

Promotion of Multilingualism in European Union and Innovative Opportunities for Foreign Language Acquisitions Online

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of the necessity to enhance the development of multilingualism in Latvia as, in accordance with the EU language policy, each EU citizen should be able to communicate not only in his/her mother tongue, but also in, at least, two other languages. Developed foreign language skills ensure greater employability in the long-term and can lead to better job opportunities. Therefore, this research study was carried out to find innovative means for fostering foreign language acquisitions. It focused on the analysis of the advantages of online learning as compared to blended learning and the conventional group work. The role of the tutor and his/her specific technical and pedagogical skills were also looked at. Sixty-eight participants, including 32 people from Latvia and 36 from overseas, were involved in an experiment: An online learning of the German language basic skills. The results show that before the course, the majority of the participants from Latvia would prefer blended learning. However, after the completion of the online course, which was offered to them by the authors of this study, all the participants highly evaluated the advantages of the online course, the main ones being the opportunity to plan one's time flexibly and choose appropriate levels of learning. It has been concluded that for adults with highly developed ICT competencies, for self-study support, online learning is recommended. For other learners, blended learning is advisable. The support provided by a tele-tutor is indispensable. Online learning can serve not only for meeting the lifelong professional development needs, but also for integrating people with special needs into society via ICT.

Key words: *multilingualism, foreign language needs, e- learning, online, blended learning*

Introduction

Current changes in the international labour market require a new approach to higher education, including acquisition of advanced professional foreign language skills at universities. The European Commission has emphasized in its Initiative New Skills for New Jobs. Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs: “A highly skilled and adaptable workforce both helps boost the competitiveness of the economy as a whole, and benefits employers and employees. Developing skills ensures greater employability in the long term, and can lead to better job opportunities, and wage increases. For employers, investing in skills is a way to enhance their employee motivation and productivity, and to boost capacities to innovate and adapt.” [New Skills for New Jobs. Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs, 2008].

Nowadays, a large part of the global population can communicate in more than one foreign language. The long-range goal of the European Commission is to achieve general multilingualism in the EU so that, in addition to the native language, every EU citizen could communicate in at least two foreign languages [A

New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism, 2005]. However, as testified by practice, a considerable number of member countries ignore this proposal because the role of foreign languages has not been sufficiently understood and appreciated by them.

In accordance with the EC initiative, in 2005 The Eurobarometer conducted a survey in 25 member countries with the aim to identify the opinions of the population on several matters, concerning multilingualism [Europeans and Their Languages, 2006.] The findings of the survey, in which almost 29,000 respondents participated, testified that approximately 50% of them considered that they could communicate in, at least, one foreign language. The most popular foreign language in the EU was English (as indicated by 38% of the respondents), followed by German (14% of the respondents) and French (14% of the respondents).

When comparing the data by countries, considerable differences were found: 99% of the respondents from Luxembourg, 93% from Malta, 90% from Lithuania and 71% from Hungary admitted that they could speak one foreign language. 28% of the respondents said that they could speak two foreign languages. According to their self-assessment, 70% of the British respondents, and approximately 60% respondents from Spain, Italy and Portugal could communicate only in their native language. However, in Latvia, in accordance with their self-assessment, one foreign language was spoken by 95% of the respondents, two foreign languages by 51%, and three foreign languages by 14% of the respondents.

It is not easy to achieve the aim that was put forward by the EC to acquire one's native language, plus two foreign languages, as a considerable proportion has rejected this aim as being difficult to implement. Also, the educational policies in many EU member countries do not facilitate the acquisition of several languages. However, a solution of this issue could be found.

The implementation of the EC initiative "The Multilingual Europe" in the higher educational institutions of Latvia is currently very significant, as specialists are being trained for employment in the international labour market. In order to be able to implement the Lisbon Strategy on the development of competitive knowledge-based economy within the EU [The Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Job, 2000] and the Copenhagen Declaration [The Copenhagen Declaration, 2002] on the facilitating of restructuring and development of professional education, innovative means should be used to implement successfully the common aims of the member countries. One of most effective solutions is gradual introduction of e-learning, using appropriate learning and teaching aids.

