

Methodological Toolsets for Internet-based Language Learning

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Abstract

CALL-based instruction is a rapidly evolving domain, employing several digital applications, one of the most prominent currently being the Internet. With the advent of new and innovative internet technologies, CALL has evolved to include sub-fields such as IBLL (Internet-based language learning) or even more specialized approaches, based on social software applications, or, as more widely known, web 2.0.

Despite the proliferation of web-based resources for language learning, what still appears to be lacking both for teachers and for students is a systematic approach to make online learning of any language most enjoyable and effective (APACALL NEWSLETTER, 2009). The above gap is evident in the scarcity of availability of methodologies, tools and content for the advanced language learning level (C1, C2) -while there is abundance of available e-learning modules and content for the beginner level (A1, A2) in many languages.

The EU project "GLOSSA- Greek as a Vehicle for Promoting Linguistic Diversity" (<http://www.ellinikiglossa.eu>), aims at contributing to the area of IBLL by synthesizing two pedagogical methodological toolsets: one for development of online language learning content for advanced students and one for self-learning in online environments, both of which can be used for any European language. In a 2nd phase, through empirical testing of these methodologies, it aims at creating a complete e-learning course for the proficiency level in the Greek language (as a foreign/ second language). This course which will include theory, plain text exercises, multimedia features and cultural aspects and will technically combine web 2.0 elements with more "traditional" e-learning solutions (platforms).

In this paper, we present the first results from desk and field research, carried out in order to inform the design of the course. Field research was carried out with students, teachers and content developers in the area of Greek as a foreign language and included 20 interviews and a focus group discussion. Research questions focused on different aspects of online language learning: pedagogical approaches to be implemented, use of multimedia aspects, use of original literature and newspaper items, type of exercises and tests to be used for assessment, duration of courses, social orchestration of collaborative activities, use of web 2.0 elements as complementary to e-learning platforms, and other issues.

Our paper aims at sketching a picture of the state of the art in IBLL for the advanced level, drawn also from best practice examples and case studies from languages other than Greek –and other learning levels-, especially English, as TEFL is currently the most rapidly evolving learning paradigm in the language arts.

1. Introduction

The EU project "GLOSSA- Greek as a Vehicle for Promoting Linguistic Diversity" aims at contributing to the area of IBLL by synthesizing two pedagogical methodological toolsets: one for development of



online language learning content for advanced students and one for self-learning in online environments, both of which can be used for any European language.

This paper summarises indicative findings included in the recent project report aiming at synthesizing an image of the state of the art in the field of online language learning (OLL) for the specific domain of Greek as a foreign language for advanced (C1 and C2) students.

The contents of the report comprise the analysis and synthesis of the data collected by means of desk and field research.

Desk research is the process of reviewing all relevant literature (papers in academic journals, books, book chapters, websites, online courses, repositories, libraries, dictionaries, e.t.c.). The axes for evaluating the examples included in the review belong to a twofold scheme: the first part focuses on the teaching / methodological aspect of online language learning, whilst the second part brings the individual learner to the forefront, focusing on needs, profile and other specificities with regards to the persons involved in OLL.

Field research refers to a set of 15 interviews with relevant stakeholders: teachers of Greek as a foreign language, advanced students and OLL content developers. This data set was complemented with transcripts from a two-hour focus group discussion with similar audience. The questions and issues discussed were drawn from the axes presented below, and adapted accordingly for each specific case. For example, for teachers who had no previous experience with online learning or tutoring, questions were open-ended and formed on the basis of their wishes as potential online tutors or even learners. For people who had concrete experience, questions were more specific, referring to past experience.

The axes are the following:

First part (teaching / methodological aspects of online language learning –OLL-):

- Methodologies for language learning used or for on-line language courses
- Systems/ platforms/ web 2.0 applications currently used in Greece (and other countries) for online foreign language courses
- Pedagogical approaches applied in OLL
- Role of the tutor (or the online facilitator)
- Use of Multimedia in OLL
- Orchestration of collaborative activities in OLL
- Organization of assessment and evaluation in OLL
- Organization of language learning communities

Second Part (learner's –individual- aspect of online language learning):

- Profile of online language learners
- Methods used for the motivation of advanced learners
- Self-study methods
- Methods for revising in self study
- Needs of students with language-based learning disabilities
- Methods used for the use of multimedia in self-study
- Tools used for the development of the 4 key skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking)

The topics chosen for this paper among the above list are a) pedagogical approaches applied in OLL and b) the role of the tutor / online facilitator in OLL. This choice was based on the importance put to these issues by the field research participant.

