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ReCALL Journal

The forthcoming issue of *ReCALL* (Vol. 23, Part 1) will be distributed to EUROCALL members in January 2011. Please send articles, software reviews, details of relevant events or other items of interest for future issues to June Thompson, Editor *ReCALL* d.j.thompson@hull.ac.uk.

The journal contents are listed [HERE](#)

All articles are considered by an international panel of referees. Notes for contributors can be found [HERE](#)



Project

Autonomous Language Learning Project: Catering to Less Widely Used Languages

1. Project description

This article describes the aims and outputs of the Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) project. It describes the challenges and targets of the project from methodological and curriculum development, to activity and platform design. It further collates feedback from the project pilots. Finally it situates the project in terms of material currently available online both in the specific context of the less widely used languages of the project, and, in the broader context of recent technological innovations in language learning in general. The ALL EU-funded project developed blended learning language courses at A2 level for Lithuanian, Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish. Courses have multilingual access in French, Italian, Spanish and English. Designers and platform developers faced a dual challenge: to innovate in terms of methodology and to innovate in terms of technology. The methodological framework of the project was to develop CEF competence based syllabi and material that promoted student autonomy and collaboration, using a constructivist task-based approach. The languages share a VLE, specifically adapted to the needs of each language. Project outputs include student and teacher guides, on and offline material and printed blended learning sets for each language.

The specific context of the less widely used and taught languages meant that for the project team, at the outset of the project, little or no material was available online and communicative methodology in the target languages was not typical. On the one hand, innovation was almost a foregone conclusion, however, on the other, the challenge was great.

Partners involved included experts in different fields from many EU countries: [Centro Navarra Autoaprendizaje de Idiomas](#), project coordination, Pamplona Spain; [Znanie Association](#), language developer for Bulgarian, Sofia, Bulgaria; [Cukurova University](#), language developer for Turkish, Adana, Turkey; [EuroEd Foundation](#), language developer for Romanian, Iasi, Romania; [Kindersite Project](#),

dissemination, UK; [School of Lifelong Education and International Development](#), London, internal quality control; [Vilniaus Gedimino Technikos University](#), and, [Mykolo Romerio Universitetas](#) both language developers for Lithuanian, Vilnius, Lithuania.

The ALL project worked in collaboration with another EU funded project, TOOL, which developed courses in Flemish, Maltese, Slovene, Magyar and Estonian. The projects shared expertise and the VLEs for the target languages.

2. Blended learning model

Blended learning is commonly associated with the introduction of new technology into a course, especially the online media, while at the same time it recognises that there is a value in face-to-face contact and other traditional methods of assisting student learning. Sharma and Barrett define it as follows: "Blended Learning refers to a language course which combines face-to-face (F2F) classroom component with an appropriate use of technology. The term technology covers a wide range of recent technologies, such as the Internet, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards. It also includes the use of computers as a means of communication, such as chat and e-mail, and a number of environments which enable teachers to enrich their courses, such as VLEs (virtual learning environments), blogs and wikis." (2007) The ALL project integrates course materials that blend face-to-face teaching and the use of new technologies.

3. Curriculum development

Communicative methodology was not in wide use in the target languages. Thus the expression of language learning targets in functional situational terms presented one of the first and greatest challenges of the project. The grammar and vocabulary would flow from a real communicative context and not *vice versa*. Furthermore, CEF descriptors did not exist in any of the target languages at the outset of the project. Finally, the definition and differentiation of A2 level also represented a high learning curve. It was necessary to train, to read, to write and rewrite, before getting the syllabi to the point where they were in line with the project proposal. Partners opted for the pragmatic solution of using existent descriptors in English, German and French to guide them. The Romanian partner developed the base model for the syllabus, which other language developers used as a reference to guide them.

Module 2, Unit 1: Travelling & holidays

Objectives for student:

Spoken production	Functions in context	Topics	Vocab area	Grammar
I can give a brief description of a journey / trip / holiday. I can report in short an incident / event.	Asking for and giving information	Travelling and holidays	Means of transport	Narrative tenses (Perfect, compound & Imperfect)
Spoken interaction I can get simple information about travel. I can exchange experiences about holidays.	Speaking about events in the past	At the airport/ railway station	Phrases	Comparatives
Listening I can understand essential information when announced on trains/planes or in railway stations and airports. I can understand essential information from a short, recorded passage on holiday attractions. I can grasp the essential information of TV news items when the visual supports the commentary.	Expressing and ranking preferences	Incidents in the past		Numerals
Reading I can read trains / flights timetables and other essential information in railway stations and airports. I can understand short narratives related to the topic.				
Writing I can write a holiday postcard. I can fill in a questionnaire on customer satisfaction. I can write a short e-mail message or a letter. I can use the most important connecting words to indicate the chronological order of events (first, then, after, later etc).				
Learning I can identify international words in Romanian vocabulary.				

Figure 1. Sample learner objectives.

The syllabi were used as the basis to develop the blended course material. Each language course offers learner support documents (student and tutor guides), online material and a blended learning set. In the blended learning sets, learners are made aware of potential learning targets unit by unit. They can consult learning objectives in the blended learning set. Transparency empowers the learner to prioritise and select objectives that are specifically relevant to him or herself.

ALL
Autonomous Language Learning

Blended Learning Course: **romanian**

Spoken production
I can describe my current job/occupation, hobbies and interests in a simple way.

Spoken interaction
I can ask people questions about their job and free time and answer such questions.
I can handle short social exchanges even though I can't usually keep the conversation going myself.

Listening
I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.
I can generally identify the topic of discussion around me.

Reading
I can understand the essential information in advertisements.
I can find the most important information in newspapers, leaflets or posters (e.g. adverts for leisure activities, exhibitions, concerts).
I can understand basic information related to job descriptions and the work place.

Writing
I can write short simple notes and messages for friends or co-workers.
I can fill in a questionnaire on how I spend my free time.
I can make a note of appointments in a diary.

Learning
I can organise my agenda and include time for language acquisition

www.allproject.info

Figure 2. Example of learning objectives as stated in a Romanian course unit.

3.1. Learner Support Documents

A key objective of the courses is to promote learner autonomy. All courses include downloadable student and tutor guides, and a blended learning set. The chief purpose of the support documents is to inform and guide autonomous learning. On and offline material are closely interrelated. The support documents help learners see the possibilities and contents of both and how the different parts of the course interrelate. In the following example from the Lithuanian course, learners are guided through the 'blend'.

MODULE 3
What's Online?

Holidays. Šventės
Vocabulary. Revision of new vocabulary and finding words to the given definitions
Grammar. Checking your spelling
Reading Conversation techniques
Speaking Techniques of a polite conversation: how to respond, how to thank smb. and etc
Reading A text about about Lithuanian holiday - Kaziukas fair
Listening about Mother's day celebrated on the 1 st of May
Speaking Different ways of celebrating holidays. Students choose the most interesting tradition or custom and share it in class
Writing: Share your ideas with one or two group mates in the class session. Then send the commentary of what you have learned about your group mates leisure activities to your tutor for corrections.
End of Unit Evaluation

&
Weekly message from your tutor
Your electronic folder with all your work to date
Your learner diary

What's In Class?

Speaking: about students' favourite holidays and festivals, the way they are celebrated, the way people are greeted on a certain occasion
Functions: Polite introductions, expressions of gratitude and expressions of interest
Grammar: Whiteboard: grammar and syntax explanations from teacher
Exercises on paper, in pairs and as a whole class: exercises on Lithuanian holidays: St. John's Day (task 7), Mardi Gras (task 8), weddings (task 10), Easter (task 11) reference book (Nė dienos be lietuvių kalbos, p. 258-261)
Listening activity tape or CD
Listening to a dialogue students write the sequence of actions
Task 10 reference book (Po truputį, p.174) and draw task 24, reference book (Po truputį p.159)
Vocabulary: Photos, pictures, descriptions on the topic: holiday, the main national and family holidays, their traditions
Vocabulary game and exercises: tasks 1, 4, 5, 6 reference book (Nė dienos be lietuvių kalbos, p.256-257).
Reading: Folktales Eglė žalčių karalienė.
Writing collaborative activity exercises: greetings, wishes, letters
Orientation session: Visiting the webpage, finding your way around
Autonomous learning: Research with the group using the Internet and messaging each other, 3 different holidays/festivals from 3 different countries and describe their traditions and customs.

Figure 3. Lithuanian Module 3, Unit 1.

The above example from a Lithuanian unit, illustrates the integration of class and online material. The course here exemplifies the cultural dimension to the activities. In the autonomous learning activity we see how technology facilitates the student collaboration and autonomy that are integral to the method.

Partners also included support documents in the form of vocabulary glossaries and grammar references. Alternatively, partners opted to include recommended links and/or references to recommended printed supplementary material. For the webpage, three video tutorials are included to guide navigation and use of the platform.

The screenshot shows the ALL Project website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'ALL Autonomous Language Learning' on the left and 'My personal page', 'Activities', 'Message box', and 'Tutor' on the right. Below the navigation bar, there are links for 'Modify information', 'Select support language', and 'Log out'. The main content area is divided into two sections: 'Tutor's page - Your inbox' and 'My Courses'. The 'My Courses' section lists several language courses with 'Enter the course' buttons. A green arrow points to the 'Enter the course' button for the 'Türkçe A2 kursu Turkish A2 Course'.

Figure 4. ALL Project website.

3.2. Online Part of Course

Each language course is divided in three modules. Online, each course consists of:

- Entry test
- 1 Orientation Unit
- 4 units plus a consolidation unit per module
- Each unit consists of ten activities

One of the key advantages of online material is its flexibility for the learner. As distinct from in-class teaching, the learner may access when and where is convenient for him or her. However, asynchronous learning is not synonymous with solitary learning. Thus while there is a component of traditional self-correcting, automatically answered material, the challenge for the course designers was to integrate tasks that took advantage of the online potential for communication and information. Online tasks present constructivist, communicative task-based activities to promote learner autonomy and collaboration. More traditional activities are also included. Just as languages and cultures were diverse in the project, so were the registers for methodology and course design. Here follow some annotated examples:

The screenshot shows a forum post from the Turkish course. The title is 'Okul olsun mu olmasın mı? / School or no school?'. The text of the post discusses the trend of some parents sending their children to school with the help of computers, and asks for the user's opinion. Below the text, there is an 'Instruction' section that asks 'Do you agree with the following statement?' and provides two radio button options: 'Evet, katılıyorum.' (Yes, I agree) and 'Hayır, katılmıyorum.' (No, I don't agree). A green arrow points to the 'Forum' link in the top right corner, and another green arrow points to the 'vote' button at the bottom of the post.

Figure 5. Sample forum from the Turkish course.

The example above of a forum from the Turkish course invites participation in a poll. Here learners can express opinions, and read and reply to the opinions of others. It is a communicative task. The following activity from the Lithuanian course is fairly open. It asks learners to comment on communication in shops.

The screenshot shows a sample exercise from the Lithuanian course. The title is 'Shopping in Lithuania Apsipirkimas Lietuvoje'. The text of the exercise discusses the difficulty of communication with shop assistants in Lithuania for foreigners. Below the text, there is an 'Instruction' section that asks the user to 'Write commentary'. A green arrow points to the 'Write commentary' button at the bottom of the exercise.

Figure 6. Sample exercise from the Lithuanian course.

Below is an example of an action-based task from the Bulgarian course inviting learners to make use of an authentic link to discover useful language for shopping.

Дрехи

Clothes

За да намерите най-хубавите дрехи, имате нужда от информация за цвят, размер, цена, които... вече съществуват. Само трябва да кликнете в сайта, като използвате речник..

In order to find the most appropriate clothes we will need information about colour, size, price... information which already exists. You just need to click on the web, using a dictionary!

[Моля, кликнете тук. / Please, click here.](#)

Figure 7. Sample action-based task from the Bulgarian course.

Another, more simple matching, culture-based task from the Bulgarian course is shown below.

The screenshot shows a web page titled "City of Sofia". It contains a paragraph in Bulgarian and English: "Забавлявате ли се, когато се разхождате из града? Аз също. Да отидем заедно в София, за да се опознаем по-добре забележителностите. Do you enjoy seeing the city? Me too! Let's go around Sofia together in order to become more familiar with the sights and sounds of the city." Below this is an "Instruction" section: "Свържете снимките с изреченията, които описват техния характер. Match the pictures with the appropriate descriptions." There are three images of Sofia landmarks: a large domed building, a classical building with a fountain, and a large domed cathedral. A green arrow points to the top image.

Figure 8. Sample culture-based task from the Bulgarian course.

The screenshot shows a Turkish language learning interface. The page title is "Okul olsun mu olmasın mı? / School or no school?". It contains a paragraph in Turkish and English: "Bazı insanlar çocuklarını okula göndermeyip bilgisayarın da yardımıyla onlara evde eğitim veriyorlar. Ama uzmanlar bunun çocuğun sosyal yaşamını kötü etkileyebileceğini düşünüyor. Siz bu konuda ne düşünüyorsunuz? Some people don't send their children to school and educate them at home with the help of computers. But experts think this can affect children's social life in a bad way. What do you think about this?" Below this is an "Instruction" section: "Aşağıdaki cümleye katılıyor musunuz? Do you agree with the following statement?" There is a voting section with two radio buttons: "Evet, katılıyorum." (Yes, I agree) and "Hayır, katılmıyorum." (No, I don't agree). A green arrow points to the "Evet, katılıyorum." option.

Figure 9. Turkish, Module 2, Unit 4, Activity 5.

In this example from the Turkish course, learners may vote, click on a link, reply to the opinions of others.

3.3. Class Material

The class activities are also designed to promote the guiding principles of the project: development of autonomy, peer collaboration and a constructivist, communicative approach. For example, learners are invited to prepare projects based on module themes for presentation in class. Classroom activities include pair work, group work, collaborative writing, role plays.. . All the classroom activities as recommended in the sets are available in PDF format, are downloadable within the courses and in printed form.

To clarify how the class activities fit into the overall model of the project, we revisit the model outlined in the ALL proposal:

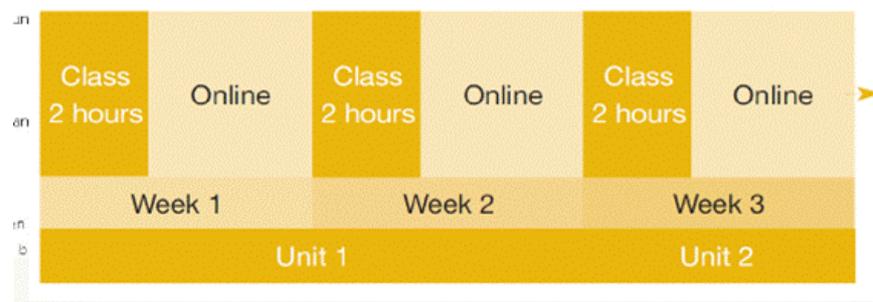


Figure 10. Blended learning model used in the ALL project.

The blended learning sets for each language respect the project model. The purpose of the set is to facilitate information to the students, in order to help them negotiate the course. Each set gives detailed information, module by module and unit by unit. There are three key sections in the set:

- Online activities
- In-class activities
- Language learning objectives

4. Autonomous learning

A key target in the ALL project was course design that would foster autonomy. The project thus provided a platform, opportunities for feedback and training to help course developers find an answer to the question "how can we design language learning courses to promote autonomy?" Experts trained, provided documentation and carried out in-depth reviews to ensure that quality standards were met. Key among the guiding principles are: learner reflection, learner choice, learner independence, self-evaluation, peer collaboration.

Notwithstanding the project process, understanding, implementation and assimilation of autonomous learning principles varied across the teams. Furthermore, the technology and activity templates were used in different creative ways by course designers.



Figure 11. Sample learner diary.

The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) itself integrates the concept of autonomy by providing both a learner diary and messaging system on the main page. This is an example of technology in the service of methodology. The degree to which autonomy is later fostered will later depend on the degree to which learners and tutors take advantage of those possibilities. Both platform and course design should lead towards effective course implementation.

As students enter the courses in all languages, they have a diary option. The above screenshots illustrate the diary with support language French and in Italian. This option is distinct from an integrated writing activity; it is the prerogative of the learner and separate from the course itself. The diary is the ideal vehicle for students to reflect upon their individual learning process.

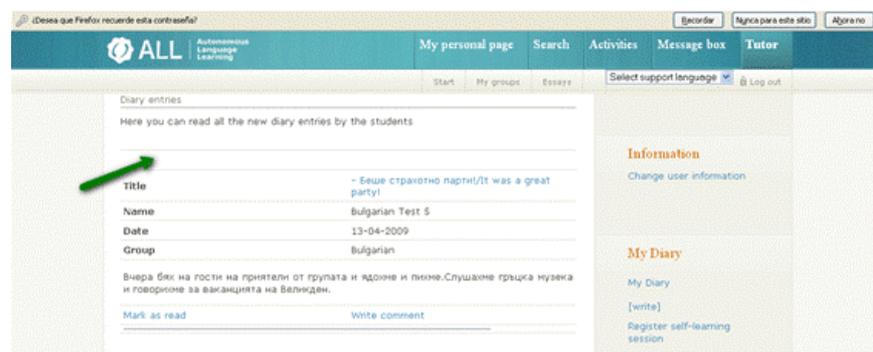


Figure 12. Bulgarian Student Entry for Diary Tutor View.

Some course designers have guided the use of the diary more and have directed students towards these possibilities in activities which instruct them to use the message system and or the diary to communicate with each other or with their tutor.

ALL course designers use both diary and message to integrate autonomous learning activities. Feedback from tutors for students is thus dynamic and highly personalized. However automatic, 'static' feedback is also a feature of the project VLE.

Key to autonomy is the value that learning can and most often does take place without the teacher. Self study books that provide answers are familiar to most educators. Online exercises provide instantaneous information about correct answers for students working on their own. The ALL VLE gave information not only to the effect if answers were right or wrong but also identified the correct target item. Ideally activities can then provide links to online material and grammar reference for students to explore in greater depth. At the time of the project, not many online grammars were available in the target languages. However, by 2010, we

see that online grammar reference material, with explanation in the target language and in English, is becoming more available in the target languages.

final result:

You got **2** right answers out of **5**.
Your final result is **40%**.

1.) 1. Kiekvieną rytą mano kaimynai po parką

✓ bėgioja

čiuožinėjo

plaukiojo

jodinėja

vaikštinėja

2.) 2. Žirgyne vaikai mielai su mažais arkliais

✗ bėgioja

čiuožinėjo

plaukiojo

jodinėja

Figure 13. Sample feedback given to learners on completing an exercise.

Another type of feedback in the ALL VLE is on compositions with a correcting tool that allows identification of error type and for tutors to make recommendations or comments as they see fit. Following is an example of a tutor view of the platform. It demonstrates how the VLE allows quality feedback for personalized guidance. Tutors can then provide rapid, high quality individualized feedback to the level of detail that they consider opportune, if they are making optimum use of the platform.

