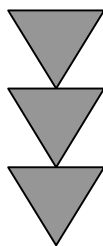


**"BLENDED LEARNING": CONCEPT
AND IMPLEMENTATION
IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

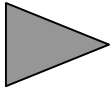
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Abstract

The aim of this article is to offer the reader an overview of the concept of “blended learning” and of the advantages of using this approach in language learning/teaching. After online learning exposure has fallen short of creating real group bonding, the rise of the blended learning approach has given a fresh impetus to the role new technologies have in education in general and in language education in particular. Its key features are illustrated with examples of how blended learning methodology functions in the context of a number of language learning courses elaborated in two European Lingua projects called TOOL 2 and ALL, respectively.

Keywords: language learning/teaching, blended learning, less widely used less widely taught (LWULT) languages, online learning



Introduction

When it comes to learning a foreign language, the main problem students have to face is finding an appropriate offer which meets their specific needs. It is common knowledge that language learning involves a lot of self-study and the possibility to learn at one's own pace alongside the mandatory need to address the special purposes individual learners might have. Obviously, this is more of a problem in the case of less widely used and less taught languages because these languages do not have the resources available to the major languages.

It is exactly these needs that two Lingua¹ projects, TOOL² (Tool for Online and Offline Language Learning) and ALL³ (Autonomous Language Learning) have set out to meet.

Over the last few years there have been several transnational collaborative projects (e.g. *Bulgarian for Foreigners*, *Smallinc* or *Oneness*) dedicated to the teaching/learning of L2 languages. Most of these, plus a number of commercial endeavours, offer either exclusively online courses or compilations of external links, information and resources. From this perspective, TOOL and ALL synergy is unique in that it proposes a *package of 9 language courses (Bulgarian, Dutch, Estonian, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Romanian, Slovene, Turkish) at the level of A2 in the format of Blended Learning*.

There are some essential characteristics for effective open learning, be it based on traditional printed materials or on online activities. **Learning by doing** must be one of the key principles of online learning because almost all learning happens when hands-on activities are used, by trial and error, practising and experiencing. Since learners spend a lot of their studying time alone, open learning depends crucially on **feedback to learners**. All kinds of learners need to find out how their learning is going. The levels of appropriateness and quality of the feedback that open learners receive as they learn by doing are the hallmarks of the most effective open learning materials, whether print-based or online. The feedback from the teacher needs to be as **accessible** and **immediate** as possible so that it reaches learners while they still have in mind what they have just done. Online learning can

¹ For more details about the Lifelong Learning Programme, under whose umbrella the Lingua projects were financed 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 learning, ref no. 230285-CP-1-2006-1-RO-LINGUA-L2) project please visit the project's website: www.toolproject.eu

³ For more details about the ALL (Autonomous Language Learning, ref. no.: 229775-CP-1-2006-1-ES-Lingua-L2) project please visit the project's website: www.allproject.info

allow feedback to some tasks to be just about instant. In terms of delivery, open learning materials need to **be user-friendly, easy to follow, interesting and supportive** – even when the subject matter is difficult and complex. Because of the importance motivation plays in open learning, this type of tools needs to address **“well-articulated needs”** (Leinenbach, 2007:12). Learners need to be able to see what open learning can give them, and this should link to the ambitions and intentions that learners relate to strongly. “They need to keep in mind good answers to the questions << What’s in this for me?>> and <<Why should I work at this?>>” (Leinenbach, 2007:12).

This is also a feature that is essential in language learning whereby students must permanently relate to the things they are learning. The things they are supposed to learn are to be embedded in real life contexts. Going back to a less general context, in teaching foreign languages it is very important that students learn things they can use in real life and things that are **meaningful** to them. The materials and situations encountered in learning a foreign language online should therefore rely on **authenticity** while their **importance for the learner** should be one of their main characteristics. One starting point for a teacher that creates materials for online learning could be creating resources that are **suitable for their learners** (in terms of age, interests, beliefs and needs).

