Chapter 7

ICT AND CURRICULUM DESIGN

7.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with forms of ICT that are more relevant to the curriculum as a whole than to individual tasks. It considers to what extent VLEs can contribute to a curriculum grounded in task-based principles and in which respects tools based on the CEFR, which provides a starting point for outlining a task-based curriculum, may be useful in this context.

In the face of the potential of ICT for task design described in the previous chapter, the challenge for teachers is to design combinations of tasks which exploit the complementary options for learning in class and out of class, with or without technology, to maximum effect. This calls for curriculum design relative to the entire ICT-supported learning environment (in which the classroom is one component).

Our conception of the role of technology in support of the variety of tasks in the curriculum is similar to that presented in Conacher et al. (2004). Conacher et al. (2004) describe the learning environment as a continuum, consisting of face-to-face sessions, distance learning, self-study, (peer) group work, etc. It is in this continuum that tasks should be sequenced and decisions should be made about whether or not to support them with technology. As indicated in the previous chapter, finding an appropriate balance between in-class and out-of-class work, independent and collaborative learning, and learner autonomy and teacher guidance are vital aspects in this environment both from the point of view of language pedagogy and from the perspective of logistics.

Course management is a typical role of VLEs (they are commonly referred to a Course Management Systems, or CMSs). In this chapter, the role of VLEs in organising the task-based curriculum will be described in greater detail.
Because it makes reference to increasing levels of difficulty, the CEFR is also potentially useful in arranging tasks in the curriculum. But, as will be demonstrated below, the tools that have been specifically developed on the basis of the Framework are also useful in bringing out other aspects of language pedagogy at the level of the curriculum.

It should be noted that the difficult issue of sequencing tasks on the basis of inherent task properties is not addressed here. Much attention in TBLT-research has focused on how tasks may be sequenced on the basis of factors relating to input, task conditions, task process, or task outcomes (Ellis, 2003: 220-229). While such factors may obviously be related to the use of technology (providing multimedia input instead of pictorial input, supporting dialogic rather than monologic discourse, etc.) and should therefore be of interest to those involved in designing task-based curricula, discussing such task parameters - and the role that technology may play in them - in relation to sequencing tasks would be well beyond the scope of this study. Relative task difficulty is only addressed in terms of the guidelines provided by the CEFR.

7.2 VLEs in support of the curriculum

7.2.1 General perspectives

McGill and Hobbs (Mcgill & Hobbs, 2008) describe a virtual learning environment (VLE) as “an information system that facilitates e-learning.” VLEs are used to “process, store and disseminate educational material and support communication associated with teaching and learning” (p. 191).

VLEs serve a central function in providing the types of flexibility predicated upon by the Flexibility-Activity Framework (independence of time, place, teacher, classroom) for both students and teachers. Flexibility and ease-of-use are important factors in the popularity of VLEs as tools for learning and teaching. Collis and Moonen (2001) regard perceived pedagogical
effectiveness and ease-of-use as prerequisite steps for fuller acceptance of technology for learning-related purposes. They recommend focusing on one technology in particular at first and complementing it with other technologies as appropriate (Lesson 9: After the core, choose more). Their technology of choice for serving this catalyst function are VLEs to which they assign a central place in achieving more flexible, innovative forms of learning. In chapter 4, it was demonstrated how VLEs provide this type of core functionality in innovation projects in the Netherlands. In the discussion of these projects, they were particularly associated with providing “teaching presence,” which is an essential component of learning in the institutional context (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

Flexibility of use appears to be one of the main reasons why many educational institutions worldwide are now deploying VLEs as part of their e-learning strategies to enhance teaching and learning in virtually any discipline (OECD, 2005). High use for language teaching and learning was evidenced in the IILL survey and similar surveys conducted elsewhere (Schneider, 2007; Toner et al., 2008).

Innovative practice does not necessarily follow from the use of VLEs. Blin and Munro (2008), exploring the impact in a university context of one particular VLE, Moodle, found that “… the VLE is mainly used for administrative purposes, to disseminate resources or information and to complement or replicate existing practices” (p. 488). Orsini-Jones and Jones (2007), on the other hand, described how VLEs may be used to teach grammar in ways that are nothing like the traditional Presentation → Practice → Production (PPP) approaches to the subject, claiming that “the VLE provided the socio-collaborative infrastructure upon which the project could be built” (p. 99). These examples demonstrate once more that it is not so much the technology but the pedagogies by which its use is informed that determine the transformational potential of ICT. They drive home the inevitable reality that teachers use technology relative to their current teaching
beliefs and learning philosophies and it is these beliefs and learning philosophies that must be central in any attempts to transform the ways in which technology is used for learning-related purposes. This issue will be taken up again in chapter 8.