The screenshot displays the 'Online corrections' interface. At the top, the URL is <http://login.allproject.info/corrector2.php?id=120491>. The main heading is 'Online corrections' with a sub-heading 'Test 1, Romanian - 03-11-2007'. Below this is a text editor with a toolbar containing icons for bold, italic, underline, strikethrough, text color, background color, bulleted list, numbered list, link, unlink, undo, redo, and print. The text in the editor reads: 'Maria Enescu locuiește din România, din țară. Lucrează la Parlamentul european, Bruxelles. Este translator. Vorbesc patru limbi străine: engleza, rusa, italiana și spaniola. Maria este căsătorită cu un american, și are doi fi. În timp liber, joacă tenis.' Below the editor is a 'Save corrections' button. To the right of the editor is a list of 'Error types' with color-coded boxes: error (general, not specified) - pink, klaida - yellow, verb form (veiksmažodžio formos) - orange, tense (laikas) - light blue, preposition (prielinksnis) - light green, wrong word (neteisingas žodis) - light purple, word missing (praileistas žodis) - light blue, spelling (rašyba) - light red, punctuation (skyryba) - light green, new paragraph (nauja pastraipa) - light blue, register (formal/informal) stilius (formalus/nefor) - light green, I don't understand (nesuprantu) - light purple, Expression (neteisingas pasakymas) - light red, sentence too long (per ilgas sakinys) - light blue, plural nouns (daugiaskaitiniai daiktavardžiai) - light green, word form (žodžių darybos klaida) - light red, clarify (patikslinti) - light blue, simplify (supaprastinti) - light green, expand (išplėsti) - light blue, Connectors (jungtukas) - light green, Lithuanian English (hibridas) - light green, Case (linksnis) - light blue, Gender (giminė) - light blue, Number (skaičius) - light green. A green arrow points from the 'Error types' list towards the text editor.

Figure 14. Error Types Romanian Tutor View.

The tutor selects a word and colour codes the error. He or she has the option of writing over the error, giving references, and correcting.

The correcting tool was adapted with a specific list of errors to each target language; it was necessary to develop the platform functions to the specific multilingual context of the project. Special keyboards were integrated to the writing activities for Turkish.

4.1. Feedback and pilots

At project outset an evaluation plan was in place. The internal project mechanism and plan for quality assurance and the integration of feedback can be exemplified as follows:

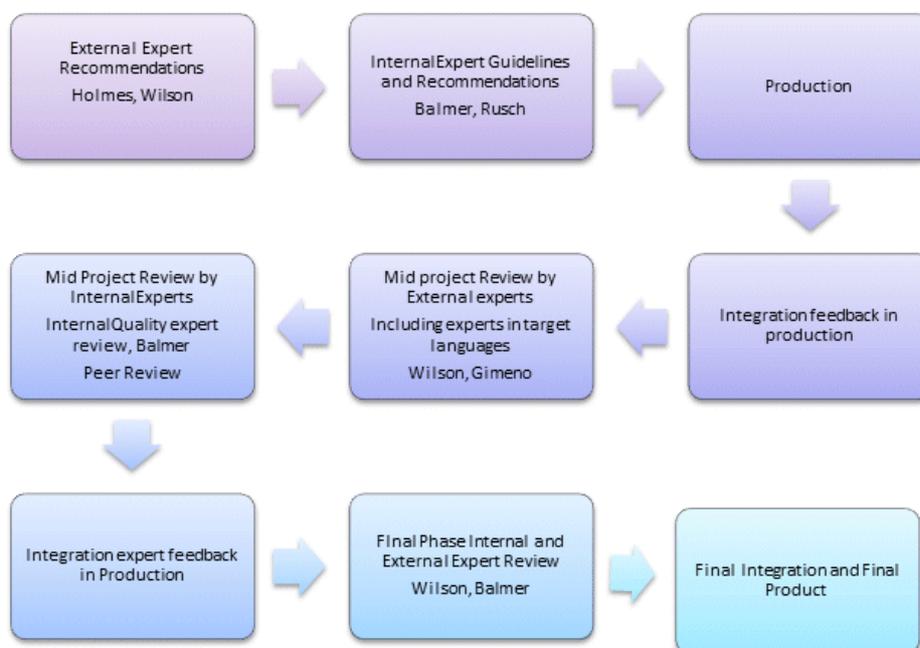


Figure 15. Integration of expert feedback: curriculum development, course design.

Apart from the mechanisms within the team, piloting with all platform and course 'users' was key in the project.

The limits of platform development were not linear or pre-defined prior to the project. Where possible it was the users who defined the possibilities of the platform. This meant that development was ongoing and slower. It also meant that the final product was more creative and a result of a team effort.

5. Dynamic process of integration of user feedback: VLE

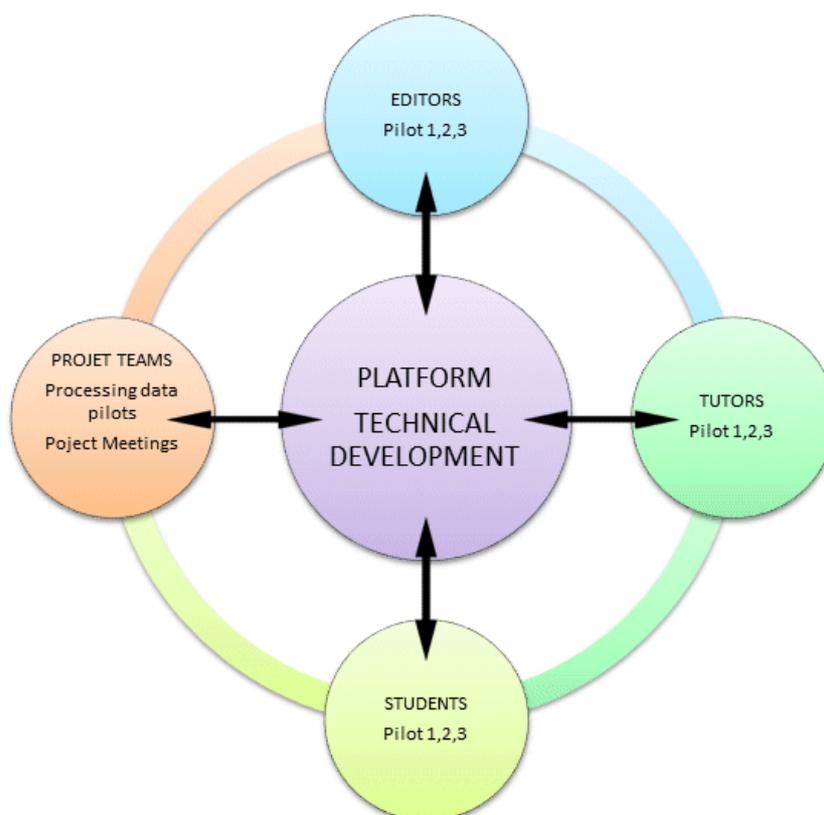


Figure 16. Integration of data derived from piloting.

Apart from the aforementioned feedback from the evaluators, teachers and learners supported the project with valuable comments and suggestions. The project collected data from each pilot and questionnaires for learners and teachers involved in each pilot were developed.

The purpose of the pilots was threefold: to inform platform design, to inform course design and to test the blended method. To that end, three pilots were carried out by each language team. Questionnaires giving both statistical and qualitative feedback were used. Data for pilots were processed by each language developer and presented at project meetings. In the final stages of the project the coordinating institution processed all the data from the pilots.

Feedback and the integration of feedback, not just of students but of all platform users were constant in and key to the project. These users included course designers, tutors, teachers and the partners themselves. The entire process informed the outcome of the project. Time was dedicated in every project meeting to the discussion of piloting and to the feedback obtained from the pilots.

The following graph shows the number of participants for each pilot:

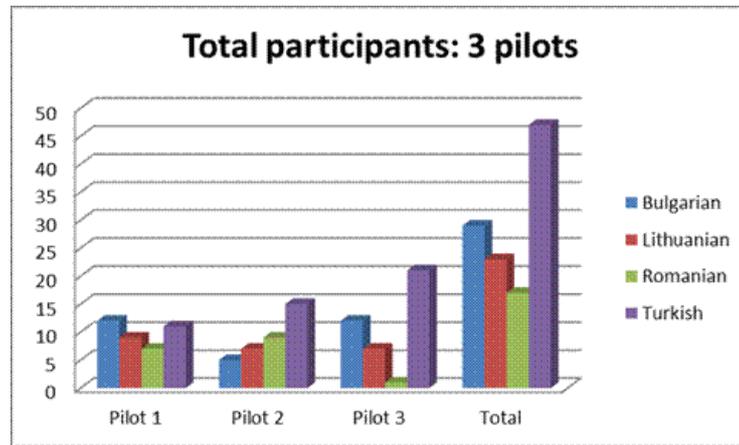


Figure 17. Number of participants in each pilot.

Pilots were evaluated using the web tool, Survey Monkey, examples of the results are shown in subsequent graphs.

The purpose was to get feedback to improve the design of the activities, to detect bugs in the system, to evaluate the course and comment on the effectiveness of blended learning. Findings were explored at the partner meetings.

	Pilot 1	Pilot 2	Pilot 3
Bulgarian	13	6	6
Romanian	6	6	4
Lithuanian	6	4	4
Turkish	35	1	11

Figure 18. Number of participants per pilot.

The third pilot and perhaps most successful pilot evidenced the progressively more positive feedback from all users of the platform. The earlier pilots were of great use to improve the material within the life of the project. The focus of the third and final pilot was to assess the blended methodology with particular to focus on the extent which learners and teachers felt autonomy had been promoted within the courses.

5.1. Pilot 3 (Learner's Feedback: Bulgarian, Romanian, Lithuanian and Turkish)

Feedback from learners' and teachers' questionnaires for the 3rd pilot was, in general, positive. 25 learners collaborated answering the questionnaire for the 3rd pilot. Though the sample is small, this does not mean it is not representative. For the following questions, 1 is low and 5 is high.

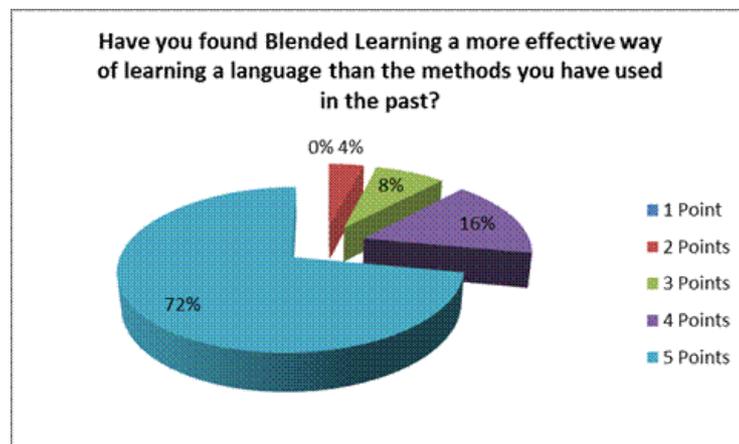


Figure 19. Question 1 Learner Feedback.

The majority found that Blended Learning was a more effective way to learn a language than those used in the past. However, there is a variation when we observe the Lithuanian Course where opinions were divided.

Response Percent

Points	Bulgarian	Romanian	Lithuanian	Turkish
1	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
2	0.00 %	0.00 %	25.00 %	0.00 %
3	16.67 %	0.00 %	25.00 %	0.00 %
4	16.67 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	9.09 %
5	66.67 %	75.00 %	25.00 %	90.91 %



Figure 20. Question 2 Learner Feedback.

Almost all the learners considered that Blended Learning was helpful to keep them interested and motivated.

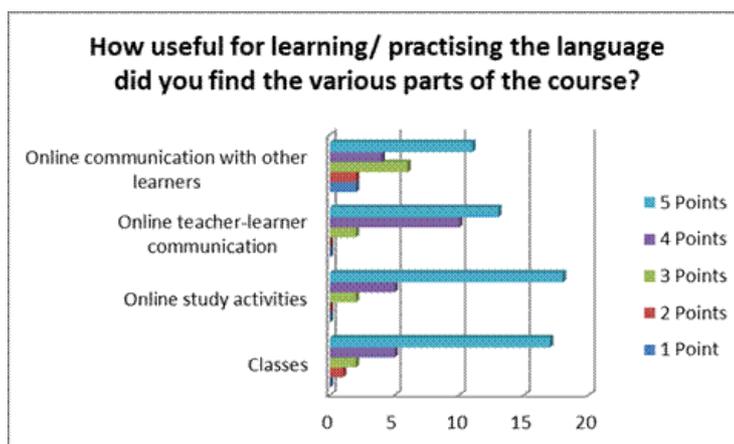


Figure 21. Question 3 Learner Feedback.

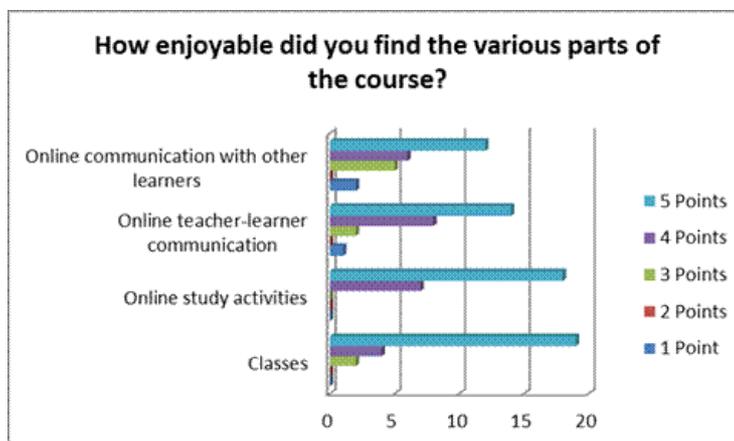


Figure 22. Question 4 Learner Feedback.

In general the responses are found in the higher values (4 and 5), especially in the Bulgarian and Turkish courses. In the Romanian and Lithuanian courses, the responses are favourable however they vary more.

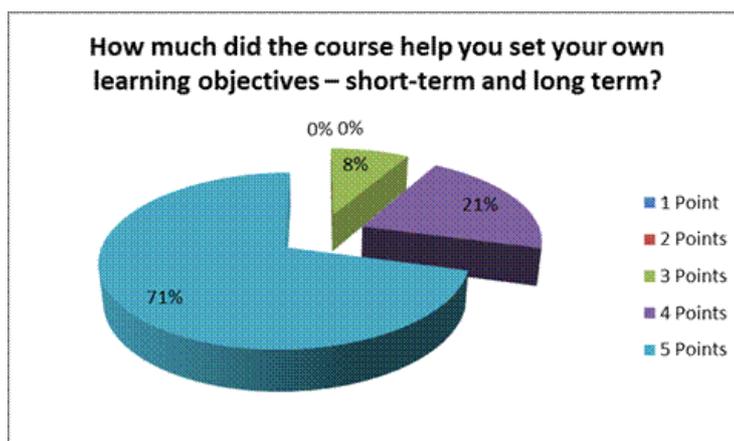


Figure 23. Question 5 Learner Feedback.

Response Percent				
Points	Bulgarian	Romanian	Lithuanian	Turkish
1	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
2	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
3	0.00 %	0.00 %	50.00 %	0.00 %
4	33.33 %	50.00 %	25.00 %	0.00 %
5	66.67 %	50.00 %	25.00 %	100.00 %

In every case the response tends to be positive.

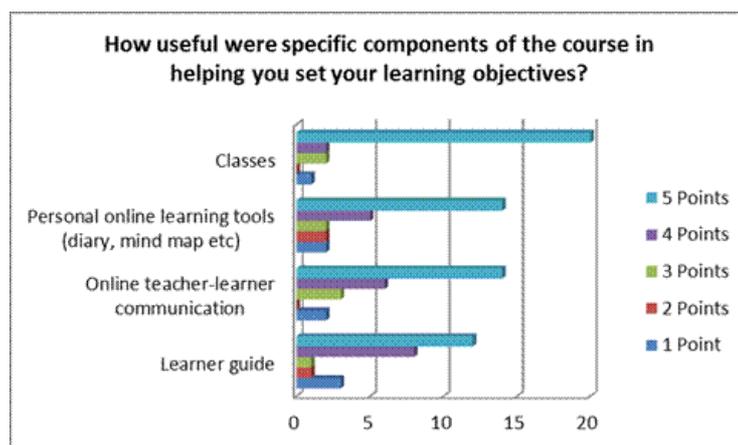


Figure 24. Question 6 Learner Feedback.

The value of the response about the classes should be noted.

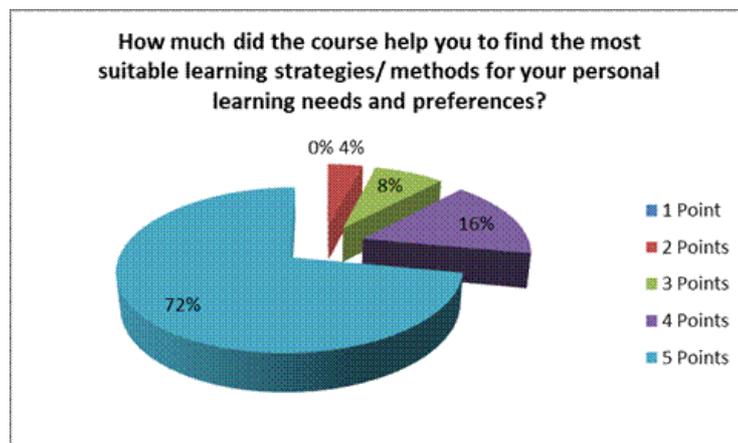


Figure 25. Question 7 Learner Feedback.

Response Percent				
Points	Bulgarian	Romanian	Lithuanian	Turkish
1	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
2	0.00 %	0.00 %	25.00 %	0.00 %
3	16.67 %	0.00 %	25.00 %	0.00 %
4	16.67 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	9.09 %
5	66.67 %	75.00 %	25.00 %	90.91 %

In all the samples the response was positive except in the case of the Lithuanian course where it was more varied.

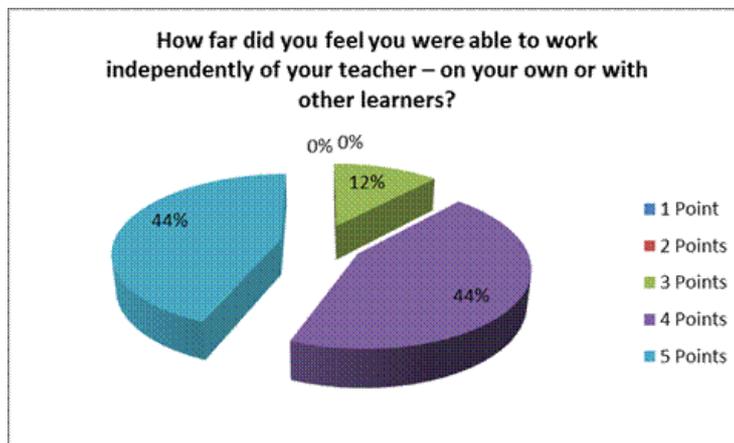


Figure 26. Question 8 Learner Feedback.

Response Percent

Points	Bulgarian	Romanian	Lithuanian	Turkish
1	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
2	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
3	0.00 %	0.00 %	75.00 %	0.00 %
4	66.67 %	75.00 %	25.00 %	27.27 %
5	33.33 %	25.00 %	0.00 %	72.73 %

In all the samples the response was positive except in the case of the Lithuanian course where it was slightly less favourable.

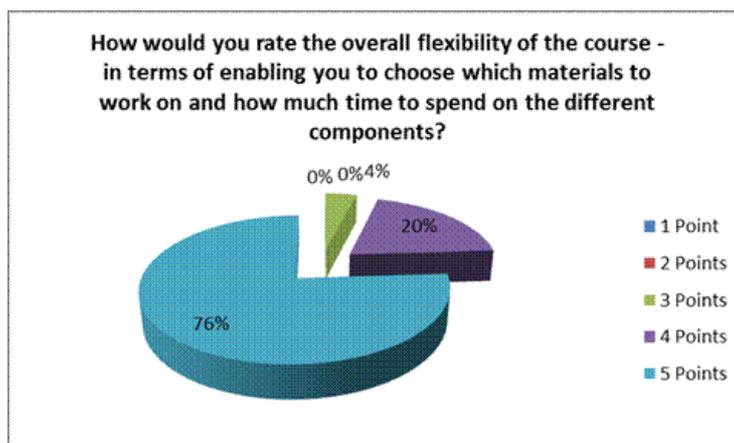


Figure 27. Question 9 Learner Feedback.

