

PERSONALIZED SUPPORT FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS USING ICT

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to offer language teachers a series of tools and practical guidelines for improving their usage of the online environment. We will cover mainly two coordinates. Firstly, we will study the concept of Personal Learning Network (PLN). In this respect, we will present an example of how to create such a network, both from the perspective of the teachers (for their own learning) and also from the perspective of the learners (how a teacher can help the learner build a PLN). Secondly, we will focus on one of the greatest challenges for teachers and learners today: how to make the most of the online language resources available. If in the past the challenge was to find any resources on the internet, the challenge of our day is to select quality resources and to ensure that the learners have access to learning material that is relevant to their needs.

Keywords: Personal Learning Networks, ICT for language teachers and language learners, quality assurance mechanisms for online learning resources

Introduction

This article presents a series of tools for enabling language educators to use (or use more efficiently) the wealth of ICT resources and internet networks that are created specifically for language learning. It also offers guidelines for improving the access to ICT resources and online language learning materials on two basic coordinates:

1. **Guidelines** for using and developing Internet Personal Learning Networks (PLNs)
2. **Principles** for selection and management of quality online language learning resources

The resources presented and the information obtained build on innovative material and methods made available with the help of the following European projects: “Lingu@net World Wide¹”, “Autonomous ‘Personal Learning Networks’ for

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Language Teachers”², “Online Networking Platform for Language learning”³ and “Language Rich Europe”⁴.

Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) for Teachers of English

a. How to create and use a PLN

A professional network generally refers to a virtual community that is focused on professional interactions rather than social interactions. When learning is added to this equation, we have people communicating who meet virtually to share and learn what is relevant for their profession.

In very few words, a PLN is a virtual environment a learner builds for himself or herself when pursuing learning on a chosen topic. To a certain extent, a PLN is like the stack of books the student has gathered on the table in the reading room, next to the course handouts and references lists and summaries compiled throughout the semester.

Every learner can create a PLN that is unique in pattern, but in general users of PLN opt for a collection of websites of interest for the target of the learning process, accompanied by newsfeeds on the latest developments, personal weblogs of experts in the field or of learners with the same goals. Another very important component of the PLN is networking. Fellow learners and experts keep contact through social media such as socializing networks (*facebook*) but most likely through professional networks (*linkedin*), through comments to a post on a weblog they follow etc. The microblogging website called *twitter* can also be used as a tool for rapid communication, especially if in need of an urgent response from a colleague.

A PLN works best if the learners can gather all the means they choose to include in their personal learning network in one place. This needs to be an interface, a starting point that works like the dashboard of a car from where the driver uses all

2 Autonomous ‘Personal Learning Networks’ for Language Teachers is a project co-financed by the European Union under the grant agreement no. 511460-LLP-1-2010-1-TR-KA2-KA2MP. This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects only the views of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

3 Online Networking Platform for Language learning is a project co-financed by the European Union under the grant agreement no. 511558-LLP-1-2010-1-UK-KA2-KA2MP. This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects only the views of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

4 Language Rich Europe is a project co-financed by the European Union under the grant agreement no. 511780-LLP-1-2010-1-UK-KA2-KA2NW. This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects only the views of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

the functions without having to move around too much. It would be impossible to do any driving if the driver should get out of the car to light the headlights or move the windshield wipers. The dashboard allows the driver to focus on their goal: driving the car to a destination. If the tools a learner needs in order to achieve the learning goals were the car and the learning the destination of the trip, then the PLN is the dashboard.

Below we would like to present an example of a PLN, hoping that it will help the readers in building one of their own, for their own learning goals. Let us assume that the goal of the learning is psycholinguistics and its applications to foreign language learning.

We start by searching the internet and we find the following to be relevant: a psycholinguistics specialized magazine online, blogs, fora, *Linkedin* groups of linguists working in the field. What the learner needs now is the dashboard, a place from where he or she can access all the resources found to be relevant and from where he or she can see whether the resources have been updated. One example of such a "dashboard" is provided by Google. It is called "*Igoogle*" and it allows a personalization of a homepage once the learners log in a google account. The *Igoogle* account has the same password and user name as a *gmail* account.

This model of creating a PLN is **transferable**, meaning that teachers of foreign languages can use it for their own learning or that they can recommend it as a learning tool for their students.

