

## **WORKSHOP 2, SESSION 2**

### **LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY – IS THE HONEYMOON OVER?**

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#### **DESCRIPTION**

Supporting language learning with new technologies can only lead to the creation of effective new learning environments (NLEs) if some important requirements are met, i.e. if learners and teachers are prepared to integrate new technologies in the learning/teaching process; if technical resources, infrastructure and support are explicit parts of a larger policy that guarantees easy access to learners and teachers; and if learners are stimulated to take control of the learning process and to analyse their needs. These issues will be illustrated with examples from ongoing innovative projects in the fields of language learning and new technologies.

#### **PRESENTATION**

The honeymoon hasn't even started. We got engaged some time ago and we are now fully aware that there is no turning back because we have committed ourselves to a future where technology and languages necessarily go together. We are living in that phase where we are still getting to know each other, trying to decide who will take on which role within the engagement.

First of all we have to take into account who the main players are and how their roles have necessarily changed regarding language learning and teaching in higher education.

#### *Policy makers*

Acknowledging the importance of language learning and cultural awareness within the EU is the first step towards creating policies that support the development of new learning environments. Accordingly, an increasing number of European HE institutions offer students a wide range of language courses, both integrated within the academic syllabus and as an extension in the form of extracurricular activities. Many universities are building independent language centres and self-access centres/facilities to cater for the increasing demand of language courses in all disciplines.

Action research on the implementation of new learning environments is slowly taking place at university management level. Policy-makers are starting to set up schemes and action programmes in order to improve the quality of teaching and to introduce innovation programmes aimed at satisfying the new demands of society.

It is becoming clear that not all of these demands and needs can be met within the 'normal' curricula and that especially in higher and adult education, learners will have to adjust to a new regime of self-directed learning that involves fewer contact hours and more interaction with other learners, often on-line. Only in this way are policy makers prepared to offer the wide array of courses needed in the future Europe, where students will be allowed to choose courses in a large number of -often smaller- European languages.

This relates to new job profiles: how to find and pay for people who are good at languages and at computers at the same time and who can combine the technological innovations with the content driven needs of teachers and learners, and still arrive at a stable, reliable and intuitive environment? Another major challenge is to include materials development in the tasks of teachers and to train them to become coaches and course administrators rather than just 'teachers' who transfer knowledge.

### *Teachers*

The integration of new learning environments very much depends on factors such as substantial funding programmes, appropriate infrastructure, availability of human resources, etc. Language teachers must be motivated in order to invest a considerable amount of time and effort in setting up innovation schemes that will lead to different types of learning environments. Resistance to change is still a major factor that hinders the widespread integrated use of technology and often it is inspired by insecurity and/or lack of training and support. Since one of the key components is technology itself, every effort must be made on behalf of governments and institutions to provide teachers with all the means that will allow them to explore and experiment within their discipline.

The role of language teachers is also changing to a certain extent. Practice work in networked multimedia labs/language centres has now been included in many official curricula, and ideally should enable the teacher to become a tutor and facilitator, encouraging a learner-centred approach to language learning. Unfortunately, the teacher cannot always fall back to clear models and examples of the new pedagogical thinking, often leading to 'safe', i.e. traditional approaches, transferred to a new technological environment. Even so, the traditional role of the teacher as the centre of the class and sole active component is disappearing. The teacher now provides all the means available in order to enable students to find their own particular learning style and work at their own pace. Traditional exam papers are also giving way to project work, online assignments through electronic forums and continuous assessment.

### *Students*

For students, the trend in Europe is moving towards creating multimedia centres/labs. to support autonomous and self-directed learning, of which face-to-face tutorials are a part, using off-the-shelf software designed for language learning and for other disciplines.

The majority of institutions have made internet, e-mail and intranet facilities, available and they are used within the framework of task-based activities where access is both to "outside" material and to institutionally-based (self-made) subject and/or language materials. Task-based and thematic-based learning has developed especially in relation to the prominent disciplines of the institutions themselves (science, horticulture, engineering, etc.).

Where multimedia centres exist, their use is usually mostly an integral part of the language programme. In 'traditional' university language departments, such centres are less often fully integrated than in more practice-oriented language centres and adult education. Even there, however, 'newer' learning environments resulting from ICT applications such as computer mediated conferencing (virtual campus), video conferencing, etc. cannot be said to represent the norm yet.