The flexibility is very well valued especially, in the case of the Bulgarians and the Turkish learners.

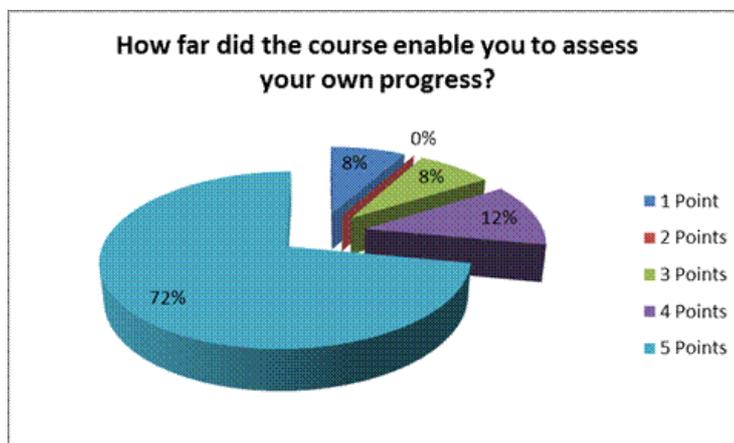


Figure 28. Question 10 Learner Feedback.

Response Percent

Points	Bulgarian	Romanian	Lithuanian	Turkish
1	8.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
2	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
3	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	8.00 %
4	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	12.00 %
5	92.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	80.00 %

1	0.00 %	0.00 %	50.00 %	0.00 %
2	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
3	0.00 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	0.00 %
4	16.67 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	0.00 %
5	83.33 %	50.00 %	0.00 %	100.00 %

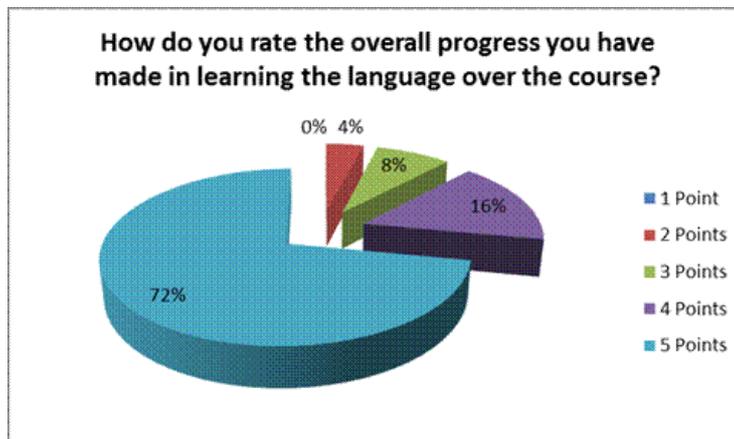


Figure 29. Question 11 Learner Feedback.

Response Percent

Points	Bulgarian	Romanian	Lithuanian	Turkish
1	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
2	0.00 %	0.00 %	25.00 %	0.00 %
3	0.00 %	0.00 %	50.00 %	0.00 %
4	33.33 %	50.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %
5	66.67 %	50.00 %	25.00 %	100.00 %

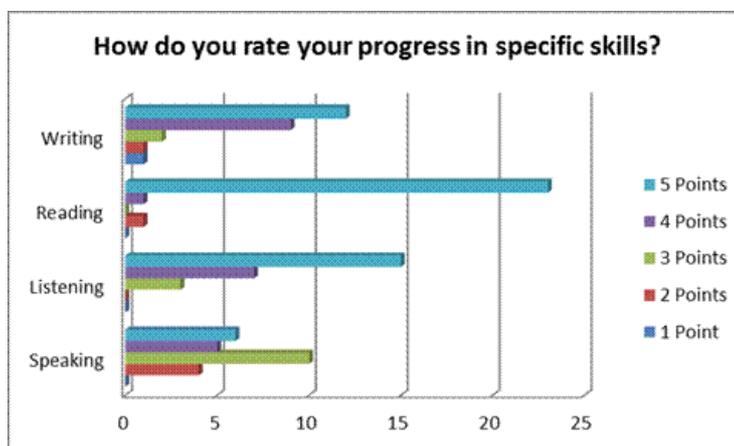


Figure 30. Question 12 Learner Feedback.

The graph above highlights that the students felt that the course improved their Reading skills especially while their progress in Speaking was not as marked.

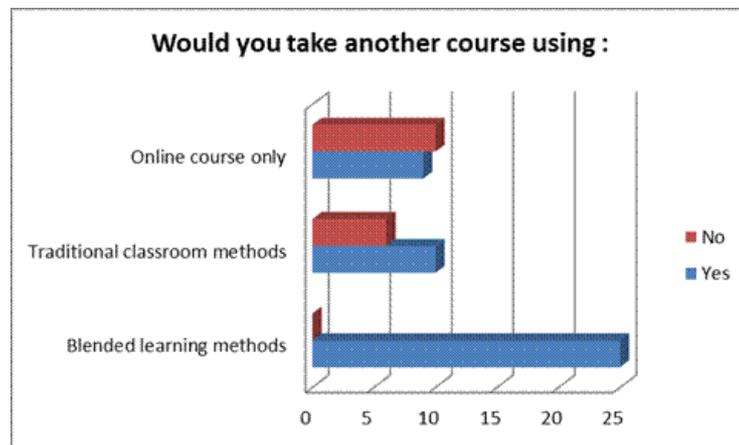


Figure 31. Question 13 Learner Feedback.

It is of interest to emphasize that all the learners would take another course using blended learning methods.

Even though the responses were, in general, positive, it is relevant to consider the variations in the Lithuanian students' answers. These differences could be due to, as Wilson mentions in his Final Report, the background of the students and their previous experience of using online tools. However it must be highlighted that even the Lithuanian students gave a favourable answer as to whether or not the blended learning method kept them more motivated in studying than other methods.

The first results of the 3rd pilot were analysed during the 7th meeting in Adana, Turkey.

5.2. Pilot 3 (Teacher's Feedback: Bulgarian, Romanian, Lithuanian and Turkish)

For the following questions, 1 is the lowest score and 5 is the highest, except when indicated.

Pilot 3 questionnaire was answered by 8 teachers:

Bulgarian	3
Romanian	1
Lithuanian	1
Turkish	3

Even though the sample of the teachers was smaller, the responses tend to be much more uniform than the learners' answers as we can see in the following graphs.

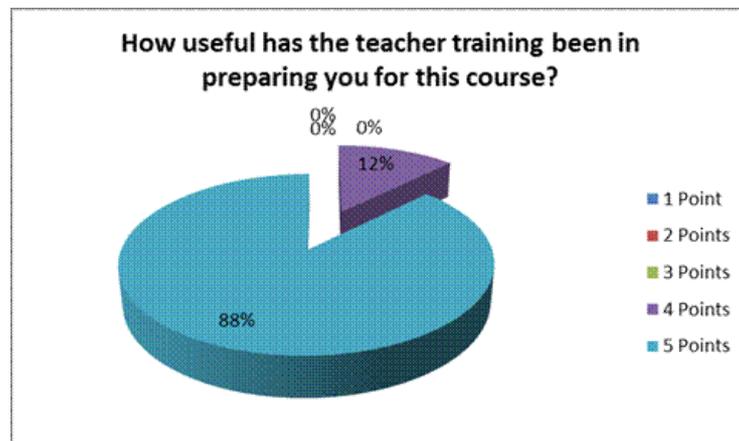


Figure 32. Question 1 Teacher Feedback.

The majority of the teachers gave the maximum mark when valuing the training done in preparing them for the courses. Partners ensured that teachers taking part in the pilots were familiar with the platform.

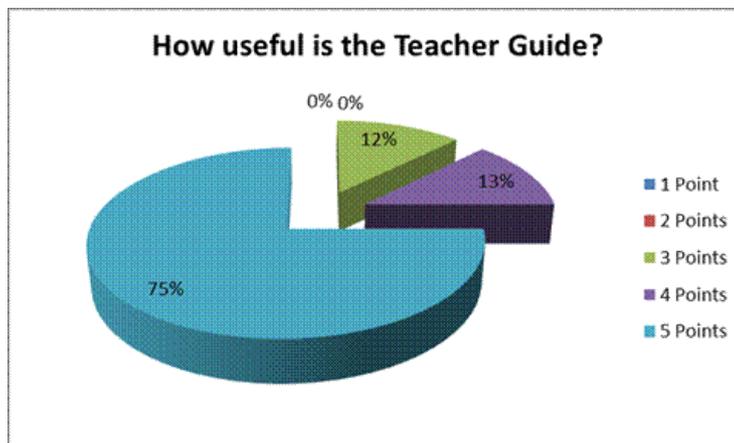


Figure 33. Question 2 Teacher Feedback.

The teacher’s guide was generally valued positively.

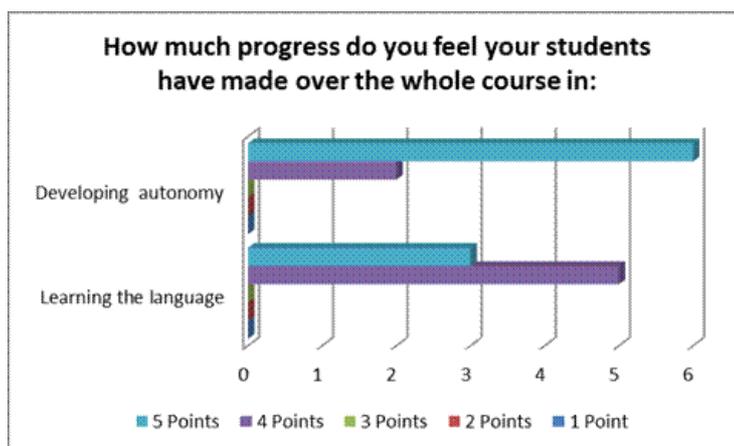


Figure 34. Question 3 Teacher Feedback.

Teachers rated the progress that learners had made with the highest values in the questionnaire.

Teachers were also asked if there were any components of the course that they would have liked more help on. Their answers are shown below:

Bulgarian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggestion: better and clearer instructions about the writing tasks • Listening in addition to writing tasks- some students may find it difficult to integrate the knowledge at the same time.
Lithuanian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed description on how to start a course in the Teacher Guide, how to correct essays.
Turkish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like to develop my own materials using the tools. I need help in this regard. • More parallelism with the in-class materials would be helpful.

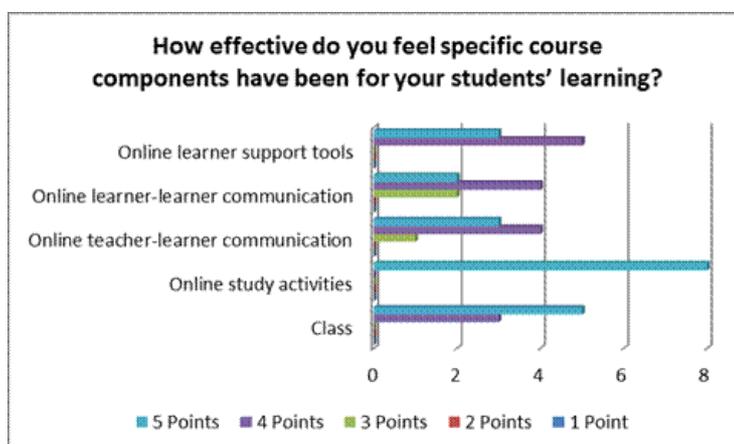


Figure 35. Question 4 Teacher Feedback.

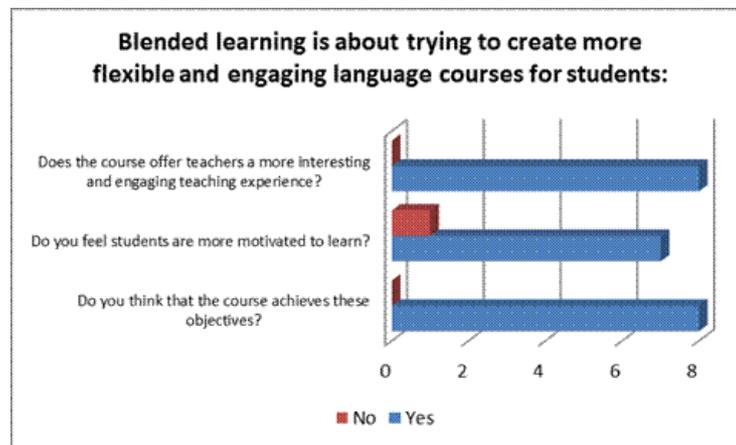


Figure 36. Question 5 Teacher Feedback.

All of the teachers were in agreement that the course offers a more interesting and engaging teaching experience and they considered that the course achieved the objectives related to flexibility and engaging languages courses for students.

When they were asked if they thought that the blended learning course motivated the students more, the vast majority agreed that it did.

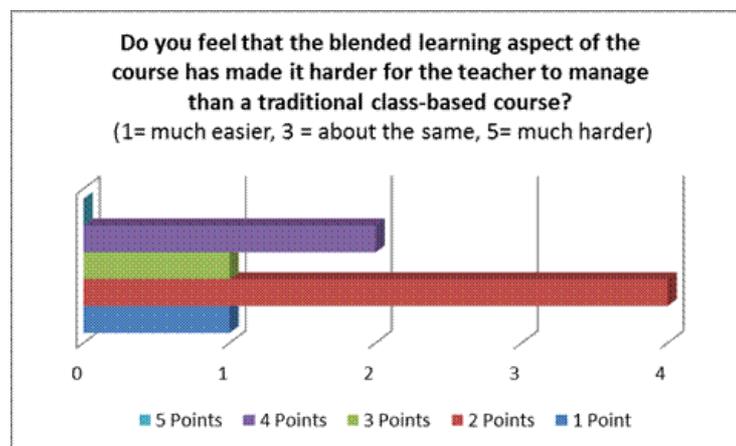


Figure 37. Question 6 Teacher Feedback.

These responses were more varied than in previous questions though the option "Easier" was chosen the most.

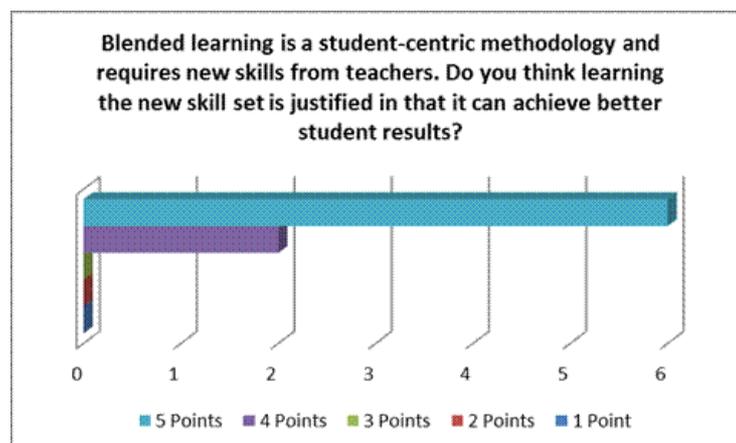


Figure 38. Question 7 Teacher Feedback.

The results from the teachers were very favourable in this respect.

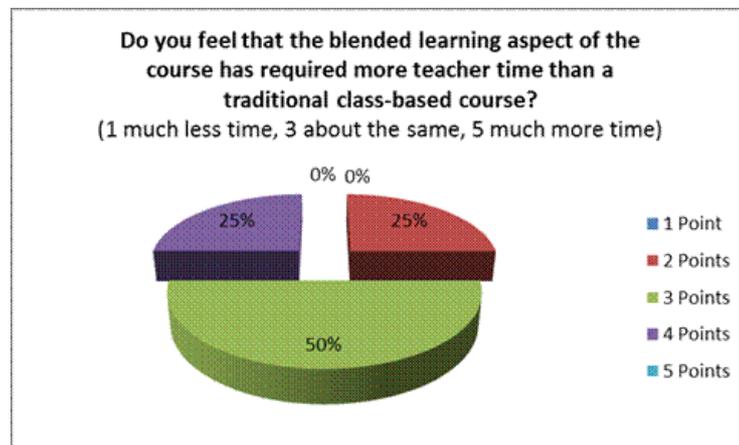


Figure 39. Question 8 Teacher Feedback.

50% of the sample considered that it required about the same time, while the rest of the responses were divided in the middle range. The reason they expressed that the blended learning aspect of the course required more teacher time than a traditional course was mainly due to the fact that they have never experienced teaching that type of course. This could mean that once the methodology had been learnt, subsequent courses would require less time.

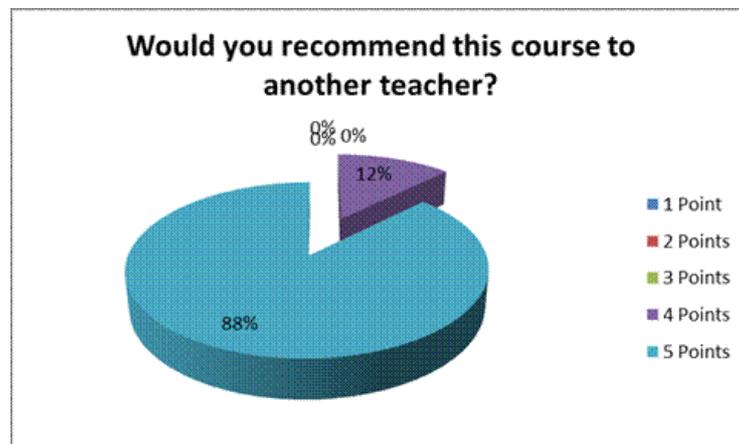


Figure 40. Question 9 Teacher Feedback.

The teachers commented that they would recommend the course due to the following characteristics: Flexibility, Efficiency, Interactivity, Development learner autonomy. Variety of exercises

Teachers were asked about other specific aspects of the course were they had doubts or suggestions to improve, examples of the comments are as follows:

They suggested more videos, pictures, additional listening and interactive exercises for speaking skills in order to motivate students.

When they were asked if they considered giving blended learning courses in the future, they unanimously responded in a positive manner, indicating that they would due to the flexibility of the course, the use of modern IT tools, the way it combines traditional classes with autonomous learning (balanced system) and the diversity of the tools that enhance learners' motivation. They considered the course easy to use, useful and that it saves a lot of time.

6. Blended State of the Art: Specific contemporary context of online material in the target languages

In 2010, as distinct from the outset of the project, we find courses and material available online in the target languages. However the courses digress fundamentally in their methodological basis from the ALL project. On the positive side, they are characterised by phrase books, grammar reference books, pronunciation rule books, self-correcting grammar and vocabulary exercises suitable for individuals, with random, limited or no online collaboration. In general, the courses do not specifically target communicative competency, no doubt because of the specific methodological tradition and context of the languages.

Materials currently available online for learning Turkish:

<http://www.onlineturkish.com>

This is a course aimed at individuals at beginner level, material is for self-access. There are self-correcting grammar and vocabulary exercises, grammar reference and vocabulary phrase books. However, the course is not a blended learning course, tutor and peer collaboration are absent. There are no online collaboration tasks or communication and no face to face sessions.

