Considerations on Educational
Issues

INNOVATIVE *TOOLS* FOR
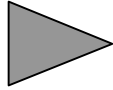# AUTONOMOUS LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

This article aims to highlight some of the ways in which innovative concepts and instruments in language learning (blended learning, autonomous language learning, online learning platform) are used to enhance the quality of less widely used less widely taught (LWULT) language learning packages created under the auspices of Lingua projects.
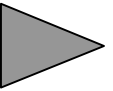
Keywords: offline and online language learning, autonomous learning, blended learning, LWULT languages, eLearning, online learning platform

Introduction

The title of this article plays with the names of two twin Lingua projects funded by the European Union. One project is Tool for Online and Offline Language Learning (TOOL), the other one is Autonomous Language Learning (ALL).

The key features of the two projects are cooperation, relevance, innovation, practicality, flexibility. The two projects aim at creating and promoting a blended learning dynamic system online and offline, with materials for learning and teaching in nine languages and a methodology transferable to the learning and teaching of other languages.
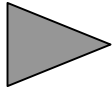
LWULT at A2 level

The learning and teaching materials cover a spectrum of less widely used and taught languages (Dutch, Estonian, Hungarian, Maltese and Slovene in the TOOL project; Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Romanian and Turkish in the ALL project) for which there are very few materials published in electronic format, either on CD-ROM or online. However, in the context of EU expansion these languages are becoming important. Linguistic competences in LWULT languages bring diversity in the cultural, economic and social exchanges as well as more business, labour and cultural integration opportunities. The TOOL and ALL projects therefore cover a very important gap in promoting linguistic diversity in Europe. They meet the needs of a large range of people who need training in less widely used languages and exposure to the culture of these target languages.

The courses created for the nine languages have been designed bearing in mind three principles:
    (i) a user-focused approach (A2 level in the Common European Framework)
    (ii) a blended learning approach
    (iii) autonomy development

Why A2 level? On the one hand, it seems that A2 is a key level for adult learners. Most of them tend to drop out after reaching A1 level considering that they manage with basic survival linguistic competences. An A2 level course with an adequate methodology can maintain the learners' interest and motivation. On the other hand, extensive research into the market has shown that this level has not been addressed in the target languages yet.
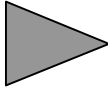
Blended Learning

Why a blended learning approach? Because it "combines the inspiration and motivation of traditional classroom teaching and the fun and flexibility of eLearning (also called online or distance learning) to create courses that are accessible and motivating for today's adult students." (home page of the ALL project) It provides support from both the tutor and peers and flexibility in choosing the time and pace of working independently, aspects which enhance motivation and satisfaction.

"Blended Learning refers to a language course which combines the face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of technology. The term technology covers a wide range of recent technologies, such as the Internet, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards. It also includes the use of computers as a means of communication, such as chat and e-mail, and a number of environments which enable teachers to enrich their courses, such as VLEs (virtual learning environments), blogs and wikis" (cf. Pete Sharma and Barney Barrett, 2007).

Blended learning models seem to have a full meaning for adult learners. They alternate face-to-face classes with working online on their own or collaborating with their peers via different instruments, such as forums, chat rooms, emails, blogs and wikis. By this system adult students can maximize their time, learning and linguistic progress.

It is commonly agreed that learning is successful only when the students take responsibility for their own learning. Independent or autonomous learners are the ones who want to learn, are aware of their own needs and of what they want to achieve, who have the capacity and conditions for reflection and self-evaluation, set priorities and plan their actions, have the ability to make rational choices, have the openness and the flexibility to co-operate with their peers. Autonomous learning is a process that develops when appropriate materials, tasks and support are provided. The blended learning approach of the nine courses in TOOL and ALL enables students to become autonomous by getting them involved in making their own decisions about objectives, activities or work plans, time management; they are involved in materials evaluation and self evaluation and are challenged to experiment different learning methods. Close guidance goes hand in hand with learner choice.

E-learning platforms

The design of the e-learning platforms in the two projects allows easy access and navigation, variety of tasks, immediate feedback and personalized feedback from the tutor, transparency of objectives and opportunity for the learners to voice their opinion at the end of each unit. The didactical and technical features of the platform facilitate collaboration, information sharing, social networking, video sharing and encourages creativity of materials developers, teachers and students. Learners can subscribe to podcasts and RSS feeds. They can also download multimedia files from activities. The platform is a dynamic tool which permits the authors of the courses to easily update or change the materials, to include news-based elements, so as to keep them in tune with the events or the specificity of each new generation of learners. This feature increases the perceived value of the course and the immediacy, which enhances motivation of the adult learner.

The close collaboration between the ALL project team and TOOL project team, the permanent harmonization between the two projects and their products will result in a package of nine European languages that can be learnt and taught with all the advantages of the blended learning methodology and the high level of transferability of best practice.

References and bibliography

Barrett, B. and Sharma, P. 2007. *Blended Learning: Using Technology in and beyond the Language Classroom*. London: MacMillan.

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