



The Use of the Common European Framework of Reference as Flexible Tool in a Blended Learning Setting

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Abstract

The possibilities for using ICT in language learning are increasing. A teacher can easily find a lot of interesting tools and resources that could be useful for his/her students to enrich and personalize learning experiences. A problem that arises when teachers use a number of different tools and resources, is that teachers lose track of what their students do. And when those students are part of a digital environment, teachers often experience limitations to the extent that they can (easily) change, adapt or supplement practices, activities and resources. Blended learning does able teachers to create new possibilities to include contemporary language teaching, but many of the current digital learning solutions lack flexibility. Also, the way a competence-based curriculum such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) can be part of the learning process, is often limited. These starting points became the start of the development of a new platform for language learning in blended setting. The learning platform that is being developed offers possibilities to easily create and adapt learning resources. Teachers are able to connect activities, results and evaluations to the can-do statements of the CEFR. The platform also offers a digital portfolio in which the student can present his or her work. The manner in which activities are related to the goals also enables students to plan their own learning. Finally, teachers are able to put together specific goals for a particular course and even for individual students. New and innovative ways to make use of functions that enable teachers and students to relate, plan and keep track of digital learning materials related to language goals represent a step forward in offering a richer and more meaningful language learning experience.

Keywords: Blended Learning; CEFR; Learning environment; Flexibility

1. Options for ICT in language learning: towards blended learning

The role of ICT in learning a new language is growing. There are many interesting and useful digital resources and apps available, such as DuoLingo, Quizlet and open source videos and practices. Anyone who would like to learn a new language on an individual basis can easily find a lot of options. Still, language courses are very popular, the Netherlands has hundreds of language training institutes with thousands of students.

In a meta-analysis [1] the learning outcomes of online and face-to-face learning were compared. On average, the students that learn in an online setting had higher outcomes than those in a face-to-face setting. Interesting was that those students that combined online with face-to-face learning had the highest outcomes. This is often called “blended learning”. The Handbook of Blended Learning [2] defines it as the combination of online and face-to-face education. Reasons to offer educational programs more blended are (a) possibilities for improved pedagogies (i.e. interactive and active learning, problem solving, collaboration and authentication opportunities); (b) enhanced access and flexibility and (c) increased cost-effectiveness.

Teachers in language training institutes are using more and more digital resources. But although the role of ICT in education has become more important over the last years, still teachers often wouldn't consider teaching without their text- and workbooks. Teachers have access to an increasing number of interesting tools and resources that could be useful. Often however, the possibilities for teachers to monitor and guide their students in the use of these tools and resources are limited or not even possible. Teachers tend to lose track of what their students do.

A digital learning environment would offer more possibilities for the teacher to coach his/her students and suite their needs. But the digital resources that come with the textbooks of publishers lack a certain flexibility (see [3] for a categorization of types of flexibility). Teachers experience limitations to the extent that they can (easily) change, adapt or supplement practices, activities and resources. Also, the possibilities to merge their own resources and activities often is complicated and/or limited.

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2. Implications for the digital learning environment

Language institutes are increasingly looking at how ICT can become a valuable part of their programmes. As noted, blended learning offers various advantages, but educators would be primarily interested in how ICT could help them increase learning outcomes. Van den Branden [4] defined six basic principles of contemporary language teaching:

1. Use of meaningful activities;
2. Rich interaction;
3. Communicative performance and reflecting on it;
4. Motivation;
5. Challenge;
6. Responding to differences.

How can ICT help create a richer learning environment that can help the teacher teach and support his or her students? In table 1 the principles of Van den Branden will be used to define the implications for the digital learning environment.

Table 1. Contemporary language teaching principles and implications for the digital learning environment

Principle	Example	Implications for the digital environment
<i>Use of meaningful activities:</i> Everyday life language is used to achieve things with all kinds of purposes. Learning should be focused on meaningful contexts using authentic tasks.	Writing an email or text message in the language that a student is acquiring. Another example is that a student could look for a typical French dish on a French website, and cook it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning environment offers authentic learning activities and/or offers teachers the opportunity to create such learning activities. • The activities are well labelled, making them easy to find. • The activities are linked to goals/curriculum. • The activities can be easily adjusted (the teacher is the one who knows students and the context best). • There is the opportunity to offer (digital) resources along with activities to enrich the context.
<i>Rich interaction:</i> Students should get a lot of language input and get many opportunities to produce their own language output. They should also get a lot of feedback on their language production. This means that a course should not only offer a wide range of language material, but also requires that teachers are aware that all students will have enough opportunities to speak, get personalized language opportunities and a lot of feedback on what they say and write.	A teacher gives feedback on products and activities of a student afterwards using a rubrics-evaluation form in which the different aspects (i.e. interaction, fluency, grammatical accuracy, etc.) of the i.e. a presentation are assessed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The digital learning environment is part of the rich learning environment, with a full range of language material provided, that is easily searchable and easy to assign for groups and individuals. • The digital learning environment provides a clear view of participants' contributions, and gives them the opportunity to view this in different perspectives: per person, per group, by activity, etc. • There are opportunities to give feedback on all contributions from participants in different ways (even spoken). • The learning environment supports innovative forms of evaluation that give students more insight into what they already can and what they need to work on (i.e. self-evaluations, rubrics and observations).
<i>Communicative action and reflecting on it:</i> Students are often faced with meaningful communicational language tasks, but also consciously	A student writing an official letter makes use of a certain domain of language with certain vocabulary and grammatical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The (digital) learning environment offers authentic language tasks in which the different uses of language form part of the course. • The (digital) learning environment offers a digital portfolio in which the student could