2. Pedagogical approaches applied in OLL

Literature shows that choosing software for teaching Greek as a second language is not a simple or a neutral choice, as it implies a relevant choice of linguistic and pedagogic concepts [1]. Similar concerns are applied into the choice of Greek language teacher training online [2]. During 2007-09, the EU (EACEA) funded an extensive survey on "The impact of information and communications technology and new media on language learning". Below we refer to the main conclusions of the survey (annex III, qualitative survey, p.22), which we consider as illuminative to the nature of pedagogical approaches suitable to be used in online environments:

The project team identified contexts within which ICT and new media can be used for language learning purposes, including:

- Use of digital content and services as learning or teaching resources
- Use of new technologies as comprehensive learning environments structuring language learning experiences and offering access to services and support
- Facilitation of remote communication and collaboration using the target language

Such activities may be made available via various widely used platforms, the Web being the most prominent among them and devices including desktop and portable computers, mobile phones, other handheld devices (e.g. PDAs, MP3 players, iPods, digital audio recorders, digital video recorders), games consoles, TV, radio, and so on.

Language learning activities include the use of:

- standalone applications specifically designed for language learning purposes
- applications, such as automatic translators, digital speech recognition and reproduction,
- digital text corpora, concordances
- Web content in the target language/multilingual websites
- Communication tools and learning environments
- asynchronous social networking environments/networking applications
- broadcasting and associated asset development
- media: entertainment, films music
- gaming: standalone video games and multiplayer games.

These forms of ICT and new media interrelate with learning and teaching languages in various ways. They may:

- be integrated as regular, systemic components into formal or non-formal language learning and teaching practices
- be included as an occasional, one-off addition or complement to formal or non-formal language learning and teaching practices
- constitute, independently or in combination, alternative approaches to classroom-based formal or non-formal learning and teaching practices
- offer incidental opportunities for language use and informal/non-formal language learning.

With regards to pedagogical approaches and general pedagogical rationale applied in OLL, our focus group participants mostly referred to how they would like an OLL course to be, on the basis of both their experience, and their needs. Their main considerations and suggestions are summarized in the following points:

- an online course should offer the learner something he or she cannot alternatively acquire through face to face instruction.
- A blended learning approach, that is, a learning modality combining online interaction with face to face meetings was preferable to completely distance learning.

- The course content should include: a) everything said, read or discussed in the class, so as to cover the needs of absent students, or of those wishing to revise something or examine something in more depth, b) activities or exercises the teacher considers time consuming in face to face settings, c) a variety of exercises and/or activities aiming at vocabulary acquisition, a need proven important for advanced students of Greek as a foreign language, d) a variety of grammar exercises.
- The course approach should promote interaction among students and students and tutor, in order to unburden some of the cognitive load and create a pleasant learning ambience. So the participants proposed collaborative activities, project work, and generally, inclusion of modern pedagogical strategies, to maintain student interest.
- With regards to time management, the students wish to have set deadlines, which they consider helpful for their self-organisation. One of them characteristically said that "they need to know when something ends and something else begins, to have a sense of organization and structure".
- The course should provide a flexible choice in terms of activities and exercises, to cater for different time schedules and learning styles.

Our field research data point towards a strong tendency to employ teacher or content-centered approaches in online learning in Greece. 7 out of the 15 persons we interviewed have been participants of various online courses (on subject areas other than language learning). The overall impression formed from the deposition of Greek teachers' (5 out the of 7 individuals) experiences is that current online learning is restricted to content delivery, and to a focus on the teacher, with little or no interactive elements.

One of the teacher interviewees characteristically said that: "My online learning experience was completely teacher-centered. We had to be online a lot, six hours weekly, but only to attend synchronous lectures. The teacher talked for 2 and a half hours and then we had about half an hour to ask questions. As we were 20 participants, there was never enough time for discussion. So we had to create an e-mail list by ourselves, in order to communicate and discuss issues related to the course and our learning experience in general".

