IMPLEMENTING ONLINE LEARNING: FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE
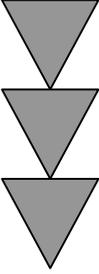
Monica VLAD and Anca COLIBABA

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to provide an overview on how online learning tools can be used in language learning. Shifting the focus from the classroom activity where the teacher is always present to an online learning environment in which the learner is alone most of the time is a great challenge to take for various reasons, especially when it comes to language learning.

Keywords: Lingua/Leonardo projects, online learning, foreign languages, integrated learning
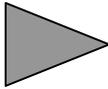
Introduction

The EuroEd Foundation has worked on the challenge enunciated in the title by getting involved in several projects that, to a lesser or higher extent, are all about providing learners with tools for learning foreign languages from a distance. The article focuses on the experiences and lessons learned in the research preceding the

creation of the tools, in the implementation of online learning and in incorporating feedback. It also provides some insight into how impediments have been overcome. The authors would like to share their experience and accumulated knowledge in this field and very much hope that the article in itself will be a useful tool and a guide for language trainers and teaching centres that consider implementing this teaching approach.

Together with a number of institutions from various European countries that are all aiming at providing quality instruments for language learning, the EuroEd Foundation is a partner in three extensive projects of the kind, co-financed by the European Union, through the General Directorate for Education and Culture under the Socrates Lifelong Learning Programme.[1], all of which are creating courses for language learning. These courses develop along two coordinates: there is an online platform of the course on which learners work by themselves, receiving nevertheless electronic support or feedback from the course tutor, and there is also a face-to-face component, where learners take part in traditional type classes, with their tutor.

The TOOL (Tool for Online and Offline Language Learning)[2] project is using an online platform and face-to-face sessions to facilitate the learning of less widely used, less widely taught (LWULT) languages. People interested in learning Slovene, Maltese, Dutch, Hungarian or Estonian and whose level of the target language is at least A1 according to the CEFR[3] will be offered a language course of 80-90 online hours and 30-40 hours spent in face-to-face sessions with their tutor.
A similar approach has been taken by the ALL (Autonomous Language Learning) project[4] that is building language courses for other LWULT languages: Romanian, Lithuanian, Bulgarian and Turkish.

The ELSTI project (European Languages for Secretaries)[5] takes a different approach. As its name states, the focus of the project is on foreign language teaching (this time the languages taught belong to the category of widely used and taught languages: English, French, Spanish and Italian) for a specific professional category: office (administrative) staff. Besides providing language courses for two levels of competence (A2 and B1), the ELSTI online learning platform aims at

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[1] For more details about the LLP and its priorities please visit: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc78_en.htm

[2] For more details about the TOOL (TOOL for Online and Offline Language learnng, ref. no. 230285-CP-1-2006-1-RO-LINGUA-L2) project please visit the project's website at: www.toolproject.eu

[3] CEFR – The Common European Framework of Reference can be read and downloaded at www.coe.int

[4] For more details about the ALL (Autonomous Language Learing, ref. no.: 229775-CP-1-2006-1-ES-Lingua-L2) project please visit the project's website at: www.allproject.info

[5] For more details about the ELSTI project please visit the project's website at www.business-languages.net

building a wider array of skills needed by office staff working in international business contexts. To reach this aim, the platform contains two separately developed learning modules complementing the language modules as such: a business culture learning module, the aim of which is raising awareness of differences and ways of coping with several European business environments, and a personal development module meant to offer learners the chance to keep an open mind and attitude towards personal improvement. In very broad terms, its approach is similar to that of ALL and TOOL because the language learning component could be used in a self access format or in a blended learning combination.

