



## New Media in Language Learning and Teaching

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### 1. Introduction

Since the introduction of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in the 1980s, researchers and language instructors alike have been stressing the need to focus on pedagogical and didactic concerns rather than allow technology to drive pedagogy [1]. Whether the format used is distance learning, blended learning or in-class use of computers, ICT resources must offer at least one of the following main benefits for language learning: individualization of the learning process, opportunity for interaction and collaboration in the target language, and/or unlimited access to target language input.

As an effect of global technologization, many educational institutions are now exploiting the potential of computer and internet applications for language learning and teaching purposes. The field of CALL has matured, and many universities provide electronic learning management systems and develop e-learning applications in-house in order to cope with curriculum and learner-specific requirements. However, though most university students are digital natives and use ICT applications on a daily basis as a matter of course, this does not mean that they will embrace self-access online learning with enthusiasm. There are quite a number of factors that might prevent the uptake or influence the use of technologies for study purposes, most prominent amongst them perhaps students' conceptions of how language are best learnt, and what being proficient in a language entails.

### 2. ICT in language learning: An overview

Following Levy [2], this brief overview will be divided according to the four skills areas, as well as focusing on learner interaction and cooperation. Concerning the receptive skills reading and listening, and, closely related, the area of vocabulary acquisition, the Internet obviously provides an unlimited source of authentic language input which learners can exploit in self-paced fashion. Online dictionaries help making such input comprehensible. Software aimed at language learners may supply multimedia (audio or video) annotations and vocabulary tasks to practice and revise vocabulary items; and numerous internet sites offer such tools and exercises free of charge. However, whilst reading materials have always been readily available in EFL contexts, and, as books or printouts there for learners to take home, listening used to be a purely teacher-driven and class-centred activity, with teachers providing audio or video tapes and playing them in class. Today, audio and video, TV programmes and films can be accessed, downloaded and distributed to students in a convenient digitized format so that they can listen or watch on their mobile devices. This allows learners to explore language input in a more flexible and independent way, with them rather than the teacher deciding when and how often to listen or watch, and whether they need to repeat or pause a segment because they have difficulty understanding.

Opportunities for writing and speaking have been enhanced tremendously through Web 2.0 technologies. Wikis and blogs allow learners to collaborate on writing projects and to share their written output with others; text chats enable them to interact with native and non-native speakers, follow discussion and defend their opinions. Oral communication is made possible through technologies such as voice chat or videoconferencing. Teachers who have set up these technologies for their students' use can usually access digitized records to provide language feedback.

Thus on the one hand, ICT technologies provide seemingly endless opportunities for exposure to the target language and for interacting with native speakers or other learners. On the other, how attractive these opportunities are to learners, and how helpful they are considered for reaching (self-imposed or curriculum-determined) learning aims is another question. As indicated in the introduction, it is also one of the key research questions motivating the two studies outlined below.

### 3. Study 1: Students' views on a CALL resource in a blended learning environment

The study was conducted at Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration (WU), where (Business) English is a mandatory language requirement. The introduction of an extensive e-learning component to accompany Business English classes was considered necessary due to numerous reasons, with student heterogeneity and student numbers featuring most prominently: First-semester students differ dramatically concerning competence level, schooling and background; they have been shaped by different instructional experiences and consequently have differing expectations. Yet on entering university, they are faced with a standardised Business English programme focusing strongly on content and terminology, and leaving little room for individual requirements or learning preferences. Student numbers are quite staggering for language classes, i.e., 70-80 in the first-semester courses.

The main rationale behind the development of the e-learning component was thus the provision of independent practice opportunities for students according to their differing needs. The online modules complement f2f classes, offering needs-specific practice and further explanations on the topics dealt with in class. Hypertext technology allows enhancement of exercises through interactive links to reference sections such as glossary and grammar



pages. Interactive hints, explanations and model answers are some more additional features which aim at individualising the learning experience.

Blended learning denotes the combination of face-to-face (f2f) and online learning, with usually one of the two functioning as a “lead mode” [3]. In our case, a “dual track approach” [4] was adopted, where the two modes run parallel. Thus students could decide to attend f2f classes (not mandatory for first-semester courses), use e-learning, or do both (or even neither) in order to prepare for the end-of-term examination. This means that the responsibility for choosing the blend most suitable for individual learning styles, as well as for identifying linguistic or content-related gaps and appropriate remedies, was handed over to the learner. In order to get an insight into students’ perceptions and use of the two blended learning components on offer, I conducted a qualitative study using open-ended questions which aimed at identifying relevant factors for learners’ satisfaction with the blended learning approach.

