

ICT in Learning Slovene as a Second or Foreign Language

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Abstract

In the last decade the Centre for Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language of the University of Ljubljana has been involved in three projects regarding ICT in learning Slovene as a second or foreign language.

The first project, which was intended for internal use and a limited number of users, was the First Click on Slovene, released in 2003. The Embassy of the United States of America in Slovenia gave a commission for a basic survival course on a CD, intended for the self-learning of their employees, mostly to equip them to cope better in a Slovene environment. This course was later followed by the Second Click on Slovene (2009) at the intermediate level.

The second project was Distance Slovene www.e-slovenscina.si (2006), a system, accessible free of charge online, which was intended to meet the needs and interests of a wider circle of users, mostly of those who, due to remoteness or other reasons, could not sign up in person for Slovene language courses. Distance Slovene was thus meant as an exclusive alternative to classroom-based face-to-face courses. The course helps learners develop the language skills of listening, reading and writing.

In 2007 we took part in the Tool for Online and Offline Language Learning (TOOL2) project, which builds a blended learning system, online and offline, in five European languages: Dutch, Estonian, Hungarian, Maltese, and Slovene. The course format is a flexible combination of classroom-based face-to-face teaching and distance teaching through an online platform. Due to the presence of a teacher it can be argued that this type of ICT-use in language learning is the most effective, as it also focuses on developing learners' productive skills. Other projects presented in this paper mostly focus only on receptive language skills.

1. Introduction

1.1 Centre for Slovene as a Second/Foreign language

The Centre for Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language operates under the auspices of the Department of Slovene Studies at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana. The Centre extends understanding of the Slovene language, literature and culture on an international scale. It also encourages international research into Slovene language and literature, organises professional and scientific conferences and develops the complete infrastructure for attaining, examining and certifying proficiency in Slovene as a second/foreign language.

1.2 Publications of the Centre for Slovene as a Second/Foreign language

The Centre publishes scientific and professional publications covering all areas of its activities, including handbooks and textbooks for studying Slovene as a second/foreign language.

At the beginning of the 21st century the Centre started to develop materials for the e-learning of Slovene as a second/foreign language. The first course for the self-learning of Slovene was developed on a CD-ROM and was intended for beginners; the course was soon followed by the improved version for the intermediate level. At the same time the free online course for beginners, intermediate and



advanced level was made available. The last important project was a blended learning system for Slovene.

2. First and Second Click on Slovene

2.1 Project Presentation

The course of Slovene on the interactive multimedia CD-ROM First Click on Slovene was intended for employees of the Embassy of the United States of America in Slovenia who have already been living in Slovenia and also for those who were planning to come to work here. The course was prepared for the self-learning, for beginners without any linguistic knowledge. The main aim was that the user becomes familiar with the new country, with the new language (the system and the basic grammar rules were explained for non-linguist users) and the most important, that he/she achieves basic communicative proficiency in Slovene. Within these topics, basic communicative models, frequently used vocabulary, and various short texts likely to be encountered in the Slovene-speaking environment are presented to the user in a modern and attractive format. Many games, pictures, and videos support the course to make the learning more attractive and fun.

The course for intermediate level – Second Click on Slovene – was prepared for the employees of the Embassy of the United States of America, who would need the Slovene language not just for everyday survival communication but also for needs in professional, economical and political life. Therefore the topics of Second Click spread into different fields of social, cultural, economic and political life.

Each of the units on both levels consist of introduction picture with vocabulary and phrases typical for the unit, audio and video dialogues which introduce some cultural elements, stories from typical Slovene life, different authentic materials, many types of exercises for listening and reading comprehension, for rehearsing new vocabulary and phrases. There is also grammar and a glossary that are common for all units on both CD-ROMs.

Since the course is prepared for self-learning it includes following elements: the user may choose to follow the computer's instructions while going through the material, which means that the program will suggest the sequence of lessons and activities; the user can hear the right pronunciation and intonation because all words, dialogues and texts can be listened to, and they are also available as an English translation; grammatical constructions used in the texts are specially marked, and the user can obtain an explanation by clicking on it; answer keys to all the exercises are provided and after solving the exercise, the user gets an immediate response; the user can check his/her progress where the percentages of completed exercises within a unit or throughout the whole set of materials may be viewed.

Both CD-ROM courses are accessible to people with disabilities, according to US national law.