<http://babel.uoregon.edu/y/c/selfstudy/turkish/lessons/>

This is a course aimed individuals in four levels. This course focuses on receptive skills. It is a distance learning course, not blended and with access instructions in English. There is no tutor or peer communication or collaboration and no face to face sessions. Learner support is provided in the form of glossaries, grammar rules and links.

Review of Materials currently available online for learning Lithuanian:

<http://www.debeselis.net/lessons.php>

This material is aimed at beginners, access instructions are in English. There is online reference for grammar and vocabulary. It is aimed at individuals. Its syllabus is Structuralist and decontextualised. It is a distance learning course, not blended. There is an open forum with sections aimed at different languages: English, Spanish, Latvian. There is some online collaboration aimed at the

resolution of doubts and random topical commentaries. The course does not present communicative or situational challenges. Learner support is provided in the form of glossaries, grammar rules and links.

Review of Materials currently available online for learning Bulgarian:

<http://www.easybulgarian.com>

Offers dialogues, audio-input, phrases, self-correcting exercises and instruction and translation to English. This distance course is aimed at individuals. This course does focus on listening skills. The course is designed for individuals.

One-to-one tutoring may be purchased on SKYPE.

Multi-language Platforms:

<http://www.mylanguageexchange.com>

This is the site which we find closest methodologically to the ALL courses. It has access instructions in English. It provides learners with an opportunity to make contact with other learners and native speakers of the language. However, the material there available might be defined as a haphazard series of resources which might be suited to a learner. The activities proposed in the site take a communicative approach and make use of e-mail, text, and voice chats. It has low-level material. However, to participate in the speaking activities, it affirms that the learner needs to be at least intermediate level. At A2 level, the learner is encouraged to make use of the support material to write e-mails. The site rather provides learners with opportunities for practice and contact rather than providing them with systematic objectives that will take them comprehensively through a level. While vocabulary activities are available in all of the target languages these are not at any specific defined level. In the public site, lesson plans are available in many languages but not in the ALL project target languages.

To summarize, all of the above provide opportunities for learners to work on the languages by themselves. The ALL courses stand apart precisely because they are not pure distance; they are blended. Level and learning targets are defined and transparent in the courses. The ALL courses can be used by individuals but they are designed for groups and guide the learner towards collaboration within a group, on and off line. Self access is not equated with the development of autonomy in the courses. Expert guidance takes two forms in the ALL courses. Firstly, there is free-standing automatized feedback and guides typical of static multimedia courses (as in some of the other online material itemized above). The second type of feedback, is more specific to the ALL courses in the target languages, where there is dynamic feedback provided by an expert tutor, who gives guidance either online via message or in class, within a course, it is personalized feedback directed at a specific learner, in a particular group, on a particular course.

Other language platforms:

A site such as www.Babbel.com provides courses in seven languages, not target languages. Such a site might be what any language blended or pure online solution might aspire to. The company is well funded and this no doubt helps its attractive presentation. The public site indicates that is lexical and functional in focus and that it includes grammar activities. It integrates mobile learning and Web 2.0 technology making use of APPs and social network sites. Interestingly, there is a latter day trend away from free online material, to provide tutors and Skype sessions.

Rosettastone.com provides courses in one of the target languages. It provides attractive audio and visual material in CD format for Turkish and it is aimed at individual learners. It stresses meaningful context, as opposed to deductive input as the best basis for learning language. Feedback on this course is static.

In a similar vein, www.livemocha.com, provides a well organized network for learners to find people with common language interests. The site has millions of users. Tutoring and composition correction can be bartered from language to language using a points system. You may set up your own language exchange with your online pals on the site. The idea is attractive and effective if you wish to study one of the languages for which material is available. In terms of the target ALL languages, to date only Turkish courses are available, some precisely if not comprehensively at A2 . However, you may find people with whom to set up an exchange. As a weakness, we may note that the same material is available for every language, so the material will separate language from any culture specific reference.

By contrast, the ALL courses are replete with activities that are focus on aspects of culture of the target languages: music, food, poetry, places of interest in the target language, festivals, and famous people. With over one hundred and fifty activities in each course, it is difficult to do adequate justice to the volume of culture-based activities. On the theme of traditional food, to take just one example, we find examples of culture focused activities, used in different ways by the designers.

In the following example (see Figure 41), from the Turkish course, learners are invited to watch the video, learn the recipe, reorder the instructions and finally rewrite the recipe using some simple linking words.

Writing and Projects

Kısır yapalım / Let's make kısır



Bu alıřtırmada Tırkiye'de ok yaygın olarak yapılan bir yemek tarifini ğreneceksiniz. Bunu yaparken hem edilgen cümleleri alıřacaksınız hem de yazma becerinizi geliřtireceksiniz.

In this activity you will learn the recipe for a dish made in Turkey. While doing this, you will also study the passive sentences and improve your writing skill.

Instruction

Ařađıda Kısır'ın nasıl yapıldıđı anlatılmıř. Ama cümleler karıřık verilmiř. Cümleleri izlediđiniz videoya göre sıraya koyduktan sonra bađlađ kullanarak tanrı bir paragraf halinde anlatın.

Below is the recipe for Kısır. But the sentences are given in a wrong order. Watch the video and put the sentences in order. Then, rewrite the recipe in a paragraph using some linking words.

Figure 41. Example activity from the Turkish course.

The Lithuanian course writer asks students to read a traditional recipe and to decide whether statements are true or false afterwards (see Figure 42).

Instruction
Pažymėkite, kurie teiginiai teisingi, kurie neteisingi.

Read the text and tick the correct statements

Cepelinai
Lietuviai mėgsta skaniai pavalgyti. Jeigu dažnai verda cepelinus. Štai jų receptas.
Išsivirkite ir paragaukite.



Produktai:
1 kilogramas žalių bulvių
3 virtos bulvės
300 gramų maltos mėsos
1 šaukštas grietinės
2 kiaušiniai
druskos, maltų pipirų, krakmolo
Padažai: rūkyta šoninė, svogūnai, grietinė

Cepelinus reikia virti beveik valandą.
 true false

Druskos į cepelinus galima nedėti.
 true false

Cepelinams pagaminti reikia bulvių.
 true false

Pirmausia reikia parigaminti padažą.
 true false

Corrections

Figure 42. Example activity from the Lithuanian course.

The Romanian course writer invites students to do an activity similar to that of the Turkish course writer, listen, reorder and write.

RETETĂ DE SARMALE I. (Ingrediente) / A RECIPE FOR SARMALE (Ingredients)

You will listen to a recipe for Romanian „sarmale”, which are a bit similar to the Greek dolmades. In Romania these meat rolls can be wrapped in all kinds of leaves, but most often in cabbage and vine leaves.

Instruction
Ascultați prima parte a înregistrării și puneți ingredientele în ordinea în care le auziți.
While listening to Part 1, Ingredients, reorder the items mentioned as you hear them.

Audioplayer

Ingrediente 00:00

Download Audiofile



EuroEd

Figure 43. Example activity from the Romanian course.

The Bulgarian course writer, in an activity more similar to the Lithuanian course invites students to read and do a comprehension exercise on a traditional recipe.

Баница
Banitsa



Опитали ли вече баница? Хората я харесват, защото българските жени я приготвят с любов. След това упражнение ще можете не само да разбирате рецептата, но и също да правите сами този български специалитет.

Have you already tried “banitsa”? People like it because they it reminds of the spirit of Bulgarian women, preparing it with love. After this exercise you will be able not only to understand the recipe but also to prepare it.

Figure 44. Example activity from the Bulgarian course.

All of these activities are ideal preparation for an in-class cookery show, for an online vodcast or for students to create any collaborative project based on preparing, demonstrating or eating the dishes!

Leaving aside specific cultural references, all of the above sites offer material of interest and noteworthy of comment. However, in general terms we see that the ALL courses do something quite distinct and quite specific: they take students through a full A2 level, The ALL courses are specifically designed and set within the target language cultures, they make use of high quality tutoring, they are courses in the most traditional sense they have a beginning and an end within a predefined time scale and with a predefined group. They are not open-ended and the groups are not open to the planet, with people who drop in and out whenever they want. Having looked at examples of some material currently available online in target languages, we now turn our attention to the broader context of technological innovation in a global context.

Leaving aside the specific context of the target languages, how innovative are the methodology and the technology used in the ALL project?

7. Use of Video and Vodcasting

Upload of video files is possible on the ALL platform. The VLE in ALL is on par with current technological possibilities. Partners have made and uploaded video for the courses. Student videos on pilot courses have also been uploaded by tutors. Partners have also taken advantage of YouTube. Over the past five years, Web 2.0 has allowed for a democratization of content. The key implication of this is that course content is not the sole preserve of course writers. In the ALL VLE, upload to the courses is principally mediated by tutors and course writers. However any student video from a site such as Vimeo can be linked in directly to the course by students via message and forum. Collaborative project presentations form a set and standard task in every module. These project presentations could easily integrate periodic vodcasting.

The screenshot shows a web-based learning interface for a Turkish course. At the top, there are navigation elements including 'English', 'Log out', and course information: 'Türkçe A2 kursu Türkçe A2 Course', 'MODÜL 1 / MODULE 1', and 'ÜNİTE 2 Şehirler ve Yerler / Towns and Places'. Below this is a progress bar with numbered buttons from 1 to 14. The main content area is titled 'Mezuniyet Planları / Graduation Plans' and includes an 'Instruction' section with a video player. The video player is currently black with a play button. A green arrow points to the video player. To the right of the video player is a quiz with three questions in Turkish. Question 1 asks how Sezin feels about graduating. Question 2 asks where Sezin will go after graduation. Question 3 asks if Sezin knows Italian.

Figure 45. Partner produced video, Module 1, Unit 2, Turkish course.

8. Teacher Training in CALL

The ALL courses are for use both by students and tutors. While teacher training was not within the direct scope of the project, partners provided guides and training in the use of the platform to teachers involved in pilots. In her article on training teachers in CALL, Dooley (2009) makes valid observations and sensible, practical suggestions for both inexperienced and experienced teachers. On the issue of teacher skills and training in ITC, she states "...recent studies into teachers' use of new technologies show that, on the whole, teachers have only recently begun to integrate the use of ITC tools to their teaching practices, and in most cases their use of ICT does not include network-based collaborative projects or any real attempts to use Web 2.0 for learning purposes (BECTA 2008; Greenhow, 2007). Clearly, there appears to be a gap between teacher training that aims to provide "isolated coursework in CALL" and a focus on "the development of a sequence of situated technology experiences for teachers". The ALL courses bridge several gaps. The first is the gap between online exercises and network experiences, to which Dooley here specifically refers. Both are to be found in the ALL courses. Another gap for students and teachers alike is between digital material and printed material. That the media for the ALL blended sets is paper is deliberate. It is printed because paper is familiar and tangible but the information there correlates and links to the digital units.

Meanwhile the online units are bridging another gap. The online units help tutors and students make the transition from teacher to student-centred learning and from in-class collaboration to online collaboration. While there appears to be consensus that collaboration online is a great advantage and principle benefit of the potential for ITC in teaching, Stickler *et al* make a key point with respect to teacher training: "Collaborative learning has thus come to be part of the new literacies (Richardson 2006) that learners as well as teachers require to engage successfully in today's educational contexts. Critical factors for teachers include fostering learners' collaborative skills, especially at sociocognitive level; prompting students' critical thinking (Engstromm and Jewett 2005: 14-15); and knowing when and how to intervene (Mangenot & Nissen 2006: 616). Yet teachers often do not possess these skills to support collaborative learning (Mangenot & Nissen 2006), and although training has been shown to be of paramount importance (Hampel 2009), it is still rare to find comprehensive training programmes." Thus the course design itself attempts to integrate collaboration. As has been demonstrated, the ALL language courses lead the learners to messages, links, forums but also to books and class. So that it is accessible and plausible, in the ALL courses, tradition meets innovation half way.

9. Sound files, Podcasting and Mobile Devices

The ALL VLE permits upload of mp3 sound files. As in the case of videos and vodcasting, we can comment that course content is principally uploaded by course designers. In the absence of material for A2 level, partners created their own sound files and uploaded them in the units. Podcasts, however, are a step beyond a sound file; they are released episodically and often downloaded through web syndication. They are the ideal vehicle for student-produced sound files or student-selected sound files. In their article on MALL Technology, the authors distinguish between podcasts that are supplementary to courses and those that are integrated to the course curriculum and requisites, recommending integrated podcasting. The ALL platform allows for the upload of sound files syndication and syndication to podcasting, a feature which course designers made use of. As above, collaborative project presentations form a set and standard task in every module. These project presentations could easily integrate periodic podcasting.

10. Mobile blogs in language learning

With respect to the accessibility of mobile devices Abdous *et al* (2009). are refreshing: "Although technology is now relatively inexpensive, students living on limited budgets may not be able to afford to purchase an IPOD or MP3 player in order to access podcasts developed for their courses." They take into account the financial reality, context and mentality of the target students of their study. From analysis of data obtained from 113 students enrolled in language courses, they comment that "it appears that some students prefer to use a device which they already own (ie; a personal computer) to download media, such as podcasts, rather than to purchase another device for use as a study tool." In terms of the relevance of material developed for the ALL project, such considerations are important. Innovation that ignores the price of the media it is using in terms of average salary, or that is not measured against such a factor will ultimately be irrelevant to the target users. Ultimately, as Abdous concludes, mobile devices will become cost and time effective for learners. In 2009, the authors conclude with respect to MALL: "These technologies will eventually be incorporated into classes in all academic departments at colleges and universities." The ALL project, as proposed in 2006 principally situates its course design on PC. However, the VLE allows students to download any sound file they wish to a mobile via USB or Bluetooth.

Comas-Quinn (2009) *et al.* present a little gem of a project, which is eminently practical and inspiring for language learning, teaching and course design. Students of Spanish take a trip to Santiago. While there they participate in the Santiago Blog. "Encouraging the learning process to take place in an informal setting (the town itself, where the foreign culture could be experienced without tutor mediation) is another one of our aims. We invite students to be alert to what is happening around them, ready to identify the

images, sounds or situations that they found interesting, puzzling, amusing or 'shocking', and that they deem worth recording. Mobile devices then provide the means to capture those cultural experiences "on the spot", as and when they happen." These are later uploaded to a blog and commented upon. Their first pilot combines distance learning, blogs, online communication, cultural immersion. Interestingly the Open University UK that carried out the project is about to adopt a blended tuition model using some of the technologies in the project described.

In their conclusion the authors allude to a problematic inherent in blended learning, using new technologies as they exist in 2010, "We believe that there is an unresolved tension between our desire to involve our learners more actively and centrally in the new learning environment, and their need for reassurance, guidance and direction to allay their anxieties." This observation is also pertinent to the ALL project. Course design that promotes autonomy does not mean everything is up to the learner, it starts from wherever learners may be and brings them to a point where they are comfortable collaborating and constructing their own knowledge. Independent learning does not mean dispensing with the tutor. In 2010 it means that tutors operate in a blended context, not only face to face, just as the course and platform design sets them up to do in the ALL project.

11. Blogs

In her excellent article, Dippold (2009) discusses the dialectic concerning the use of blogs for language learning. When used for 'peer review' she warns of the danger that the use of blogs turns into an essentially critical, traditional, error-focused and tutor controlled vision of language learning. She suggests that they are better employed in a mode closer to their genre, as student-centred, online diaries for the purposes of peer collaboration, problem solving and production. As is common with respect to the use of almost any new learning technology Dippold concludes that "more intensive training for both tutors and students is necessary to enable both sides to exploit the medium to its fullest potential. Moreover, both students and tutors need to be ready to abandon traditional roles and writing models in order to be able to fully engage with the medium."

Although partners trained piloting teachers in the use of the platform and its possibilities, it was outside the scope and time frame of the project for them to dedicate time to training tutors in the specific use of blogs. The ALL VLE does provide a space in which students can freely express and directly publish their opinions. However, within the environment, student generated themes need to be uploaded via the tutor. If learners wish to move outside the ALL VLE, to a free online facility such as Wordpress, it is easy to involve other group members via a link in the ALL platform. The value of maintaining a blog within the learning environment, means that group integrity and privacy are preserved. This may also be achieved relatively easily using the free Web 2.0 software but it does presuppose a degree of technical and administrative know-how, or time spent gaining it. In the ALL platform this responsibility is taken away from the learners, and even from the tutors, making use very simple.

12. Conferencing

In an academic context for trilingual students using language at what appears C2 level rather disparate to A2 second-language level, Kosunen (2009) analyzes participation in an online conference and its implications for university course design. Her final conclusions, however, may have some parallels with and implications for the ALL project experience. As she draws her conclusion she comments "In terms of the traditional dichotomy of speech and writing, which characterizes speech as active, dynamic, concrete, spontaneous, narrative, social and dialogic and writing as reflective, synoptic, abstract, scientific, paradigmatic, individual and monologic (WELLS, 1999: 146) participants in computer conferences would in my line of reasoning, seem to include towards a speech-like mode of discourse. The challenge for the educator, in this respect, would be to find a proper task for asynchronous computer conferencing in the overall course design." In the ALL VLE, designers have recognised that conferencing is by function, a task that is closer to speaking than to writing. This is why the platform includes voice recording with forum tasks. Furthermore, ALL course designers use forums to request students to express opinions, not to summarize or to clarify, as is recommended by Kosunen.

All forum activities allow students to record their voices. Course designers chose to use forum activities because they were an excellent way to promote online communication, while giving the students practice in integrated skills. 22 forums are available in the ALL language courses, an option used more by some language developers than others. Two examples of online communication tasks using the voice recording feature follow:

The screenshot shows a forum page for 'Limba română nivel A2' with the title 'UNDE MÂNCĂM / WHERE TO EAT'. The forum content includes an instruction in Romanian and English: 'Doriti să aflați mai multe despre preferințele culinare ale colegilor. Acest site vă poate ajuta cu sugestii pentru locuri în care ați putea servi masa de prânz sau cina. Sunt atât restaurante cu specific românesc cât și de alt specific. You want to find out more about your colleagues' culinary preferences. This site could help you with suggestions of places where you can have lunch or dinner. There are restaurants with typical Romanian food and other types of restaurants. http://www.lasasi.ro/despreias/undemancam1.htm'. Below the text is a microphone recording interface with a '00:00' timer, 'Microphone level' and 'Microphone volume' indicators, and a 'Save audio' button. A green arrow points to the 'Save audio' button. At the bottom, there is a text area for 'Write your commentary here' and a 'Send commentary' button.

Figure 46. Sample voice recording activity.

13. Conclusion

The context and resources of less widely used and taught languages place already endangered languages at a disadvantage in terms of innovation. Therein lies part of the value of the ALL project. It situates Lithuanian, Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish at the edge of developments in language learning methodology and technology. The project takes its own route, while many interesting developments are taking place in the world of online language learning, the ALL project takes an eclectic approach to them. All that is new is not necessarily all that is better. For example, online collaboration is positively embraced by the project designers.

However, in the ALL project, that collaboration is guided and set within the context of a course; it is not totally free and up to the student. Students may pick and choose from a series of proposed activities, but by doing the totality of the activities on the course, students will be taken through not just random aspects of the language, but a full level of the language. The freedoms inherent in Web 2.0 at face value may render tutor guidance regressive or outmodish. However, the project team would contend that it is at the very least a quality, if not a necessary, aspect of the learning in the ALL courses. Learning will take place without a tutor, just as learning takes place without a course. However both courses and tutors foster autonomous learning in the ALL project. For further information about the ALL project, visit www.allproject.info.

