

Title of example of practice: Effective language delivery through ICT

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Institution and initiating department/faculty

(i.e. where example of practice takes/took place):

Leiden University, University of Groningen, University of Tilburg, Radboud University Nijmegen, University of Utrecht;
Centre for Excellence in Multimedia Language Learning, (CEMLL) University of Ulster;
European University Foundation - Campus Eeuropae, Luxembourg, with the following partners:
University of Greifswald, Germany; University of Alcalá de Henares, Spain; University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia; Vienna University, Austria; Lodz University, Poland; Technical University of Lodz, Poland;
University of Aveiro, Portugal; Joensuu University, Finland; Gazi University and University of Ankara, Ankara, Turkey; Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania; European Humanities University, Vilnius, Lithuania; University of Novi Sad, Serbia, St. Petersburg State University, University of Trento, University of Nancy, University of Luxembourg

Departments/faculties in which initiative implemented/to be implemented:

As above

Abstract

(QA question: What are/were you trying to do?)

In this case study we describe three initiatives aimed at developing and/or evaluating ICT-supported language learning environments in higher education. One initiative (Campus Europae) is an ongoing project, in the other two cases we report about projects that have already led to successful implantation of ICT based learning environments in the participating institutions.

In the past years, many initiatives have been undertaken at different institutions, aimed at increasing the effectiveness of higher education language programmes through ICT. In many cases,

ICT is implemented in short-term pilot projects, sometimes in cooperation with other institutions. Since these projects very often rely on external funding, sustainability and broader implementation after the end of the project are key issues. From a more theoretical point of view, different studies report about benefits of ICT for language learning. ICT offers valuable opportunities for autonomous language learning, language testing and authentic interaction through exposure to the foreign language.

Since ICT implementation is expensive, funding and financial support are critical areas. To maximise the impact of the activities, projects based on cooperation and sharing and dissemination of resources should be encouraged. Moreover, in this way teaching staff at different HE institutions is stimulated to exchange results and share experiences in using technology in teaching and also in applying innovative pedagogical approaches. The three initiatives described below represent different ways of putting cooperation and dissemination into practice.

In the UK, the CEMLL was set up in 2005 to establish and evaluate a variety of technology-enhanced language learning methods and to assess their impact on the learners as well as to integrate multimedia technologies into the learning and teaching environment in order to facilitate greater normalization of the technology. Dissemination is one of the key factors. It seeks to bring together good practice examples from HEIs across the UK and disseminate these as widely as possible to ensure benefits to the teaching and learning process can be maximized.

In the Netherlands, five universities worked together from 2005 to 2008 in the INTUIT (English tuition through IT) project. The aim of the project was to create and implement an ICT-supported learning environment for English at the university language centres of the participating institutions. The principles of languages learning autonomy and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) were an important point of departure for the project. Cooperation and sharing resources is one of the key factors.

The university network of Campus Europae (CE) started in 2008 the development of an ICT-based collaborative learning environment enabling students involved in year abroad programmes to access tuition in languages including those not taught at their home universities. The specific objective is to have students reach a B1 level as soon as possible to maximise the learning experience abroad which is a condition for the award of the CE Certificate and/or the CE Degree. CE is a network, cooperation, sharing of resources and transfer of know-how among different partners is also at the basis of the ICT activities.

Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative

(QA questions: Why are/were you trying to do it? / What are/were the aims and objectives?)

The common objective of these three initiatives is increasing the effectiveness of language learning instruction using ICT. In other words, creating a language learning environment in which ICT resources are effectively integrated with other forms of language instruction.

The common elements of these approaches are:

- ICT is not used exclusively for distance learning and does not replace classroom instruction; rather it reinforces language progress in a so-called “blended” approach;
- a range of ICT applications are used, not only one application.

The common quality question is: how can ICT enhance language learning? ICT can be effectively used to support language courses and autonomous learning after course completion, if it

- allows easier access to resources and learning materials (including languages not taught face to face in the immediate environment)
- facilitates differentiation (students can learn at their own pace, with materials that fit their level)
- enhances feedback and monitoring, because teachers can easily access students’ products
- facilitates authentic interaction in foreign languages (e.g. through asynchronous and synchronous communication, both written and oral, via e-mail, chatting, audio- and videoconferencing, audiofora, etc.)

- helps teachers to compare different technology-based approaches and choose the best option for their own situation (e.g. through websites with information and evaluation about different experiences)

In the case of CEMLL, the main aims were

1. establishing a range of ICT-based teaching and learning practices and evaluate their effectiveness within the institution;
2. facilitating the creation of a critical mass of ICT-based teaching and learning resources and banks of practice-based examples across the UK.

At Dutch universities, the growing number of MA-courses taught in English has increased the need for language support among staff and students, especially for speaking and writing skills. Students entering BA-programs usually master English at B1-B2 level, but C1 is required for MA-courses. Since in the majority of cases no time is reserved for compulsory English instruction at BA-level, students need to learn in short courses (12-13 week, 2-3 hours per week) at university language centres how to autonomously improve their English skills.

Campus Europae requires that students spend two years abroad in different countries and learn two foreign languages, however often their schools and home universities do not offer language learning possibilities in all 12 languages of the network. Time and financial constraints do not enable travel months before the academic year to learn the language onsite and available 1 month language courses do not enable for students to reach a sufficiently high level to follow the subject oriented courses. The network had to find a solution: ICT can support offering language learning opportunities independently of the human resources in each university, independently of time and space constraints and early enough to enable quick progression.

Description of activity or initiative

(QA question: How is/was the activity/initiative implemented?)

