

# ICT Workshops for Autonomous Language Training

Erik Hemming, École supérieure des Îles Åland (Åland University of Applied Sciences – Högskolan på Åland)

## **Ateliers d'utilisation de langues étrangères (résumé)**

*L'apprentissage de langues à travers l'intercompréhension à l'aide des nouvelles média sociales et les technologies de l'information et communication (TIC) – comment l'organiser ? Cette intervention traite des expériences de deux cours de langue utilisant des plateformes d'apprentissage et des média sociales populaires comme matériaux et comme méthode. En principe les activités ont été choisies par les étudiants et puis suivis d'évaluation plutôt que de contrôle et planning. Donc, les étudiants avaient beaucoup de responsabilité de leur propre travail. La communication a eu lieu et sur l'Internet et physiquement, en forme de réunions de travail.*

*L'un des cours était pour 80 employés d'une compagnie visant les marchés européens de l'Espagne à la Russie. C'était un cours d'anglais, mais les méthodes seraient utilisées aussi pour des autres langues. L'autre cours était de suédois utilisant l'anglais comme langue de portail pour des étudiants d'échange. Ce cours a souligné les similitudes entre suédois et allemand pour augmenter le niveau de motivation. Le cours a puis servi de modèle pour un cours au sens inverse, c'est à dire de trois langues romanes à la fois avec l'anglais comme portail.*

*Les cours ont essayé des manières de travail qui pouvaient être aussi plaisantes que les étudiants voulaient continuer après les cours en sorte d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. En partie le choix de média populaires comme matériaux était motivé du désir de trouver une forme de cours qui pouvait aller bien parmi des groupes d'étudiants de familles sans tradition d'études supérieures. Aussi, l'Internet influence la communication, les média et la culture d'une manière profonde, aussi dramatiquement que la presse d'imprimerie ou la télévision. C'est absolument nécessaire de transférer l'apprentissage de langues aux nouveaux milieux virtuels, peu importe si ils nous plaisent ou pas.*

## **Abstract**

*Intercomprehension as learning method assisted by new social media and information and communication technologies (ICT) – how can that be organised? This report deals with experiences from two language courses using learning collaboration platforms and popular social media as materials and as method. In principle the students have chosen their activities themselves, followed by evaluation rather than control and planning. Thus, the students had a lot of responsibility for their own work. The communication took place both on the Internet and as physical work and follow-up meetings.*

*One of the courses had 80 participants, all employees of a company expanding into many European countries. The target language was English, as it had been chosen as the company language, but the methods used are universal. The other course was in Swedish for a small group of exchange students, using English as a gateway based on its similarity to both Germanic and Romance languages. That course included references to other Germanic languages, in order to increase the motivation to learn a small language as Swedish. This course later served as a model for the design of a course in the opposite direction, i.e. learning three Romance languages by means of existing knowledge in English.*

The courses tested work methods that could be pleasant enough to become pastimes and therefore a realistic part of life-long learning. Also the predominance of popular media and Internet-based communication as course materials was motivated by the objective to create a course that would be popular for students from families without traditions in higher education. In addition the Internet influences communication, media, and culture in such a profound way that language learning has to move into the new virtual environments, whether we like it or not.

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## Introduction

An ICT-based three-credit beginner level Swedish language module for Erasmus exchange students was designed, implemented, and evaluated during the spring of 2009. That course is compared to a large web based Language Learning Package (LLP) that was planned, implemented, and evaluated in cooperation with a local company with branches in other countries in the autumn of 2008. Both courses had more or less the same basic design and built on the same ideas on language learning and communication on web platforms.

## Purpose

It is the aim of this report to present some ideas and experiences of how ICT and social media can be used to facilitate and sustain self-directed language training. The most difficult question is how strong and well-structured the scaffolding needs to be in order to help students to work efficiently, but still allow them to choose what is interesting to them to work with. Scaffolding then refers to supportive structures in the organisation of a learning situation. Typically it means procedures that ensure that methods are performed in the best way. "Like its namesake in the construction industry, scaffolding in education is a temporary support mechanism.