In order for open learning to confirm its **declared flexibility**, it is very important that it should **start where people's experience already is**. When learners need starting competences or knowledge, it is important that such prerequisites should be clearly stated from the very beginning of the course. With language learning tools this can be achieved by designing instruments for different levels of competence, a context in which the placement test plays an important part. There are placement tests that can include an automatically generated feedback or self-evaluation forms or questionnaires consisting of “can do” statements that the learner can use in order to define the level s/he needs to start from.

Nevertheless, for most learners the online type of study has proven difficult to keep their motivation going for a time long enough to show a meaningful degree of progress. The role of the social component of learning is so enlighteningly emphasised in the high percentage of learner dropout rate evidenced by the statistics analysing online learning. A corrective answer seems to be offered these days by the methodology of blended learning-found in full development, where a number of solutions to problems complement the already acknowledged advantages of online learning.

What is innovative in using blended learning methodology in the teaching/learning of less widely used languages? In other words, what is new in the proposal of blended learning courses for 9 LWULT (less widely used less widely taught) languages TOOL and ALL projects put forth?

To understand what innovation means here, a bird's eye view of the current situation may be relevant.

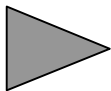
In the context of a growing interest in the linguistic diversity of Europe manifest at the level of the fundamental principles as expressed in the European Union conceptual documents by its strategy makers alongside the reality of the major role good communication plays in the developmental capacity of the extended Europe (the ELAN study commissioned by the European Commission, which was released last year, investigated the relevance the command of foreign languages plays in the success of EU trade and demonstrated that in business transactions the knowledge of the business partners' language and business culture has a substantive role) the teaching industry of less widely used and less widely taught languages as second or as foreign languages faces an unprecedented challenge; still in its infancy, with little recent research in applied linguistics, with no tradition but a newborn interest in the effectiveness of the methodology of teaching these languages as foreign languages or as second languages – due to the new economic realities and especially so because of the open and free labour market of extended Europe - the professionalization of teaching less widely used and less widely used languages as foreign languages is nevertheless rapidly advancing.

One interesting factor helping this progress is the generic EU tendency to harmonise procedures and elaborate standards that are EU meaningful. Language teaching has followed this direction as well: witnesses for this alignment process in the linguistic field are the instruments elaborated to measure, demonstrate, plan or evaluate the mastery of a foreign language and culture, such as the European Language Portfolio and the Common European Framework of Reference.

Another contextual factor is the awareness that one *lingua franca* may not be enough; reality shows that despite the role English has been playing and is expected to continue to play in the mid-term, other key actors have started to show up on stage to contribute to the EU economic progress and social cohesion, i.e. the languages of the various players on the labour market.

The combined pressure of all these elements on the development of the LWULT profession is huge and the consequences are seen everywhere in the field. Innovation at high speed is registered in the teaching of Romanian, Estonian, Slovene or Dutch as foreign languages, empiric research about the linguistic profile of Hungarian, Maltese, Bulgarian is being carried out alongside the development of learning/teaching tools, piloting of new methodologies in the teaching of Turkish or Lithuanian as foreign languages is underway, (self) evaluation procedures and testing systems used for widely used languages are being adapted to suit LWULT. Flexible systems of teaching/learning are created or looked into for adaptation to a large variety of needs, quality assurance systems in the teaching/learning of LWULT are identified and implemented.

This is the main niche the package of 9 LWULT language courses target.

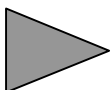


Students' needs in learning LWULT languages

Research carried out prior to developing the **TOOL** and **ALL** courses has confirmed that when it comes to foreign language learning - especially LWULT, where very specific personal and/or professional motivators converge – top of the students' wish list comes **immediacy of application** combined with **progress measured through regular testing** and **self evaluation, systematic cultivation of learner independence** (henceforth **tailored courses**), **systems of peer interaction, time flexibility**.

The **TOOL** and **ALL** approach answers these needs by developing **blended learning courses** based on **internet technology** which are aimed at **developing learner autonomy** while the **availability of the tutor on a frequent basis**, be it online or in the face-to-face sessions, offers the necessary motivational hook for the less self-disciplined, for those more dependent on the social dynamics of learning or for those less technologically inclined.

