse AVOGL&TMs in terms of their relevance, value and credibility for classroom use (Jisc 2018). Taking evaluation literacy one step further, the final section of



this paper demonstrates how the underlying, implicit communicative function of one evaluated grammatical concept can be put to use in contextualized blended learning.

The aims of this information literacy project are to

1. design a user-friendly and adaptable framework for evaluating AVOGL&TMs
2. trial it on approximately 345 AVOGL&TMs associated with 28 grammatical concepts from the English Key Stage 4 Curriculum
3. demonstrate how this framework can be used to select AVOGL&TMs suitable for individual learners' particular goals and needs

2. Methodology

To achieve the first goal, we started with Swan's (1994) criteria for 'pedagogic language rules' (truth, demarcation, clarity, simplicity, conceptual parsimony and relevance) and modified them to accuracy, clarity, simplicity, use of metalanguage and conceptual parsimony. We added two further categories, namely quality of illustrating examples (range and contextualization) and appeal. In a first small-scale pilot study, the modified criteria were tested on grammar clips representing adverbs and clefts (two examples each) by an interdisciplinary group of 8 linguists, TESOL, ESOL and MFL teachers. Based on the feedback from this pilot, we reduced the rating scale from 6 to 4 and provided working definitions for the following evaluation criteria:

quality of definition

- accuracy: quality of definition
- clarity: clarity of terminology and structure

quality of illustrating examples

- range (of examples): from prototypical to exceptional
- contextualization: examples placed in a real-life context

use

- difficulty level: easy or difficult to understand
- use of metalanguage: use of grammar specific terminology
- prior knowledge: previous knowledge required to access video content

appeal

- how appealing is the material e.g. design, music, illustration

In a second pilot study 20 participants (linguists, language teachers and students) were asked to apply these eight evaluation criteria to the AVOGL&TMs also used in the first pilot. Respondents of the second pilot study provided information on their age and language background, the frequency with which they use AVOGL&TMs and the learning environment in which they use them. Participants rated the videos on a four-point scale and were given the opportunity to leave open ended responses. The two pilot studies served to establish a framework for the following audit, in which 345 sample videos on 28



grammar concepts were evaluated and embedded into learning contexts (classroom use vs self-study). The grammatical concepts were extracted from the glossary of the UK National Curriculum KS4 (Department of Education 2016). The audiovisual materials were identified through an online (Google) search for the respective grammar concept. The first ten clips were selected; ones that did not meet basic quality standards (such relevance, quality of language use, sound and design) were excluded. In addition, the audit provides information on AVOGL&TMs' coverage and the learner levels they are suitable for – in correlation with the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001) and the English Key Stages. To increase the project's usefulness for teachers and learners, follow-up activities are suggested. 10% of the videos were independently evaluated by the Principal Investigator (PI). In a final stage it was decided to merge the categories 'accuracy' and 'clarity' and present their mean because the ratings of these two categories were not significantly different.

3. Results and Discussion

The most obvious result of the audit is that 'contextualization' has the lowest mean score (2.05) of all evaluated categories. This confirms the impression gained during the audit that – despite the much wider range of opportunities videos offer for contextualized grammar teaching than a classroom setting – few AVOGL&TMs utilize them.

The category 'range of examples', i.e. the variety of illustrating examples ranging from unequivocal to less clear cut, also has a low mean score (2.17). We attribute this result to a general human preference for prototypical examples (Rosch 1975). Prototypical examples, however, tend to be intuitive and not to encourage (language) learners to actively engage with more complex examples or facilitate the honing of (language) analysis skills.

The next two results of the sample evaluation of AVOLTMs show that many of them require little prior knowledge to be accessible ('prior knowledge', 2.33); most videos also use limited grammar specific terminology ('metalinguage', 2.34). This result is unsurprising given that most of the AVOGL&TMs audited for this project are short stand-alone clips.

The difficulty level of the AVOGL&TMs, i.e. how easy or difficult they are to understand according to our evaluation, does not necessarily correlate with the difficulty level of the grammatical concept dealt with in the clip. The complement vs. adjunct distinction, for example, is notoriously difficult (Huddleston and Pullum 2002). Complements are indeed the highest scoring grammatical category in terms of difficulty (3.11). The semantically transparent concept plural, on the other hand, has the lowest mean score (1.86). AVOGL&TMs on adjectives, on the other hand, seem to be more difficult (2.32) than those on adverbs (2.08), despite the former being arguably easier in English – the language most clips deal with so far – than adverbs.

The fact that accuracy and clarity have the highest mean (2.85) seems to indicate that quality criteria are the main aim of producers of AVOGL&TMs.

Appeal, despite being highly subjective, emerged as the most commented upon category from the open response section of the first pilot study. For this category only the individual rankings are



meaningful. One generalisation we can, however, make is that the more AVOGL&TMs an individual produces the higher their appeal.

4. Example

Evaluation literacy is important when accessing and selecting AVOL&TMs. However, if the communicative function of a grammatical concept is not further taken into consideration, the full impact of evaluation literacy on the learning process may not emerge. Grammar learning needs to be given a broader communicative purpose by being embedded in a real-life context. Our results should not only foster evaluation literacy in online (grammar) learning and teaching, but also show that there is a need to contextualize grammatical concepts. We therefore outlined some ideas for a possible transfer of grammar knowledge as presented in AVOGL&TMs.

At a teaching and learning workshop we, for example, asked participants to watch one of the evaluated clips on adverbs, providing them with a definition and prototypical examples. While at this point the participants might have been able to *define* this grammatical category, they had not engaged in any communicative situation in which they had *applied* this knowledge. We therefore asked the workshop participants to watch a sequence of a world-cup football match (Panama against England 2018) and produce a short audio-recorded sports commentary, using their mobile phones. Participants subsequently listened to each other's audio recordings and asked and answered questions based on the video they had watched (e.g. How did X play the corner? How did the goalkeeper try to stop the ball from going in? How did the referee handle the situation?). During the plenary discussion participants noted that through this contextualized activity they had implicitly gained the understanding that communicative function (i.e. giving further details about the manner, place and time of an action) can be performed by various grammatical forms – for example adverbs. AVOLTMs can therefore serve as valuable input for more contextualized grammar teaching if there is an opportunity for learners to personally respond to authentic language input after engaging with AVOGL&TMs on a self-study basis. In a follow up activity, we used a tweet for a reparsing activity, which demonstrates the different uses of adverbs and adjectives.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we presented a digital literacy project which examined the potential of audiovisual learning and teaching resources for the acquisition of grammatical knowledge and understanding in mother tongue and foreign language education. We adapted and developed criteria which can be used by both students and teachers to evaluate AVOGL&TMs in terms of quality of content, illustrating examples and use in various learning contexts. The application of these criteria to 345 clips revealed that clarity and accuracy take priority over contextualization and range of examples, which suggests potential for development in this area. We furthermore present a worked example of embedding AVOGL&TMs in a contextualized functional blended learning approach. In future, we intend to expand the project, making it accessible on an interactive platform and thus enhancing awareness about the need to approach digital L&T tools from a critical pedagogical perspective.



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