*Students receive assistance early on to complete tasks, then as their proficiency increases, that support is gradually removed. In this fashion the student takes on more and more responsibility for their own learning.”*  
(*Designing Principles for Creating Effective Web-Based Learning Resources in the Geosciences*)

*It has been the objective of the language training to explore how the target language(s) can be integrated into activities that are part of communication that students would engage in outside of the language learning situation. In order to achieve that, much of the focus of the language training was on receptive competences. English has been both the vehicle of the scaffolding (Bråten, 1998) and the gateway through which speakers of Romance and Germanic languages can access the languages of the other side.*

## **Background**

*In 2008 a language training initiative took place at a local business with some 300 employees in the process of rapid internationalisation. Since co-workers had very little time to spare and were spread out in a few countries the MS SharePoint collaborative platform was chosen as venue. The participants met every two weeks for a one-hour videoconferencing session for follow-up and planning of self-chosen activities. (See appendix 1 for a survey and to-do list of activities.) The target language was English, the new company language, but the language training package was designed so as to suit all language training and on all levels. The company will continue to need competence in the languages of its markets, in addition to English.*

*In 2009 a language training course was implemented for Erasmus students along the same lines. One difference was that Facebook and Google Docs were used instead of a collaboration platform. In both courses one aim (Gillberg, 2006) (Wännman Toresson, 2006) was to train habits that would be so stimulating to the students that they would want to continue even after the course finished. This could be imagined since the courses were entirely task based, see appendix 1. The tasks are such that people do the same things normally in their own language, but could transfer some of them to the target language without too big changes of lifestyle.*

## **Theoretical Framework**

*At the basis of the type of learning which is promoted in the projects cited in the present study, lies the assumption that learning new languages is facilitated by knowledge in other languages. This idea is derived from Cummins' dual iceberg model of language acquisition in which the differences of concepts between languages enhance the students' understanding of the world and thus makes it a better basis for language learning (Özerk, 1998).*

*On a more linguistic level it is common knowledge that if one knows one language it is easier to learn another one that is related to the first one. But the making sense process is more general and more invisible than that. "Understanding a text is a special case of understanding the world" (de Beaugrande, 1980). So what it takes is largely a universal ability, trained in regular socialisation. This fact should be emphasised, since it takes off some of the pressure of "knowing" so much about languages. Less pressure, more fun, and more positive energy.*

*In addition to that, Jim Cummins has found that a person's native language can be enhanced through learning a new language. Bilingual people have more creative language. This is because the new words relate to the concepts already present in a learner's object world as Vygotsky's scientific concepts to the spontaneous ones (Özerk, 1998).*

*Therefore the training which has taken place in the courses described here has insisted on putting the students in the centre of the process, so as to enable them to access the wealth of knowledge already residing within them. By waiting for the students' initiatives based on their own interests, their competences have been ex-*

*pressed and have been used as the point of departure for activities and follow-up. This can be likened to working within the students' zones of proximal development, as it is called by Vygotsky (Bråten, 1998).*

*As for the transferability of existing language competence into the target language the EuroCom method called the Seven Sieves was used in part (Klein, 2000). This way the students have been able to recognise words that are similar in both Germanic and Romance languages, although they have gone through alterations and semantic shifts throughout history. Grammatical structures have been compared as guidance for writing and speaking. Since Swedish is a small language and maybe not useful in many countries, a point has been made to show how competence in Swedish helps to understand many Germanic languages.*

*By directing the communication to a web platform the participants' words will be visible and not their bodies (except for the photographs of and by the participants). This might be a negative thing for a beginner's course in a foreign language, if the participants feel that they need to be perfect. On the other hand, it is not as restraining as bad group dynamics could be if the assignment would be to discuss one's understanding of a scientific concept that one has problems with, which is the case in web forums in other university courses. A silly mistake could be used by negative group members, and then the classroom would not be polyphonic anymore (Dysthe, 1996).*

*But also in a beginner's language course knowledge and competence are constructed through activity in discourse (Dysthe, 1996). Learning is not copying. As a consequence less emphasis was placed on correctness. Knowledge is constructed in a sensitive and tentative way – much like thinking aloud. A mistake is a step in the right direction. Silence is failure. A lot of effort has to be made by the teacher to find ways to avoid the traditional student-teacher relationship.*

*As Filomena Capucho (2005) points out very neatly, discursive competence (more or less what is called global communicative competence in EU policy documents such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – CEFR), has three main components: a) a strategic component that deals with how a language user deals with a situation with whatever resource s/he has including creativity and intuition of how languages function, b) an affective component filtering through attitudes the construction of knowledge of a language and its cultural system, and c) a cognitive component including perceptions of language and meaning, learning styles, and knowledge of the world. All of these three components have been considered in the design of the activities included in the lists from which the students have been able to choose what to work with.*

## **Methods**

*As actual learning takes place in students' zones of proximal development, it is of key importance that the tasks that students work with are linked to their conceptual worlds (Bråten, 1998). A teacher can design activities that connect well with the learners, but it takes knowing them very well. Since that is not always the case, it is good to inspire the initiatives of the learners instead. What do they want to work with? If they are attracted to something, and if that something involves linguistic activity in the target language(s), then chances are good that this is what they will learn a lot from. Here is a list of activities that students might choose to work with (refer to appendix 1 for more):*

