



Use of ICT Elements to Supplement Informal Language Learning

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Introduction

Since foreign language skills are considered as basic skills, it may be inferred that foreign language learning not only gives greater flexibility to the workforce but also increases generic skills and changes attitudes and behaviour, which, in turn, leads to greater employability. According to Sue Jackson, there is an "increasing demand that lifelong learning should enable the development, up-skilling and retention of the current workforce, leading to more flexible employees. Clearly flexibility will be of some benefit to the workforce, giving greater opportunities for employment in changing markets." [5]

Employers need workers who not only have a flexible skill repertoire but also are intrinsically aware of the environment in which they use their acquired foreign language skills. Intercultural competence as an integral part of language acquisition provides this insight into other cultures. "Like languages, intercultural competence is important at different levels – it can affect individuals, organizations, communities and nations as a whole. At the interpersonal level, its absence can easily provoke conflict, misunderstanding, embarrassment, or disillusionment. It may have serious commercial or political implications translated to a professional environment." [7]

Support elements in language learning

Adults who enroll in a lifelong learning educational establishment can acquire foreign languages by different modes of instruction. Instruction itself has changed from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach and from rote learning to communicative language teaching.

Taking into account the diversity of forms in which the lifelong learning may take place, there are certain elements which are necessary for any form of learning. Black and Holford claim that "the essential or desirable features of any system of learning support" are the following:

- "Communication. A few people study quite happily in isolation, but for most a system of learning should incorporate mechanisms for interaction with other learners who are at roughly comparable points in their studies.
- Interaction with teachers. Learners need meaningful interaction with tutors and opportunities for feedback. Many learners also want personal support.
- Confidence and regularity". These features may be interpreted differently in the case of language education where more trust is put not only in the certificates and diplomas granted by the institution or but also in the quality of instruction at the language teaching centre.
- "Learning resources." Adult learners need learning resources which are "consistent with their learning situation".
- "Administration and records. Reliable and effective monitoring of student progress and a fair system of prior learning" are required. Although the authors claim of a fair system of credit transfer, this is not yet possible in lifelong learning. Although the Common European Framework of Reference provides a common standard in language proficiency assessment for different skills, different languages and different countries, the system has not been introduced in a number of countries, such as Latvia.
- "Learning materials". Although many teachers either compile or develop language teaching materials according to the needs of learners, there is a vast industry for the majority of foreign languages which provide teacher's manuals, textbooks, workbooks and other material that ensure the most up-to-date materials available to adult learners taking according to their foreign language skill proficiency levels.
- "Staff. In practice, staff – teachers, trainers, instructional designers, educational technologists- are key". [1] Staff development in adult learning is also a critical factor in many countries because teaching staff who are involved in lifelong learning need specific skills.

Since all of the above-mentioned learner support elements are available on-line, it is necessary for an adult learner to know what ICT (information communication technologies) can offer with regard to language acquisition.

ICT as an adult learner's support

In considering an adult learner's needs, certain limitations which restrict an adult learner's possibilities to learn should be kept in mind; the most important limitation is the time factor.

ICT applications help an adult learner to choose a time for learning that does not interfere with work or family life; they can also help to intensify the learning process if the learner chooses to allocate more time for studies.

Nowadays we can assume that every teacher is well acquainted with the traditional applications of Internet: email, YouTube, blogs, Twitter, etc. Thus, one of the first choices for a teacher is to use ICT in a "dispersed" way.

"Despite likely institutional support for one VLE system over another, teachers may also possess the core choice to use virtual technologies in a dispersed or integrated way. Cross describes the dispersed way as "communication via email, distributing content through (public or private) standard 'read-only' web pages, and



reflecting upon taught sessions via 'wiki' (i.e., user editable web pages)" and confirms that these applications offer "great flexibility but have the potential drawback of appearing complicated and/or confused". [3]

"The dispersed approach tends to support an emphasis on 'real' teaching and , by use of off-the-shelf technologies with which participants are likely to be familiar from their daily lives, simplifies the questions of functionality and appearance." [3]

The dispersed way may also imply that an adult learner may surf freely on the Internet without learning actually taking place. That means the teacher of the adult learner should pay greater attention when giving directions and assigning tasks. "The greater availability of information to enhance skill development on the Internet means the menu from which the learner can choose with the aid of the consultant teacher has increased enormously in recent years, but there is a need to plan encounters so they are not just visits to sites filled with information." [1]

Consequently, a teacher of adult learners should devote considerable time in planning the course by visiting the Internet and also planning the activities before and after the virtual lesson in order to achieve progression in task implementation and fostering of language acquisition. "Teaching is better defined as not only the delivery but also the planning of learning that precedes the learning and the supplying of feedback on progress during and after the event. Thus experiential and reflective learning have to be planned if they are to occur." [1]

There is a debate among educators whether the time for preparing the Internet encounter is comparable to the time spent on lesson preparation. Since ICT integration is a new subject, concerns may arise about teaching preparation time and consequently about estimates of how much time teachers have actually spent on the lesson. Foreign language teachers regain their status as authorities especially when adult learners need guided access to language learning materials specific to the learner's language proficiency level; it may be solely the foreign language teacher who can provide access to the right materials Although Black and Holford assume that one of the consequences of using ICT " has been to de-emphasize the teacher's role as the sole source of knowledge and replace it with one of manager of the learning environment", [1], it is the opinion of the author of this paper that teachers have become the main carriers of necessary information and the sources of valuable knowledge regarding the resource sites.

