

**Virtual Learning Environments and World Languages
The Way Forward
The Flexi-Pack Project as SOAS-UCL CETL
(University of London)**

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Abstract

The SOAS-UCL Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning 'Languages of the Wider World' at the University of London aims to promote excellence in the teaching and learning of languages that do not have a large presence in UK Higher Education but which are of increasing strategic importance, locally and globally. A key objective of the CETL is to support blended language learning. Flexi-Packs, one of our flagship projects, is an innovative package of specially-tailored learning materials, designed to promote mobile learning, with opportunities for learner empowerment and collaborative learning. The paper will present the pedagogical rationale behind the Flexi-Packs and reference will be made to Romanian materials produced at University College London.

Keywords: Virtual Learning Environments, World Languages, mobile learning, learner empowerment, collaborative learning.

1. Introduction

The precarious situation of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in the United Kingdom (UK), with issues such as the decreasing number of students on specialist language degree courses and the closure of university departments, is reported by numerous organisations such as the Centre of Information for Language Teaching (CILT) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), as well as in the Nuffield Language Inquiry Reports (2003).

According to official figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, around 71,000 students were taking at least one accredited module in languages in 2001/2002. This represents 4.6% of all students and has declined from 90,000 (6.4%) in 1998/1999. (Kelly & Jones, 2003)

Considerable concern has been expressed in the press about the long-term future of languages in UK schools and universities and about the implications for business. (CILT, 2005)

In this context, various initiatives have been implemented in an attempt to improve the precarious situation of MFL in the UK. The National Languages Strategy, launched in 2002, has implications at all stages of the education system and extends beyond the classroom, including at international level:

In the knowledge society of the 21st century, language competence and intercultural understanding are not optional extras, they are an essential part of being a citizen. (Ashton, 2002)

In addition, HEFCE has agreed to fund a programme to encourage the take-up of language courses in England. Routes into Languages was originally funded from HEFCE's Strategic Development Fund. The programme is running for four years from 2006/07 to 2009/10. It will be led by the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS), in a partnership with the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) and the Centre for Language Teaching (CILT).

In a context of significant evolutions in Higher Education, such as the widening participation of students from non-traditional social and educational backgrounds, together with the necessity to operate within budgetary constraints, e-learning is presented as the ideal answer to current requirements, both at students' level and at institutional level.

Increasing diversity in the student population, through widening participation, new technologies and new, more cost-efficient practices in course production are forcing a re-think of current activity and providing a challenge to all those involved in the design and delivery of learning constantly seek out ways of ensuring that the needs of our language learners are met. (Hurd, 2002)

The economic necessity of linking Information and Computer Technology with education is perhaps the most prominent strand of the rhetoric surrounding learning technologies in post-compulsory education. However, the majority of the rhetoric surrounding learning technologies has centred on the individual learners, in particular the empowerment of the individual's learning experience:

Until now, learning has tended to be static and fixed. Learners have had to go to a site of learning such as a college or school at specific times. E-learning can change all this. Learners can choose what, how and when they learn and learning can now be defined by those choices, rather than by the time available to attend a physical centre of learning. (DFES, 2002)

In March 2005, the DFES presented a five-year e-learning strategy *Harnessing Technology: Transforming Learning and Children's services*, with implications in all areas of education, from primary schools to universities. ICT is clearly shown as a participational and motivational tool:

At any stage of learning, ICT could re-engage the unmotivated learner" (DFES, 2005) and "the new technologies are capable of creating real energy and excitement for all age groups. Used well, they should motivate, personalise and stretch. (DFES, 2005)

The CETL Languages of the Wider World is a collaboration between University College London and the School of Oriental and African Studies and is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The CETL aims to promote, foster and support excellence in the teaching and learning of languages of the Wider World. It covers four main themes: reflection and research, materials and curriculum development, learner and teacher training, as well as dissemination.

The Flexi-Pack project, which focuses on m-learning, is based at and funded by the SOAS-UCL Centre of Excellence for the Teaching and Learning Languages of the Wider World. CETL launched a call for bids for Flexi-Pack funding in May 2007 and applications were successful in the following languages: Romanian at University College London, Bengali, Nepali, Japanese and Turkish at the School of Oriental and African Studies. The project has recently been completed and is now being piloted with students. It is now intended to increase funding in this area.

2. Mobile Learning

In recent years, mobile learning (m-learning) has attracted a great deal of interest throughout the educational spheres and this has resulted in numerous pilot projects and research papers. An example of this is the review conducted by Cobcroft et al (2006) which concerned over 400 publications on m-learning including conference papers, reports, reviews and research projects.