Another teacher said that she had been an open university student (of the Greek open university), and she had experienced blended learning. She pinpointed that, apart from periodical face-to-face meetings, there was a platform specifically designed for collaboration and idea exchange, but that the bulk of content was so extensive, that only very few students found the time and energy to use it for these purposes.

One of the student interviewees had a slightly different perspective: "I participated in a course, where there was a video conferencing for the lesson, and then we could go to a forum and post our ideas and discuss. This was a very positive element".

In general, lack of interaction seems a basic issue, as well as a focus on content delivery.

3. The role of the tutor in OLL

Teaching effectiveness may be defined as how an instructor can best direct, facilitate, and support students toward certain academic ends, such as achievement and satisfaction [3]. It is a concept thoroughly investigated by extensive empirical studies in traditional classrooms over the past decades [4]. Over the past five years, this line of enquiry has shifted towards teaching effectiveness in online or virtual classes. By this shift from the actual to the virtual classroom, emerged the term "instructor / teaching presence", encompassing "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" [5]. Palloff & Pratt (2003:118) describe an ideal online tutor behaving as follows: "posting regularly, responding in a timely manner and modeling good online communication and interaction". For a comprehensive review of several models proposed for effective teaching presence, see [3].

According to our research audience (focus group discussion), the role of the tutor should be active. He or she should encourage a sense of personal contact, through synchronous communication such as chat or video chat, though most of teachers' reactions towards this (live video conferencing) indicated a certain degree of technophobia, a feeling of unease towards seeing themselves on camera, even if it is that of their computer. This finding is in line with Papadima-Sofokleous's suggestion that "In teaching Greek as L2 the analysis carried out showed that the teachers had not acquired the skills necessary to teach Greek as L2 and at the same time implement new technologies (ICT) in the classroom" [2].

However, all participants seemed willing to "face the challenge", as stated by one of the teachers and potential online tutors. He or she should also encourage students to express themselves and interact. Finally, he or she should have a frequent and consistent presence, and cater for constant content updates. They all agreed that all of the above functions would certainly require time, but they seemed willing to dedicate it to this new experience.

The teachers also considered their proper training a sine qua non, in order to be able to operate in this new role. One teacher also pinpointed that "I should definitely have the help of a very understanding and open-minded technician, because, due to my lack of technical expertise, I won't be able to transfer my teaching ideas and/or materials in digitized content and I will need expert help for this".

Also, recurrent themes from the 15 interviews with regards to tutor role are the following:

- frequent presence is a prerequisite for establishing a good learning ambience
- orchestration of collaborative activities for students is also a necessary element of a successful OLL course.

One of the teachers told us that: *"what troubled me most during my online learning experience [not in language learning] was that the tutor was available to us in programmed lecture time, so we held whole class video-conferences twice weekly, but, as covering the content was a priority, we almost never had the chance to take the time we needed to ask questions or comment on the lecture"*.

Another teacher expressed the opinion that *"the tutor should be even more enthusiastic than in a real classroom, to motivate and to keep students"*. The same interviewee at a later point stated that he wouldn't want to be an online tutor: *"In general, I would not like to become an online tutor, because I believe in direct personal communication. In online teaching the human contact is lacking, the relation between tutor and student is not complete, there are issues of lack of understanding, the issue of timing is also there, the sense of humour is not working correctly. When chatting, for example, the little figures are smiling / laughing, not us. A main concern is that the visual contact is missing, the whole body of the tutor and the student is missing"*. Lack of personal contact was a concern also expressed during the focus group discussion, though no participant rejected the idea of participating in an online course, either as a tutor, or as a student.

Finally, a teacher referring to her learning experience online, shared similar concerns:

"The facilitator has an even smaller role in online courses: the group of learners could be more autonomous. I have seen online learning groups, but after 1-2 months it does not work. (we say the proverb: "eyes that don't see each other can be forgotten soon" In a forum , people only participated one or two times. The younger ones more (they are familiar with this tool) Chatting is very boring to me".

A student described how she would like the tutor to operate, as follows: "to post exercises frequently, and to give immediate feedback. I expect someone to really care about what I do. He can also comment on my work, give ideas and advice. Maybe once a week, he could post grammar and exercise "packages", for more practice".

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