E-learning as an Effective Means of Fostering Foreign Language Acquisitions

In our opinion, to enhance efficient acquisition of foreign languages, computer software programmes "Intelligent Tutorial Systems", "Simulations" and "Hypermedia" should be used. These programmes can be relatively called "instructors with the artificial intelligence". These kinds of software stand out because of their high level of interactivity – new knowledge is acquired through modules based on the learners' preliminary knowledge, and the levels of knowledge are related to the learner's wants to analyze his/her achievements, and to develop new knowledge [Ehler and Schenkel, 2005]. Autonomous learning can be combined with support given by the tutor. Learners are free to model the content of the lessons by combining modules and choosing the most suitable time and venue for learning online. The communication needs of the learners are satisfied with the help of ICT that provide possibilities to socialize with other learners and the tutor.

As we know, in practice, e-learning is conducted in diverse versions. For example, many German and British higher educational institutions successfully use virtual lectures, "Virtual Collaborative Learning",

and "Self-paced-learning" on the basis of Web Based Training ("WBT"). In Latvia, the popularity of WBT is also rapidly growing, because WBT interactive multimedia learning aids with links, simulations or scenario games, supported by a tutor, are found to be very motivating. The main principle of the organization of learning is that the learner can choose the time, the pace and venue him- or herself, is also important because the learning process becomes very flexible.

E- learning scenarios are as follows [Bruns and Gajewski, 2000]:

- The learner acquires the virtual lectures online independently and then during a video conference, participates in a discussion with other learners or only with the tutor, using a communication tool based on the internet ("Open Distance Learning");
- The learner works with the interactive learning material in the network with other learners and during the learning process, communicates with other participants and the tutor; and
- A class for a group of learners in the video conference format is conducted. During it, the learners are actively involved in the class online activities, they are seen on the screen, and they can communicate in an audio-visual format.

Certainly, e-moderation implemented by electronic mass media takes a very significant role. For learning a basic course of a foreign language, tutors usually use virtual classrooms, but for skill development, the informational support - online tools with the function for individual application, ranging from e-mails to group video conferencing - are very suitable. In order to deliver virtual lectures, run seminars, give consultations or correspond, several preconditions are indispensable, technical facilities and skills to communicate in the virtual environment being in the first place. Regretfully, practice testifies that virtual meetings cannot always be efficiently organized due to the lack of adequate competencies of the academic staff and learners to use electronic mass media.

Acquisitions of Foreign Languages Online in Diverse Countries

In higher educational institutions online courses for foreign language acquisition are not abundant. Nevertheless, there are many successful examples. Some of them are as follows:

Singapore National University Pilotproject: e-DaF German as a Foreign Language (e-DaF NUS, elektronisches Selbstlernzentrum für Deutsch als Fremdsprache an der National Universität Singapore. [Retrieved from the internet 17.04.2008.] <http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/e-daf> ;

Thailand Cyber University offers foreigners an e-learning basic Thai Language course (25 classes for listening comprehension and speaking competencies, and 10 classes for basic writing and reading skills: [Thailand Cyber University. E-Learning Thai Language. [Retrieved from the internet 14.03.2008.] <http://www.courseware.thaicyperu.go.th> ;

Edinburgh University offers an English course to international students who take the course Innovation, Technology and the Law (distance learning). [Retrieved from the internet 9.04.2008.] http://www.law.ed.ac.uk/distancelearning/programme/moduledetails/English_Language.htm ;

Several online foreign language courses have been offered within the EU-funded projects aimed at the integration of the population into society, their retraining and professional development [ICC. The European Language Network. [Retrieved from the internet 12.04.2008.] http://www.icc-languages.eu/completed_projects.php

Whilst conducting a study on online learning of German for Beginners in the Latvian higher educational institutions, we found that such an offer does not exist. In comparison with offers for online English courses, we noticed that online German courses are offered mainly by publishing houses and IT companies which focus on development of e-learning and teaching aids, for instance, Max Hueber Verlag. Deutsch online für Anfänger. [Retrieved from the internet 12.04.2008.] <http://demo.hueber-language-alliance.de/illias>

In Germany, the private school of Claudia Popova Interdeutsch based in Leipzig is well known [Popova.C. Lehrwerk "Interdeutsch". [Retrieved from the internet 29.05.2008.] www.interdeutsch.de, as well as the Training Centre Eurocosm (Eurocosm Deutschland. Interactive Sprachprodukte. [Retrieved from the internet 30.05.2008.] <http://www.eurocosm.com>

A very successful example of best practice of learning foreign languages online is the international Project ActivELP carried out by the Faculty of Education and Psychology (ActivELP Project. Mentors Activate European Language Portfolio through Multimedia [Retrieved from the internet 30.05.2008] <http://www.activelp.net/partners.html>

However, when interviewing officers from the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia, we found out that the offer of foreign language online courses is very limited in Latvia.

