
Adaptivity vs the idea of progression in language learning environments : antagonism or complementarity?

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1 Introduction

The notion of progression has already been widely and deeply studied by many pedagogues, but most of the times within face – to – face settings, where the learner and the teacher are in the same place at the same moment. What happens with this concept if we consider online learning, which often means at distance and non-synchronous working (Vermeersch et al., 2005), and more specifically if we think of adaptive learning environments, where the learning path the user will follow is not definitely mapped at the start of the learning process ?

2 Progression vs. adaptivity

The idea of this talk arose during my research for my PhD, which focuses on the concept of progression in online language learning environment, more specifically concerning Dutch as a foreign language. The main purpose is to examine what could be the best progression for learning materials Dutch for French learners trying to reach a A2-level of the CEFRL (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), the progression being the order in which things are taught or learned. For example, if you teach english grammar on an explicit basis, you will have to teach the construction of the past participle first before you can teach the past perfect. The concept of progression has been widely discussed by Serge Borg (2001).

W.F. Mackey (1981, quoted by Martinez 1996) notices that the grouping, sequencing and progression of selected contents, in other words the sequential organisation of those contents, mostly form a complex problem of which the solving generally appears to be unsatisfying. Mackey (quoted by Puren, 1988) also tells us that the criteria of easiness (defined by the French pedagogue Compayre at the beginning of the 20th century as "from simple to complex, from defined to undefined, from concrete to abstract, from particular to general) is ambiguous because an unknown element without link to anything already known will always seem very difficult to the learner. The approach by Compayre is similar to what is given on the website of the Dutch Linguistic Union (Nederlandse Taalunie) : "*Een leerlijn kan chronologisch zijn (bv. in het vak geschiedenis), maar kan ook een traject weerspiegelen van gemakkelijk naar moeilijk, van concreet naar abstract, van vertrouwd naar niet-vertrouwd, van deel naar geheel (of omgekeerd) enz.*"¹ A progression can be chronological (in the teaching of history, for example), but can also show a path from easy to difficult, from concrete to abstract, from familiar to non-familiar, from part to whole (or vice versa) etc. (free translation). Most pedagogues (so does Martinez, e.g.) want to add other elements as learner's motivation,

1 <http://www.taalunie.org/onderwijs/termen/term/513/>

usefulness and context. A deep study of the progression followed by some books (manuals, grammar books, vocabulary books, language courses etc) will allow me to determine what the best (or most frequent) progression is for the face-to-face teaching of Dutch for French learners². The comparison will also be made with the few existing electronic products (online or not, CDRoms / DVDs or websites).

I then would make a test of what I consider being a good progression for online materials on a test group of learners, with a second group getting the same type of content but without the progression (giving the activities in a random order, for example).

The original question of this research was thus : are the principles that are considered to be valid for a good progression in face-to-face teaching also valid for online learning, with or without coaching ? And if the answer is yes, to what extent can you apply these principles to online learning materials Dutch for French natives on a level A2 of the CEFRL ?

In this talk, I would now like to try to draw some lines about the possible links between the notion of progression and the idea of adaptability, with the following questions in mind :

- if a learning environment adapts itself to the user's behaviour, do we still need a progression, or do we just "let the system rule" ?

- do we consider the progression as a guide to structure the learning objects in a certain order, and how ?

- is the progression a useful tool for a posteriori control of the learner's working path on the environment ?

The talk will rest on some examples taken from the online learning environment Fanel (<http://www.fanel.eu>), providing freely accessible learning materials Dutch and French as foreign languages, and it will examine some possibilities based on ad hoc didactic scenarios and random selections within large numbers of items.

A few references

1. Borg, Serge, La notion de progression, 175p. Didier, Paris (2001)
2. Mackey, William Francis, Language teaching analysis, 562p. Longmans (1981)
3. Martinez, Pierre, La didactique des langues étrangères, 127p. PUF/Que sais-je, Paris (1996)
4. Vermeersch, Jens (red), Van start gaan met open en afstandsonderwijs, 136p. Garant, Antwerp (2005)

2 Due to the very specific situation of Belgium, where Dutch and French are both official languages (with German), there are lots of learning materials Dutch for French natives.