Overall, all these three projects make use of an innovative learning and teaching methodology that has been referred to as "blended learning" due to its mixed character. In comparison to exclusively traditional classroom lessons, this approach has both advantages and drawbacks and, in designing such a course, developers have to consider a number of potential problems and relevant differences from traditional classroom settings, as will be detailed in what follows.
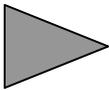
Blended Learning: an innovative tool

Some of the most significant advantages of blended learning relate to the freedom learners can enjoy in this environment. There can be freedom of starting dates, as learning programmes can be designed to be "roll-on, roll-off" systems. The key feature here is that learners can start more or less at any time of the year and finish when they are ready. If the instructors make sure that any prerequisite knowledge and skills are spelled out clearly so that all learners can tell whether they will be able to progress, there may be freedom of entry levels. There is also the freedom of choosing one's own pace, whereby learners can decide how much time they spend on different course sections. This is one of the most attractive features of many open learning programmes and it also fits language learning, where the freedom of pace is very often an essential and much desired feature. One should only think of the mixed classroom situation in order to appreciate this asset of online learning, let alone the observation that, in the end, all classrooms are mixed-levels when it comes to foreign language learning. Besides the classroom in which levels are rather mixed, there is the one in which learners of a foreign language have different needs. Usually, every learner's needs are different, be it at the skill level (one needs reading skills more than speaking or vice versa) or at the level of purpose (medical, technical, business or legal English are just a few examples). Online learners have the opportunity to spend more time on their main points of interest than the teacher can afford in a class with 20 other learners.

Another aspect that must be taken into consideration is the fact that there are very many learning styles and people employ different personal strategies in their learning process. For learning in general and for language learning in particular, it

is very important to try out different things and learning by trial and error is a productive way to learn most things. Many learners fail to achieve success in foreign language learning because they are afraid of getting things wrong in front of their peers. With self-assessment questions and exercises, learners can afford to find out what things they are confused about and when they know exactly what the problems are, they are usually on their way to solving them.

Learners can also have freedom about how much support they use. Tutor support may be available to all the online learners but some may make little use of this, yet still succeed without difficulty because many learners prefer working on their own.

Some learners simply do not like being taught. There is also increasing freedom in choosing the learning environment: one can study at home, in a public library or university, wherever one feels comfortable, and free internet access is provided in most public places. In a traditional classroom setting the teacher is the one who decides whether learners work alone, in groups or in pairs, but this can also be the learners' decision when working online.

Another hallmark of open learning programmes that justifies their attractiveness and efficiency is the flexibility they offer in terms of schedule or location. Learning online offers learners the possibility of choosing the most appropriate time of the day, without giving up other commitments such as work or family or fun.

Open learning plays an important part in developing a learner's self-esteem and autonomy and this helps learners to make the most of every learning opportunity they meet. Learner autonomy is certainly one of the key concepts in today's pedagogical contexts. In permanently changing environments, re-qualifying and acquiring new skills on one's own becomes more and more a valuable asset, appreciated both by instructors and also by employers. Life-long learning is closely connected to the extent to which a person can embark on a learning experience, whatever stage in life he or she may have reached. When one feels confident about learning and also about self-study, continuous learning becomes easier.

At first sight, open learning is very attractive because of its modernity and the range of innovative resources it uses. Young learners in particular are more motivated to use technical equipment in their learning process rather than the traditional pen and paper. For older learners however, this feature may turn into a drawback because most adults are somewhat behind with the latest technical developments and find it difficult (and sometimes embarrassing) to acquire new competences.

Although the many qualities of open learning make it a very attractive tool to use, it also brings about a series of drawbacks that not only learners, but also instructors should be aware of. To put it as bluntly as possible: online learning offers

absolutely no motivation NOT to drop out; therefore students need more motivation than in real life (cf. Macdonald, 2006). As we have already seen in the previous sections, learners enjoy a great deal of freedom and this fact can turn against them.

Both learners and teachers may not feel confident in using technology and, after some frustrating experiences of failure, they can soon quit learning online. The open learning tools available are sometimes very complex and their degree of complexity does not count for their purposes. There can also be many bugs and errors that prevent these instruments from working properly. Not to mention the special expertise needed from the part of online materials designers. Moreover, many materials designers are tempted to take textbooks off the shelf and convert them to electronic form. One sign that online learning has failed is that the course could have been a book given as reading material. On the other hand, the production of customised materials can be expensive (cf. Leinenbach, 2007) and similarly, the costs and time required by open learning are harder to estimate. Many learners that embark on this type of learning simply have not acquired yet a series of competences and skills: time management is not developed, writing skills are not good enough, self-motivation and discipline are lacking, and critical thinking is not properly developed. Some can be taken aback by the novelty of the approach and prejudice takes its toll.

In this context, the development of the three blended learning courses we have mentioned above includes both taking advantage of the benefits of this approach and devising ways of coping with some of the drawbacks previously described.