- ✓ *Search for materials that are motivating to them (pictures, films, music, web pages) using search engines in the target languages*
- ✓ *Understand the texts they are confronted with in their daily lives (all of which are present in contexts with non-verbal content)*
- ✓ *Write texts on themes such as: a regular day, my apartment, a trip, my family, a TV series, etc.*

- ✓ Analyse similarities of words in texts in the target language(s) with other languages they are familiar with
- ✓ Solve tasks involving interaction with native speakers and reporting on them afterwards
- ✓ Work with exercises, play games, find information, etc.
- ✓ Write entries in blogs and forums on simple topics
- ✓ Give feedback and ask questions to each other

*In the case of the two courses described here, all work was registered in some way on SharePoint, Facebook or Google Docs so as to allow for follow-up and reflection on learning outcomes.*

*The follow up process is one of the main responsibilities of the teachers. It has many purposes. One of them is to lift up the contributions of the students and show that they are to be taken seriously and are on the same level of language as other things they work with. One student's output can (and even should) be used as other students' input.*

*Meta-communication and reflecting on one's own learning in terms of costs and benefits is one goal to strive for, especially if the aim is to train students for life-long learning. Without reflecting upon what one is doing students will stay dependent on teachers. When they have a clear idea of their own learning styles and once they know what they want to learn they can move on on their own.*

*In order to provide the learners with words to describe what they were learning, the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) grid was used as a self-assessment activity. The self-assessment was repeated at the end of the training, so as to inspire the participants to continue with their fruitful, still self-chosen, efforts.*

*There is a lot of room for improvement as to the way these tasks need to be presented, guided, and followed up, so as to achieve maximum learning for the students. This learning can and should be two-fold: learning the target language(s) AND learning ways to use unfamiliar languages as part of an ongoing lifelong learning process.*

## **Success Factors**

### **Group Dynamics**

*Young people's worlds today are so full of temptations – the most recent ones on the web – that it is hard to compete. This is especially true if one is leading a distance training course, where the social cohesion is at a minimum. Therefore it is a key success factor that there be some social dynamics on the platform (Gillberg, 2006). Moreover it is absolutely necessary to clarify the expectations and requirement and to get started quite simultaneously, so that the students will see new contributions by others every time they log on. That way there will be a feeling of going somewhere together – a very basic human instinct. Leadership then, is the quality of pointing out the direction and to pull and/or drive the group there. What lures and tools to use, is the issue here.*

*At the outset of the course, it is important to work with objectives. These will be needed as motivation as the course draws out in time. In order to make the going less lonely, milestones can be placed out as reference points and feedback stations. Face-to-face meetings were used as milestones in the two courses described here. In between the students worked on their own or were supposed to do so.*

*One sine qua non is to ensure that participants feel that their contributions are followed up. This requires frequent attention by the moderators. Ideally this does not mean writing, but rather making sure that other par-*

participants write. For an activity to stay interesting, generally speaking, there needs to be rewards as reinforcement.

If a student drops out it is possible that is because s/he felt that the level was too low or too high. It is a pity to lose somebody because of that, because s/he might have an unrealistic opinion about her level. In addition, level is an awkward concept when competences are assessed. In order to straighten up the discussions the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) has been used. At least it becomes clear that there are five different fields of competence to measure. But in a collaborative environment so much is communicated, and students may get the wrong impression. The right impression is that doubts, whether the "level" is right, can be communicated. That kind of communication is difficult and should be challenging enough for those who consider themselves at a higher level.

### **User Friendliness**

According to Oblinger & Oblinger (2005) young people today are: "Digitally literate, highly Internet familiar, connected via networked media, used to immediate responses, preferring experiential learning, highly social, preferring to work in teams, craving interactivity in image rich environments, and having a preference for structure rather than ambiguity."

Humans are animals, and stay motivated longer and better if they are stimulated through the five senses. As vision is the most powerful sense, the presence of images on the web platform is the key factor. Humans process 10,000,000 bits of visual information per second (Nörretranders, 1998). Deprivation of that sense presents an obstacle to many today as mainstream media is what sets the standard. Lack of concentration and enthusiasm is the consequence if there are no pictures or only a few. This was the case in the LLP on MS SharePoint. Even though many of the participants then were well in their thirties and forties it was clear that every time somebody managed to load up a picture (which was very complicated) there was enthusiasm.