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Article:

Intercultural Learning in Asynchronous Telecollaborative Exchanges: A Case Study

Abstract

Recent studies have shown the potential that telecollaborative exchanges entail for the development of intercultural competence in participants (Warschauer & Kern 2000; O'Dowd 2003; Liaw 2006; Ware, 2005; Belz 2003; 2007). However, trying to assess the development of such a competence is a highly complex process, especially of those components that go beyond knowledge such as attitudes. In this article I present the findings of an online intercultural exchange carried out between university language students (Spanish-English) during the academic year 2006-2007. Students collaborated electronically outside the classroom via email and wikis and data was gathered from a series of instruments, including email and wiki content, language learning diaries, critical incidents, essays and self-evaluation questionnaires. On the basis of Byram's (1997; 2000) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) we attempted to assess qualitatively the development of the different components of ICC in telecollaborative intercultural exchanges. Our findings suggest that the instruments mentioned can help us to trace the development of intercultural competence with regard to a) interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others and c) knowledge about one's own and others' culture for intercultural communication (Byram 2000:4). However, we found little evidence of b) ability to change perspective and, therefore, further research needs to be carried out on how best to encourage students to decentre and to exhibit 'a willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging' (Byram 1997:34).

Keywords: Telecollaboration, asynchronous learning environments, intercultural communicative competence, online exchanges, wiki-spaces

1. Introduction

The importance of intercultural competence as a learning objective in the foreign language classroom has featured prominently since the 1990's. Byram (1997:3) suggests that the success of communication does not depend only on the efficiency of an information exchange but rather on establishing and maintaining relationships. For this reason, intercultural competence or "the ability to understand and relate to people from other countries" (Byram 1997:5) has become an increasingly important objective in foreign language teaching. Given the difficulty of achieving this goal within a traditional classroom set-up, the advent of the Internet has provided us with highly efficient tools (e.g. email, chat, blogs, wikis, forums, etc) which may facilitate the development of such a competence in virtual environments. Therefore, it has become necessary to find ways of implementing distance intercultural exchanges whose main purpose is to engage students who are linguistically and culturally different in social interaction and telecollaboration outside the classroom. By telecollaboration we mean online interaction between language learners and native speakers who engage in collaborative project work, debate and intercultural exchange with a view to learning each other's language and aspects of their culture. Over the years, many researchers have explored how different types of online projects may contribute to the development of intercultural competence in participants (Warschauer & Kern 2000; Reeder et al. 2004; Levy 2007; Vinagre 2008). However, the assessment of intercultural competence is complex and research on this matter is still scarce. In this respect, our aim in this article is to describe aspects of the development of intercultural competence in a telecollaborative exchange between university language students (Spanish-English) during the academic year 2006-2007. The main objectives of this project were to encourage students to learn each other's language and to compare and contrast two different cultures and two different ways of life as a basis towards understanding each other's 'languaculture'. We adopted Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) for the assessment of intercultural competence in telecollaborative projects due to its wide acceptance by language teachers and researchers as a representative guideline (Belz 2003; O'Dowd 2003; Liaw 2006; Vogt 2006). Byram proposes

a model of ICC which consists of five interdependent principles or *savoirs* : a) attitudes, b) knowledge, c) skills of discovery and interaction and d) skills of interpreting and relating. The interplay of these four principles should lead to the fifth, namely critical cultural awareness. This final component underlies all the others, since it focuses on comparison and evaluation, key abilities for any learner who is to become a truly intercultural communicator. In addition to this model, Byram (2000:4) offers some guidelines for the assessment of the intercultural experience. These will be presented briefly in Section 4 below.

2. Institutional context: setting up the exchange

We set up an exchange programme between eleven second-year students of applied languages at Nebrija University in Madrid and eleven second-year students of applied languages at Dublin City University during the academic year 2006-07. The academic profile of the learners from both universities was similar. Most of the students were between nineteen and twenty-one years of age, except for two students who were a few years older. Students at both universities were specialist learners of English and Spanish respectively, and their level of proficiency in the foreign language was between higher intermediate and advanced. Students worked collaboratively in an e-tandem learning exchange by email during the first semester and had to carry out two tasks in a wiki-space in the second. The online exchange and all the work (1) related to it were to be carried out outside the classroom and were worth 20% of the students' final grade in their English and Spanish subjects.

The first step was to assign each of the students a partner, which we did on the basis of the students' similarities in terms of their level of proficiency in the target language. Once paired, students had to exchange a minimum of two emails a week (2) which were to be written half in English and half in Spanish and discuss a series of topics such as personal information (age, family, pets, hobbies, free time, studies, work, the place where they live, the place where they are from, friends, etc.), customs and traditions, music, cinema and television programmes, the educational system, the use of idioms and colloquial expressions, stereotypes, food, festivals, sports, history and politics, etc. Students were encouraged to offer feedback to each other and were given specific guidelines with regard to error correction. In the second semester, the students were required to carry out two tasks in a wiki-space specially designed for the project (see content pages at <http://nebrija-dcu.wikispaces.com>). Each dyad had their own wiki-page in which they were to exchange information, discuss and prepare a topic for an end-of-term oral presentation based on one of the topics discussed with the partner via email and write a 250-word essay in their target language discussing some 'rich points' in both cultures. Rich points "are pieces of discourse that indicate that two *languacultures* or conceptual systems have come into contact" (Belz, 2007). Examples of rich points are bullfighting or fox hunting, understood by some as shows of bravery and courage, whilst others consider them to be cruel sports. Following Neuner (2003), we decided on an intercultural approach to foreign language teaching that focuses on the discussion of cross-cultural experiences, the discussion of stereotypes and negotiation of meaning.

3. Methodology

Data collection involved qualitative data gathered from a series of instruments, which included emails, wiki-space content, critical incidents that occurred during interaction, essays, language learning diaries and self-evaluation questionnaires. Data analysis was carried out by the author and a research student and discussions were held between the two raters until complete agreements were reached on the categorization of samples. The categories used for this study were those of Byram (2000: 4) (3) and these criteria and their descriptions are given below:

a) Interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others

- I am interested in other people's experience of daily life, particularly those things not usually presented to outsiders through the media.
- I am also interested in the daily experience of a variety of social groups within a society and not only the dominant culture.

b) Ability to change perspective

- I have realised that I can understand other cultures by seeing things from a different point of view and by looking at my culture from their perspective.

c) Knowledge about one's own and others' culture for intercultural communication;

- I know some important facts about living in the other culture and about the country, state and people.
- I know how to engage in conversation with people of the other culture and maintain a conversation.

d) Knowledge about intercultural communication processes

- I know how to resolve misunderstandings which arise from people's lack of awareness of the view point of another culture.
- I know how to discover new information and new aspects of the other culture for myself.

4. Results and discussion

The data analysed revealed examples that fall within the four categories mentioned above. We provide examples (4) of this categorisation below and the data analysis results can be seen in Table 1:

a) *Interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others*

"It is interesting to learn about the language that people really use because it is different to that I have read in my books. I know that there are many different expressions in English used in DIFFERENT parts of the country. One example in Massachusetts is that everyone says "wicked" in order to say "very very", whilst in California they say "hella"; in New Jersey we say "mad", but personally I say "crazy" in order to express this idea".

"Maybe we have something in common. I'm referring to that fact that the Irish were conquered by the English and you were conquered by the Moors, isn't that so? [...] How has the invasion of the 'Moros' influenced life on your people? Have you adopted any of their customs? Have you ever studied Arabic at school or visited your neighbouring country? Are you interested in their music? Do you appreciate their humour?"

b) *Ability to change perspective (decentring)*

"I've discovered that there are some preconceived ideas about the Irish that aren't true; although my partner does acknowledge that many Irish people drink, she actually doesn't"

"I've realised that the Irish are not English; before I thought both cultures were similar but now I've realised there are important differences between them"

"During this semester and the wiki I also found interesting to discover that although many of us have travelled and lived in other countries we still believe many stereotypes and make all kind of generalisations about other countries and cultures [...] To conclude I think I learned a lot and that if you have an open mind and are hungry for "knowledge" you'll always learn something new and interesting"

c) *Knowledge about one's own and others' culture for intercultural communication*

"Spain and Ireland are both Catholic countries. The people in the six counties in the north (of Ireland) don't want to be called Irish. It is the same with the Catalans, isn't it? Most people in Northern Ireland want to be independent from the rest of the country. This was caused by an important event in the history of this country. [...]"

"Besides learning a new language you learn a new culture. Not only can you speak the second language but you also start to take on their customs ... like myself, for example, at three o'clock everyday I have a siesta ;)"

d) *Knowledge about intercultural communication processes*

"What do you think about these preconceived ideas? You can say what you think about Spain, I am not going to get mad or anything like that...[...] if you want you don't have to talk about your country (5) you can talk about Ireland, but I will prefer if you talk about yours because I could learn lots from your point of view..."

"[...] What is your impression of bullfighting-is it not such a cruel art?"

"[...] I can understand that you don't get the meaning of bullfighting. I'm Spanish and I can't see the point of it either. I don't understand how killing an animal can be fun, but it doesn't mean that to many people; it's something more intense, a tradition they have seen since they were children and it constitutes an intense experience for them. I hope that these comments are helpful to you, but, as I mentioned before, not all Spaniards, myself included, like bullfighting".

Category	Total number of examples	Percentage of total
a)	216	64%
b)	38	11%
c)	86	25%

Table 1. Results of categorisation of examples.

Category a) Interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others

Most of the examples found (216) belong to category a) 'interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others'. This interest can be inferred from the detailed questions that the partners posed to each other. We are referring here to questions that went beyond enquiring superficially about aspects such as their studies or hobbies. The high presence of instances in this category (more than half of all instances found) may be due to the fact that students were required to discuss a series of topics related to their culture, topics they were then asked to contrast and compare. In order to do so, they had to look for information (in documents, books, on the Internet) and exchange information with their partners. This process could explain the abundance of questions about the other's country and culture after a specific culture-related topic had been introduced. Most questions were duly answered and follow-up questions developing from a conversation were also indicative of a real interest in the partner's culture:

In response to your questions regarding whether or not I knew about the Spanish Armada, I do. It sank off the west coast of Ireland if I am not mistaken, in Sligo. [...] As to whether or not people in the area look Spanish, it's doubtful! They are typically pale skin, blue eyes and 'Irish' looking as I like to call them with strong western accents. You might find it difficult to understand them. Where in Spain is it easiest to understand the natives, not only because of their accents but due to dialogue and the way they use words?

Another linguistic aspect that showed this willingness to discover different perspectives of their partner's culture was the presence of questions such as "can you tell me what Spanish people are like, what is true in what people say and what is not?" and "what do you think about these preconceived ideas?". In addition, remarks such as "I am very interested in exchange opinions with you", "Quisiera saber mucho tus ideas" [I would very much like to hear your ideas] and "I'd like to know your opinion" also helped to encourage a response from the partner regarding their own or their partner's culture. Finally, students used terms such as 'curious' (5 times), 'curiosity' (2), 'curiosas' (1), and expressions such as 'me intriga' [I'm intrigued, 1] which reflect attitudes of "curiosity and openness", preconditions for the success of intercultural communication and a clear manifestation of intercultural learning.

Category c) Knowledge about one's own culture and others' culture for intercultural communication

The second biggest category was c) 'knowledge about one's own culture and others' culture for intercultural communication' (86 instances). Within this category we need to distinguish between the two types of knowledge, declarative and procedural, as mentioned above. Declarative knowledge, which is factual, refers to information about the other's country, state and people, whereas procedural knowledge refers to information about the process of interaction, that is to say, how to engage in conversation with people from other cultures.

There were many examples of declarative knowledge. Many students had visited their partner's country before the exchange started and some had spent time in the foreign country either on holiday or as part of their study programmes. Students also looked for information in books and on the Internet when they had to discuss certain topics (such as history and politics) and they felt they did not know much about these matters in either their own or their partner's country. This was important since students were asked to contrast and compare the way things were done in the two cultures. This type of factual juxtaposition and the learning that may derive from it requires extensive declarative knowledge of one's own culture as well as that of the other. In this respect, students were willing to learn about their own culture in order to provide their partner with information, as well as showing their partner how much they knew about the foreign culture. In one particular case, the student was happy to show how similar to the Spanish he was:

I love Spanish sports and music (ranging from Lolita to Alejandro Fernandez). I have lived in the Canary Islands, in Barcelona, Gerona [...] There are many things I like about Spain; for instance, the pace of life, the language, its extroverted people and the atmosphere in the bars ;) In addition to learning a language, you learn a culture [...] I think that you begin to get more involved in their habits, public holidays and customs. You start to notice when it's el dia de San Juan for example and things like that, no?

In this excerpt, the student expresses not only his knowledge of Spanish music and way of life in general, but having lived in various Spanish cities (two of them in Catalonia) he could actually write some words in Catalan (Barça -Barcelona's football team- and Girona -Catalan for Gerona, a city in Catalonia) and remember some feast days (el dia de San Juan).

Critical incidents

As regards procedural knowledge, we found that some instances in which the students showed their capacity to engage people in conversation were also connected to their knowledge about the intercultural communication process (i.e. how to resolve

misunderstandings in social interaction, category (d) above). This became evident when analysing the only critical incident we found which occurred during interaction. According to Cushner and Brislin (1996), a critical incident involves a situation concerning cross-cultural misunderstanding. These incidents are particularly interesting in telecollaborative exchanges, since telecollaboration relies heavily on the social interaction that takes place among participants and misunderstandings may pose a threat to the success of such interaction. Below, we present an excerpt of a communicative exchange between two students in which a critical incident could have undermined their exchange completely had they not managed to become friendly throughout the exchange:

[Student 1]

The other day I asked a classmate if she could tell me something about the Irish. She said that you drink a lot, don't shower very often, rarely clean your houses and that Irish girls are very forward with boys. I don't know if this is true but I hope you don't get offended by it.

[Student 2]

Regarding what you heard from your friend about the Irish, of course it's not true, and your friend sounds a bit ignorant to be honest. Of course something like that would be offensive, it was just a list of insulting things. It is true that the Irish drink a lot, but of course we bathe regularly and clean our houses. I hope you can see the absurdity of your question. Also, you said "Creo que en Irlanda como en otros sitios de Inglaterra...". Just as a cultural note, never call the Irish English. England had oppressed the Irish for 800 years, and many Irish would take that as the biggest offence of all. I understand if you didn't know, which is why I have explained these things.

[Student 1]

I'm sorry much from the other day, what I said about Irish. I didn't think that I upset you. I asked my classmate because I wanted to know something about you, but I see that it wasn't a good idea. But I said you that you will tell me things about Irish and for this reason I asked. Excuse me.

[Student 2]

One thing that your classmate said and it's true is that Irish people drink a lot in general. However, as in many other places in the world, if you drink in moderation it's not a problem. I don't know if they drink much more than people in other countries. My friends and I drink at home before we go to the disco, but I don't like discos much. I rather have a good conversation over a nice drink-in English we say "over a nice quiet pint" [...]

There were a few mistakes in the email you sent me. You wrote "I'm sorry much from the other day", but you should say "I'm very sorry for the other day".(By the way, don't worry about it. It was just a misunderstanding I suppose. But negative things are hard not to be taken in a bad way, so I just wanted to make you aware that the things your classmate said were not true at all. Will we put it behind us?)

The highly offensive remark made by the Spanish student could have jeopardised this dyad's exchange, since the Irish student could have reacted by being offended and ending the interaction. However, the situation did not escalate because the Irish student realised there was no malice, only ignorance, in the Spaniard's comments, and that she was deeply sorry for them. In their communicative exchange, we can see that they had established a strong bond and it is likely that their previously good relationship was the reason why the offended party, after clarifying the situation, was willing to "put it [the misunderstanding] behind them" and forget about the whole incident.

Category b) ability to change perspective

Category b) 'ability to change perspective' recorded the lowest number of instances (38). A plausible explanation for this is that students were interested in providing information about their own culture and learning from the partner's culture, but this exchange of information did not necessarily involve a change in perspective. Similar to findings in O'Dowd (2003:124), there were some students who wanted to "correct misrepresentations" and "fight stereotypes" when they thought their culture was not properly perceived or represented abroad. However, we also came across students who were able to decentre and change perspective. This was reflected mostly in the language learning diaries, where reflection about their own culture and that of the partner was encouraged:

[My partner] asked me in her last email about "Los Sanfermines". I do not like bullfighting, so I did not know a lot about it, but I looked for information to be able to explain to her about this festivity. This way I also learnt a little bit about my own culture.

Today, [my partner] wrote me three emails...in the first one she explicated me her opinion about bullfighting, after my explanation about "Los Sanfermines". In short, she has the same opinion as I have. She does not understand why the animals has to suffer before they die. She qualifies it as cruelty this kind of 'art'.

Today I realize that there is a big rejection against bullfighting in foreign countries. I think it is normal because it is an act of cruelty with the animals. Here we live with it since we are babies, so it is more common. Although, as I said before, I do not like it and I do not understand it. Therefore, I totally understand that foreigners so not understand it neither.

(Three entries from a student's language learning diary.)

In other cases, some conclusions based on serious reflection were pointed out by the students:

I think there are many prejudices and preconceived ideas in this world. For instance, many people think that the Irish drink a lot of spirits when they are in a foreign country ...this is quite true. However, there are many Irish people who travel to see different peoples, cultures and lifestyles. I think such judgements are unfair..but we must expect that this is where the world is at today and I feel it is only through such discussion similar to which we are under taking that progress and understanding will be achieved.

Category d) Knowledge about intercultural communication processes

The category 'knowledge about the intercultural communication process' (d) when defined as "I know how to discover new information and new aspects of the other culture for myself" was difficult to identify in isolation, since examples of this category tended to appear linked to the category 'interest in knowing other people's way of life' (category a), as shown above. In order to be able to show an interest in knowing other people's way of life, it is necessary to know how to discover new information about the other culture. In a similar way, "knowing how to resolve misunderstandings which arise from people's lack of awareness of the view point of another culture" (category d) also appeared to be linked to an ability to decentre, since this capacity to see things from a different point of view and to look at one's own culture from someone else's perspective clearly facilitated the solving of misunderstandings that arose in communicative interaction.

Other data

In addition to the data elicited from the email and wiki-space content and the language learning diaries we also gathered data from a self-evaluation questionnaire specially designed to determine the students' knowledge of the culture and people they were going to work with throughout the semester. They were given the choice of answering the questionnaire in the foreign language or in their mother tongue, thus enabling them to provide clearer and more elaborate answers. The questionnaire was presented to the students as a tool for stimulating serious reflection and raising learner awareness. It included open-ended and closed questions and was administered online so that the students could enjoy easy access to it and we could examine the results shortly afterwards. At the end of the exchange period, the participants were then asked to fill in a similar questionnaire and to write a composition in their mother tongue, commenting on their own experience of the project. The data gathered from the students' answers to the questionnaires allowed us to assess whether the project had been a positive and productive experience for the learners, not only from a linguistic point of view but also from a cultural perspective.

From the students' point of view, the exchange had been highly successful. Thus, on the Spanish side, 10 students (90.9%) regarded the exchange as highly positive and all of them (100%) considered that the project had helped them to develop their cultural knowledge. When asked to provide suggestions for improvement in future projects, 5 students (45.4%) suggested that some form of synchronous communication (whether through skype or chat) should be introduced, in order to exchange views and communicate more regularly with their partner.