### 3.1 Study results

The salient points emerging from the analysis of the data provided by a sample of 120 respondents can be summarised as follows. Basically, the motivations students mentioned for availing themselves of either mode fell broadly into three categories: linguistic/content, social, and strategic. As far as language and content is concerned, students expected a global introduction to topics from classes, as well as the opportunity for aural and oral practice. The CALL materials were then used for more detailed-focused work, often just-in-time for exam-focused practice, for self-testing and checking of understanding. Social functions of classes included keeping in touch with fellow students as well as getting a frame of reference for learners’ level of competence: classes offer opportunity for comparison or even competition. A similar ‘social’ function, at least concerning the option of contacting and exchanging information with students from all parallel classes, was provided by the learning platform’s online forum. Strategic reasons for posting on the forum included the swapping of exam hints and tips. Students of course also hoped that teachers might drop some exam hints, yet strategic reasons for class attendance went further than that: the weekly meetings provided the regularity and external structure often missed in distance learning settings.

As mentioned above, the e-learning materials were rarely used as intended – i.e., regularly and in sequence with classes – and much more frequently just in the week before the final examination. This lack of regular use can be traced to a number of reasons, most prominent the following: lack of endorsement from the teacher and a certain reliance on the assumption that the teacher would know best; inexperience in self-directed learning; overconfidence either as far as general English or knowledge of content/business was concerned; reliance on ‘just-in-time’ cramming for exams, and learner beliefs. This last factor proved to be very influential and will be discussed later on.

Student perceptions of the main advantages of e-learning include the following: They appreciated being able to choose time, place and speed of learning; found the individualisation of the learning experience useful; liked the immediacy of case-specific explanations and relevant feedback; and, finally, found that e-learning facilitated the monitoring and consolidation of knowledge.

Many of the reasons students gave as to why they had failed to use the e-materials and what they perceived to be major limitations can be traced back to language learning beliefs. Some of the observations students made underlined the direct link between individual beliefs and actions: one student, for instance, simply observed “I didn’t use it because that’s not how languages are learnt”. Other comments were more specific and circumspect, but clearly related to students’ lay-linguistic theories of how languages should be taught: “In English I don’t like it, cause in my opinion discussing in groups or just speaking with other people is much better”. And finally, a certain frustration with the ubiquity of e-learning (at least at WU Vienna) could be gleaned from statements such as “I don’t really like working with computers all the time”.

Summing up, it can be said that adding an online component to a traditional f2f setting is certainly no panacea for a less-than-ideal teaching/learning situation and was not perceived as such by either students or faculty. Its introduction was, however, a necessary and pedagogically sound measure, and represented a much-needed and much-appreciated individualised practice opportunity for the majority of students.

### 4. Study 2: Students’ views on Web 2.0 technologies for language learning purposes

This second survey was conducted at the same university, however, amongst students nearing the end of their studies. Eighty students participated, answering open-ended questions on how they proposed to further improve their English proficiency. In particular, the survey focused on participants’ use of the Internet for social and study purposes, as well as on their assessment of the usefulness of communicating with native speakers (NSs) versus non-native speakers (NNSs) for learning purposes, and their opinions on the importance of speaking ‘correct’, i.e. accurate, English.

The data suggested that students’ perceptions of social (NSs & NNSs) and electronic (Internet & social media) resources is tightly bound up with a) their language learning beliefs and b) their projected future use of English. The majority of respondents believed oral communicative competence to be the benchmark of good English, and thus thought that extensive speaking practice was crucial. As business students, most of them hoped to eventually work for international corporations in global contexts where English would be used as a lingua franca.



Despite being aware that many of their future business partners would be NNSs, they still aspired to NS norms concerning grammar and pronunciation. The high proficiency they aimed at was described along the lines of “being able to express what you want to say appropriately, using *correct grammar* and vocabulary”, with excellent pronunciation being considered highly desirable. A high level of English was equated with competence and professionalism: “An inferior level of English is not only embarrassing for oneself but can even harm the company’s image”, one student stated; another remarked that “If you want to start an international career, you have to create a good image and a good first impression. To do so, you have to have excellent English communication skills”.

Consequently, the subjects tended to watch American TV shows and films on the Internet, read newspapers online or consult news sites and blogs to improve their vocabulary as well as their grasp of ‘everyday English’. However, though most of them regularly used social media technologies such as Facebook and Skype to communicate in English, they generally did not consider this a measure to improve their language skills. This was partly due to the fact that communication was often with other non-native speakers who were considered inferior models of English, partly because the interaction on these media was usually in written form, thus failing to provide the highly-rated speaking or listening practice. The following quotes from students illustrate these language learning beliefs:

“I am convinced that speaking would be much more helpful to improve your language skills than simply writing emails or communicate via Skype”.

“I do communicate a lot with speakers of other languages, but too little with English native speakers. I am fully aware that this is a problem, because you can learn a lot more from a native speaker”.

“I regard correcting mistakes as important part of the language learning process, and non-natives are not in a position to correct you”.

To conclude, despite the wealth and diversity of language learning opportunities offered by Web 2.0 technologies, and despite the increasing internationalization of English (which this group of advanced learners was very much aware of), respondents’ language learning beliefs and aims meant that for them nothing can come close to the benefits of actually being immersed in the target language culture and of talking to native speakers.

## References

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