Online Foreign Language Courses: Opportunities and Advantages

In order to identify the advantages offered by foreign language acquisitions in the virtual environment in comparison to face-to-face learning, an experiment was conducted, within which the learning aid „Deutsch online für Anfänger“ was tested. The demo version of the learning aid can be retrieved from the internet: <http://demo.hueber-language-alliance.de/illias> Sixty-eight participants were involved in the experiment. They represented different age groups: 18 participants up to 24 years of age; 35 participants from 25 to 39 years of age, and 15 participants from 40 to 55 years of age. Three groups were formed: 1) Thirteen students from Latvia; 2) Nineteen volunteers from Latvia, and 3) Thirty-six volunteers from overseas.

The mother tongues of the participants were English (49%), Latvian (46%), Russian (5%), and Ukrainians (1% of the respondents). By gender, 37 female and 31 male respondents were involved. By occupation, students (25%), IT specialists or IT project managers (32%), middle or top managers (43%) participated in the study.

The learning aid was envisaged for learners who can use in English. The experiment lasted 12 weeks. A web page was developed by one of the authors. For this purpose, a free tool Mambodesign was used. The learners registered themselves, received their personal ID, and gradually completed 10 modules of the course German language for beginners. After the completion of each module the results were sent online to the data basis developed with the help of the Microsoft Access programme.

Before the course, the respondents expressed their preferences for online learning, classroom based work or blended learning (See Fig. 1). Their responses testified that many of them were not sure whether they could do without the support of the tutor, and this was suspected to be why 39 of the 68 respondents would prefer blended learning.

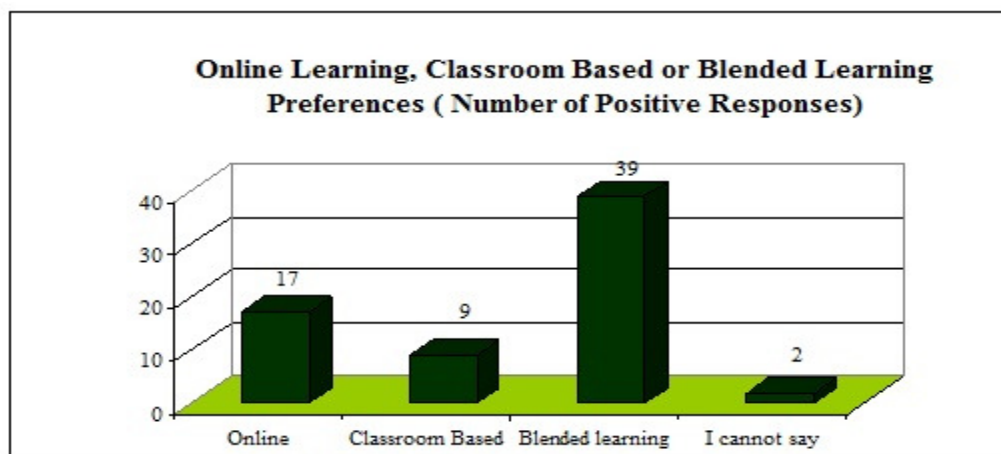


Fig. 1. Respondents` Opinions before Starting the Course

(Source: Data obtained by the authors of the current study)

After the course, the respondents became more confident, as they relied on their experience acquired. When comparing the advantages of blended learning and online learning, 100% of the respondents from overseas preferred online learning, but the respondents from Latvia chose blended learning. This can be explained by the fact that the respondents from overseas had considerably higher ICT competencies, as their professional activities were related to IT applications.

The respondents assessed the importance of diverse motivating factors to learn online (See Fig.2).

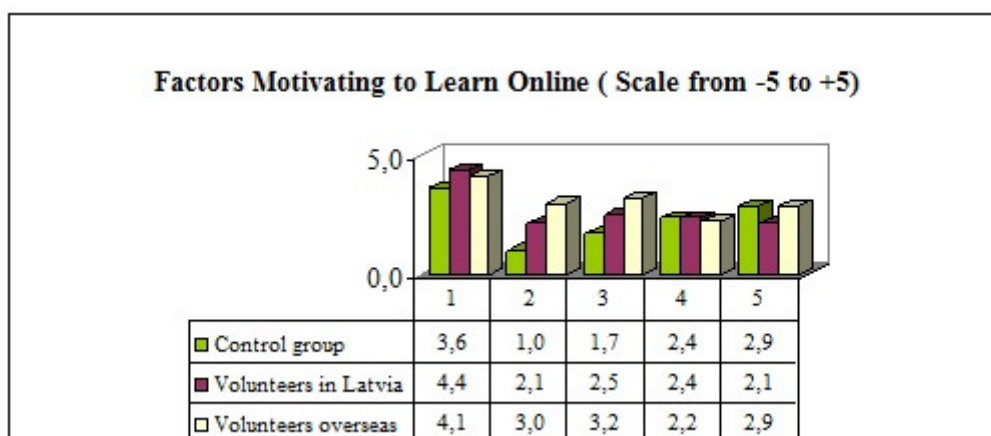


Fig. 2. Evaluation of Factors after Course Completion

(Source: Data obtained by the authors of the current study)