In addition to the students' subjective assessments, we wanted to check whether their positive answers reflected, in any way, on their performance. In order to do so, we analysed the students' tasks qualitatively. Thus, the students' final oral presentations and essays had been carefully researched and prepared and their content went beyond a mere list of facts or a checklist of knowledge; they showed an awareness and understanding of some of the behaviours, beliefs and concepts of the other's culture and their own that had been enhanced through the discussion and negotiation with their partners. The length of the students' essays went beyond the stipulated 250 words with an average of 814 words per essay, and their wiki-pages had been edited an average of 28.4 times. These pages included images and links and had been corrected according to their partner's feedback, which, in most cases, also provided further information about the topic.

Finally, we include some of the Spanish students' commentaries regarding their experience below:

- I did not know any Americans (6) before this exchange, so the only points of reference I had were films and series. Now I understand many of their forms of behaviour. Even so, I think I still need to learn more about them in order to understand them better.
- A teacher at school once told me that 'if you generalise you are always wrong', and that is what I have discovered with tandem. I have found that many of the stereotypes and preconceived ideas I had about the Irish are not true. There is more to their food than fish and chips and hamburgers, as I thought.
- After I visited Galway one the summer I came back with the idea that Irish people were red-haired, had very white skin, drank Guinness and didn't like English people much. Obviously, you can't generalise since I've had a great Irish partner who's made me realise that Irish people are not all the same; some of them are nice and others aren't as it happens with people everywhere.
- I've realised that, although Irish people are also Europeans, we are quite different. They see things differently and this has helped me to look at things from a different point of view and to learn to value someone else's perspectives & ideas.

In the first three excerpts, the students show an increased awareness of the inaccuracies of stereotyping, whereas the comments in the last example refer to key aspects of intercultural learning. While this may not be the "third place" aimed for in intercultural communication, these comments do show some progress in the development of the students' cultural awareness.

Finally, the findings of this project also demonstrate the benefits of using virtual environments and new technologies for intercultural learning as many researchers have suggested previously. However, special emphasis should be placed on the integration of online activities into the contact classes in order to offer students additional opportunities to discuss and reflect on the cultural issues being discussed.

6. Conclusion

One of the purposes of this project was to foster the development of the participants' intercultural competence in online exchanges. In this learning environment, students searched for information, exchanged information with their partners and discussed a series of topics relating to their partners' culture and their own. This environment provided participants with a unique opportunity to contrast and compare theirs and other speakers' cultural practices and products and to reflect about both cultures in order to be able to hold meaningful discussions with the speakers of the target language.

The students were also able to communicate fluently and collaborate efficiently, and this was reflected not only in their successful completion of the tasks, but also in their positive answers to the questionnaires and comments about the exchange. Although the findings of the project show some of the benefits of using online exchanges for intercultural learning and the tools used helped us to find some evidence that the students had exercised intercultural competence in some categories (i.e. interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others and knowledge about one's own and other's culture for intercultural communication), this was not the case with others (i.e. ability to change perspective). Thus, most students showed a genuine interest in the other's culture and were happy to provide information about their own culture. However, the majority of them failed to decentre, which prevented them from taking intercultural communication a step further.

With regard to this matter, it may be worth carrying out further research to discover whether Liaw's (2006:60) suggestion is correct and this type of learning environment is "conducive to the development of knowledge and attitudes of intercultural competence but not necessarily to the development of empathy and (meta) intercultural skills". Although the connection between this imbalance and the mediated nature of the learning environment is clear, it is imperative to discover how best to encourage students to exhibit 'a readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours' and a 'willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging' (Byram 1997:34) in order to ascertain whether the development of empathy and (meta) intercultural skills can be equally facilitated by telecollaboration.

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(1) Students had to write a language learning diary on their online experience, prepare an end-of-year oral presentation on one of the topics discussed with the partner and write an essay discussing different aspects of both cultures. These last two tasks were completed in the wiki-space.

(2) A copy of all messages was also sent to their instructors.

(3) Byram's (2000) guidelines also include a fifth criterion, namely "ability to cope with living in a different culture", which we have omitted here since it was not applicable to this study.

(4) Examples and excerpts have been left as they were written. Where the original is in Spanish I have translated the information without the students' errors.

(5) The student is from Poland, but she is living and studying in Dublin.

(6) The partner was American and studied in Dublin.

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[Top](#)

Article

Effective Online Foreign Language Courses: Theoretical Framework and Practical Applications

Abstract:

Institutions are increasingly turning towards online foreign language courses, yet there are almost no guidelines for their development and implementation. Because there is significant research on online education and instructed second language acquisition (SLA)—but very little on the intersection of the two—this article emphasizes the importance of considering research from both fields for the successful design of online foreign language instruction. Empirical evidence from distance and blended learning, applied linguistics, and SLA research is considered as the article presents four guiding principles of online foreign language course design: 1) follow principles of SLA; 2) establish a sense of community; 3) choose relevant and appropriate technology and content; and 4) provide students and instructors with adequate training. The discussion of the third principle includes an overview of the technological and pedagogical options available for online courses and makes specific recommendations for teachers, administrators, and designers. This section includes a discussion of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and web-conferencing software; a review of the research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) as well as information on how to choose appropriate tools to facilitate CMC; a discussion of how to incorporate relevant audio and video into online courses; and a discussion on simulations and virtual worlds. All of these recommendations are based on educational, educational technology, and second language research findings on how to maximize language learning.

Key words: Online learning, foreign language, technology, second language acquisition, course development.

1. Introduction

For the past twenty years instruction has been moving out of the traditional classroom and into online learning environments, (1) and with this shift towards virtual learning has come significant research on what works (and what doesn't) in online learning and teaching. At the same time, the past twenty years have seen an explosion of empirical research in the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA), giving foreign language instructors new pedagogical strategies, goals, and frameworks. However, there has not been a lot of overlap between the two domains. While there are now degrees, departments, and even entire universities that only exist in cyberspace, online foreign language courses are often developed and offered without sufficient consideration of pedagogically sound practices for online learning or research findings from the field of SLA.

This article is intended to serve as a guide for institutions, administrators, and teachers interested in developing online language courses. Beginning with a discussion of the empirical research on online learning and second language acquisition, it will propose four guiding principles for online language courses as well as practical considerations, resources, and concrete examples of successful online practices. The article will emphasize how foreign language instructors can make the most of the Internet to create innovative courses that provide learners with opportunities for language learning that reach beyond those possible in a traditional classroom.

2. Guiding principles

2.1. Follow established principles of SLA

To have any hope of success, online language courses must follow empirically established principles, which have been discussed repeatedly in the SLA literature (see, e.g., Doughty & Long, 2003a; Gass & Selinker, 2001; Hinkel, 2005). Despite this, we think a brief review of these principles would be a logical place to begin our discussion, as they serve as the cornerstones of all effective instructed SLA, including instruction outside of the traditional classroom.

Provide sufficient input

Even when theorists disagree about how the SLA process works, they all maintain that without sufficient *input* —i.e., exposure to the target language—people will not acquire a second language. Input provides positive evidence of the correct formulations of the target language so that learners can form hypotheses about how it works (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Gass, 1998, 2003; Oliver, 1995; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993; Williams & Evans, 1998). However, not all input can be processed by second language (L2) learners, and genuine discourse (2) from fluent speakers may be too complex for learners, especially at the lower levels. In order to facilitate instructed SLA, several researchers have proposed modifications of L2 input in order to make it “comprehensible” (Gass, 2003) and “noticeable” (Schmidt, 1990; Ellis, 1991). This does not mean, though, that input should be simplified. Empirical evidence has shown that *elaborated* input (i.e., input that has been expanded to clarify potentially troublesome structures) is more beneficial for learners than simplified input (Oh, 2001; Parker & Chaudron, 1987; Yano, Long & Ross, 1994). In addition, *enhanced* input (i.e., input that has been made more salient for learners through highlighting or other emphasis) has been shown, in some cases, to improve learner noticing of target language forms (Chapelle, 1998; Sharwood-Smith, 1993). Online courses can accommodate a variety of input that can then be tailored to an individual learner’s needs and learning style.

Provide opportunities for output and interaction

Input alone is not sufficient for acquisition—learners also need opportunities to produce *pushed output*, as illustrated by the studies conducted in French immersion programs in Canada (Swain, 1985, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). This research revealed that second language learners were unable to attain target-like competence despite many hours of exposure to multiple and rich forms of input. The researchers concluded that through *output* learners test and correct their hypotheses about how the language works and develop automaticity (Gass, 1997; Swain, 1995). Empirical evidence has also shown that when all treatments are equal, learners acquire language more quickly when they are pushed to produce it (Izumi, 2002).

Although students can produce output in many ways (e.g., in writing, through elicited imitation, by reading dialogues), in order to learn to communicate effectively, learners must interact in the target language. The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) states that interactive tasks facilitate second language acquisition because they connect input, attention, and output in a productive way. Through interaction, learners receive negative evidence and feedback, both of which require them to make multiple adjustments to their discourse as they communicate. An online language course that includes communicative competence among its learning goals would then clearly benefit from activities that promote students’ interaction with one another, as well as with other speakers of the target language, as much as possible.

Provide feedback

In addition to input and output, it is accepted among SLA researchers that learners also require corrective feedback on their emerging language systems (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Trahey & White, 1993) and research has shown that feedback is more effective when it is immediate (Tomasello & Herron, 1989). There is less agreement about how exactly to go about error correction. Corrective feedback can be provided in a continuum from complete, explicit correction of all TL errors to providing implicit feedback by for example recasting problematic utterances. Although the decision of how and when to provide feedback is very context-dependent and linked to other pedagogic choices, one approach that works well for online courses is Focus on Form (FonF) (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1999). FonF argues that for error correction to be effective, students’ attention should be shifted to linguistic form after they are already engaged in meaning, and not before. That is, learners’ attention should be drawn to an error when it is interfering with their communicative tasks, making FonF an individualized approach to feedback. One advantage to online instruction is the ability to include activities that provide students with immediate feedback that targets their own personal errors while they are engaged in communication, providing the ideal conditions for effective feedback.

2.2. Establish a sense of community in the online foreign language classroom

A sense of community, which Rovai (2002b) defines as “connectedness, cohesion, spirit, trust, and interdependence among members” (p. 201), is essential for participants in all online classes. Early online courses tended to transfer traditional classroom content directly to the online environment, with isolated students using the Internet to complete what was essentially a correspondence course. After analyzing student performance and experience in one of these early courses offered through the British Open University, Wegerif (1998) determined that a sense of belonging to a virtual community correlated highly with student success. Numerous subsequent studies have identified a positive relationship between participants’ perception of belonging to an online community and their success in and satisfaction with online courses (Brown, 2001; Liu, et. al. 2007; Ni & Aust, 2008; Sadera, et. al., 2009; Swan & Shea, 2005). In addition, we can find multiple texts that suggest methods for fostering this online sense of community such as requiring students to meet mandatory participation requirements, providing multiple communication tools, maintaining an active instructor presence, and providing frequent and meaningful feedback (i.e. Brown, 2001; Hill et. al., 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Rovai, 2002a).

If a sense of community is important for online classes, it is a *must* for foreign language online courses. To maximize opportunities for acquisition, online foreign language courses must include a social space so that students can interact in the target language through tasks that require collaboration (Fleming et. al., 2002; White, 2006). According to Liu, et al., “[c]ommunities cannot develop on their own without careful planning, continued support, and intentional tasks and activities” (2007, p. 22), and many online instructors have difficulty doing so (Zhang & Walls, 2006). Online instructors must be engaged in the virtual classroom themselves to promote student participation (Morris & Finnegan 2008; Ni & Aust, 2008). One of the benefits of online language instruction is that students can actually have more opportunities for output and interaction than in a face-to-face course because they can communicate with more than just their instructors and fellow students. Students can interact in public or private chat rooms with native speakers (Tudini, 2003), work with native speaking tutors (Hampel & Stickler, 2005), or participate in a student-student exchange with English as a foreign language learners at a different institution (O’Rourke, 2005).

3. Maximize the benefits of the Internet by choosing relevant and appropriate course content and technological tools

When developing online courses, it is important to keep in mind that we are not designing curricula and materials to compensate for the “disadvantages” of online teaching, but rather to maximize the benefits that working via the Internet can bring to the learning experience. As Newlin and Wang (2002) point out, “if educators develop Web instruction solely as a means of changing student access, they have missed the point about using the Web as an instructional tool” (p. 329). For example, online students have the world at their fingertips—they can access target-language discourse from a seemingly limitless pool, making it easy to forgo traditional textbooks, which can be poor choices for facilitating SLA because they lack authentic input and emphasize language-as-

object (Long, 2007, p. 125). Before identifying the content for an online course, instructors and administrators should determine the purpose of the course and what types of online materials would be most useful (see Long, 2005; Long & Norris, 2000, for a discussion of the importance of a needs analysis before designing any foreign language program).

Another advantage of online courses is the ability to incorporate a wide variety of synchronous, asynchronous, and multimedia-based tools (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). However, while it is tempting to include all of the latest web-based resources, online instructors must choose tools that have demonstrated their utility in the SLA process. That is, instructors should select tools that give students opportunities for output and interaction, increase students' exposure to the target language, make target-language input more salient, and provide students with appropriate feedback. The following discussion provides recommendations and guidelines for choosing technological components of online courses, from learning management systems to web-based exercises.

3.1. Learning-management systems and/or web-conferencing software

The first technological consideration is the selection of an appropriate Learning Management System (LMS), which is the web-tool that delivers the course content and engages the students with the course materials. The first place to look for an LMS is the institution hosting the language course. The three most popular platforms in educational contexts are [Blackboard Learning System](#), [WebCT](#) (acquired in February 2006 by BlackBoard, Inc.), and [Moodle](#). Moodle is an open source LMS, while BlackBoard and WebCT are available by subscription. These platforms are typically managed by a central office at each institution and have relatively fixed functionality and features, which are often not selected for their application to online language learning. When the in-house LMS is not set up to accommodate the multimedia tools necessary for language courses, or when an institution does not have an LMS available, there are multiple online learning platforms that allow for custom tools, such as [Desire2Learn](#), [Metacoön](#), [OLAT](#) (Online Learning And Training) [Claroline](#), [A tutor](#), and [Sakai](#) (See Appendix 1 for links to all the tools mentioned throughout the article).

When choosing an LMS, language instructors should consider the following factors: ease of access and navigation; technical support; ability to incorporate necessary tools; ability to hide unnecessary tools; potential for interactivity (e.g., whether it allows students to incorporate content, create materials, and upload and download content, audio, and video); potential for monitoring student use (e.g., participation, time spent using tools, time spent on different activities, and performance); and potential for incorporating different types of assessment. Finally, an essential feature in an online language course is feedback, so before choosing an LMS, instructors should ask: Does the LMS provide opportunities for immediate feedback, both orally and in writing? Can students provide peer-feedback? Can students and teachers access and retrieve past feedback for formative purposes? Because online foreign language courses require so much from their LMSs, the systems that are used successfully for other types of classes are frequently unsuitable. In order to work around this, many educators choose an LMS that meets some needs, and then have students use alternative tools for other applications, such as synchronous voice chatting. While this approach can work, it is not ideal because learners can get overwhelmed when they need to visit multiple websites for the same course.

Web-conferencing applications are a flexible complement to LMSs. These packages are becoming popular among individual educators who do not want to be constrained by the LMSs used in their institutions and want to use a tool that allows them to meet their students virtually. Some of the most popular and comprehensive of these tools are: [Elluminate Live!](#), [Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro](#), [Wimba](#), and [Dimdim](#). The first three products listed require a subscription while Dimdim has both free and for-pay versions. All of these web-conferencing tools have similar features: They permit audio, video and text conferencing, they can display PowerPoint presentations, they have an interactive whiteboard, they allow guided web browsing and desktop sharing, they allow for simple feedback, they allow users to record sessions to be replayed (for those students that may have missed "class"), they work cross-platform, and they are password secured. According to Lavolette (2009) some of the advantages of Elluminate over the free version of Dimdim are that Elluminate is stable if the presenter logs out while in Dimdim if the presenter closes his/her computer the meeting also ends. In addition, Elluminate has better audio (especially for Mac users) and allows users to choose the resolution of presentations (although this makes the process more complicated).

Web conferencing software does not typically incorporate the classroom management tools, such as gradebooks, assessments, and portfolios that come standard with LMSs, so instructors might need to use them in conjunction with some sort of course management software. Regardless of which LMS and conferencing tools are chosen, it is important to keep in mind that the instructor's methodological and pedagogical approach to the software and tools is critical for student success in an online course.

3.2. Synchronous and asynchronous discussion tools and strategies for fostering interaction

Effective online foreign language courses should employ a variety of tools for computer-mediated communication (CMC), so that learners can interact synchronously and asynchronously through text, audio, and/or video with other speakers of the language. Synchronous computer-mediated chat (SCMC) has been the subject of significant empirical research, and it offers several advantages to language learners. It has the potential to foster collaborative learning by linking geographically dispersed participants. It allows learners to interact and modify their discourse while engaging in meaningful "conversation" (Doughty & Long, 2003b). SCMC fosters student-centered interaction (Beavois, 1998; Chun, 1994; Freiermuth, 2002; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996), facilitates interactive competence (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995), and promotes a sense of community (Darhower, 2000; Skinner & Austin, 1999; Wilkins, 1991). In addition, some research has shown that text-based CMC may indirectly improve speaking ability in a second language by developing the same cognitive mechanisms underlying spontaneous conversational speech in a second language (Beavois, 1998; Payne & Whitney, 2002). For a more in depth review of CMC research in SLA, see Blake (2008).

In addition to the research findings on synchronous, text-based chat, there is also evidence that other types of computer-mediated communication can offer unique benefits to online language learners. Asynchronous computer-mediated chat (ACMC) is beneficial for L2 learners because it provides significantly more opportunities to communicate than either a traditional classroom or SCMC—students can contribute at anytime from anywhere—and it allows for reflection on their developing interlanguage, permitting "more thoughtful" (Kol & Scholnik p. 61) and syntactically more complex (Sotillo, 2000) interchanges than SCMC. And although most of the research on CMC has been done on text-based interchanges, recently there have been several studies on the potential of voice and video chat for language learning, which highlight the similarities of the medium to face-to-face conversation (Jauregi & Bañados, 2008; Yamada, 2009). A well-rounded online course should afford students opportunities to engage synchronously and asynchronously through both text and voice/video.

Whereas most standard LMSs offer tools for CMC, especially for text-based communication, the inclusion of voice or video tools is rarer. There are multiple tools for synchronous CMC, most of them free of charge. Some of the most popular SCMC tools are [Skype](#), [AIM for Windows](#), [MSN](#), [Yahoo Messenger!](#), and [Google Talk](#). Several websites can help learners locate interlocutors with whom to practice their L2 through text and audio/video chat. Some of the most popular are [EyeBall Chat](#), [Camfrog](#), and [PalTalk](#). In addition, sites like Google Groups and Yahoo groups provide spaces for learners to interact in the target language with people who have similar interests, providing a place for highly motivating and individualized language practice. Before determining whether to use text chat, audio chat, video chat, or (most likely) a combination of the three, instructors must consider the purpose of the activities, the number of participants, and the technical capabilities of the interlocutors. Audio chat requires a headset and microphone, video chat requires a webcam, and both require more bandwidth than simple text chatting.