### **The Teacher Role**

The teacher has very much work to do, but quite different to what traditionally is done in a classroom. Here only a few tasks are mentioned. Clearly much more of the teacher's work consists of planning, in a web course. It is good if the students get to know everything before they even get started. This can be done by writing a study guide (Wännman Toresson, 2006).

In these two language-training courses it has been the aim to transfer the initiative from the teacher/trainer to the participants. The overall aim was to implant such an attitude to training that the behaviour will become a part of life-long learning. If that will happen, the benefits of the efforts will multiply.

The first step on the way was to work by means of a task list. From this list students may choose to work with what they want. The point here is that in the process of choosing, the students will connect to their inner processes and will work in the so-called zone of proximal development (Bråten, 1998). The free choice implies motivation as well. Since language is part of many of our favourite pastimes, there is no limit to what one can do – and through the Internet much of precisely that is accessible.

The teacher's responsibility is to help in the selection of tasks, so that the level of difficulty is reasonable. The teacher also needs to show practically how one can work and with what available tools. Some of these methods and tools will be dealt with in the following.

### **Meeting Places on the Web**

## **SharePoint and Facebook**

*Not only is it much cheaper to meet on the web; it also solves the eternal question whether it is physical or mental presence that is required by the students. But for the work to get done there need to be social pressure.*

*The collaboration platforms share many social characteristics. In a social context in which verbal language is the main vehicle of communication, participants' concept worlds will stay in constant interplay with those of other participants (Bråten, 1998). It will be the task of the moderator/teacher to set the framework so that the demands be sufficiently but not overly challenging. For this to be possible, students' active input is imperative. Otherwise one can hardly tell for sure if a task is challenging or not.*

*MS SharePoint has many advantages. It is highly controlled so nobody will ever see anything to which s/he has not been granted access. It is powerful and versatile. One drawback is that the threshold is high before a user will master it technically, or even understand what there is to master. This proved to be a problem for the LLP of the local company, since the co-workers were very busy with other tasks, and it was not really clear what the management preferred them to do. If MS SharePoint would have been easier to get into, perhaps more students would have met there. As it was in this case, many tried, but saw very little interaction once they had logged on to the platform. Furthermore they saw no pictures, so the interface was bland. Many persevered and managed to write attractive forum posts and to load up lists of what they had been working with or actual products in the form of texts, even with pictures in some cases.*

*As for Facebook the advantages are that it is easy to get started and it is very image rich. If Facebook is a success, those are two of the main reasons. A FB group is a protected place to a large extent, but it is not quite clear what will surface in the "walls" or profiles, when a person posts something. Facebook is weak when it comes to the number of file formats that it can handle. Therefore Google Docs was used as a complement. That is not an ideal situation since it takes away some of the intensity of the interaction to divide it into two platforms.*

*A clear advantage of Facebook is that students go there spontaneously. In the Erasmus student course alumni were invited who now live in other countries. The idea was to increase the interaction and that there would be more life in the group room. This turned out to be difficult to achieve however. For young active people to go to such a group room in their spare time, there need to be substantial rewards...*

## **Google Docs**

*Google Docs is what one makes it. There is no social aspect apart from what the users provide themselves. But it is powerful when it comes to handling shared documents. In the case of the group of Erasmus students, we needed to work on shared word lists. These were formatted as tables in Word documents, something that Facebook can not handle. The points with the word lists are many. The lists will be used as help in discussions and writing tasks. They have four columns: Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and other (parts of speech). Since the students make the lists themselves they will know where to find the word they need. Lists can be made from texts or made as preparation for a special situation, such as ordering at a restaurant or talking about ones family or what one does in the course of a normal day. Of course, phrases can be entered as well, but the real advantage of the list is that when using it one activates one's grammar. That is because grammar is the art of making sentences. And that, of course, is to express meaning.*

## **Web Resources**

*The natural thing to do as one works on a computer with Internet connection, is to access the tools that are at hand. For a language teacher it is both threatening and alluring what is possible today and widely practised by*

students of all ages. It is not only copying and pasting or downloading essays. Today the very core of a language teacher's existence is questioned by automatic translation. Or is it?

### **Google Translate**

It is common knowledge among young people who attend language courses that Google has a good – but imperfect – automatic translation service, at least to and from English. Translations between other languages are processed through English which increases the number of mistakes exponentially. The question is whether automatic translation should be banned or not from the context of language assignments. In the case of the cited courses here it was not. Hence it was used a lot. The way this circumstance was dealt with was discussions where the learning outcome from different ways of working was discussed. As teacher I wanted to hear more about HOW students use this popular function. Does it replace learning or is it just another way of learning?