The implications for foreign language teachers are that "in reality, the effective lecturer developing distance learning materials will not be de-skilled, but will have to develop even more skills than those needed in traditional classroom, face-to-face lecture/tutorial environments." [1]

EU- supported projects to promote language acquisition through ICT

Many EU-funded projects help to develop various support mechanisms for adult language learning; some of them have also been implemented in Latvia. One of the recent EU-supported projects is the project "EU-Everyplace where a strong emphasis is put on the intercultural components in language acquisition." The course will be taught in a face-to-face situation with the use of ICT and on-line elements in a specifically new way as it relates to intercultural components. Linguistic aspects and communicative skills can be taught successfully, but that is not necessarily true of intercultural competence. As Grima Camilleri puts it: "Language can be defined as the set of verbal and non-verbal symbols shared by a community. Culture provides the 'rules of the game' that enable individuals to communicate meaning and experience, to make sense out of events, activities, actions and behaviours." [4]

The project "EU-Everyplace: Less Widely Used Languages in Less Widely Visited Places", project No. 519101-LLP-1-2011-1-PL-KA2-KA2MP has been developed under the Lifelong Learning programme Transversal, K2, Languages, in order to enhance the teaching and learning of less widely used and less taught languages (LWULT). In this particular case, the Czech, Latvian, Polish and Lithuanian languages are involved. Instruction is to be assisted by language training and methodological materials which have been developed by the partnership; they include the sights of a small town of the country where the particular language is spoken. Ten functional situations will be developed and taught at an interesting cultural, historical or recreational object. The project is led by the Austrian co-ordinator, and the materials should be available by the end of 2012.

The project was selected for funding in 2011 but has not been completed yet. The project tackles the problem of communication barriers linked to export performance of European small- and medium-sized enterprises. The project is aimed at developing on-line courses for the 4 LWULTs in authentic small-town settings.

As T. Black and J. Holford have indicated "The greater availability of information to enhance skill development on the Internet means the menu from which the learner can choose with aid of the consultant teacher has increased enormously in recent years, but there is a need to plan encounters so they are not just visits to sites filled with information." [1]. This statement suggests why the "ActivELP" project was developed. The reason was to create an IT platform to support learners' activities directed towards self-assessment and exercising of all skills related to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Mentors Activate European Language Portfolio through Multimedia (project No. 135454-LLP-2007-1-LV-KA2-KA2MP, funded by the European Commission) is a project whose aim is to stimulate the practical use of the European Language Portfolio via mentoring and multimedia.

Within the framework of the project "Mentors Activate European Language Portfolio through Multimedia (ActivELP), a survey was conducted regarding the use of the ELP in language teaching and learning. The survey was distributed to language teachers in formal educational institutions and lifelong education providers. One of the main goals of the survey was to determine to what extent the ELP has been used in language classes and



how familiar language teachers were with the application procedures. The survey does not claim to be representative of the project's partner countries; nevertheless, it does reflect the general attitude and the general readiness of language teachers to use an ELP in language classes.

The project team collected 602 filled-in questionnaires from the following partner educational establishments: ECET in Bulgaria, PIXEL in Italy, Akademie IEE in Turkey, ICC (an international network of lifelong learning establishments), College of Computer Science in Poland, the University of Latvia, and PSLC in Latvia.

The teachers who took part in the survey agreed that an ELP was available in their respective countries; this showed their awareness of the existence of this self-assessment tool. Despite this awareness, only 39% of the teachers had made an effort to use an ELP in the language teaching process. They also regarded the ELP Passport as the most popular and useful part of their classroom activities.

The positive finding was that the majority of the 602 teachers regarded an ELP as a tool that could improve the quality of teaching. The greatest benefit of using an ELP was the fact that it fostered learner autonomy. A total of 64% of the teachers confirmed their willingness to use an ELP in foreign language teaching, provided there were ELPs available in their respective countries.

Thus, with the help of an IT platform, adult learners have access to guided skill assessment via implementing exercises and activities offered by the ActiveELP platform. This not only promotes further application of an ELP but also fosters learner autonomy via a medium which is available any time and any place.

Conclusions

Nowadays ICT has become a learning resource which contains learner support elements that can promote language acquisition by increasing a learner's autonomy and offering broader access to learning resources.

Adult learners gain greater flexibility by setting their individual learning time and creating their own learning styles. More specifically designed resources should be created to provide greater access to different language skill activities that are appropriate for a learner's language proficiency level and specific language course aims.

References

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