1. Factor. *Flexible choice of time for learning.*
2. Factor. *Choice of level of learning according to learner's wishes.*
3. Factor. *Self-adjustment of pace and intensity of learning.*
4. Factor. *Choice of topics according to learner's interests.*
5. Factor. *Provision of feedback upon learners` request.*

As evident, all the respondents highly valued the first factor. The respondents from overseas gave a very high evaluation also to Factor 3.

This research study also identified the significance of the opportunities provided by the new ICT (See Fig. 3).

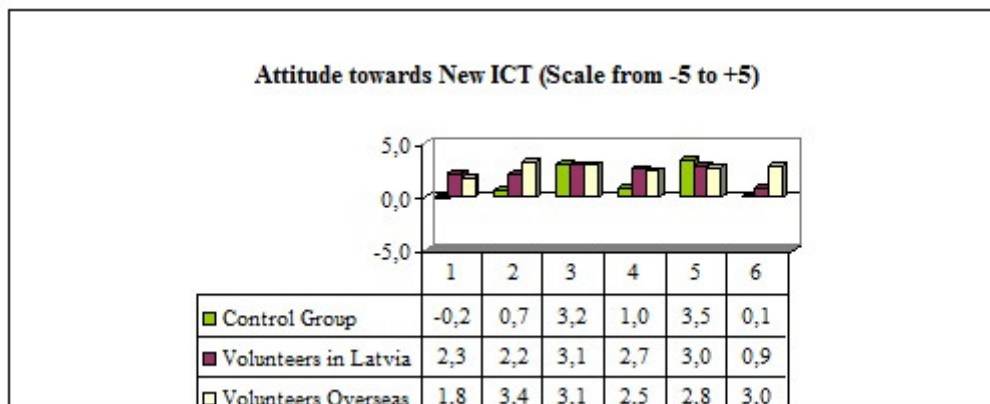


Fig. 3. Respondents` Attitude towards Usage of New ICT for Learning Online

(Source: Data obtained by the authors of the current study)

1. Factor. *ICT replace printed mass media.*
2. Factor. *Participants are inspired by the usage of progressive tools.*
3. Factor. *Hyper-text resources are available on the internet.*
4. Factor. *Personal e-vocabulary can be developed.*
5. Factor. *Authentic and topical texts can be read.*
6. Factor. *Via mass media active intercultural communications can be organized.*

The data testified that the opinions were very diverse. For the respondents from overseas, the second, third and sixth factors were the most significant. However, for the respondents from Latvia, the fifth and third factors.

The respondents also evaluated the usefulness of e-learning for the following purposes:

1. To acquire a foreign language,
2. To integrate people with special needs into society,
3. To consolidate foreign language skills before going abroad on a business trip or holidays.

