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5th EUNoM Symposium "ICT, e-Learning and languages"
Rapporteur's Summary

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Introduction

The 5th EUNoM Symposium on ICT, e-learning and languages was held at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya on the 14th and 15th of May, 2012. Multilingualism and multicultural understanding are becoming essential skills in an increasingly internationalised Europe and more generally in a globalised world. Those who are able to operate in a multilingual and multicultural environment will benefit economically and socially. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has the potential to play an important role in developing these skills; the question is how best to realise this potential. The Symposium explored key issues surrounding technology-enhanced language and culture learning and multilingualism. The sixty delegates attended to a total of thirteen papers which presented a diverse set of perspectives relevant to the theme. Among the specialists invited as beneficiaries and stakeholders were ISOC-CAT and the Barcelona ICT-language cluster.

Overview of papers

Linnar Viik in his keynote address stressed the importance of reducing misunderstandings and miscommunication between and within organisations and cultures. This would require cultural understanding, not just multilingualism. He warned of overstating the short term impact of ICT but underestimating the long term impact. He emphasised the need for long term organisational strategies, whilst recognising the tensions between this and short technology lifecycles. In particular there was a need for innovation and the courage to learn through failing.

Taija Swanström and **Heidi Rontu** described the use of Second Life in language learning. They suggested that Virtual Reality (VR) can be used to provide a safe, playful, authentic environment for learners. Furthermore VR may be good for lowering attitudinal barriers and increasing motivation. The use of VR may also help to address issues of lack of access to authentic offline language environments. Some tensions were acknowledged around using a system provided by a commercial company. The use of VR poses challenges in terms of the students' technical proficiency, facilities, pedagogies and

institutional and technical support. The importance of evaluating the student experience and the learning was also emphasised.

Orsolya Hegedüs and **Ildiko Pšsenáková** discussed the use of ICT in foreign language training for teachers where there is a requirement that these teachers be at least bilingual, if not multilingual. They suggested there are multiple roles for technology and that it is necessary to find a "healthy blend" to supplement traditional teaching methods. Different technical modalities provide different opportunities, but also different restrictions. When used appropriately technology can result in greater efficiency, increased fun and better achievement. They however caution that multilingual education and ICT tools will mean extra work for students and teachers.

Norbert Pachler's keynote address focussed on the potential for mobile-assisted language learning. He situated this in a world marked by fluidity, provisionality and instability which poses a challenge to traditional notions of curriculum, learning outcomes, and so on. In this world learners take individual responsibility for their learning, thus broadening the traditional concept of learning. Knowledge is seen as distributed across people, communities, and institutions who are engaged in open knowledge exchange – creating, sharing and remixing. This suggests a need for new models and understanding of what learning is and how it happens. He balanced this somewhat by noting that just because people own a device, doesn't necessarily mean that they can use it. There are also issues concerning how to evaluate and make pedagogically sound judgements about language apps when there are 100s to choose from.

Tenesoya Pawlowsky talked about the formation and purpose of Clusterlingua the "Language Industries Cluster" Catalan Association. The perspective taken was that of languages as a market and the notion of a multilingualism industry. While there are numerous agents involved in the value chain of multilingualism, it is not necessarily the case that they perceive of themselves as being part of a single coherent industry. Among other things, the Association aims to promote innovation and to improve competitiveness. She identified the need to highlight importance of the multilingualism industry and increase its visibility. The need for government support was also highlighted.

Anouk Gelan explored the issue of cultural understanding, pointing out that a lack of cultural understanding can lead to misunderstanding even where a language has been learned. She presented an approach to cultural learning through the interpretation of scenarios and a bespoke software package. The need to provide authentic communicative environments was highlighted. A more general point concerned the scale of teacher involvement; whether the teacher is part of a blended approach, the role of the teacher is internalised into the technology, or whether the teacher is non-existent.

Montse Vall-llovera and **Maite Puigdevall** used their keynote to discuss their experiences of distance learning, but setting this in the wider context of needing to consider multilingualism and multiculturalism at an organisational level. Among the points they touched on was the concept of multilingualism as a market and the need to train professionals in multilingualism. They acknowledged tension between different classes of language – minority, majority, immigrant, global – but suggested that the use of a language such as Catalan can help illuminate issues around multilingualism. They reported that students had a positive reaction to the technologies used, but that there were additional demands placed on teachers' time.

Jochen Rehbein suggested that language teaching needs to stimulate self-learning in the student. Using a multilingual corpus of authentic discourse he suggested ways to support students in actively participating in real multilingual communication. Such a system may have a variety of applications in classrooms and teacher training and may also have theoretical applications. He highlighted the potential for language learning technology to feed back into traditional language learning materials and practice. The presentation was situated in the wider context of the learning of immigrant languages by majority language speakers which might have a broader possibility of reducing 'nationalistic' behaviour and of causing a rethinking of the nation state.