This approach, already established in the teaching of a variety of contents, has been chosen for the teaching of our LWULT courses because it is generally understood as a very flexible educational tool which can combine different teaching methods and learning styles; typically, it involves computer-based study alongside traditional classroom teaching, the ratio of the two being established according to the learners' needs. In the context of the **TOOL** and **ALL** courses the generic ratio online/face-to-face is 120 course hours (online and face-to-face) allocated for the development of A2 competences, of which 34-38 face-to-face hours and 80-90 online hours. The hours cover 12 units each of 5 online hours, 3 consolidation units of 6 online hours each, an orientation unit of 2-4 hours and a final test of 2-4 hours. As noted before, the approach has no established tradition in the learning/teaching of the nine languages under scrutiny.



***Blended Learning didactic and pedagogic principles
implemented in TOOL and ALL***

There is a series of pedagogic and didactic principles that underpin the choice of the Blended Learning approach in the **TOOL** and **ALL** courses.

Firstly, autonomy, collaboration and technology must be correlated and taken into consideration so that **flexibility** needed by adults learning a language is not

understood as mere self-access which really means “total lack of support”. Therefore, the misunderstanding “Autonomy is self-access” that is to be found frequently in exclusively online FL courses should be corrected. Autonomy is a process to be developed; there is no such thing as an autonomous course, only courses that develop autonomy. Moreover, in Blended Learning, the materials should have an open structure that can be adapted to different learning contexts in different countries and at different times.

The second issue at stake is that both **learning** and **language acquisition** through immersion are encouraged and exploited. All forms of learning, practice and exposure to the target language and culture are valued and built on. Practice of intercultural skills or of specific communicative receptive or productive skills necessary for professional communication or for survival in the new culture are practised with the help of exercises combining authentic texts with audio/video files or action-oriented and task-based learning, which are used extensively. The balance of activities and the pace of development of the four main communicative skills may be decided by learners themselves according to the personal priorities set and revised on a regular basis.

The learning methodology used in TOOL and ALL also focuses on the new roles of the teacher. The teacher does not have a **central position** any longer, and s/he assumes the role of a **guide** instead of the model that feeds information to the learners. Nowadays, information can be obtained from a great number of resources including online encyclopedias, libraries, universities that make research available to the public, downloadable books etc. Thus, the emphasis is not placed on the amount of information one can recite by heart or write flawlessly in an exam. The materials developers of these courses have been aware that information should be very easily obtainable, and hence the teacher should not be merely a data provider. The so-called “containers” of vocabulary, grammar, cultural information in the TOOL courses serve this precise aim. Moreover, the course developers support the idea that in order to be relevant, teaching must focus on **hands-on** activities and **acquisition of skills**, on designing **task-based learning activities**, on things that cannot be learned from books. This is what TOOL and ALL language courses create: the learning opportunity through active and life relevant practice.

The course tutors must also acknowledge that sometimes they are functioning as **moderators** for learners. To encourage the online and face-to-face group dynamics, peer feedback and peer learning and sharing, to guide the learning choices of learners who are empowered with the coordination of their own learning processes is what the tutors of the TOOL and ALL courses are expected to do.

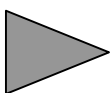
As learning is an option and not a compulsory activity our tutors are provided with tools which **sustain** student motivation throughout the courses: they will be there for the student to offer orientation on the online learning environment; the platform

for the courses has forms designed for student interaction and tutor feedback, student reflective diaries, self evaluation grids with learning goals structured per unit and learning outcomes measured accordingly, a clear mapping of learning which is necessary for informed learning choices, instruments to self measure the tiniest linguistic progress and giving the learner a valid and standardised placement of their language competence at a certain moment.

