Learning English for Technical Purposes: The LENTEC Project

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Abstract

This chapter presents some research findings in the area of self assessment, obtained from the European Leonardo Project: Learning English for Technical Purposes (LENTEC), carried out 2001–2003. In this project, upper-secondary vocational students solved problem-based learning cases in a virtual environment. The project aimed at stimulating upper-secondary vocational school students from six different European countries to improve their English-language skills. It also aimed at helping foreign-language teachers to develop their skills in online tutoring. A validation study was undertaken and the results underscored that students need time and practice to assess their own results. According to students and teachers, a majority of the students became more aware of their own language-learning development. The teachers in the project developed a new teacher role where some of the responsibility for assessment moved from them to the students themselves. This not only motivated the students but also gave them added time for actual language learning.
Introduction

The aim of the chapter is to describe the use of self assessment in the LENTEC project, the materials used, and how the involved partners tried to validate the results obtained when using this approach to assessing language learning in an online environment.

The LENTEC project, which was carried out between 2001-2003, involved upper secondary vocational students from six different European countries. The students solved problem-based learning cases in a virtual environment to improve their English language while giving their foreign language teachers an opportunity to develop their online tutoring skills.

Questions investigated in relation to assessment were: Did students feel that their language skills improved? What opinions did their teachers express? In what ways could progress of learning be recorded or measured? To what extent did students make reliable self assessments?

Theoretical Background

Autonomous learning and the ability to evaluate one’s own learning has become an educational aim in many European school systems. This is reflected in a range of national modern-language syllabi and curricula and in European language policy in general (Delors et al., 1996). It is one way to prepare young people for lifelong learning and thus prepare young people for increased work mobility in Europe. Especially, the smaller countries have realized that a basic knowledge of languages other than their own is essential to promote their own products and make use of technology from abroad (Perkins, 2004b). A central aspect of the lifelong learning concept is to be able to assess one’s progress and attained results and, on the basis of this, make judgements on learning goals. When learners become more independent, it is neither possible nor desirable for teachers to be the ones to assess the students’ learning in all areas. In fact, formal or traditional language testing is seldom used as the sole instrument for placement, diagnosis, and measurement of achievement outside educational bodies. Instead, language assessment has become increasingly more authentic and direct as it involves students in tasks in which they would normally be involved in their daily lives. The assessment in such situations is primarily formative and process-focused rather than summative and product-focused. As maintained by Gipps (1994), assessment is becoming part of and a way to support the learning and teaching process. Educational theory supports this development, especially modern constructivist theories of how knowledge is constructed. The importance of autonomy is often stressed (Holec, 1988).
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