<p>need to take good steps to fulfil those language tasks. It involves the use of language and reflection on the use of (correct) language and knowledge of the language.</p>	<p>structures. It is different from an informal email for example.</p>	<p>present his or her work (related to curriculum goals) [5].</p>
<p><i>Motivation:</i> Students will be more motivated to do a language task that is in their personal interest. Motivation helps to overcome certain obstacles in the completion of a language task and to persevere or to ask for help. It is important to motivate not only at the beginning of an activity but also later on, for example by solving problems, encouragement and keeping the task interesting.</p>	<p>A teacher offers the opportunity to choose from a number of assignments aimed at writing a review in his program. That may be a book that someone has already read, or a play that student has visited. Every student will be linked to a peer who will provide both positive and negative feedback on the first draft.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The digital learning environment offers powerful possibilities for differentiation so that the teacher can organise different activities for the students (in level or interest). • Within the digital learning environment, there are several opportunities for students to collaborate, such as an environment project in which documents are shared and discussions held. • It is possible to have (digital) conversations on each language activity or resource, in order to share ideas and exchange feedback.
<p><i>Challenge:</i> Tasks should be just slightly above the level of the student, so that he/she is challenged to push his/her limits. High hopes have much influence on the result. Teachers should continue to provide challenging language tasks, but also assist in processing and acquiring new skills that are offered.</p>	<p>For example the offering of new vocabulary and expressions for individual students, based on the level that they are working on. Also, input can be modified by new types of texts (i.e. a review or a manual) or by providing new information on new topics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning environment provides an overview of the goals or abilities in a learning line or a reference framework (CEFR) so that language students (better) understand what they control and what not. • The teacher has different possibilities for differentiation, so that he/she can address individual differences and needs. • Students are given the opportunity to define what they want to work on, based on the (CEFR) goals of interest. • Here too, detailed feedback (i.e. using rubrics), gives the student a much better insight into his or her language development.

A teacher should have more opportunities to create a blended language learning environment that suits the contemporary needs of today's students. The first five principles relate to the last one: responding to the differences between the language learners. The guidelines and examples of how a teacher can offer an optimal learning environment in table 1 give a teacher also a number of practical ways to differentiate.

3. The CEFR as part of a new learning environment

An important tool for language learning to relate it to meaningful activities is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) [6]. It also helps students to become more aware on where they are and where they are heading in relation to the curriculum. This is important for the motivation and reflective- & self-directed learning.

The way a competence-based curriculum such as the CEFR can be part of the learning process, is often limited in digital learning environments. Language teachers however could benefit from an integrated learning environment with resources related to the CEFR. These ideas became the start of the development of a new platform for language learning: the Bloomwise learning environment. The setting is that of a blend between face-to-face and ICT. Within the learning platform with possibilities to easily create and adapt learning resources, all of the CEFR "can-do" statements for the different language domains (i.e. speaking or reading) are made available in an interactive way. Teachers are



able to connect activities to the can-do statements (within the CEFR structure) keeping track of who works on which statement in what activity. Also the results and evaluations per student can be presented in a similar way, helping the teacher and the student keeping track on the progress related to the goals. The platform also offers a digital portfolio in which the student can present his or her work, again related to the can-do statements. For example: an application letter is related to: "I can prepare/draft professional correspondence" (Writing, C1). The manner in which activities are related to the goals enabled students also to plan their own learning. Finally, teachers are able to put together specific goals for a particular course and even for individual students.

4. From here on

For over 20 years, digital platforms have been used in (language) education [7]. Where at first ICT seemed to be rather complicated and unreliable, it seems that the benefits of using digital solutions finally outweigh the effort and cost. For a teacher, the important question is whether ICT can help offering a richer learning environment for students, while simultaneously supporting the educator in his or her work so that the student is enabled to successfully acquire a new language.

The implications that apply to new digital learning environments can be used for the creation of the new generation of digital learning environments. These new environments will be increasingly influenced by the way in which courses will be organized. On the other hand, the model where a group of people acquires a new language under the guidance of an expert remains. It is an extremely powerful concept, also important because of the social element of learning. The new digital learning environments offer flexible and challenging opportunities in order to better blend learning, and make learning more meaningful, richer, more communicative, more motivational and more challenging.

The Bloomwise learning environment has been developed and keeps developing, based on the needs of both students and educators. In close cooperation with publishers and language teaching institutions the offering of flexible solutions for blended learning will enable teachers and learners to become more successful.

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