As for asynchronous CMC, some of the first tools employed for language learning were Forums and Bulletin Boards, which are still incorporated in most LMSs, where the teacher or a student would post a question or a comment to which all other class participants would respond. Blogs are the second generation of Bulletin Boards--basically they are open journals written on a web platform. Blogs

are chronologically organized with the most recent posting first, and users can include text, multimedia, and active links. In addition to allowing students to practice L2 reading and writing skills, blogs also give them opportunities to collaborate, persuade, contend and develop ideas as individuals and as part of a group in a public arena, rather than in the closed environment of a classroom forum, a factor which gives them a "sense of agency" (Gallagher, 2000; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008). Blogs can be used as tools for reviewing, providing feedback (teacher-initiated or peer-peer), and as spaces for collaborative writing. To cater to the growing interest in blogs as an alternative to forums and bulletin boards, numerous sites now offer simple, ready-to-use blog services (e.g., [Blogger](#), [WordPress](#), or [Moveable Type](#)), and there are also blogs created specifically for educational purposes (e.g., [Blogs2Teach](#), [weblogs4schools](#), [The modern languages blog](#), [Eslblog](#)).

Although blogs can be used for collaborative writing, the chronological order of the postings limits their interactive potential. Wikis, on the other hand, encourage truly collaborative writing efforts. The term "Wiki" ("quick" or "fast" in Hawaiian) is short for WikiWikiWeb, an open-editing system in which anybody can edit, add, or delete content to a page. The most popular Wiki is certainly Wikipedia, a publicly-created encyclopedia that has swiftly reached mammoth proportions (see LeLoup & Ponterio, 2006 for an evaluation of its use for language learning). [Wikispaces](#) is an environment in which wikis can be created easily for classroom purposes. As with blogs, the potential of wikis for language learning lies in their collaborative nature and the potential that this has for L2 writing acquisition. Godwin-Jones (2003) provides an excellent review of blogs and wikis as language tools.

Due to the wide variety of tools available for CMC, it is important to keep in mind that there are often logistical scheduling constraints with synchronous CMC, especially when grouping students across time zones. Further, while there are advantages to using different tools for different tasks, asking students to use, for example, an LMS, web-conferencing software, external SCMC software, a blog, and a wiki has the potential of requiring students to log into five different programs, which is likely to result in infrequent and inconsistent use. It might make sense to choose one or two tools that can cover as many of the possible CMC functionalities to increase the likelihood of participation. In addition, instructors should take learner level and course goals into consideration when choosing tools; writing-intensive tools, such as wikis and blogs, would be most beneficial for an online course that focuses on L2 writing. And while access to fluent speakers and expert performances is one of the most significant advantages of web-based language courses, instructors must have students access these resources carefully. When using CMC with younger students, it is essential to ensure that their chat rooms are private and do not allow people to come in from outside the course without an invitation from the teacher. Finally, just as with the LMS and any web conferencing software, students will need tutorials in how to use the various CMC tools as well as chances to practice with them under low-stakes conditions.

3.3. Audio and video discourse

The adaptation of existing media to the field of second language learning is a process that is far from complete, and "the dizzying array of technologically feasible options in distance learning" (Doughty & Long, 2003b) remains vastly underexploited. For example, given the nature of the field, the insertion of video and audio in materials to be viewed on- and off-line is highly desirable, yet many materials developers continue to rely on inauthentic, scripted exchanges. Online instructors should use genuine audio and video whenever appropriate, modifying and elaborating the input to make it match the learners' needs. There are many easy-to-use tools that allow the creation and manipulation of audio, such as [Audacity](#), which is free software, as well as [WavePad](#) for Windows and Sound Studio for MacOS, which are available for purchase. As for video, from simple programs such as [Windows Movie Maker](#) (a Windows application) or [iMovie](#) (for Mac) to more sophisticated options, such as [Corel VideoStudio ProX2](#), there are multiple tools on the market that allow the creation of videos that can be incorporated into online courses. In addition, students can use these audio and video tools to work collaboratively in the target language.

One way to incorporate audio in online courses is podcasting, which refers to the online broadcasting of streaming and/or downloadable files. Students can receive these files electronically as an mp3 file, listen to them on their mp3 players, and manipulate them with several programs. Podcasts can be used in the language classroom as a source of input (created by the teacher or by others), they can be used in conjunction with written text, such as questions for listening and comprehension exercises, or they can be created and distributed by the students. A common source of podcasts is *iTunes* and its podcast section "Education." Other popular podcast sites are [Digital Podcast](#), [Podcastalley](#), and [Weblogs](#). Podcasts are available in different languages, with either a pedagogic objective or as an information source (see, for example, the [BBC](#), [Toefl Podcast](#), [BBC Mundo](#), or [Chinese Pod](#)).

3.4. Simulations, virtual worlds, and Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming Spaces (MMOGS)

These "game-like" tools are some of the newest technological applications with potential educational value (Gee, 2003, 2005; Jenkins & Squire, 2004; Steinkuehler, 2008). Simulations help create a student-centered environment that promotes interaction and collaboration (Godwin-Jones, 2004; Schwienhorst, 2002), allowing students to set their own goals (Bryant, 2006). Simulations can offer students increased opportunities for practice by using computerized interlocutors in a practice-oriented environment (Morton & Jack, 2005) and by restricting the amount of teacher-talk (Sharrock & Watson, 1987). For language learning, simulations have a positive effect on motivation and achievement, particularly on the understanding of vocabulary for specific purposes, and the assimilation of cultural issues (García-Carbonell et al., 2001; Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne, 2008; Thorne & Black, 2008; Zheng, 2004). In order to be effective for language learning, these tools must be carefully integrated into online courses in order to compensate for the complexities of the technology (Deutschmann et al., 2009; von der Emde et al., 2001).

3.5. Interactive language materials

One of the benefits of online courses is that they can easily include a wide variety of interactive multimedia activities with individualized feedback. Despite this, the multimedia used in technology-mediated language training is often quite static. For example, little use has been made of exercises that require the movement of audio or video clips to match, sequence, or group phrases – activities that are a fundamental step beyond the linear listening exercises presented in the traditional tape-and-textbook scenario (Brett & González-Lloret, 2009). While it is straightforward to locate authentic video and audio clips on the web, innovative online teaching should go farther and include interactive activities.

There are many software packages available that allow users, both teachers and students, to manipulate audio and video to create multimedia projects. Some of these are: *GISMO*, *CLIC*, *Adobe Authorware 2*, *Malted*, *Flash*, and *Director*. For a review of these tools, see Brett and González-Lloret (2009). Some of these products are quite complex and require programming experience and/or training, but the most widely used materials development software among educators, *Hot Potatoes*, is user-friendly. This program is free of charge for educational institutions and produces JavaScript-based exercises that are suitable for on- and offline use. Instructors can create a wide variety of exercises, including multiple-choice, jumbled sentences, crosswords, matching/ordering, and gap-fill. Graphics, pictures, audio and video can be incorporated in the activities, and the materials developer can provide feedback to learners in a variety of ways.

4. Provide instructors and students with sufficient training

The final guiding principle for online language courses is training—in order to teach effectively, foreign language instructors should be trained in online language instruction as well as relevant technological tools (Bonk & Dennen, 2003; Dennen & Bonk, 2007; Hampel & Stickler, 2005). Instructors new to online teaching benefit from guidelines for participation and interaction, such as staying "visible" in the classroom by responding to student discussions and assignments as quickly and as thoughtfully as possible. It is important to prepare instructors for the time commitment involved when teaching online. "[T]imely feedback can be an important time workload

issue for the instructor or mentor teaching online. There is no doubt that online instruction is more time intensive and requires more continuous attention in order to provide timely responses to student needs than does traditional presential instruction" (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000, p. 235). Because effective language courses are focused on interaction, instructors should try to engage the students in communication through computer-mediated chat, asynchronous discussions, real-time voice chat, and assignments that require student-student interaction. In order to do this, instructors must understand how turn-taking and other conversational conventions "translate" to CMC and assist students as they negotiate this type of technology-mediated communication. Matching online language instructors with an experienced mentor is one way to enhance instructor training—having access to archived versions of effective online courses can go a long way towards preparing teachers for distance instruction.

As for students, they should be given detailed information about expectations for online learning, tutorials for the course's technological tools, and access to an archive of frequently asked questions. Students must engage with the content, with the instructor, and with other learners while adhering to the course schedule and other requirements. When students are prepared for the online classroom, their study time can be devoted to the activities and materials that will facilitate language learning, rather than learning how the environment works through trial and error or troubleshooting technical difficulties.

5. Conclusion

Distance courses are rapidly proliferating and online language courses are becoming more commonplace. In order to be successful, online foreign language courses must be based on methodological and pedagogic principles based on SLA research, while maximizing the advantages of the Internet, by, for example, providing students with access to multimedia, genuine discourse, and expert speakers. It is essential for the success of any online course, and especially a foreign language course, to establish a sense of community among teacher and students, choose course content that is relevant and appropriate to students' language learning needs, and incorporate technological tools that complement the course content and facilitate the tasks. Practical training cannot be overlooked. Teachers new to the online environment must be prepared to teach online in terms of both technology and pedagogy, and online learners must be prepared so they can participate appropriately.

As more online courses are offered, it is imperative to collect empirical data on their effectiveness so that we can evaluate and revise our course design recommendations. In addition to evaluating courses based on learner performance (see, e.g., Blake, 2009, Blake, et. al., 2008, and Volle, 2005), researchers must seek out feedback from online learners so that instructors and course developers can take their experiences into account as they design and deliver online language courses (Lai, et. al., 2008). Finally, while we have listed many resources and technological tools throughout (see Appendix 1 for all resources and links to more information) these are just examples, which will quickly be replaced as newer and more powerful ones are developed. Online learning courses should evolve as fast as the technology progresses. New programming is giving way to increasingly realistic graphics and interfaces, which will soon allow students to have more life-like interactions with simulated interlocutors. More sophisticated programming will also bring more interactive activities with sensorial multimedia and accurate, individualized feedback. As new tools and technologies become available they should be considered with respect to their role in the SLA process so that they are used judiciously and appropriately in online language courses.

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Appendix 1

Resources that might be helpful when establishing an online foreign language class

PRODUCT	COMPANY	WEB ADDRESS
Learning Management Systems (LMS)	• Desire2learn	http://www.desire2learn.com
	• Metacocon	http://metacocon.net
	• Olat	http://www.olat.org
	• Claroline	http://www.claroline.net
	• A Tutor	http://www.atutor.ca
	• Sakai	http://sakaiproject.org
	• Blackboard	http://www.blackboard.com
	• Moodle	http://moodle.org
Web-conferencing software	• Elluminate	http://www.illuminate.com
	• Dimdim	http://www.dimdim.com
	• Wimba	http://www.wimba.com/
	• Adobe Connect Pro	http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/
	• Centra	http://www.ivci.com/web_conferencing_centra_solutions.html
Voice and/or text computer mediated communication (CMC)	• Yahoo Messenger	http://messenger.yahoo.com
	• Skype	http://www.skype.com
	• AIM	http://dashboard.aim.com/aim/
	• MSN	http://www.msn.com
	• Google Talk	http://www.google.com/talk/
	• EyeBall Chat	http://www.eyeballchat.com
	• Camfrog	http://www.camfrog.com
	• PalTalk	http://www.paltalk.com
	• Wimba	http://www.wimba.com
	• Google groups	http://groups.google.com
Audio and Video tools	• Audacity	http://audacity.sourceforge.net
	• WavePad	http://www.nch.com.au/wavepad/
	• Youtube	http://www.youtube.com
	• Windows Movie Maker	http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/downloads/updates/moviemaker2.msp
	• iMovie	http://www.apple.com/ilife/imovie/
	• Corel VideoStudio ProX2	http://www.corel.com
	• Digital Podcast	http://www.digitalpodcast.com
	• Podcastalley	http://www.podcastalley.com
	• Weblogs	http://audio.weblogs.com
	• BBC podcast	http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts
	• Toefl Podcast	http://www.toeflpod.com/
	• BBC Mundo	http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/mh/
	• Español Podcast	http://www.spanishpodcast.org

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese Pod http://chinesepod.com • Learn Japanese Pod http://learnjapanesepod.com/all-podcasts • ESL podcasts http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts/ • Language Learning podcasts http://www.word2word.com/podad.html • Radio WillowWeb http://www.mpsomaha.org/willow/radio/index.html • Brandon's Online Magazine http://Mrmayo.typepad.com/podcasts/
Blogging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blogger http://www.blogger.com • WordPress http://wordpress.com • Moveable Type http://www.moveabletype.org • Blogs2Teach http://www.blogs2teach.net • Weblogs4schools http://www.ict4schools.info • Modern language blog http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/cs/blogs/mfle • Esl blogs http://eslblogs.org
Wikis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wikispaces http://www.wikispaces.com • Craig's CALL wiki http://danielcraig.wikispaces.com/CALL+Class+Resources
Webquests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WebQuest http://webquest.org
Software to create learning objects/course content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GISMO http://languages.londonmet.ac.uk/CALL/call/home.htm • CLIC http://clic.xtec.net/en/index.htm • Max Author http://cali.arizona.edu/docs/wmaxa • Adobe Authorware 2 http://www.adobe.com/products/authorware • Malted http://malted.cnice.mec.es/ingles/whatMalted.htm • Flash http://www.adobe.com/products/flash/flashpro • Director http://www.adobe.com/products/director • Hot Potatoes http://hotpot.uvic.ca

(1) Throughout this article, *online* or *distance* instruction refers to instructor-mediated courses where all of the content and interactions are web-based. Online/distance courses are different from *web-enhanced* or *blended* courses, which integrate some online instruction with traditional, face-to-face classroom-based teaching. While the recommendations and practices discussed here are intended for use in fully online courses, most of them can be adapted for web-enhanced or blended language courses as well.

(2) Genuine discourse is that which has not been modified from its original form, while authentic discourse can be created for authentic classroom purposes without necessarily being genuine. Authenticity can be conferred on a text by virtue of the use to which it is put by a particular group in a particular situation. See Taylor (1994) for a discussion of authenticity in language classrooms.

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Article

ESELE: Independent language learning resources for Spanish at the University of Manchester

Abstract

This paper describes ESELE (Enhancing the Spanish E-learning Language Experience), an innovative project that presents a comprehensive virtual learning environment with a wide variety of inbuilt e-tools and resources that aims to boost the independent learning of students of Spanish at all levels at the Language Centre, University of Manchester. The main objectives of the project are presented together with the structure of the various learning modules. Subsequently, the results of a student survey are put forward in order to provide an indication of the frequency of use, the usefulness and appropriateness of the materials, as well as the impact on the students' language skills. Finally, some comments and recommendations about the course components are suggested by the students. The outcomes indicate that the Blackboard-based e-learning platform resources proved to be beneficial, helped to improve the students' motivation and confidence, and encouraged autonomy by providing guidance and support throughout their multiple forms of interactive and collaborative practice.

Keywords: Independent language learning, Spanish

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy underpins language learning pedagogy (Benson 2001, Little 1991) as well as a wide range of CALL applications and computer-based educational materials (Warschauer 2002). For successful language learning it is paramount that learners take responsibility for their own learning i.e. planning specific goals, challenging themselves with motivating language input and evaluating their performance on a regular basis.

The combination of the Internet as a vast collection of authentic resources where educational content is freely made available

together with the VLE as the platform for new technologies where content specific modules and good models with appropriate feedback can be disseminated university-wide helped us develop a compilation of interactive and hyperactive learning resources for the blended learning of Spanish via Blackboard at the University of Manchester Language Centre.

Given the extensive syllabus to be covered in language courses within the limited number of contact hours available it is a challenge for language tutors at the University Language Centre to include in their lessons significant components and specific activities aimed at raising the students' awareness and at the same time enhancing the comprehension and further practice of grammatical, lexical, functional, cultural, strategic and communicative issues. These weaknesses were addressed by developing and delivering a range of e-learning components that focus on a variety of topics catering for the interests, needs and learning styles of a broad spectrum of students from different degree programmes.

With the challenging coming of Blackboard as a new VLE at the University the Spanish tutors at the Language Centre decided to get the most of this time and revamp the resources available to students. This was the beginning of the ESELE project aimed at complementing face-to-face teaching and enhancing the students' language learning experience by presenting them a variety of resources from relevant language specific content modules to interactive online assessment directly linked to the specific learning outcomes for each level, without ignoring synchronous and asynchronous discussions to promote sociocultural and collaborative language learning.

2. ESELE

ESELE (**E**nhancing the **S**panish **E**-learning **L**anguage **E**xperience) is a Blackboard-based project that focuses on the development and implementation of e-learning models catering for various levels of the CEF from Introductory Spanish (level A1) to Further Spanish (level C1), and provides a variety of independent language learning resources for an average of 300 students per academic year.

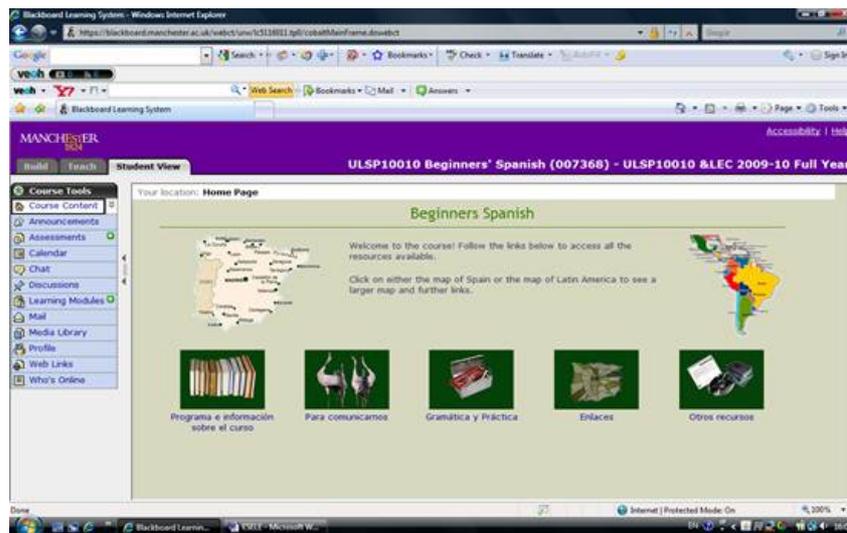


Figure 1. Main site of one of the Spanish courses.

The main aim of the project is to supplement and support the classroom-based linguistic activities with a view to raise the profile of the teaching and also to enhance the students' overall language learning experience.

The main objectives of the project are the following:

- To increase students' language acquisition
- To help them gain more motivation and autonomy by means of independent language learning resources.
- To make them more aware of the importance of involvement and engagement, good models, collaborative work, adequate resources and relevant feedback to notice some progression in their language skills.
- To boost their sociocultural learning by means of online authentic input and interaction.

The project developed seven general Spanish modules, namely, Introductory Spanish, Beginners, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Intermediate Business, Post-Intermediate and Further Spanish. Each learning modules presents:

- course information and course program with main objectives and learning outcomes, formative and summative assessment information, academic policies for disability and mitigating circumstances, course outline and important dates, an overview of the course lessons and contents per week and a list of required and recommended books
- content-based language learning modules adapted for each level and with special emphasis on grammatical explanations of the aspects of the language that cause more difficulty to students

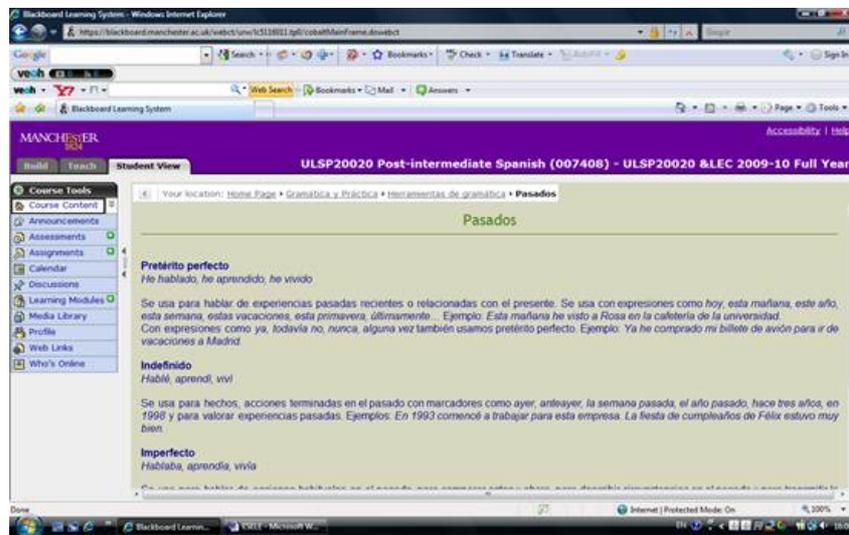


Figure 2. Snapshot of one of the grammar language content modules.

