



Language Learning and Teaching Project

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Abstract

The language-learning and teaching project of the University of Education Baden contributes to improving the student's hearing abilities. Using the "Electronic Voice & Ear-Trainer" we are able to provide the students a native language level. The elaborated teaching units and the produced auditory material afford a native-near level regarding pronunciation, melody and intonation as well as with the view on updated use in the country of the target language. Therefore the project adds to the creation of a language friendly environment within Europe; it supports the variety of languages and makes easier to acquire language competence in the course of lifelong learning. The system provides the basis for building up a system of eLearning.

1. Introduction

Learning one or more foreign languages is for many people not only necessary for job-related reasons. In order to support this long life learning a friendly environment for languages has to be created, which supports to acquire a foreign language in a practice-oriented manner. The traditional language training is in many cases dominated by cognitive aspects and provides too little possibilities to gain experience in pronunciation and intonation of the foreign language as well as to practice communication within a contingency approach.

If learning a language means on the one hand to acquire language competence by auditory processing approach and on the other hand to bring the use of language in every-day-life-situations into focus then the most effective way to learn a foreign language is to live in the country where the target language is spoken. The second-best alternative is to use native speakers as language trainers. Both ways are mostly out of question because of time and money constraints.

Using the "Electronic Voice & Ear-Trainer" we are able to provide the students a native language level both with regard to pronunciation, melody and intonation as well as with regard to the updated use in the country of the target language.

The importance of listening in language learning and its role in helping the learner overcome this barrier has long been recognised. Indeed, there is hardly an institution without a language laboratory or tape-recorders. But we also know from our own experiences that there are cases when students simply do not succeed in producing words or sentences correctly even after hours in the language laboratory. Is it because they just fail to reproduce the correct sounds or is it possible that they do not hear them correctly? Voice production is closely connected to auditory comprehension. This means that pronunciation problems are not always articulation problems and, therefore, pronunciation exercises can be of little help if, from the very beginning, the auditory input is not being decoded correctly. Consequently, how can traditional pronunciation training help if the student keeps hearing sounds incorrectly? Pronunciation exercises should therefore start with a battery of exercises aiming at sound perception training!

We will inform you about an interesting project that provides a new technology in language training and a new approach European networking and cooperating in the field of language training

2. Current situation

In the past a lot of people learned a foreign language to get a better knowledge of the language itself, to get be able to understand writings and poems in the original language. Nowadays most people first of all learn a foreign language in order to be able to communicate with foreign people in their own language.

Obviously to all of us, the most effective way to learn a foreign language is to live in the foreign country - but this is not always possible or in the same way comfortable would be to live with a Native Speaker as partner. The most common way is to attend a language course. Some parts of language learning – grammar and vocabulary – can be made in a cognitive way. But this is not possible with respect to sound discrimination, intonation and pronunciation.

At our institution students say, that they would work hard in the classroom to acquire a foreign language, learning grammar rules and vocabulary, translating, reading, making role plays and so on. Then, they go out of the classroom and try to communicate with native people. And what happens? Often they can't understand what native people say. And they wonder why they can't speak properly. What would be the reason for this?

Voice production is closely connected to auditory comprehension. That means, if you don't hear the sounds correctly you possibly can't reproduce them. Here adult learners feel they face an insuperable barrier. Also the language laboratory is of limited use if students are not able to hear correctly. They wonder if there is a quicker way to improve their speaking ability. However: Let's have a look at this new and exceptional way of language learning.

3. New way of language learning

Alfred Tomatis¹, a French ear, nose and throat specialist, found out: frequencies which you could not hear were also missing in the voice spectrum. He developed an electronic machine – which he called "Electronic Ear". The electronic ear improves the listening ability and leads to a better comprehension of the language in general and better language production. The electronic ear stimulates the innate listening ability - using special headphones with an integrated bone-conductor. The sound vibrations go immediately through the bone into the middle ear. You will learn a foreign language in the same successful way like your mother language during childhood – by listening.

I can imagine which question is coming up in your mind: Does this machine really work?
In 1997 the "Audio-Lingua Research-Project" – coordinated by the University of Bologna – tested the efficiency of this method. The project was supported by the European Commission through the Lingua Programme. One group of students did the sound perception training (SPT) just with the electronic ear the other group worked just with a trainer. The result: students working with this method were able to achieve the same results in half the time.

