

SoTEL Symposium 16-18 February 2022

Learning Spanish language and culture: a virtual reality

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Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, constructivism, language learning, Spanish, heutagogy, intercultural citizenship

Abstract

Developing intercultural understanding is vital in language education; with this in mind, this project creates an online language-learning tool with the intention of increasing secondary students' intercultural communicative skills and to practice the Spanish language through scripted content that encourages social interactions. This virtual learning environment (VLE) features 360-degree video recordings of a native Spanish speaker acting as a significant historical figure. Students are encouraged to engage in one-on-one dialogues as part of digital selectable modules which are centred around the influential character's main life events; these modules present vocabulary in different contexts. The footage is recorded in a green screen studio and features are added in post-production. Participants can opt to watch a video narrated by the historical character about past events to only develop listening skills. However, this resource intends to represent a real-life communicative experience through social interactions with a native speaker. Thus, the character prompts questions and users can opt type or select provided answers - voice recognition is a desirable feature that depends on finding suitable software. The actor is encouraged to offer non-verbal reactions such as facial expressions to encourage examinations of those responses. The goal is to promote intercultural communicative competence (ICC) via online interactions. By scaffolding learning, interactions will develop language skills to succeed in today's globalised world, stimulate reflective practices and inspire social action.

This project-based research will evaluate, review, and analyse literature regarding distance-learning approaches, student-centred theories and means by which ICC can be facilitated and promoted in digital education. A framework is devised considering pedagogical aspects for its effective use. Firstly, VLE supported by constructivism promote interaction between learners and content; student involvement in the construction of new knowledge is imperative (Whitlock, 2017). New knowledge is built on prior knowledge and influenced by social experiences as connections to the real-world increase engagement and make learning relevant (Reid-Martinez & Grooms, 2021). Similarly, heutagogy promotes active participation, autonomy and self-determination to learn (Blaschke, 2012). Online learning allows students to take ownership of their education, enhancing skills of self-direction. As a result, language students' roles change from passive learners to confident speakers able to communicate with native speakers in digital platforms (Tolosa et al., 2021). Correspondingly, concepts of ICC and intercultural citizenship (IC) are integrated into the framework to enhance students' abilities to value their culture, to relate to others meaningfully and to promote active and collective social action (Byram, 2021). Subsequently, key elements will be categorised and implemented to create a platform that fosters Spanish language acquisition. During the process, a script is devised which includes cultural aspects of the language, prompts language practice and generates instances where interactions could occur. Video performances are recorded, edited, and revised. Additionally, a prototype is presented to a focus group consisting of language experts to provide feedback. To evaluate its usefulness, quantitative data will be collected via online surveys; close questions with ratings will be part of the questionnaire to investigate participants' experiences. Pre and post surveys implementing questions from the intercultural sensitivity scale (Chen and Starosta, 2000) and ICC scale (Arasaratnam, 2012) are provided. The panellists' feedback about their experience with the prototype will be integrated for further modifications. Qualitative data will be gathered through observations, interviews and discussions with undergraduate students and/or specialist panellists. This data will be transcribed, organised and examined following naturalistic interpretive analysis (Aguayo, 2014) to measure changes in users' awareness about ICC skills. This project promotes the development of skills necessary to become intercultural citizens through immersive, 360-degree footage of real-world scenarios that are not possible in traditional classroom settings.

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