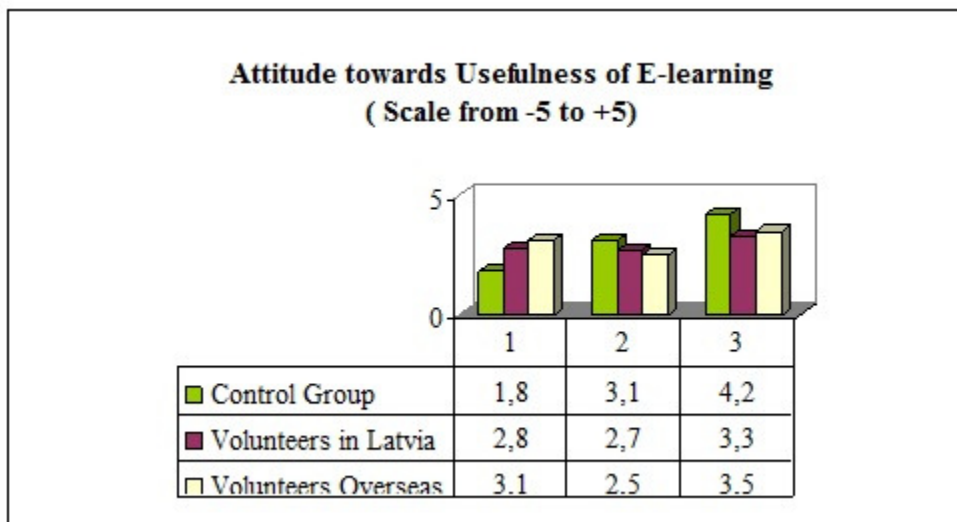


Fig. 4. Respondents` Attitude towards Usefulness of E- learning

(Source: Data obtained by the authors of the current study)

All the three groups of the respondents gave high scores (from 3.3 to 4.2) for usefulness of e-learning aimed at consolidation of foreign language skills for mobility purposes. In comparison to the other two groups of the respondents, the students gave much higher scores of foreign language learning in the virtual environment for the purpose of integrating people with special needs into society.

The data from Fig. 5 illustrates how radically different the opinions on the necessity to have a tutor's support are.

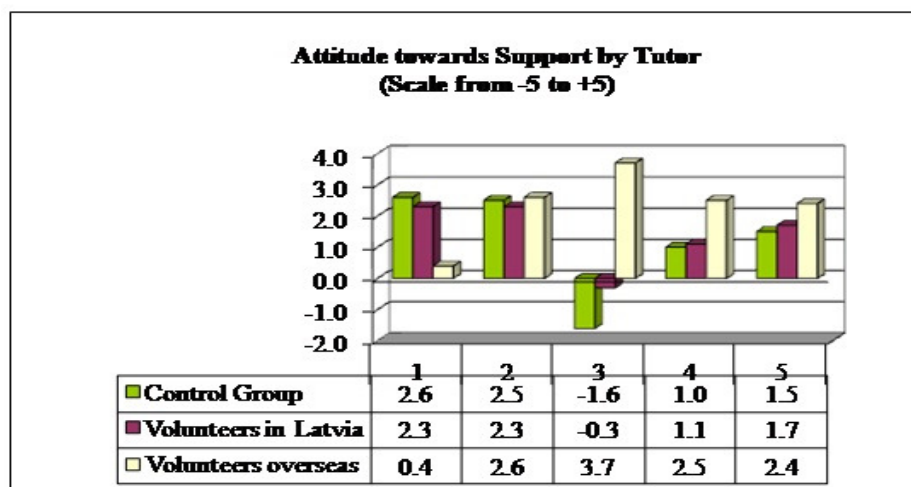


Fig. 5. Respondents` Opinions about Tutor's Role in Online Learning of Foreign Languages

(Source: Data obtained by the authors of the current study)

1. Factor. *Tutor works only as a consultant for ICT users.*
2. Factor. *Tutor works as a foreign language teacher.*
3. Factor. *Tutor is a private teacher for pay.*
4. Factor. *Tutor acts as an interactive moderator.*

5. Factor. *Tutor provides feedback in the learning process.*

Contrary to the respondents from overseas, the students from Latvia are willing to see a tutor as a consultant for ICT usage. The role of a tutor as a foreign language teacher is valued similarly by all the respondent groups. As to the payment to the tutor, the respondents from Latvia are not ready to pay for his/her services. However, the respondents from overseas hold a completely different opinion. They also evaluate much higher the role of the tutor as an interactive moderator and feedback provider.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The international labour market and knowledge-based economy require highly competent professionals, who possess skills of several foreign languages. The EU language policy envisages development of multilingualism in the EU. Subsequently, higher educational institutions in Latvia should also look for innovative approaches towards the implementation of the idea of the *multilingual Europe*.
2. In order to increase the motivation of learners and enhance the acquisition of foreign languages, innovative means of learning and teaching should be used, one of them being online learning.
3. The learners, whose competencies in the modern ICT are high, prefer the virtual learning environment and the self paced learning method.
4. In spite of the fact that online learning provides the learners with opportunities to organise their independent learning flexibly, support by a tele- tutor and his/her involvement should also be provided.
5. The most significant prerequisites for successful blended or online learning are the trainer's experience of working in the virtual environment and mastery of relevant methods of teaching.
6. Learning online can serve not only as a means for lifelong development of foreign language skills that are needed for professional purposes, but also for the integration of people with special needs into society.
7. For developing foreign language courses, a considerable amount of the EU funding is available. In order to write relevant project proposals, it is useful to acquire the international experience of other higher educational institutions.

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