### **SOME MAJOR QUESTIONS THAT MAY BE DEALT WITH DURING THE WORKSHOP SESSION**

*What are the target groups we are talking about when we talk about technology in language learning? How representative are they of the total group of learners? Should technology reach everyone?*

The target groups are the learners themselves, who have to adapt their learning styles and become more self-directed; teachers, who will have to be encouraged to integrate ICT into their daily teaching practice and be trained to make use of new pedagogical practices; and HE institutions themselves that have to provide the resources to aid students and teachers in this process. The learners we have in mind are mainly non-linguistics oriented students (students of other disciplines) and learners in adult education.

*To what extent is technology innovation limited in scope and not yet mainstream implementation? Who are the people who want technological innovation?*

Technology innovation is limited in scope in the sense that innovation does not come from technology itself, but from the methodologies and pedagogies guiding its use. In order to be effective, the introduction of NLEs must be driven by innovative ideas regarding teaching and learning.

ICT supported language learning is in no way mainstream. All the efforts in creating NLEs, including developing pedagogically sound and technologically robust web-delivered or on-line CALL authoring tools, are still isolated efforts which depend on individuals or small groups of individuals cooperating together. At the moment these developments very much depend on the person's enthusiasm and belief in progress and change. The tools do exist, but the lack of mainstream implementation is often still used as an excuse not to innovate too much.

*Technological innovation should also imply pedagogical innovation. This means we should go for integration rather than for remediation (add-in vs. add-on). But policymakers are not always ready for this. How serious is the resistance to change?*

There are two main "models" according to which NLEs are implemented in language education:

1. The ADD-ON model, which tends to consider the new environment as additional to the existing structure and practice, i.e. no changes in the existing system are necessary; and
2. The ADD-IN model, where NLEs are integrated into the existing system thus causing changes in its structure and in professional development.

The first model is characterised by a more unsystematic use of NLEs in the sense that the use is typically based on individual initiative. Often the existing practice is transferred to the NLE as it is primarily for economic reasons. The second model is often a collaborative effort based on institutional strategies and the outcome often leads to pedagogical innovation. There is a tendency for institutions to pass through the first model in their pursuit of the second, unless proper pedagogical preparation and training is available. The environments, however, are only as good as their underpinning learning ethos. Thus, many universities which emulate networked learning and the development of virtual campuses often end up trying to reproduce real university learning environments based on very traditional models of knowledge transmission. The same applies to language education. The changes in the attitudes, initiative, and approaches required from both learners and teachers in order to manage knowledge and skill construction together in a reciprocal partnership, while using new technologies in a flexible way, are substantial in nature and can only be implemented over a considerable period of time.

*How crucial should on-line courses be in our educational process? What is the relationship with 'traditional' classroom teaching?*

Language learning should never solely rely on on-line courses (or CD-ROMs, for that matter). They should be seen as an enriching supplement to one of the most complex acquisition processes –that of second/foreign language acquisition. There has to be a balance between the role of technology and that of more traditional classroom teaching, which cannot be replaced in many ways by technology, unless, of course, the distance learning model is chosen. Total distance learning requires many additional technological and pedagogical safeguards in order to be workable, however.

*How to avoid dependence on ICT experts (programmers, server administrators, maintenance people). How reliable is the technology?*

One way of avoiding dependence on ICT experts is precisely by creating pedagogically-sound, intuitive-to-use web-delivered CALL dedicated authoring tools that teachers can use in order to create a pool of materials, resources, etc. A number of examples will be referred to during the workshop session. Using such tools, teachers generally do not need the assistance of ICT experts to create technology-enhanced language learning materials, but there continues to be a definitive need for training teachers to use the new technologies effectively in methodologically-coherent ways. In addition, in order to achieve any sustained use of new technologies for language learning, institutions should provide adequate support in terms of infrastructure and assistance.