Particularly in this kind of learning environment where students are easily demotivated, it is very important that they know what their benefits from participating in the course will be. In language learning this translates into providing students with a bird's eye view of the objectives the course aims to accomplish, of the skills and competences that can be acquired. Knowing what time and money will be invested is very important when engaging in language learning, as in any type of activity.

In practical terms this becomes operational in TOOL and ALL due to a clear structure the learner is made familiar with where the learning objectives are presented at the beginning of each of the 12 units of the 9 language courses. The objectives are closely correlated to the description of the learning outcomes found in the consolidation units where the learner can easily self evaluate the newly acquired skills and competences by first doing and then self-scoring the tasks included. These learning outcomes are situational, concrete realisations of the generic "can do" statements found at the basis of each unit's learning aims. These goals are designed following the "can do" statements specific for the level A2 as found in the ALTE/Eaquals ELP and the CEFR. The extent to which the learner

acquires mastery of skills and competences by partially or completely accomplishing the objectives set at the beginning can be both self-assessed and tutor assessed. Besides the correlation between learning objectives and learning outcomes that helps the learner understand how s/he is progressing, the objectives are mapped onto the content of the courses so that they meaningfully reflect the learner's progress when their skills are evaluated according to the progressive subtle scale found in the description of the CEFR levels. Not only the students but also the tutors can thus measure and consequently plan more precisely future learning and evaluate how language learning takes place in small steps which testify to evolution from one level to the other.

Another very important aspect that course developers have had to consider before designing the syllabi of the courses was to research into the profiles of the target groups and to identify their needs. Both TOOL and ALL language courses are addressed to people who are interested in learning a LWULT language for travel, work or study purposes and who already have basic competences in the target language. These specific traits of the target group translate onto two levels: on the one hand there is the choice of language level that such a group may need and on the other there is the choice of themes and topics that are relevant for this group. It is clear that students need to be motivated with materials that help them practise language and skills likely to be needed in real life in contexts that are most relevant to them. Therefore, the developers of the TOOL and ALL courses have decided to build units focused on relevant topics and situations such as: having a meal out, greeting and meeting new people, being able to purchase goods, speak about one's family, hobbies, professions etc. The developers are aware that their target group may never be interested in investing further effort and time to progress to a level higher than A2 – a level that may fully satisfy the needs the learners have. This involves a new type of attitude concerning the process of language learning, where the learner's goal may never be that of acquiring native speaker-like competences and communication skills, as the traditional language learning theory and practice would advocate some decades ago. This may be particularly true in the case of the learning/teaching of LWULT languages.

The same goes for the ELSTI platform where on account of the target group being office staff the content of the course is adapted to the professional needs specific for an executive assistant of the 21st century. Some of the course units are: Presenting a company, Advertising, Travel arrangements, Welcoming a guest, Participating in a meeting, Negotiating and Preparing an order, Organising transport of goods. Professional subskills such as looking for information, using the internet to analyse the market, making a presentation of the competitors present on the market are practised while language acquisition also takes place.

Because the freedom of the autonomous learning environment is often proven to turn against the students, the course developers have come up with additional tools

to support student motivation and the learning process altogether. In the first place, the students do not communicate with their tutor only during classes. Whenever they encounter problems they can write to their teacher and also any homework submitted is reviewed by the tutor and returned to the student.

Before the course, the learners are prepared for this new learning environment with the help of another product of the project, namely the student guide, meant to get them acquainted with the learning approach and with the ways of making the best of their learning process.
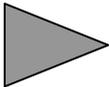
Learner Autonomy

It is obvious that the blended learning approach used in these 3 projects fosters learner autonomy which is the main source responsible for the learning process. Autonomy in itself sounds like a great asset, all learners should develop the ability to learn autonomously, be it in language learning or in any other field of study. On the other hand, being independent also has disadvantages and students in an online environment are more easily tempted to drop out than students found in a face-to-face learning environment.

Learner motivation should thus be sustained and both TOOL and ALL have employed methodological techniques for providing students on their way to autonomous learning with the necessary tools to feel safely taken care of - if need be - while they allow for as much flexibility and independence as the learner needs. Thus, both ALL and TOOL courses offer students the possibility (and this is also highly recommendable) to keep a diary of one's progress with a focus on content specific difficulties and also with an eye out for technical problems.