*"Results show that in all the testing groups at all partner universities, the SPT training led to an increase in phonetic ability, with the SPT groups showing a significant advantage in comparison to the control groups and the zero groups. These results show clearly that the method might mean a remarkable innovation in foreign language learning and teaching. If transferred into time units, a student working with the SPT method would be able to achieve the same results in almost 50 % less time as someone from the same course who worked without any specific sound perception training."*²

4. Project at the University of Education Baden/Austria

Now let's take a look at our project³ itself, which had taken place at the University of Education Baden/Austria 2006. The idea was simple. Each university, which joined this project created language-learning modules in their own language and got then access to each other's modules through this system. It is a new approach and technique to the acquisition as well as management of language competence.



What was the point of doing this project? How can our students benefit from this?

- The students and lecturers gain more language competence in a shorter time.
- The students and lecturers get a better inside into cultures and ways of life and promotes in this way the intercultural dialogue.
- It helps students and lecturers who don't have enough time or money to spend on travelling.

However I just like to mention the unique aspect of this method

- It helps students with hearing impairments. They are really going to benefit from this training.

4.1 Partner universities

The project was organized by the University of Education in Baden/Austria and realized with 8 partner institutions:

- Germany/University of Bremen
- Ireland/Mater Dei Institute of Education Dublin
- Poland/Jagiellonian University Krakau
- Austria/Pädagogische Akademie des Bundes in Oberösterreich Linz
- Austria/Tomatis Language Academy Neudörfel and Wien
- Luxembourg/Institut Supérieur D'Etudes et de Recherches Pédagogiques Walferdanges
- Italy/Istituto Universitario Suor Orsola Benincasa di Napoli
- Greece/University of Patras

4.2 Benefits for the universities

- Each university participating in this project will create some language learning modules and get access to many more language learning modules providing a wide variety of languages to choose from.
- In the minimum it is a valuable amendment to your language training or you can see it as the first step to install a system of distance learning and eLearning.
- Get a new approach to build up a network and cooperation in language training.
- Become a pioneer in a revolutionary technology in the field of language teaching in the subject area of teacher training focus on developing
 - a. new professional skills and learning environments
 - b. new approaches / techniques to the acquisition and / or management of knowledge
 - c. new skills how to update knowledge
- Respond to the future skills needed in the area of communication and information sciences.
- Promote intercultural dialogue and understanding between Europe and its neighbouring regions.

4.3 Benefits for the students

- The students gain more language competence in a shorter time.
- The students get a better inside into cultures and ways of life and promotes in this way the intercultural dialogue.
- It helps students who don't have enough time or money to spend on travelling.
- However I just like to mention the unique aspect of this method.
- It helps the students with hearing impairments. They are really going to benefit from this training.

4.4 Main activities

The main activities of students and lecturers were:

- Defining the structure and content of the language-learning modules (levels with respect to the European Language Portfolio, contents, integrated CD-ROMs, ...).
- Creating language-learning modules in the languages of the participating universities.
- Using the modules during the project – as teachers and students (including the production of the auditory material (CD)).

Based on the electronic Voice & Ear Trainer we developed language-learning modules. They had been an additional component in the language training (mother tongue, foreign languages) of the students as well as in the further training of the teachers:

- based on the auditory comprehension
- using the language in any situation (scenario technique) application-oriented
- supporting the communicative competence
- boosting the intercultural communication
- improving the ability to understand "foreign" culture and behaviour
- creating a language friendly environment

A language-learning module consisted of 4 – 6 lessons.

Materials we needed:

- Written documents
- 1 CD Dialogues (used in the lessons)
- 1 CD Basic Vocabulary and Phrases (Pronunciation Training)

The themes dealt with person, human body / wellness / body care, reside, places, every day life, wine and dine, education / training / learning, work and profession, business / trade / consumption, services, nature and environment, travelling and traffic, leisure and fun, media and modern information techniques, society / state / international organizations, relations to foreign people and Cultures

The vocabulary contained wordlist in alphabetical order, wordlist in group order and figures (fraction numbers, date, time, time data, week / days, months, year / seasons, holidays / festivals, currencies, measures and weights, countries, political units and notions, schools and educational institutions).

4.5 Documentation

The documentation of the project included:

- Language-learning modules (written material)
- Auditory material (Master-CDs containing basic words and phrases (pronunciation training))

References

¹ The Tomatis method: A review of current research. Montreal: Mc Gill University, 1983, Gilmore

² Ulrike A. Kaunzner, University of Bologna, Italy, http://www.methode-tomatis.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19&Itemid=70&lang=en and <http://www.tomatis.lu/download/AudioLinguaE.pdf?PHPSESSID=eeedf1c9f18df64c5c2405dce7942042>

³ Projekt EARL – Ear & Language – Entwicklung von Sprachlernmodulen mit muttersprachlichen Trainern und unter Verwendung des Elektronischen Ear&Voice-Training-Systems, Baden 2006