It works very fine as help to understand texts when it is used to create parallel texts. A task can be to account for the meaning of a text and to make a list of useful words for a purpose. Google Translate can be helpful in finding materials in the target language. In order to stimulate beginners it is good to use Image Search with search words that have been translated one way or another.

It is much less desirable that students use automatic translation instead of trying on their own in a written task. However, it is still a question of manipulating language and if the follow-up session includes explaining what has been written, then there is a lot of learning going on anyway. Perhaps it is best to keep the door open for further experimentation.

### **YouTube and Film**

From now and on film clips is part of the normal contents of a school day. By using films, music videos, news items, etc. and the various translation and subtitling options that are offered today, life is brought into texts in a powerful way. The drive to understand the lyrics of a song one likes is one example of the kind of motivation that young people navigate by in their lives. Another fun activity is to use words in the foreign language to search for videos. These will then disclose new linguistic and cultural content, which will be useful in the understanding of new expressions in that language.

It is not the role of beginner courses to question popular culture. Therefore, if something is popular and part of students' spare time – use it! In the Erasmus group a forum has been developed around the sitcom Big bang Theory, which was what the students said they liked to watch. In the forum Q&A skills are trained.

American mainstream culture serves a useful purpose in the learning of basically all foreign languages. Through the abundance of TV shows and Hollywood productions available in translated versions in virtually all languages, and thanks to the effortlessness of watching them, learning materials are in no short supply in our affluent societies. By watching a particular product several times the linguistic differences will come up to the surface of the attention of the media consumer.

### **Conclusions**

New technology is threatening to teachers since we always seem to be among the last to know of innovations. However, by changing to a task-centred perspective, the role of the teacher and that of the students change by and by. Since a task-centred way of working implies the possibility of more than one way of reaching the goals, students will act as models for each other, as well as for the teacher, who will be able to pick up a lot of new ideas. But in order to ensure the feeling of security for the learners it is important to provide methods that are easy to use and follow up if there are not so many new ideas in the beginning. Creativity needs limitation, so be

prepared to explain a method in detail. This might seem contradictory to the aim of introducing an attitude to training languages that could become a part of the participants' lifestyles, i.e. life-long learning.

Many activities were designed and tried during the courses, most of them using the Internet and collaborative web platforms. It has become apparent however, that methods how to use the presence of native speakers for training their language are needed. This needs to involve brief instructions directed to those native speakers on how they can act so as to contribute in the best way to the learning of the people who are in training. By using natives or proficient speakers of the target language, the teacher will be freed from a lot of time-consuming activities – and from blocking the kind of students who have inhibitions in the presence of authorities. Of course such activities also need to be documented and followed up somehow; otherwise their quality can not be assured.

A lot of attention and effort should be placed on assuring that there will be good and positive social dynamics. Web platforms need to be maintained and visited very frequently. In addition there needs to be pictures and human faces. But that is not enough. There needs to be discipline and careful follow up as well.

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## Appendix 1

### LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES: In English + other languages

Mark what you use/do in English (to the left ←) and in other languages (to the right →) under each category!

Post on SharePoint: What do you watch/read/write/talk about USUALLY and STATE ONE EXAMPLE that you describe in more detail.

1. Newspapers
2. Magazines (weeklies, professional, special interest)
3. Radio
4. TV
5. Novels
6. Textbooks/specialist literature
7. Learning materials (CDs, cassettes, educational TV/radio, computer programs)
8. Poetry/philosophy
9. Films (DVD/video/TV)
10. Writing (letters/e-mail)
11. Forms (filling out)
12. Conversations (work, authorities, shops, friends, discussion groups)
13. Advertising (direct mail, web, newspapers, TV)
14. Electronic menus (telephones, iPods, electronic devices)
15. Product information (manuals, warning texts)
16. Computer programs

TSVP: Please turn! 17. WWW

- a) Search Engines
- b) Web Directories
- c) Images (using search words)
- d) Translation
- e) Video Clips (YouTube e.g.)
- f) News
- g) "Web communities" (MySpace, Facebook, etc)
- h) Chat (Skype/MSN)
- i) Blogs
- j) Pod casts (broadcasts, iTunes e.g.)
- k) Computer Games/Internet Games
- l) Scientific texts (articles, theses)
- m) Learning Materials (e.g. [www.eslgold.com](http://www.eslgold.com), [www.esl.about.com](http://www.esl.about.com))
- n) Learning platforms (SharePoint, etc)
- o) Dictionaries
- p) Groups

Other