OSNOVNA ILUSTRACIJA - KLIK NAPREJ - frizer



Figure 1: First Click on Slovene: Introduction picture with vocabulary and phrases typical for the unit

2.2 Using First and Second Click on Slovene

Both of the abovementioned were used for learning Slovene on the courses organized by Embassy of the United States of America in Ljubljana from the year 2003 on. The users of the interactive multimedia are the employees of the Embassy who learn Slovene once or twice a week under the supervision of a teacher of Slovene as second/foreign language.

2.3 Advantages and disadvantages

Although the users were very satisfied with the materials, they were not so self-motivated to learn on their own, so the role of the teacher in the classroom changed – from supervisor he/she became a teacher who provides face-to-face classes, using interactive multimedia CD-ROM instead of the book.

3. Distance Slovene

3.1 Project Presentation

The first online course for the Slovene Language, Distance Slovene (www.e-slovenscina.si), was made available in 2006. It was aimed at non-native speakers of Slovene living in Slovenia and abroad, Slovene emigrants and their descendants, exchange students, as well as others interested in learning Slovene who could not sign up in person for a Slovene language course.

The course is divided into three ability levels: beginner, intermediate and advanced. The user can choose the level on his/her own or he/she completes a placement test on the website and on the basis of the result the system recommends the most suitable level of the course. Different language skills, mostly listening, reading and some writing are practiced on all levels. The course consists of six topics which are presented at all three levels: personal identity, personal relations, shopping, health, traffic and travelling, work. Each topic includes audio and video recordings of conversations as well as written texts. Each of the activities is complemented by interactive exercises with answer keys and immediate response.

Besides the language course for adults there is also a special corner aimed at children with three units: numbers and colours, animals and school. The course also offers some information on Slovenia and Slovene.

At the beginning many tools and services were planned to be available, like a forum, chat room, notice board, possibility to communicate with a teacher, but due to financial issues these tools were unfortunately not fully realized.



Figure 2: Distance Slovene: Example of an exercise

3.2 Using Distance Slovene

Unfortunately we do not have permanent supervision over the project but according to our information people from different parts of the world and of different levels of Slovene language knowledge tried this course of Slovene.

3.3 Advantages and disadvantages

At the beginning of the Distance Slovene course there were two tutors who had contacts with the users. The users communicated with them quite frequently, they sent their texts, but mostly they pointed out some difficulties, mistakes or technical inconveniences that appeared in the programme. Due to financial reasons tutoring was not possible any more; therefore we do not have the complete information about users. But from time to time a person appears at a Slovene course with some knowledge of Slovene received from the Distance Slovene course.

4. Tool for Online and Offline Language Learning project

In 2007 we took part in the Tool for Online and Offline Language Learning project (Socrates – Lingua 2), funded by the European Union, which builds a blended learning system, online and offline, in five European languages: Dutch, Estonian, Hungarian, Maltese and Slovene (www.toolproject.eu).

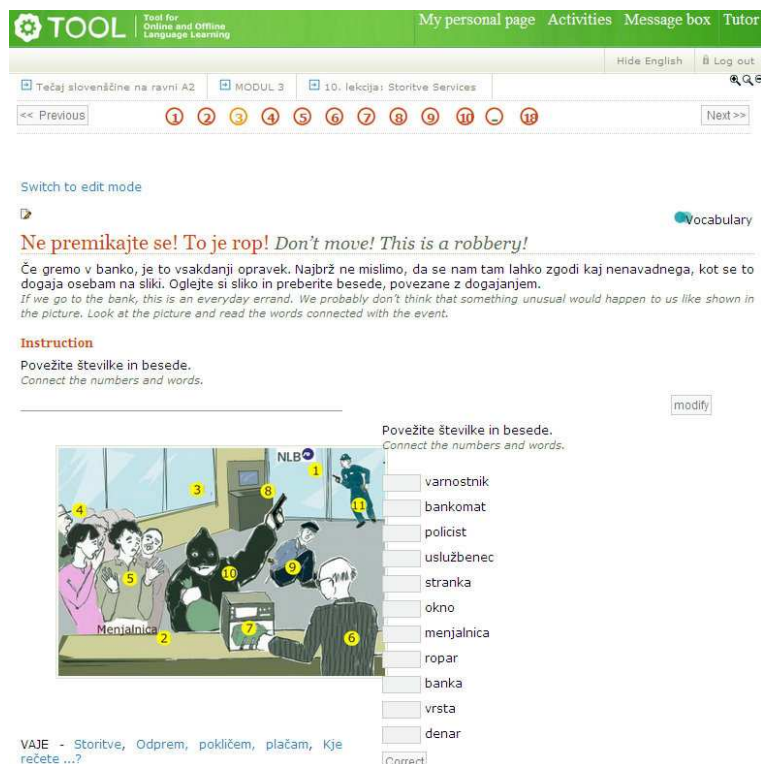
2.1 Project Presentation

The course format is a flexible combination of classroom-based face-to-face (f2f) teaching and distance teaching through an online platform. It is designed at A2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference and addresses learners who have had an initial introduction to the Slovene Language and who wish to progress from a basic survival level to higher competence.