Because the tutor support and feedback is not instantaneous as in a traditional classroom and because feedback and assessment are needed in order for the learner to feel encouraged and motivated, the TOOL and ALL content developers encourage self-assessment and offer self-assessment opportunities to the learners. One of the methods is a good correlation between objectives and achieved goals. At the beginning of each study unit the learner sees what skills and competences s/he should have gained by the end of that unit. Once the unit is finished and the tasks and exercises done, the learner is evaluated against the initially stated objectives which are now reformulated in the shape of achieved goals. It is easy therefore for the learner to comprehend where in the learning process s/he has been successful and where more work is required.
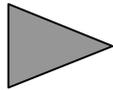
Conclusions

Learners of widely used foreign languages such as English can already benefit from blended learning courses that have well-developed methodologies and resources. On the other hand, for most of the LWULT languages such as the ones that are addressed by the TOOL and ALL courses, there are too few resources available in general, not to mention the online or blended formats.

Even if ELSTI develops blended courses for English, Spanish, French and Italian, the project aims at tackling not only the linguistic component, as for the target group of the project other elements are offered to complement language learning: cultural awareness and intercultural competences are equally important and a hands-on guide to personal development is also included. This shows that of late language learning has been mapped alongside other vital lifelong learning skills integrated with basic competences that help the adult professional adjust to an ever changing environment.

In this article, we have analysed two different types of projects, different tools and the contexts in which online learning has been approached at a European level in the last five years. As the EU funded projects always have a degree of innovation built in, by analysing the direction they take it is only natural to foresee that language learning will become integrated into bigger learning frames and that teaching/learning methodology will selectively choose advantages offered by the development of technology while fighting to preserve what is invaluable in the traditional approach: the human factor.
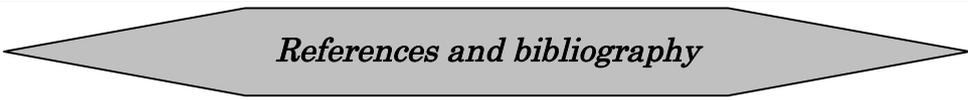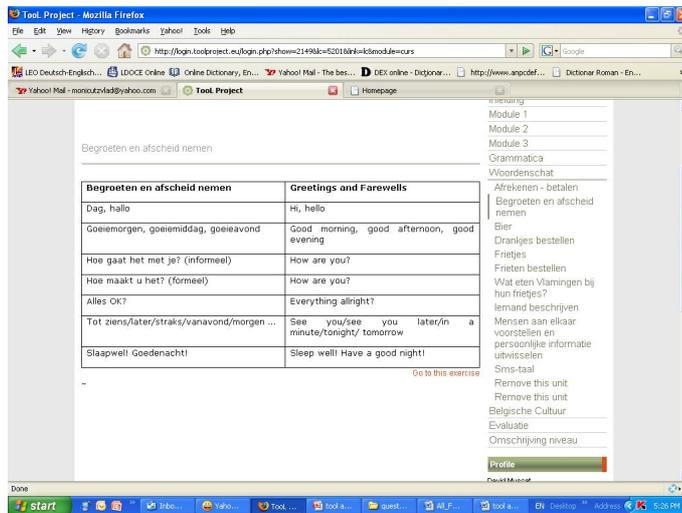
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Annex

Snaphots of the TOOL and ALL websites:

This is a snapshot of the vocabulary section from the Dutch course. The vocabulary is structured on the units contained in the course, not being limited to words, but rather aiming at teaching language in context, with frequent collocations and phrases, specific to the A2 learner.
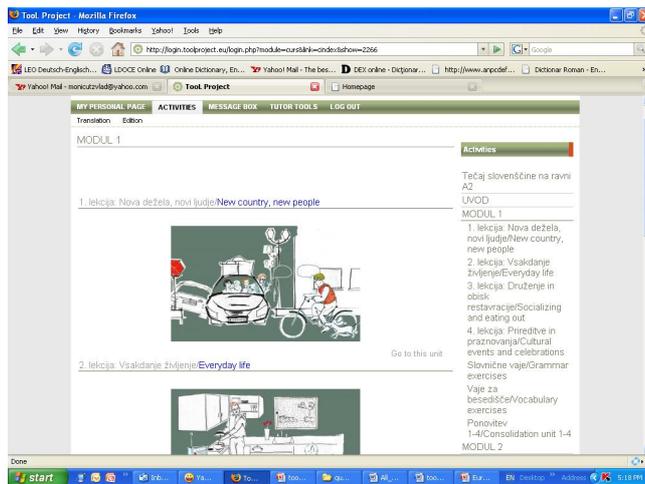
This is a snapshot from the first module of the Slovene course. The course developers also aimed at creating a visual identity for the set of courses and a graphic designer has been employed to create representative illustrations for all the courses
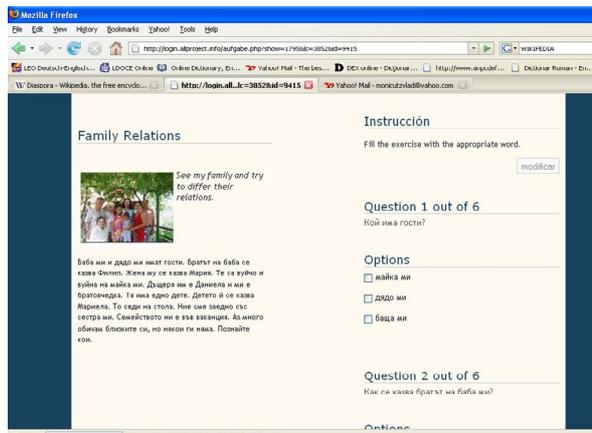
First exercise in the unit 1 of the Bulgarian course "Me & them"

This is what viewers see on the homepage of the TOOL project, without having bought a login. Everybody can thus access relevant information about the project and learners/language schools can decide whether the courses are relevant for them, whether the methodology (Blended Learning) is suitable and interesting for their profile.

The home page of the ALL project is similar as far as categories are concerned to the TOOL homepage, trying to keep a unified perspective for all the 9 language courses.
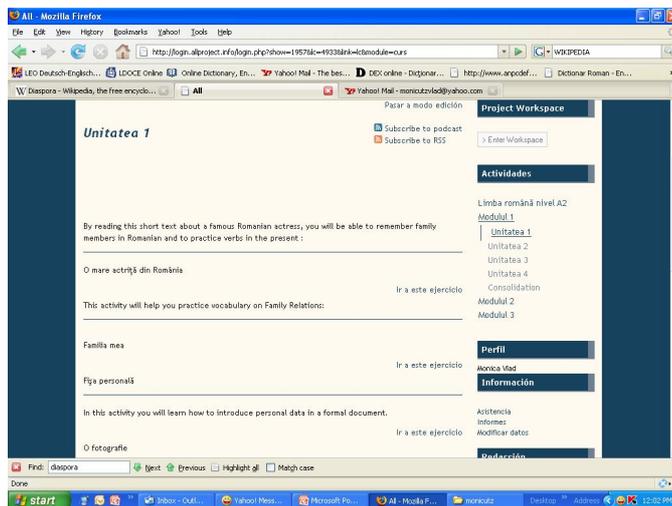
Part of the first unit of the Romanian course on the ALL platform, **Me & Them** (family members, personal data). On the whole: giving personal information

The authors

Monica Vlad is project coordinator at the EuroEd Foundation Romania. She holds an MA in "Applied Linguistics – Teaching English as a Foreign Language". She has the following professional interests: adult learning, lifelong learning, translation and terminology research.

Dr. Anca Colibaba is the executive president of the *EuroEd* Foundation and a PhD Reader at "Gr. T. Popa" University, Iaşi – the English Department. She is also the president of QUEST Romania (Romanian Association for Quality Language Services) and the president of FocusEd International Association (an International Association that promotes quality, diversity and innovation in education). She holds a Bachelor Degree in English and French from "Al. I. Cuza" University Iaşi; a PhD in Psycholinguistics ("Al. I. Cuza" University, Iaşi), an International Diploma in Language Teaching Management - co-validation: University of Cambridge, University of Queensland and SIT - USA. She has been the project coordinator of over 15 projects co-funded by the EU and implemented locally, nationally or trans-nationally by the *EuroEd* Foundation.