*Technology can be made reliable, but can we convince enough people to really start using them?*

In many ways all the necessary technology is now available at affordable prices to integrate ICT fully in language learning. We are now faced with the task of encouraging teachers to use it as part of their everyday teaching practice. This means creating new educational patterns and procedures, and abandoning others. Above all, it means investing in change and taking charge of new responsibilities. Both learners and teachers commonly resent change because it makes them face an unknown situation where the risk of failure is perceived as high. The solution lies probably in making the technology as intuitive as possible and presenting teachers and learners alike with both simple and more advanced models and examples allowing them to start by adapting these models and progressively moving towards more complex situations where completely new models are created in their full complexity from scratch using e.g. pre-programmed templates. It is this changeover from initial insecurity to confident competence that must be translated into step-by-step learning procedures for both learners and teachers. Once people feel they can still be themselves in the new environments and are even given new opportunities, their initial resistance will melt away.

*What software is (should be) available to really start implementing technology?*

One of the drawbacks of modern technology is that the pace of evolution is so high. People barely have time to adjust to a given piece of software before they have to change over to a completely new version. New virtual learning environments such as Blackboard, WebCT and Merlin take considerable effort to get to know but are in some ways limited in their possibilities, because they have been designed following top down rather than bottom up principles. This means that they provide many possibilities within the overall administrative/organisational sphere (assignment of courses, e-mail facilities, linking to other websites), but they are much less useful when it comes to providing e.g. extensive authoring facilities or detailed fine tuning according to specific needs. They are too discipline-independent and often not dedicated enough for language learning. And that may lead to unnecessary frustrations.

*Does language learning/teaching require implementation strategies that are different from other forms of technology supported learning/teaching?*

One of the differences between language learning and other disciplines is that language skills are never an aim in itself, but vehicles that can be used in specific contexts. An assignment in language learning is always about a particular topic which is often the aim itself in other disciplines. This means that e.g. interaction between learners in electronic forums need to focus both on the language elements and on the contexts in which they are used. These contexts need to be made authentic and have to have real value for students of e.g. other disciplines. This makes the implementation strategies much more difficult for language learning and creates a need for far more sophisticated and dedicated authoring tools (including, sound, video, images and animation, voice recording, ...) than for other disciplines.

*The use of standard vs custom-built technologies (dedicated language learning environments) and how can dedicated language learning environments be linked to generic Virtual Learning Environments (Blackboard, WebCT, ...)*

Some of the issues here have been dealt with above. The bottom up approach of dedicated software needs to be integrated with the top down approach of the major commercial VLEs. Fortunately, it is often possible to provide such links and integration, and the commercial providers of VLEs have begun efforts to deal with the problems, even though the process is often still far from intuitive. Even so, both types of software will continue to be needed for a considerable period of time

*The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) in a technological context.*

One of the problems with existing materials is the transferability across systems. Organisations such as the IMS Global Learning consortium endeavour to promote the widespread adoption of specifications that will allow distributed learning environments and content from multiple authors to be compatible (compare in this respect the RTF file format for text processing). The technological codes that describe these specifications have been worked out by IMS and now enjoy wide acceptance, but in terms of content specifications too, standards have to be worked out by the various disciplines. Within Europe, the most widely accepted reference for language learning at present is the CEF. This document provides a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. For instance, at the University of Gent codes have been derived that can be used by developers to express their concrete learning objectives in a largely language independent manner. This means that the materials themselves can also be coded in the same way. At Ghent University and in the Digitalenklas project these codes have been made operational as part of larger software applications.

#### **EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE THAT WILL BE ILLUSTRATED DURING THE WORKSHOP**

##### *1. Digitalenklas and Ellips*

Digitalenklas ("Digital Language Classroom") is a two-year project funded by four Dutch universities (Utrecht, Leiden, Groningen, Tilburg) and the Dutch HE organization for network services and ICT, SURF. The project aims to further the use of computers in the learning of languages in higher education in the Netherlands. The focus is on the use of VLEs such as Blackboard and WebCT in conjunction with specifically designed software for language learning. The languages involved include English, Spanish, Dutch and Arabic.

One of the key elements of the project is the fact that the universities involved have decided to work together in determining how to employ technology effectively for language learning. The collaboration during the first phase of the project, which set out to design and implement language learning materials for the generic VLE's Blackboard and WebCT, generated many ideas for innovative language teaching methods, several of which (such as the use of webquests) have been implemented in the course of the project. In addition, we have dealt with many practical issues to do with the use of technology, which we feel would have been less successfully dealt with by the universities on their own.