A range of learning activities have been designed and evaluated by the CEMLL in different projects. The findings of each evaluation are documented in a final report and published online. For instance, to support the year abroad the CEMLL team created an electronic support area for monitoring student progress. This area allows students to submit regular reports, download documents and destination support notes and complete forms online to ensure effective monitoring of student progress. This is also complemented by the creation of an online synchronous chatroom that enables students to engage in virtual pastoral support meetings (with the tutor offering consultation hours online each evening).

In the Netherlands, pilot sessions with students were set up to investigate how language learner autonomy could be reinforced by a range of ICT applications, both for learning and testing (like Dialang). All institutions used the same learning environment, Blackboard. All relevant learning materials were put together in a special area in Blackboard, the online Language Tool Box, created during the project. Students could access English language proficiency tools in three categories: self-assessment, practice and reference. For instance, students were encouraged to self-assess their oral skills using an online version of the European Language Portfolio. Then they were asked to practice by recording short monologues about academic topics (by using audiofora or other online tools) and making them available to the teacher, who gave written feedback. As a reference, they could access video fragments of academic lectures about different subjects.

In the Campus Europae initiative, the aim is to create an online platform to support learning of the 12 languages of the network combining various types of learning environments: self-study, group/individual tutoring online and face to face, online and face to face classroom, using various existing tools and approaches: tandem, learning assistants, collaborative learning opportunities and production of learning material, etc. The virtual language environment used is Moodle together with web 2.0 tools. Virtual learning is "hooked" with formal (CE/ERASMUS courses, semester university courses), and informal language learning environments (polyglot cafés, Tandems, participation in local activities), continued after the period abroad.

Evaluative comments

(QA questions: What are/were the outcomes? What is/was the impact? Is/was the activity/initiative successful? How do you know whether or not it works/worked?)

In the Dutch and UK projects, which have already been trialled out, outcomes were set in advance, e.g. during the design of the pilot with students. The qualitative and quantitative data provided by student questionnaires and the monitoring of student performance in pre- and post-test activities provided evidence that the initiatives had or not impacted on the student learning process. It was not always possible to measure improvement in language development, due to the conditions in which the pilots took place, but degrees of students' and teachers' (dis)satisfaction could always be measured. The impact of the projects was very broad, due to the involvement of different institutions and/or to the broad orientation of the leading institution.

In both cases, the pilot approach was a part of the whole quality cycle: pilots were evaluated, adjustments were made, then after this revision a new series pilots took place, according to the quality cycle. This was also a "scaling up" phase, in which combinations of programs with larger groups of students were used and more teachers were involved. The pilots were not experimental any more, but run as part of the language institutions' regular language provision programmes. At the end, lessons learned, guidelines, tips & tricks were made available on the project websites.

For instance, in the Dutch project one of the results of using recorded monologues was that students appreciated this possibility for training oral skills outside classroom hours. But not all teachers decided to permanently integrate these tasks in the courses, because giving feedback was time-consuming. Teachers who decided to use the recordings chose in most cases to substitute the individual written feedback with oral, general feedback during classes.

In the case of the Campus Europae initiative, *Hook up!*, the impact will be measured by the language level of the incoming students at the start of the academic year in the host country and by their involvement in producing learning material and tutoring new learners.

Advice to others

- Ensure cooperation with other institutions and dissemination of results after the project
- Invest in pedagogically sound use of ICT : pedagogy first, technology second
- Start with small pilots, set clear learning outcomes in advance and take into account practical and organizational constraints, which may frustrate a large scale implementation after trials. For example: from a theoretical point of view, synchronous communication with native speakers through videoconferencing is very valuable for language learning, because it provides possibilities for authentic interaction. But from a logistic point of view, synchronous communication is not always simple to organize; moreover, participants need good technical facilities and support. Another technical challenge is organizing feedback: video- and audio-conferencing sessions can be recorded, but this requires again technical assistance.
- A project-based approach and external funding are essential for a successful start-up of the development of an ICT-based learning environment; however, its perennality will depend on institutional commitment to e-learning and the availability of training and incentives for teachers
- Pedagogical effectiveness does not necessarily imply organizational efficiency. Introducing technology may very well lead to higher workload for teachers and extra tasks for students: for instance, technology enhances training opportunities (think of students sending digital recordings for correction: oral skills training can also be done outside classes), but this means that teachers should give more feedback and guidance. The challenge is finding effective, time-saving ways to provide feedback.

Reflection/any other comments

QA question: Is/was that the best way to do it? Why/why not? What improvements or adjustments are needed?

The most relevant issues in projects aimed at integrating ICT in language learning are:

- Finding the right balance in the “blend” of ICT- supported and non ICT-supported learning activities. Issues to be taken into account are extra workload for students and teachers. For students, because ICT-supported learning activities should come in place of “regular” learning tasks, otherwise the curriculum will be overloaded. This sometimes implies a shift in course objectives (e.g. more focus on particular language skills). Teachers also need to consider the implications of introducing ICT for their workload. Only interactive programmes (like interactive grammar or listening exercises) in which the computer provides feedback save teaching time. But training of speaking and writing skills can only be supported by ICT in the sense that ICT allows for making students’ products and performances easily available to others: but the computer cannot provide automatic feedback.
- Sustainability and broader implementation after the end of the project. The project-based approach is the best way to do it, because a good starting point is created, but if institutions want to invest in this area, a long-term policy is needed: otherwise the initial investment is only disinvestment.

Further details

e.g. web links; relevant references/publications; alternative contact names

Evaluation learning activities, CEMLL:

<http://cemll.ulster.ac.uk/site/centre%20research/evaluation>.

INTUIT project website (The Netherlands) with downloadable Language Toolbox

<http://www.intuit.nl>

<http://languagelearning.campuseuropae.org>