

# Workshop on New Learning Environments 7-8 June 2002, Copenhagen

## Session 4

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*The I4LL online language learning environment*

### Summary of the presentation

I4LL is currently under development developed at the Language Centre of Gent University. ICT materials are far more expensive than the traditional ones, cooperation and the possibility of sharing experiences are therefore crucial for further development of electronic learning environments and language teaching content. The most important reason why we have to invest in ICT, despite of well-known obstacles like reluctance of staff and high maintenance costs, is that ICT is a part of our society. If we reflect on language teaching, we should also reflect on the role of ICT in language pedagogy, to find out which elements really enhance language pedagogy (the added value of ICT).

The components of the I4LL learning environment are:

- 1) Authoring Tool, supported by a Scenario Tool. In this way the teacher is also being trained in producing CALL materials. The teacher can use predefined templates (at the present moment 20 templates have been produced; every template corresponds to a particular exercise type), but he can also change the template (e.g. by giving the feedback at the end of the exercise and not after every answer). A lot of work has also been spent in formulating the messages given by the computer to the students. Through the Preview function teachers may see the exercises as they will appear to the students.
- 2) Repository Tool, a database where the materials are stored and described by metadata, based both on IMS standards and on the CEF. This means that it is much easier to share materials with other teachers and to look for materials (e.g. materials for a specific language skill at a certain level), a great advantage for both students and teachers. To ensure uniformity, only the last 2 parts of the codes are language dependent. In the system everything is an object: imagines, exercises and courses. Information at all levels can be provided. To keep teachers' work simple, a distinction has been made between two categories information: what a teacher should/would normally know and "advanced". For the materials of the Language Centre the basic work unit is a 30 minutes one; every unit must be described with metadata.
- 3) Repository Preparation Tool, a tool which helps the teacher to code the materials and create a structured learning path.

- 4) Scoring and Tracking Tool, to keep track of students' activities and achievements. Apparently this seems paradoxical, but tracking can help the implementation of autonomous learning, because the teacher has a clear overview of the learners' progress.
- 5) Communication Platform, a forum containing different spaces (e.g. for communication on class, group and personal level)
- 6) Administration Tool, to manage the information about registration and payment. Systems like Blackboard or Web-CT have particularly strong communication and administration tools, this is way the Language Centre decided to give priority to the Authoring Tool and the other parts of the I4LL system.

I4LL is among other used for a project between the Flemish Government and Slowakija. For this project three versions of the exercises have been produced: very similar to the book, tailored for self-access and with a high degree of interactivity.

Some final thoughts about students' attitude towards these programs. The experience is that young students lack computer experiences, despite of what is normally believed. This is something to take into account by deciding to introduce ICT materials in the curriculum. Secondly, such a course costs students much more time than a traditional course. Usually students wait until the end of the year, then they start studying for the exam, but this way of working is not compatible with the use of an electronic environment.

### Summary of the discussion

The reason why the Language Centre decided to develop the I4LL system is because existing tools lacked the needed sophisticated authoring possibilities of I4LL in combination with the repository tools and the tracking system.

Students at the Language Centre follow three weeks courses: in week 1 they work with the computer, in week 2 there is classroom work, in week 3 computer work. There was a lot of fall-out due to technical reasons (lack of familiarity with ICT). Therefore next year orientation sessions at the beginning of the course will be introduced.

### Summary of the presentation

Blackboard was introduced at the Erasmus Hogeschool in Brussel at the beginning of 2000. The secret of the success of this digital learning environment is the user-friendliness; it is very easy to learn to use it. The features of Blackboard 5 Learning System are: course management, building blocks, advanced integration and system management, community portal system, transaction system. (see <http://products.blackboard.com/> for more information). The Course Management System of Blackboard has course and content authoring tools, assessment tools and management tools. For communication there are different possibilities:

E-mail

Virtual Classroom

Discussion Board

Group pages

- group discussion board
- group virtual classroom
- file exchange

Dropbox

It is possible to create different groups, which have access to specific communication facilities. Interesting to know, the synchronous communication function (Virtual Classroom) will be changed in the next version of Blackboard, because it is not used. The new strategy of Blackboard is: plug-in the software that you need ("add-ons", see also <http://buildingblocks.blackboard.com>). Among the software that you can plug in there asynchronous voice tools ([www.wimba.com](http://www.wimba.com)), web conferencing ([www.centra.com](http://www.centra.com)) and support for Problem Based Learning (Polaris). There are now 30-40 projects dealing with building blocks.

The release of Blackboard Multilingual Edition is expected for the summer 2002; now the interface is only in English, but with the Multilingual Edition it will be possible to "translate" the interface (features: language customisation for user interface, language preference for content, local specification) in German, Japanese, Chinese, French and Spanish (Portuguese, Italian and other languages are currently under development).

Blackboard is used at the Erasmus Hogeschool also for language teaching, in a 4-years Master in translation and interpreting (different languages). Teachers use Blackboard to distribute handouts of lectures and for project-oriented activities. They also use Question Mark Perception, now building block for Blackboard: in the past years 6000 questions for 7 languages have been developed. Every student must complete 2 exercises every week; these self study exercises (20 items each)

are a supplement for the classroom teaching. The advantages are clear: students can make the exercises as many times as they want, they get immediate feedback and can consult their results online. An interesting example of the use of Blackboard is the course on bilingualism and multimedia. Objectives of these course are to increase bilingual vocabulary (Dutch/French) and to appeal to the young television generation through the use of video excerpts. For instance, in the unit about bank and finance (see handout) students first have to look a short videofilm with subtitles, then look again without subtitles and then they get specific vocabulary activities and exercises, and they also have to take part in a discussion forum.

Conclusion: Blackboard offers a lot of possibilities for language teaching:

- communication
- organization of course
- flexible in time and place
- building blocks offer opportunities to create plug-ins for authoring, content management, assessment

### Summary of the discussion

Some issues related to the use of Blackboard for language teaching:

- Time investment. In the example of the course on bilingualism and multimedia the teacher got 30% of his time free to develop the materials. It is clear that a lot of investment is needed to produce sophisticated teaching materials.
- Software costs. A Blackboard license is expensive.
- Pedagogical issues. These systems are teacher-centred. The trend now is putting the learner at the centre. In deciding how to use Blackboard and similar programs for language teaching, the learner perspective should be chosen. Can students for instance choose a learning path? It is certainly possible to structure Blackboard courses in a learner-oriented way, but it is very attractive to use Blackboard in a traditional way. As a consequence, the drill & kill approach tends to dominate. The point is that these systems are used by teachers who apply traditional pedagogical approaches; so the problem is not so much in the system, but in the user. However, even for language teachers with a good pedagogical background it may be difficult to implement new pedagogical views within these systems. There is a clear need for examples of good-practices.
- Reuse of materials. In Blackboard is possible to copy courses and to reuse them, which saves time: once you have designed the course structure, you can apply it many times, but every time you have to upload new documents.