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Didactic Concept of Learners as Designers in Teaching German as a Foreign Language

Extended summary

This paper deals with the didactic concept of Learners as Designers (Jonassen and Reeves, 1996), which is based on the assumption that digital media, as a cognitive tool, have the potential to accompany, support, and complement the learning process, to enable active knowledge construction and transfer, and to change the role of learners in the classroom. An important outcome of this approach is the creation of learning products and their availability in the virtual space and for other users (Proske, Damnik, Körndle, 2011: 206).

Unlike twenty years ago, today almost all students own a smartphone and other digital devices (Jurkovič, 2019). However, research also indicates that students use them primarily for communication and entertainment, and less often for learning purposes (Milovanović et al. 2015), which has also been noticed for students of non-philological faculties where the authors of this paper teach. The study aimed to determine the potential of the Learners as Designers concept to motivate students to learn autonomously, apply new vocabulary learning strategies supported by digital tools, and improve their digital literacy using the Quizlet app.

The study was conducted in 2019/2020 among 78 students of German for Specific Purposes from three universities: the University of Belgrade and Singidunum University Belgrade, Serbia, and the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The mean age of the participants was 20 years.

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Quantitative and qualitative data for the study were collected by two online surveys. The surveys were pre-tested and involved colleagues' comments that helped refine the survey. Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25.00. Qualitative data were coded and then processed by the method of descriptive analysis. The statistical methods used were descriptive statistics and the independent samples t-test.

The study was employed in two phases. In the first phase, students practiced vocabulary in groups using learning sets prepared by the teacher in Quizlet. Students were encouraged to repeat the vocabulary until the next lecture. In the second phase, students autonomously chose the relevant vocabulary and used Quizlet to create learning sets that included translations and images.

The results showed that students spend more time on vocabulary learning using different strategies provided by Quizlet in comparison to their previous learning habits. During the first phase there was a change of learning strategies towards using digital tools. During the second phase of the research, the increasing trend in frequency of learning words in general, and especially by using digital tools, was observed. The results indicate that the students showed more positive attitude towards learning vocabulary. The qualitative analysis reflects their opinion that they learned more and were motivated because of the opportunity to create learning material autonomously and collaboratively. They also emphasized the fun and competitive character and the possibility of quick feedback as the motivation factors.

Considering the dynamic changes in demands on education, it can be assumed that the need for self-regulated and autonomous learning will be emphasized, thus it will be even more necessary to redefine teacher and student roles. Having this in mind, the use of digital tools as cognitive ones is becoming essential. Especially the situation caused by the pandemic have intensified the need for distance learning, the ability to work autonomously, expand learning strategies using digital tools, and intensively develop key competencies.

Keywords: Teaching German Language, digital media, vocabulary learning, motivation, Quizlet

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