M-learning may currently be considered as a loosely-defined concept, with a wealth of initiatives related to the use of handheld devices both in and out of the classroom, including for self-study and to supplement taught sessions. There is a need to clarify the definition and scope of m-learning and, in this paper, m-learning is described as the use of handheld devices outside the classroom by adult students for learning purposes in Higher Education contexts in the United Kingdom.

M-learning concerns the acquisition of knowledge and skills through the use of mobile technology, irrespective of time and location. (Geddes, 2004)

the term "mobile learning" is frequently used to refer to the use of handheld technologies enabling the learner to be on the move, providing anytime anywhere access to learning. (Price, 2007)

M-learning gives us the opportunity to design learning differently, to create extended learning communities, to provide expertise on demand, and to support a lifetime of learning.

mobile learning is not just about learning using portable devices, but learning across contexts. (Sharpley, 2007)

Researchers such as Attewell present the advantages of m-learning, which concentrate primarily around personalisation of learning, collaborative learning, a greater informality of the learning experience and an enhanced engagement of reluctant learners.

Mobile learning is unique in that it allows truly anywhere, anytime, personalised learning. It can be used to enrich, enliven or add variety in conventional lessons or courses.” and also “Mobile learning helps to remove some of the formality from the learning experience and engages reluctant students. (Attewell, 2005)

Kukulska-Hulme, another supporter of m-learning, insists that learning technologies have ceased to be the preserve of technicians and experts and that teachers and learners have begun to integrate them into their normal daily practice. For her,

Mobile learning promises to deliver closer integration of language learning with everyday communication needs and cultural experiences. (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006)

3. Snapshot on the Romanian Flexi-Packs

Romanian Flexi-Packs produced at University College London, with funding from the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning Languages of the Wider World, are specially-tailored materials designed for e-learning and m-learning, in accordance with principles of blended learning. Their purpose is to supplement traditional taught sessions with online materials tailored to students’ needs, both in terms of contents and level of difficulty.

Romanian Flexi-Packs are based on a Virtual Learning Environment and available for learners to download and use “on the go” for mobile learning. Every week, students of Romanian have the opportunity to download a text file in PDF format, together with a set of mp3 audio-files. A typical text file normally contains sections such as: learning objectives, learning tips, reference sections with vocabulary and grammar, a carefully-selected list of web sites with additional tasks to complete, a whole range of exercises which correspond to the contents of the previous lesson and cover listening, reading and writing skills, as well as grammar and vocabulary and finally, transcripts for all the audio-files and keys to all the activities to allow for students’ self-assessment. Flexi-Packs focus on functional language and aim to provide students with real-life snapshots on Romania in context, offering topics such as meeting people and travelling on the train.

Twenty Romanian Flexi-Packs, suitable both for undergraduates and post-graduates have been produced at University College London. They contribute to reducing the lack of suitable published materials identified by tutors, especially regarding listening and speaking skills. Romanian Flexi-Packs have been piloted among students, who have responded very positively to their new m-learning experience and have made the following comments: “it really is what I was looking for”, “Flexi-Packs are straightforward to use” and “with Flexi-Packs, it is easier to progress”.

Flexi-Packs correspond to the objectives of the HEFCE e-learning strategy launched in 2005, in particular regarding the diversity of learners’ needs and the flexibility of provision. Another measure of success employed by HEFCE in its e-learning strategy is tutors’ communication with the students, as well tutors’ access to materials for regular use and improvement. The Flexi-Pack Project has taken these points into consideration.

Flexi-Packs offer a variety of advantages, with a view to maximise students’ experience of m-learning. First of all, Flexi-Packs are specially-tailored to the students’

needs and give them a greater say in what they learn, when and how. Then, Flexi-Packs are easy to modify by tutors, even with limited technical knowledge and this applies in particular to text files. Moreover, they offer flexibility in terms of presentation, as they can be placed on web pages or on Virtual Learning Environments for students to download and use for m-learning.

4. Concluding Notes

This article outlines the rationale for creating Romanian Flexi-Packs, a range of m-learning materials with a fully-integrated approach between traditional lessons and self-study. Flexi-Packs are currently being developed for a variety of languages including Turkish, Bengali, Nepali and Japanese at SOAS and UCL. Flexi-Packs truly offer a m-learning experience to students, with materials which correspond to their needs and allow for a greater empowerment in their learning experience. More opportunities for further development are available through a greater use of Virtual Learning Environments. For further information about Flexi-Packs, or about CETL work more generally, please visit <http://www.lww-cetl.ac.uk>

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