Cor van der Meer used his keynote address to suggest that new/social media should be considered a significant domain in terms of linguistic vitality. Social media can be used as a means to encourage people to write in their minority language. Practical examples using Facebook, Twitter, and a dictionary app to encourage the use of the Frisian language were presented. The possible beneficial effects of such approaches for a minority language includes raising awareness, increasing prestige, improving writing skills, and promoting communication outside the immediate peer group. He also referred to the benefits of designing software which can be reused in other language contexts.

Melinda Dooly described her experiences in using computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools in the training of language teachers. She argued that as CMC becomes increasingly common in language classrooms there is a growing need to understand not only the language learning taking place, but also pedagogical implications and issues relating to teacher education. She described in detail an intensive approach to teacher training with an emphasis on reflection, and how this could then be carried forward into teaching practice.

Tünde Dokus used her keynote to point out that the definition of e-learning is imprecise and can be construed to include anything from the production of a word-processed handout to a complete online course. She also suggested that using ICT in teaching is inevitable, but that there is still a need to consider the balance between traditional methods and ICT. Through the use of

practical examples she explored the way in which a balance could be achieved. The speed of change in technology, and therefore in e-learning, was particularly emphasised.

Sònia Prats and **Enric Serra** in their keynote looked at the experiences of the Language Service at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. They highlighted the changing emphasis in online teaching and learning, from the creation of materials, through the development of bespoke platforms, to the need to respond to the internet and social networking and to provide personal learning environments. Thus the role and nature of language Services needs to adapt and change. They recognised that partnerships and networks are becoming increasingly important in developing and delivering online language teaching. They also suggested that it is important to engage with the students to discover what they want and what they currently use.

Conclusions

It is clear from the work presented at the Symposium that the question of how best to realise the potential of ICT in the development of multilingualism and multicultural understanding is a complex one. It is also one which can be, and indeed needs to be examined and understood on multiple levels. These range from the characteristics of the learner, through the design of the system, to organisational and even political contexts. One of the key challenges is how to synthesise these and to conceive of solutions which address these multiple levels.

Another factor which makes the synthesis of individual systems and approaches difficult is the diverse conceptualisation of the overall purpose. A wide range of different purposes were articulated during the Symposium, including developing multilinguals, developing an understanding of multilingualism, developing cultural awareness, supporting non-state and minority languages, and challenging the nation state. It is not necessarily clear that there is a single shared common purpose here. The use of ICT to promote cultural awareness appeared to be relatively unexplored. There would perhaps be a benefit in a more detailed explication of multilingualism and cultural understanding.

There is a spectrum of ways in which ICT might impact upon traditional learning and teaching approaches. One end of the spectrum sees ICT becoming part of traditional approaches, being used alongside traditional methods. Several of the papers considered how to achieve the correct balance or blend between traditional methods and ICT. At the other end of the spectrum is the possibility of what might be called 'distributed learning' where the individual learner structures their own learning, making use of multiple sources and multiple forms of learning in a highly dynamic fashion. This possibility is explored most thoroughly in the keynote by Pachler with his world marked by fluidity, provisionality and instability. The distributed

learning environment is one which will challenge established notions of education and the traditional role of educational institutions. It is also one in which there is likely to be far greater involvement of commercial and other non-education sector actors. One of the defining requirements for success in this environment is likely to be agility – the ability to change and respond to change swiftly. This raises the question of whether the various actors and services in the environment are or have the capability to be agile. These include the learners and teachers (do they have the skills, resources), the organisations and processes (can they innovate, collaborate), and also the learning materials (can they be reused, repurposed, remixed) and the systems themselves (perhaps considering factors such as interoperability, platform independence, open source). If these actors are not currently agile, how can such agility be developed?

Many of the papers made the point that in order to support any form of adoption of ICT into the teaching and learning process a firm evidence base is required in order to understand what does or doesn't work and the contexts in which this is the case. There is also a requirement for multiple forms of evidence, for instance concerning the long term sustainability of solutions, possible negative impacts on sociability, and so on. In order to achieve this and to make the results actionable there is arguably a need for greater consensus around what should be measured and how.

While the use of technology to enhance the learning of languages and cultures clearly holds great potential, the importance of maintaining a critical perspective was raised by several delegates. Technology is not distributed equally across society, typically the economically disadvantaged, the uneducated, the disabled and the elderly are excluded. It is important that these constituencies are also able to take advantage of the economic and social benefits of multilingualism and multicultural understanding.