Collaboration is also a distinguishing feature of the web-based language learning program Ellips, which we have developed as part of the project. Given the relatively high cost of developing on-line learning materials, we wanted teachers in the universities involved to be able to exchange and re-use materials already available. In the future, we want to involve more teachers in using the materials, as well as students, who should be able to make their own selections of relevant materials.

This calls for a uniform descriptive mechanism, which is transparent to both teachers and students. We turned to the Common European Framework for Language Learning (CEF) for developing the descriptors needed. For this

we were able to use the system described above, which was designed by the Language Centre of Ghent University. The use of this system is particularly relevant for our purposes, since Dutch universities have agreed to use the CEF as the basis for describing language proficiency at tertiary level. It is too early to report on the use of this system in actual teaching situations, but we hope that the use of this system and a number of other features of the program will set the stage for larger scale cooperation between universities to develop innovative, technology-enhanced language learning materials.

More information about the project can be found at:

<http://www.let.uu.nl/digitalenklas> (in Dutch)

## 2. *WELCOME and I4LL*

Welcome is a one-year Lingua 2 project that has just ended. It aimed at the development of five linguistic and cultural preparation courses (EE, ES, FI, NL, PT) for exchange students in higher education. These courses were developed as on-line courses to give exchange students the opportunity to become familiar with the language and culture of their host institutions before they leave their home institutions.

The language courses were developed according to a language-independent format, which was defined in accordance with the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages proposed by the Council of Europe. This makes it relatively easy to develop additional courses for languages not covered in the project. The units making up the courses were produced with the I4LL Authoring Tool designed by the Language Centre of Ghent.

The development of various learner supported tools (a communication forum with workspaces at various levels, hyper-dictionaries and generic hyper-reference tools (e.g. a grammar for each of the languages) formed an integral part of the project and the overall language independent learning environment.

More information can be found at:

Welcome project: [http://www.taalnet.ugent.be/Description\\_of\\_Welcome.pdf](http://www.taalnet.ugent.be/Description_of_Welcome.pdf)

I4LL online learning environment and authoring tool:

[http://www.taalnet.ugent.be/on\\_line\\_model.pdf](http://www.taalnet.ugent.be/on_line_model.pdf)

The WelcomeWeb Course site can be accessed at:

<http://talenc29.UGent.be/welcomeweb/>

To log in use *Welcome* as the username and *Project* as the password.

## 3. *The IN6ENIO On-line Authoring Shell, Content Manager and Learning Environment*

*Proyecto IN6ENIO* is an R+D project, entirely funded by the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, which has been designed and developed by the CAMILLE Research Group led by Ana Gimeno. The project has two basic practical aims. On the one hand, to create a language independent, on-line multimedia CALL authoring shell, and on the other, an on-line learning environment offering courseware designed and created with the *IN6ENIO* authoring tool.

The authoring shell, which is open to registered users completely free of charge, enables teachers to create entirely new language courses or to build upon existing materials contained within the system's database. The materials embedded in the system comprise the *IN6ENIO* database and are hosted on a central server. When registered, teachers may access the database and feed their own newly created courseware with materials taken

from the archive. The materials can be accessed as isolated multimedia components (video, audio or image files) or as readymade exercises or reference materials. Courseware-design is based on the template approach to CALL authoring. At the moment 14 exercise templates are available, as well as templates to design reference materials such as grammar, use of language or culture notes, in addition to bi- or monolingual dictionaries.

Registered learners of the courses created with the *IN6ENIO* authoring shell have access to the entire on-line learning environment. Currently two courses are available: an intermediate level course for learners of Valencian –*Valencià Interactiu Grau Mitjà*– and an intermediate English course called *Intermediate Online English*.

Within the courses, in addition to receiving appropriate feedback, learners can call up progress reports to monitor their work at any point during the learning process since the relevant data is automatically transferred to the server while the materials are in use.

The *IN6ENIO* multimedia CALL authoring shell and on-line learning environment are unique in the sense that all the components are managed via the web. The system is completely machine independent, allowing teachers to work from any computer at hand. It is an extremely versatile and flexible open system that can be constantly updated and improved.

For more information: <http://camille.upv.es> (in Spanish)

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