

News on New Learning Environments
ELC Conference Aarhus
Workshop 2, Session 2
Friday 27 June, 14.30-16.00 hrs

Language Learning and Technology: Is the honeymoon over?

Session chair: Ana Gimeno-Sanz, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, ES

Presentation: Valère Meus, Universiteit Gent, BE

1st Response: Christine Appel, Dublin City University, IE

2nd Response: Tim Crook, Universidad Autónoma, Barcelona, ES

Rapporteur: Sake Jager, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, NL

Introduction: The chair introduced the subject explaining that the presentation reflected the work undertaken by the TNP-subgroup 2 on New Learning Environments (NLEs) and that the workshop was part of the dissemination of the TNP results. She also pointed out that, since the presentation was made available beforehand to the audience, the group would particularly welcome suggestions and answers to the questions which were raised in the document.

Presentation: Valère Meus introduced the subject to the audience, particularly concentrating on issues that needed further discussion. He briefly discussed that NLEs involve both technology and human resources, a pedagogy based on independent language learning philosophies. Prerequisites for successful use include sound infrastructure, staff and student training and institutional support policies. If any of these elements are missing, successful deployment will be impossible. The questions to be answered include: Should technology reach everyone; are students ready for autonomous learning; what will be the impact of computer-mediated communication? Who are the keyplayers; what are their roles? How can we find a balance between classroom learning and distance learning? Which literacies are required? A copy of the presentation is available at: <http://www.sprog.asb.dk/elc2003/Workshop2.htm>

1st Response: Christine Appel argued that virtual learning environments can support LL in several ways, some of which need further exploration. She specifically mentioned the opportunities for implementing two methodological principles from SLA-theory: Providing an opportunity for *focus on meaning*, while allowing for *focus on form* at the same time. She also expressed considerable concern about the domination on the market of commercial programs such as Blackboard and WebCT, which are not perfectly suited for language learning and cannot be modified in ways that might be more amenable to language learning. As an example she mentioned the fact that they close off course materials to the outside community (because of strict registration policies), thereby making community learning or reaching out to native speakers virtually impossible. In view of this, she made a strong case for open source software which can be modified by the language teaching community in linguistically relevant ways and which does not have the restrictions associated with the major commercial platforms.

2nd Response: Tim Crook discussed NLEs both from his experience as a student who had participated in an on-line language advising course and as a language teacher attempting to introduce new technologies. He explained that participating in an on-line environment can be very daunting. Since you may not know about the abilities of your fellow-students you may be insecure about personal achievement. He emphasized that successful use requires absolute clarity about assessment criteria from the very start, but above all creating a sense of community and the realization that you have to achieve something as a group. In addition a whole range of cognitive, social and technical skills are required which may have to developed as part of the course. Drawing on his experience as a language teacher in Spain he explained that his attempts at using technology as part of the language classes had failed because he did not pay sufficient attention to just these details. He concluded by stating that the use of NLEs involves:

- Substantial support for learners, also psychological, to take away insecurity about using NLEs.
- Support for teachers to develop successful applications of NLEs
- Special attention to the attributes of the learning materials
- Clear evaluation criteria

Discussion: The presentation and responses spurred off considerable debate. The issue raised by Appel about open-source programs remained largely unresolved but there was considerable support for easy-to-use systems, allowing simple integration of authentic language learning materials. Ole Lauridsen (Aarhus) remarked that the Business School's Campusnet system was particularly well-suited to attract less computer-literate (language) teachers and that it could be adapted if needed. Ana Gimeno pointed to the inherent danger of reinventing the wheel. In fact, three members in the TNP subgroup had been involved in different projects, each developing their own particular authoring system for language learning. Valère Meus pointed out that what is needed is standardization and the exchange of content. Specifically for language learning, the University of Ghent has developed a coding system based on the Common European Framework. Upon a question from Vicky Wright (Southampton), he made clear that the system is available for anyone wanting to use it. Jim Coleman (OU, UK) pointed to a system (Lyceum) recently developed by the OU which has many features that language learners and teachers are looking for. It has advanced facilities for task design, research into CMC, etc.

With respect to Tim Crook's response, it was pointed out that negative experiences with technology-enhanced learning may considerably throw back the field. A recent failure in the Barcelona area, which involved many learners who had paid dearly for on-line multimedia courses and were not refunded when the company went bankrupt, was used as an illustration. If anything, Christine Appel remarked, this shows that language learning cannot be the sole responsibility of commercial companies. It was also pointed out that students' expectations about technology may be misguided completely, for instance when they expect technology-enhanced learning to be quicker and to require minimal effort. Another inherent danger of new technology that was pointed out: the digital divide: e.g. when African students do not have the necessary skills or access to use

technology. It was pointed out that the skills problem may be solved, but access may remain problematic.

Recommendations: At the end of the workshop a number of useful recommendations were made:

1. There is considerable need to share expertise. A channel of dissemination should be established.
2. Institutional backing is essential. University language policies should pay attention to this element too.
3. There is a definite need for standardization of language learning materials (content-based coding systems, etc).
4. The ELC should be taking a leading role in developing these issues further.