- a compilation of independent learning web links for each module divided into reading, listening, grammar, vocabulary, writing, speaking, culture and language tools
- a media library or database containing text, audio, video and image entries for each course
- interactive online assessment in the shape of cultural quizzes and self-tests (one per course programme unit, different for every course) containing reading, listening, grammar and vocabulary practice activities of various kinds (gap filling, multiple choice, true or false, jumbled sentence, matching and short answer) with hyperlinks to audio files and podcasts created by the tutors and also to online video extracts from authentic films, tv programs/series or videoclips providing automatic immediate feedback to the students

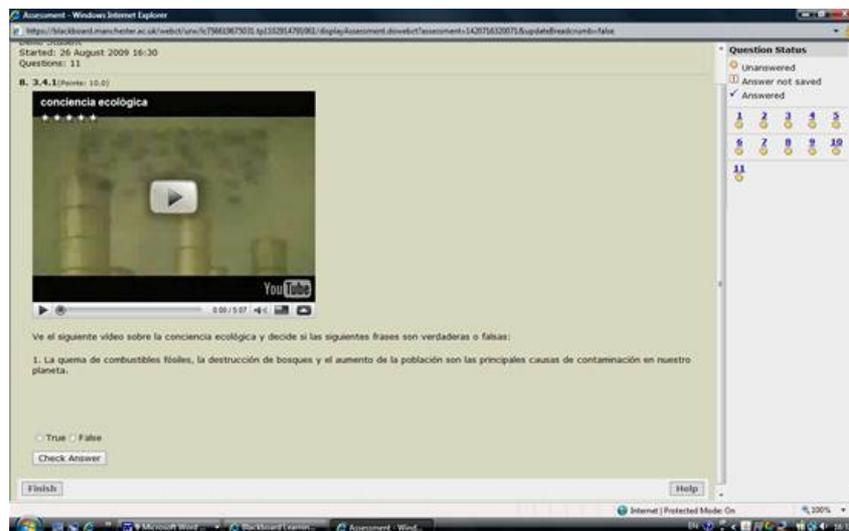


Figure 3. Snapshot of one of the online assessments.

- *Voiceboard* or tutor developed podcasts for pronunciation and intonation practice via peer learning activities that foster listening, guided and free speaking practice depending on the level
- discussion fora for directed collaborative writing practice revolving around topics seen in class and easily controlled by tutors via Group Manager

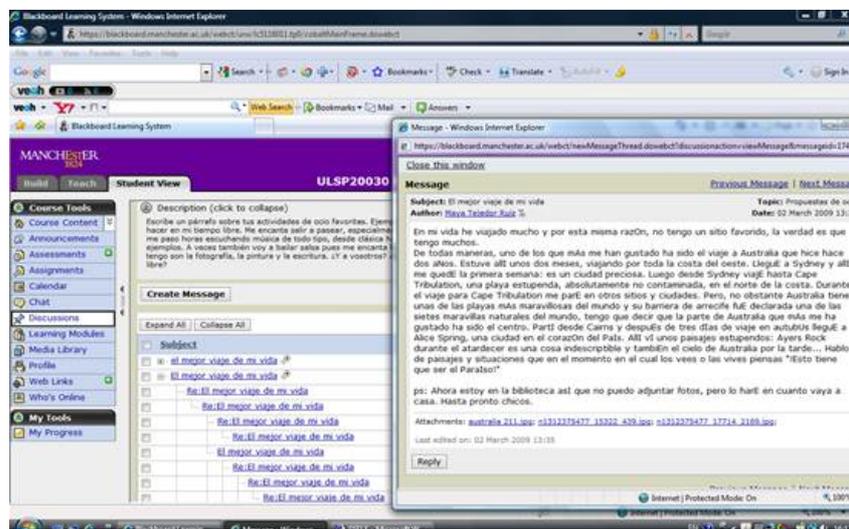
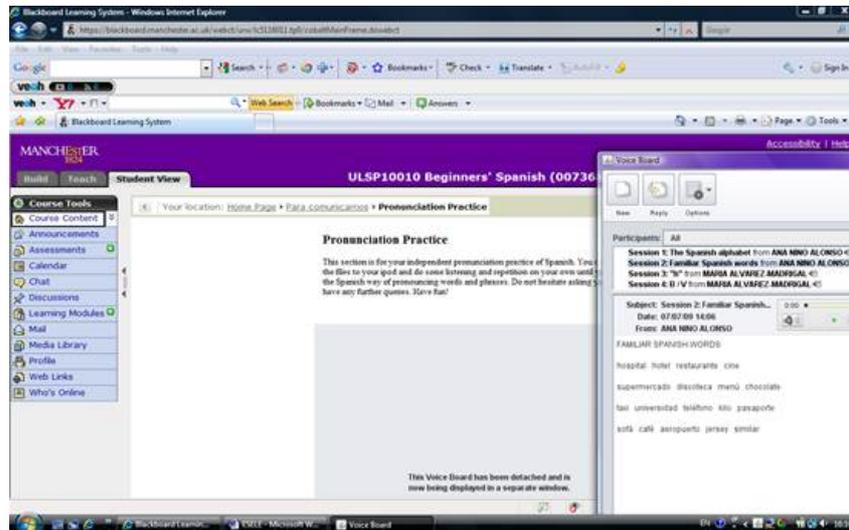


Figure 4. Extract from asynchronous written discussion.

Figure 5. Extract from the one of the Pronunciation *Voiceboard* components.

- a glossary with target language definitions and bilingual terminology for specialised courses such as Business Spanish
- language learning strategies to help students manage their own learning
- other resources such as sample tests from previous years, role plays (audio files and transcripts), photos, PPPs and recommendations of books, music and films related to the Spanish-speaking world



Figure 6. Snapshot of some film recommendations for advanced students.

- other communicative and collaborative tools (tutors and students' profiles, announcements, calendar, chat, who's online)

3. Student survey results

The ESELE project was to be developed from July 2008 to June 2009. By May 2009 the majority of the independent learning Blackboard-based resources were complete and we decided to run a general survey to test the level of satisfaction of our students regarding the various tools and functions implemented along the project. The survey was delivered to students in class at the end of semester 2 and contained some questions about their frequency of use, the sections that they found most and less useful, whether they had noticed any improvement in their language skills after having accessed the materials on a regular basis, and, finally, it also included some questions enquiring about the logicity of the site structure and its navigation, as well as the appropriateness of the learning materials themselves. Altogether 254 students from all levels participated in the survey. In the following lines we present a summary of our findings:

- Frequency of use: A majority of the students (62%) confessed having accessed the Spanish Blackboard site "sometimes", against a 22% who did it "rarely", a 15% who did it "very often", and only an 1% who never entered the site.
- Tools use: *Grammar Tools* was the most widely used tool (25%) by the students followed very closely by *Discussions* (23%) and *Assessment* (21%). In a lesser extend were the tools *Weblinks* (13%), *Course Program and Information* (9%), and *Other resources* (5%) accessed by the students. To our surprise *Voiceboard* (4%) was the less used tool.
- Usefulness: Most and less useful sections: *Grammar Tools* (24%) was the most useful tool for students followed by *Course Program and Information* (22%) and *Assessment* (18%). The students also regarded *Discussions* (15%), *Weblinks* (10%) and *Voiceboard* (5%) as useful for their learning and found the *Chat* and *Who's online* functions (1% each) rather useless though.
- Improvement in language skills: A great majority of students agreed that the Spanish Blackboard resources had helped them improve their writing skills (40%) followed by grammar and vocabulary (27%) and reading comprehension (21%). The less developed skills according to students were oral comprehension (8%) and oral production (3%).
- Site structure and navigation: A majority of students agreed that the site was "rather/very" logical (73/20%) and "rather/very" easy to navigate (65/24%).
- Appropriateness of learning materials: Most of the students categorised the materials as "rather/"very" appropriate (56/42%) and "rather/"very" inspiring/motivating (68/20%).

In general the students provided very positive comments and suggestions about the new components. We present some of them

below:

- *Grammar Tools* : It was regarded as "good practice and very useful, especially for revision". The students found the grammar notes "concise and straightforward" as well as "quick and easy reminders that help simplify the tedious process of learning the intricacies of the language".
- *Course Program and Information* : As expected they expressed it provided them with the information they needed to organise themselves e.g. constant deadlines, exams, etc. and helped them prepare for the classes.
- *Assessment*: This component received a wide range of encouraging feedback comments and proved to be one of the most efficient independent language tools to test progress prior to exams. Some of the students' comments that illustrate this are the following: " I find I can test myself on elements of Spanish that I need to improve". "I find the unit exercises are especially useful, with the short audio and video clips because you can do it at your own pace". "It provided me with interactive, constant feedback that helps to prepare for the exam". "It allows for more independent learning and extra practice". "You receive an immediate report on progress that makes it easy to identify problem areas".
- *Discussions*: Judging by the students' comments, they enjoyed this tool because of the social element attached to it and because it had a positive impact on their written skills. Some of the students' comments were the following: " It enables to know better our classmates and practice written skills". "Discussions help me to use what I have learnt in the grammar session and improved my writing skills!" "You get the feeling of teamwork". "It provides the opportunity to practice prolonged writing outside of class". "It allowed me to see how other people work and to compare; it gave me ideas".
- *Weblinks* : The students found that this tool introduced them to very interesting sites and resources they would not otherwise have found. Various students agreed that it helped them to improve their Spanish outside of class everyday and learn about the Spanish culture in a fun way.
- *Voiceboard*: The comments regarding this tool were few and diverse. A minority of students pointed out that they disliked the fact that their oral output was made public and that they either lacked the equipment or the confidence to explore its full potential. On the optimistic side some students from various levels reported that this tool can actually help you to improve your pronunciation at the same time you revise grammar and vocabulary and that it can actually help to increase your oral confidence.

4. Conclusion

The ESELE project developed a Blackboard-based learning environment, which combines content-based language learning materials with interactive online assessment activities, hypermedia and communication tools providing appropriate and motivating learning resources to foster the learners' autonomy and supplement in-class program materials via a blended approach that is relevant to specific learning outcomes and attempts to accommodate different learning styles aiming at academic and personal development, thus making the learning progress more engaging and efficient in the long term. We believe that, like with any project, this is still work in progress and it is our intention to continue taking on board students suggestions to improve our site. In the future we would also like to incorporate new software such as blogs, wikis and e-portfolios and explore the potential of online social software and video conferencing for language learning purposes.

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Related links

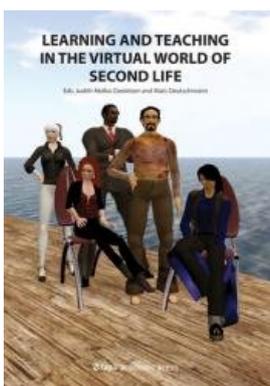
Spanish courses at the Language Centre, University of Manchester <http://www.langcent.manchester.ac.uk/foreign/leap/spanish/>

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Book review

Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life



Eds. Judith Molka-Danielsen and Mats Deutschmann

Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life

Published by Tapir Academic Press

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194 pp

ISBN: 978-82-519-2353-8

This book discusses key issues in relation to one of the most innovative learning and teaching approaches within Web-based CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), i.e. the pedagogical use of virtual worlds. More specifically, it deals with learning through Second Life (SL), a widely used modern MUVE (Multi-User Virtual Environment). This virtual environment is used by many people in the world to play, communicate and interact for many different purposes by simulating an amazingly elaborated and versatile virtual reality. The publication follows the structure of a coherent collection of research articles, each one with its particular focus and yet well integrated within a whole picture depicting the pedagogical use of a given virtual environment. Every paper could be read and considered individually –which is also indicated by the fact that they have separate bibliography and reference sections–, and nevertheless, all the papers should be put into the broader context provided by the general discussion of the whole book, which metaphorically acts as magnifying lenses that give a new comprehensive meaning and value to the individual papers. Arguably, the structure of the book could also have been organised around traditional chapters (although the papers of the book are actually called chapters) with a common bibliography section at the end, but the individual paper-collection format is more dynamic, versatile and innovative-looking, since it allows readers to concentrate on specific topics and cases in turn, or, following the optical metaphor, they can observe a series of snapshots of the whole landscape of educational uses of virtual worlds.

The title of the book deserves a twofold comment in order to clarify its actual scope. Firstly, although it makes no reference to language learning, most of the discussion going on throughout the book is –or may be– analysed with language learning pedagogy in mind, which is not surprising, given the close relation of the two editors with the CALL domain. In any case, even when some projects presented as well as some points made and conclusions drawn in the book do not relate to language learning, one could still consider them from a CALL perspective. Secondly, on the other hand, the title does mention Second Life, although many ideas and issues could be applied just as well to other virtual worlds or even to the broader field of online distance learning. Therefore, the scope of the book is quite broad and many statements in it can be of great interest for a number of people with varying backgrounds, such as students, educational psychologists, teachers, CALL researchers, etc., thus giving the book an appealing multidisciplinary flavour.

The nature of the book is both theoretical and practical. On the one hand, the theoretically-driven discussion is reflected in the thought-provoking treatment of issues such as pedagogical design, themes within the field of educational psychology or methodological approaches, among others. The authors certainly provide us with some food for thought when it comes to using virtual worlds for educational purposes, and they do so from a wealth of theoretical standpoints, which is enriching. On the other hand, in analysing the affordances and potential possibilities of SL as far as education is concerned, the book is mostly practical in nature, since it presents a comprehensive roadmap and guide to efficiently assist the actual implementation of SL for teaching and learning, illustrating not only case studies of good pedagogical practice but also plenty of practical ideas for the educational use of SL in several contexts and within different subject-matters and fields. Consequently, the work does not merely show what has successfully been done in SL in the past and at present (*SL reality*) –which would already render a good result–, but it takes one step further by incorporating some useful pedagogical ideas that could be readily applied in the future (*SL potential*) –which somehow gives the book an added value for teaching practitioners and learners.

One of the key contributions of the book can be seen as a direct consequence of its twofold nature (theoretical and practical) and lies in the fact that it bridges the gap between a new technology-based learning environment, namely SL, and the long-expressed need within the CALL literature of theoretically-grounded teaching and learning use of that given technology or environment. It is implicitly assumed in the book that SL, being an innovative multi-purpose technology and environment, not necessarily conceived of or used for learning, should not be used in teaching/learning contexts simply because it is a new technology, but because of its capability of providing the learning process with an added value from a pedagogical point of view. To state it differently, as a question: *what can be done through SL that cannot be done (in the same way or at the same level of success) by means of other more traditional or conventional methods/technologies?* The whole book is a multi-faceted answer to this question. SL is a virtual world, a kind of “empty” space, a form without a content, so this book aims at filling this gap by providing this empty space with pedagogically relevant content, and, in so doing, it also meets the need of a learning and teaching community that is eager to learn how to use the new technology successfully and learn what to do with it and in it. That is probably why Graham Davies, in his preface, believes that “the publication of this book is timely”: indeed, there is need for books like this to fill technology with the required pedagogical content.” Davies, like the book, also advocates for the urgent need to equip both learners and teachers with sufficient training and background information to use the technology appropriately when teaching or learning.

The book features case studies of successful educational projects that use SL as a teaching or learning environment within different fields (computer science, languages, culture, art, literature, among many others), some of them linked to the Scandinavian “Kamino Education Island” in SL. It also includes discussions on theoretical issues and practical ideas that may be relevant or useful when using SL for education. The structure of the book is divided in two parts: Pedagogic Design (part 1) and Learning Projects (part 2). This division could be misleading up to a certain point, since both of them include cases of learning projects together with more theoretically-oriented reflections on pedagogical design and other related pedagogical issues, and, moreover, the first and the last chapters could be regarded as a general introduction and as a conclusion to the whole book, respectively. Each chapter starts with an overview or introduction which acts as a research paper abstract and finishes with a bibliography. Although the titles of the chapters are quite self-explanatory for the specific topic or field at hand, some ideas and concepts are recurrent throughout the book, such as collaborative learning, learning by doing, interactive approach to teaching/learning, social learning, authentic communication, affective aspects of learning, active methodologies, enhanced motivation, among many others. It must be pointed out that this recurrence is not a weakness in this particular publication, since it presents a series of case studies discussed by researchers with apparently similar degrees of commitment to active and innovative teaching methodologies. But such an iteration may add a bit of confusion should the reader wish to reflect upon those pedagogical ideas and concepts in depth and on an individual basis (one after the other), rather than concentrate on the analysis of the case studies and their educational contexts. Having said that, the pedagogical topics and related theoretical aspects are dealt with in a remarkably insightful manner and with the necessary theoretical background, i.e. based on relevant literature or logical reasoning.

One of the many levels at which the book may be read and analysed is from a procedural perspective, i.e. as a manual showing the prospective SL user some useful technical and pedagogical guidelines, together with plenty of useful tips that will be of use for the reader when SL is actually implemented in practice. Even if the reader has never had a hands-on involvement in SL, s/he can still get an overview about what SL is and what it implies. Some brief fragments resemble instructions for the good use of SL in learning, which makes the book even more versatile. We also find several examples of detailed and clear explanations of SL-specific terms and expressions, which is a very welcome feature given the often complex metalanguage used within this virtual world (for e.g. prims, sims, etc.). In this respect, a general and separate list of acronyms or SL vocabulary would have been very useful. At various points in the book the authors express their concern about the need for students and teachers to become familiarised with the virtual environment prior to their educational experiences. Another welcome characteristic of the book is that the contributors show a high degree of knowledge on SL, making it clear that they have experienced the environment and thus speak out of experience, as opposed to embracing unrealistic pedagogical expectations. This is yet another advantage when it comes to the dissemination of expertise on a relatively new technology.

Answering the research question posed implicitly by the book (*Can SL provide a pedagogically sound added value in teaching and learning?*), the general conclusion, which is present throughout the book, that can be drawn in positive response to this question, is that SL has a wealth of pedagogical possibilities to efficiently implement active methodologies and action learning at many levels, in many fields and from many different perspectives. The case studies presented here demonstrate this positive answer to the research question. Moreover, this pedagogical potential of SL will very likely be improved and extended in the near future. Like other

innovative approaches, it also implies a shift in the traditional roles of learners and teachers. To sum up briefly, SL enables learners and teachers not only to do things they could do before in a more efficient way, but also to do things that were impossible before in the field of education. But if we are to take full advantage of its many possibilities, it is necessary to be familiar with the new technology or environment in depth, being aware of its weak and strong points; in other words, investigating what it can do best and worst. And books like this are necessary precisely because they help us to get to know the technology better and analyse it from a pedagogical perspective.

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