The Blended Learning approach in TOOL and ALL also focuses on scalability and content updating. The learning materials, including most of those for the face-to-face classes, are available on a platform (which is the virtual course support) that also facilitates communication by e-mail, forums, VOiP, and allows the necessary fundamental interaction between learners and tutors. The platform permits a percentage of the course to be updated or changed, something that never fails to add interest as every course will be almost a **unique experience**.

The Blended Learning approach in the TOOL and ALL courses aims at **using the two learning environments involved to their maximum potential**. Thus, it brings a new quality to the face-to-face sessions and contact hours with the tutors, as they are entirely reserved to aspects that cannot be covered in the online sessions. One possibility is to work on developing skills (such as speaking and oral interaction) for whose practice online learning is not compatible. Moreover, piloting has shown that students, being aware of the limited amount of face-to-face time available and the scarcity of the opportunities to communicate directly with the tutor, are motivated to use the classroom time more intensively. In the online activities the nine language courses are designed in a manner that allows for interaction in a low hierarchy, providing learners and tutor with opportunities for a relaxed, non authoritarian counselling.

In a nutshell, as far as the approach to the courses is concerned, this can be described as situational, true-to-life, cultural and task-based, aiming at making learners aware of the process of acquisition. In terms of meeting the need of the learners to monitor self-progress, each course offers a grid for self-evaluation which is integrated in the course material, somewhat similar to the way the European Language Portfolio functions.



***Innovation in Blended Learning brought by TOOL
and ALL***

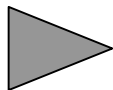
Blended Learning has been used in teaching foreign languages, albeit major languages. **When it comes to LWULT languages, Blended Learning is an innovative approach.**

Practice indicates that online courses today are underused. Therefore, the TOOL and ALL partnership opted for Blended Learning. Most of the online courses available so far develop mainly reading and writing skills. This is a prime reason why learners drop out of so many online courses. Learners appreciate speaking and oral interaction skills more than course developers imagine. Lack of group dynamics is another major issue. It is a BASIC motivational necessity that students can practise and use their newly acquired skills and are given opportunities to interact. Henceforth, our choice of a task-based content and of an interactive context. Depending on the learners' needs the number of hours spent online and in the classroom can be customised. Generically, in the TOOL/ALL model, learners attend 120 hours altogether, 30-40 face-to-face hours and 90-80 online hours, depending on their needs.

An innovative feature of special relevance for a number of the languages involved is the synergetic creation of the 9 LWULT online courses at the A2 level and their harmonisation with the-face-to-face component or the elaboration of the face-to-face materials when not available or not complementary with the online courses created through the projects. The methodological principles derive from the CEFR and the ELP and also draw on the good practice identified in the use of Blended Learning for the major languages.

The course developers have decided on using the CEFR and the ELP as the main tools in designing the syllabi for the courses, both with considerable impact, particularly visible in the last decade, on the setting up and implementation of European language policies but with a rather limited application to the development of materials and methodologies for LWULT languages.

A thorough project-based pioneering work for the application of the CEFR and the ELP to the nine languages is definitely an important contribution TOOL and ALL bring to the domain of foreign language learning and teaching in Europe.



Feedback from students: results from piloting the courses

The nine language courses have been piloted and most of the students attending the courses as part of piloting gave positive feedback concerning the learning methodology, the mode of delivery and the course content: the degree of learning, enjoyment and clarity of instructions is rated high (33%) or very high (66%), and the same percentage is recorded when it comes to course relevance.

The opportunity to make use of the advantages of technology was also highly appreciated while the necessary corrective measures are duly incorporated.

Below there are some of the testimonials of the learners that took part in piloting the courses:

The two projects have one more year to go and this period is expected to successfully contribute to their final piloting, dissemination and valorisation.

Snapshots from the Slovene piloting:



"I especially like my vocabulary workbook. It is easy to record new words, and I like that there is a question that tests me, if I remember the word."

"I really appreciate the variety of exercises and the opportunity to practise with real life situations."

"I also enjoy having several opportunities to practise vocabulary about the same topic, like having more than one exercise on hiring cars, for instance."

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www.toolproject.eu

www.allproject.info

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