Abstract

This paper describes the use of phenomenography to explore the different ways in which language learners experience Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). The use of computer as well as new media has dominated language learning and teaching (Gamper and Knapp, 2002) and raised new potentials and possibilities in the field. These new possibilities need to be further exploited in order for instructors and curriculum developers to understand the ways in which learners understand CALL and enable them to develop a curriculum that focuses on students’ particular needs. This paper focuses on presenting the main findings of a qualitative study undertaken on the basis of phenomenography, investigating how learners experience, understand and ascribe meaning to CALL. In this study the phenomenographic approach is adopted since it can richly describe the object of study by emphasizing the variation in the meaning that is found in the participants’ experience of the phenomenon (Marton, 1981; Marton and Booth, 1997; Souleles, 2012). More specifically, the study focuses on exploring learners’ attitudes towards the use of technological means in language learning and their preferences on the type of technology to be used. This phenomenographic study demonstrates a hierarchical set of logically related categories, from complete ignorance to the highest level of awareness of CALL.

Attitudes towards CALL

The use of computer as well as new media has dominated language learning and teaching (Gamper and Knapp, 2002) and raised new potentials and possibilities in the field of applied linguistics. These new possibilities need to be further exploited in order for instructors and curriculum developers to highlight the ways in which learners perceive CALL and enable them to develop a curriculum that focuses on students’ particular needs. Ayres (2002) research, for instance, examined students’ attitudes towards CALL and the findings reveal that learners appreciate and value the amount and quality of knowledge gained using computers. Similarly, Mahfouz (2010) explores students’ attitudes towards one specific CALL resource. More specifically, this study investigates university students’ perceptions of using email exchanges with native keypals. Findings revealed that students’ perceptions of using email exchanges with native keypals were highly positive. Another study by Kraemer,
Ahn, Hillman and Fei (2009) explored users’ perceptions towards an online resource, MIMEA –Multimedia Interactive Modules for Education and Assessment– for practicing language skills in cultural contexts. Findings revealed learners’ overall positive perception of MIMEA as well as positive effects on language learning and use of technology. This research does not attempt to illustrate student’s attitudes towards CALL in depth. Several studies have been cited above in order to provide an indicative notion on how language learner perceive this particular matter.

**Phenomenography**

The study aims to ’: a) explore learners’ attitudes towards the use of technological means in language learning and b) investigate language learners’ preferences on the type of technology to be used for a more effective learning. In order to gain a more comprehensive view of the issue, this study employed semi-structured interviews –the main tool of phenomenography. The primary assumption of this method of data analysis is the existence of a certain number of qualitatively different ways of perceiving a particular phenomenon (Suleles, 2006). Recent phenomenographic studies (Pang, 2002; Suleles, 2006) focus, not only on the variety of ways of experiencing a phenomenon, but also on what is a way of experiencing a phenomenon. The former refers to the ‘structural’ aspect (what) of the variations of perception, and the latter as the ‘referential’ (how). The output of phenomenographic research is hierarchically arranged categories of description of the various conceptions of a phenomenon (Suleles, 2006). The identification, the description and the categorization of perceptions and practices creates a hypothetical ‘outcome space’ or a ‘topology’ of inter-related categories or groupings, described by Åkerlind (2002, p.2) as a ‘space of variation’.

The criticism on phenomenography refers to the role of the interviewee, the subjectivity of establishing categories of description and the credibility of findings.

However, Entwistle (1997, p.132-3) provides a set of guiding principles as a reply to this critique. According to his words:

> It is essential that the questions are posed in a way which allows the … [participants] to account for their actions within their own frame of reference, rather than one imposed by the researcher...
He continues by pointing out that the categories of description, which are also considered as the outcomes of phenomenographic analysis, need to be presented with adequate extracts to delimit the essential meaning of the category entirely. This meaning, according to Entwistle (1997), resides in the essence of the discussions from which the category has been constituted. To establish the categories in ways that most fairly reflect the responses made, great care must be taken: also, another important safeguard are the discussions with others in the process of collating the reported categories. Although actions such as the ones mentioned above are taken, the interpretations remain to some extent subjective … phenomenography explores relationships between them... Entwistle concludes that phenomenography involves the researcher in an analysis of the meaning of each category in relation to every other one… and a thorough analysis of meaning of these differences.

Methodology

In phenomenographic studies the focus is on identifying the range of variations of a phenomenon. The objective of this paper is to investigate the range of perceptions of undergraduate have on the potential of technology in language learning. The data for this study were gathered through open-ended questions during interviews with students in a public university in Cyprus. Considering the small number of interviewees, this is not an exhaustive study but rather a limited investigation that reflects the context of the particular context. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and form the raw material for this study. The intention is to report on the variation that emerges from the learners’ understanding of the phenomenon - in this case, of CALL. Thus, the questions were designed to focus on students’ perceptions on different technologies, which they experienced in their language learning.

The set of questions was piloted with a number of learners within the same institution. Individual interviews lasted between fifteen to thirty minutes, and concluded when students indicated that they satisfactorily answered the questions.

Categories of conceptions and outcome space

The first level of analysis involves the identification of the qualitative distinct ways the interviewees conceive and consider different elements of CALL. This is the structural aspect of the variations. The replies to each question comprise the minimum number of
conceptions expressed, and form distinctive categories that are mapped in the outcome space.

References