The course is designed for 30–40 hours of classroom f2f teaching and 80–90 hours of autonomous online learning. The model path through the course is chronological, starting with module 1, unit 1, task 1 and progressing through the course to the end of module 3 and the final consolidation unit. While working on the course, links to vocabulary lists, grammar rules and examples, study skills and more information on socio-cultural matters can be followed. The themes of the course relate mostly to personal and public domains and the activities are focused on the specific needs of learners in the Slovene context.

Blended Learning helps users become autonomous learners by providing practice and experience in autonomy during the course. Offline, f2f classes with the tutor are meant to introduce new topical issues connected to linguistic structures, clarify online issues brought up in the previous week(s), and reflect on the process of learning. Each f2f session is carried out using Power Point presentations and is thus divided into two parts: in the first part of the introductory session the participants browse through the course getting to know the topics and learning how to work with the course, as for in the second part the tutor introduces the topics, vocabulary and grammar of the first unit. All following f2f sessions include the revision of the previous unit and preparation for the following unit.

The tutor's role between two f2f sessions is to correct texts sent to him/her and provide feedback, either on an individual basis or as 'common errors' during the next f2f session. He/she is available during limited digital office hours which are to be posted before the start of the course. The tutor organises f2f sessions and is responsible for the follow-up and exercising of what was learned autonomously by the learners, he/she also helps learners determine individual learning paths through the study materials.



The screenshot shows the TOOL interface with a navigation bar at the top. The main content area displays a lesson titled "Tečaj slovenščine na ravni A2" and "10. lekcija: Storitve Services". Below this is a "Vocabulary" section with the text: "Ne premikajte se! To je rop! Don't move! This is a robbery!". A paragraph of text describes a robbery at a bank. An "Instruction" box asks the user to connect numbers 1-10 to words in a list. The list includes: varnostnik, bankomat, policist, uslužbenec, stranka, okno, menjalnica, ropar, banka, vrsta, and denar. A cartoon illustration shows a robbery in progress with numbered markers (1-10) indicating the locations of the words in the list.

Figure 3: TOOL: Example of an exercise

2.2 Using TOOL

The course has been piloted three times at our institution. The participants involved in the first pilot were students who had just finished an 80-hour beginner course, in the second pilot the course was



offered to Summer school participants with the adequate level of Slovene, to complement the morning course they were attending. In the third pilot the course was offered to Erasmus students who had just finished a 64-hour beginner course.

The fourth pilot took place at the Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere of the Università degli Studi di Udine. The Slovene teacher used the course to repeat the topics and grammar covered in class.

2.3 Advantages and disadvantages

The positive side of the project is that it is a dynamic combination of both online autonomous learning and classroom-based face-to-face teaching with a tutor. The course materials are interactive and interesting as they can be updated at any time so they are never out of step with the times. Additionally, a learner can determine an individual pathway through the course, concentrating on those parts that best answer his/her needs.

The downside is that the role of tutor is considered to be central. He/she is the organiser of f2f sessions therefore the participants sometimes consider the f2f sessions to be the language course they signed up for, and the online work just an addition to the classroom-based course. When this is the case, the price of a course that is estimated as a 120-hour course and only has 30–40 contact hours, can be considered too high and therefore unacceptable.

5. Conclusion

In the last decade the Centre for Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language has developed three different applications of ICT for learning Slovene as a second/foreign language.

The First and Second Click on Slovene, courses on CD-ROM, were well prepared, carefully guided and interesting. They present a whole process of acquiring language skills, from the beginning to intermediate level. Since the material was prepared in advance there are no possibilities to update or correct information. The biggest disadvantage is the lack of the tutor/teacher who motivates and advises the users and gives them feedback.

Though Distance Slovene is the most accessible online course possible, it costs a lot to maintain it in its best form and to offer all additional services and functions like forums, tutoring etc.

TOOL, the blended learning system, is a good combination of online and offline learning, since it uses the latest technology and modern approaches to language learning, but still keeps the traditional role of the tutor. The tutor helps participants develop their productive skills as well; however his/her powerful role can reduce the online course to being just a dynamic addition to the classroom-based course.