We would like to present now an example of a PLN for a student of English. Let us assume that the learner has already found a few websites and resources that he or she wants to use and have at hand when focusing on learning English. The list may include: a reliable newspaper's website such as "The Times": <http://www.thetimes.co.uk>, a few English learning websites: for example: <http://www.english-to-go.com>, <http://english-zone.com>, <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com>, <http://esl.about.com>, weblogs of fellow learners (to begin with, a learner should select maybe five relevant blogs of other learners and start reading them: for this they can use *google reader* to have real-time updates of the blogs they selected), a forum that provides its users with help <http://www.usingenglish.com/forum> and, for more advanced learners maybe even a language corpus such as the *British National Corpus*. The BNC can also be accessed via a friendly interface that can be found here: <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc>. It allows the learners to find out the solution to language related problems such as: when to use *make* or *do*, what is the most used plural of a noun: *indexes* or *indices* for *index* for example. The BNC is thus capable of offering solutions to an entire range of language related questions, starting with grammar uncertainties and up to fine nuances of vocabulary. Adding all these online resources to an *Igoogle* personal page will allow the learner to see the updates that appear on each resource in real time without even having to refresh the page.

b. Advantages of a PLN

One of the most important advantages of a PLN is the accessibility it provides for the learning topic. The improved accessibility to information and material that is of immediate need is crucial especially for a learner that is online and not in the traditional classroom. In the online environment the learners have a lot of autonomy but no constraints and thus it is very tempting to quit. Having at hand the possibilities to solve a problem might help the learners stay connected and keep learning. Having the possibility to contact a member of the network who is already familiar with the issue significantly accelerates the learning process by having immediate access to what is needed.

Another advantage is the possibility to share experiences with other learners and constantly improve the quality of the resources used. However, at the same time, correct usage of a PLN also means responsibility. The learners should share the information they have discovered themselves and not bother a colleague when they can find out the answer for themselves.

Quality management in selecting online resources for foreign language learning

The Lingu@net World Wide project is being developed since 1998 and the project platform already contains 3 700 online resources for learning 20 foreign languages. Until the end of 2012, this project will offer guided access and support for accessing more than 5 000 resources for learning 32 languages (five of them being emergent widely used languages: Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese and Russian). All these resources have been found by project partners or project collaborators, including visitors to the website. They have passed through a process of indexing and thus they were included in their corresponding category on the project platform.

The website of the project, www.linguanet-europa.org, had up to now approximately 100 000 visitors per month and it is estimated that it will reach 400 000 visitors per month until 2011. Because of the large number of languages, resources and professionals to be managed, quality assurance is one of the central concerns of the Lingu@net World Wide partners. Because a prerequisite for quality assurance is defining the adequate instruments (Byram, M. *Routledge encyclopedia of language teaching and learning*), the project partnership has created an instrument for standardizing the process of adding a resource on the project platform. In this article we would like to present this instrument and then demonstrate its transferability for ensuring quality in language teaching-related contexts.

The inclusion of a resource on the platform of the Lingu@net World Wide project follows the steps of a standard process, respected by each member of the team performing the indexing process.

These are the stages a resource goes through before being added to the platform:

1. The type of resource is selected (a direct tool for learning the language: a website containing language lessons, exercises, vocabulary etc. or a resource that assists the learner in becoming more familiar with the target language: an online newspaper, a museum website, a radio website that allows online listening of broadcasts etc.).
2. Description of the respective resource (including the skills learners can practise using it – grammar, vocabulary, listening etc., its availability – whether it is free of charge – what computer applications are needed for accessing it).
3. Specification of the copyright, of the contact person for support – if available.

None of the resources can be added to the project platform without complying with these stages. Moreover, the resources are subsequently verified by another member of the team.

This tool for introducing a resource on the Lingu@net World Wide platform can be adapted to serve the needs for classification of online resources for language learning in different institutions (foreign languages teaching centres, universities, foreign languages departments, centralization of student-developed projects, resource cataloging for libraries or e-learning organizations etc.), or professionals (foreign language teachers building a resource database for different categories of learners or students trying to use the online environment for their learning process). The usage of such a pattern, that implies going through compulsory sections, will create standardization and consistency of the data base.

Conclusions

In the last decade, the challenges for the language teaching professionals have changed. Traditionally used to the face-to-face teacher-student interaction, teachers might have difficulties in adapting to a new reality in which e-learning and online learning are omnipresent. Moreover, the new technologies are very attractive to students and this makes it even more important for teachers to adapt to the new media.

This article has presented two possibilities for teachers to take advantage of the online environment. One of them is the PLN (personal learning network) whose usability has been proven both for the learner and for the teacher. The other one is a guidance system for a teacher overwhelmed by the large number of resources

available online for teaching and learning a foreign language. This guidance system is a quality assurance mechanism, a tool that helps managing a large number of resources and enables the teacher to recommend the resources that are relevant to a defined group of learners.

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