7.2.2 Practical uses

Most VLEs have built-in features for presenting the course outline to students. In some cases, these may be rather rudimentary, such as with Blackboard’s ‘syllabus tool’, but these limitations can usually be overcome by teachers fashioning the course outline in some other way, such as by setting up appropriate folder structures on a weekly schedule or topic basis for the course. At the University of Groningen, for instance, teachers make use of a course organiser to present the course content to their students. In Figure 24, an example is shown of the course organiser being used for a Business English course at the University of Groningen.

The course is built around a commercial web site (Market Leader, http://www.market-leader.net/) and presentation and writing tasks, and makes use of learning tools and supplementary activities, all of which can be accessed from the course organiser.
On the face of it, the use of technology for this purpose may be regarded as rather trivial and not contributing much to the pedagogic innovation that is central in the debate about the potential-practice gap in ICT for language learning. It illustrates one way in which ICT may be used “to post material online”, “send students to specific web sites” and “have students search the Internet”, all of which are regarded by Arnold (2007: 169) as “utilitarian” rather than pedagogically innovating uses of technology. However, the
benefits of these “utilitarian” functions for supporting pedagogically innovative language teaching and learning practices should not be underestimated.

First of all, syllabus outlines such as that presented in Figure 24 may be helpful in conceptualising tasks in relation to the entire learning environment, in which the classroom is just one element (section 7.1 above). This is important for both teachers and students, who may regard the classroom as the primary place for language learning, even if, because of time constraints on contact hours, only a small portion of that learning can be covered during class time (the IILL survey revealed an average distribution of 40% working time in class and 60% outside class). The discussion above has shown that the classroom continues to be an important place for interaction, also in the face of new technological potential, but it is by no means the only place for situating language learning tasks.

An email sent by one of the teachers to students in the aforementioned Business English class (see Table 47 below) gives an impression of the different aspects involved in teaching in a multimodal blended learning environment. The email was sent using the mailing function of Blackboard, which is the main tool of the local learning environment Nestor.
Dear students,

Welcome to English 1c.

As you know, this is a Nestor self-study week. It is designed for you to explore the Academic Word List Highlighter tool. The full assignment was posted on the International Marketing Nestor site at the beginning of this semester and is now also available on the English 1c site (Weekly Organizer, scroll down to Block 4, Week 18).

Resit students, who have not been studying IM this year, can of course use any other suitable piece of individually written work.

Everyone, please remember to bring your Nestor week reflective report to the first lesson. Your teacher will discuss your findings in the context of the potential of the AWL for future university written tasks.

Please also read the Course Information Handout for 1c and bring it to class. You are advised to pay particular attention to the imminent graded presentation symposium. This will take place for one 4-hour period only in either week 20 or 21. These dates and times cannot be changed and there will be no other classes in these two weeks. The schedule and a full description of the task is available in the Weekly Organizer (scroll down to Block 4, week 20).

This is a challenging but rewarding block for all those students who approach it with enthusiasm and a supportive team spirit.

Wishing you all every success,

Kind regards

XXXX

Course Coordinator

The mail draws attention to how the Course Organiser is used in support of both in-class and out-of-class activities for the course, the mix of media used to support it and aspects of student responsibility and teacher guidance in the context of performing these activities and using the tools. The use of these two VLE components in this context demonstrates several aspects of
“convenience” pointed to in Arnold (2007), but they indubitably also contribute to realising the pedagogical objectives of the course.

A second benefit is that VLEs offer significant advantages over traditional print-based media (or classroom instructions) in providing access to the task descriptions and the online tools and resources that are relevant to performing the tasks. Web resources offered to students for purposes proposed in sections 6.3-6.6, are more easily accessed through a link in a VLE than through a reference in a book or paper handout. Online dictionaries, other reference works and tutorial applications discussed in sections 6.7 and 6.8 may be literally only a keystroke away. And many of the communication and collaboration tools described in section 6.9 are available as integrated tools in VLEs, which greatly facilitates general communication, calling up support, or setting up innovative language learning tasks on the basis of them. As the number of ICT resources and tools used for language learning increases, the benefits of using VLEs in this umbrella function will grow accordingly. In line with the recommendations made previously, the use of VLEs for presenting the course syllabus should cover all tasks, in class and out of class, and all media both traditional and new, that are pertinent to performing the tasks inside or outside the familiar classroom space. Restricting coverage to only those elements of the curriculum that are supported by technology will create a sense of discontinuity between the more traditional elements and the new elements in the learning environment, impeding effective integration of all the components that make up the course.

A third, related benefit is in the establishment of a transparent, highly accessible, easily modifiable and extendable common core of learning materials, tools and resources. This is particularly relevant for courses taught collectively. Willis and Willis (2007), quoting a teacher introducing a task-based program in Japan, point to the following aspect as particularly important for implementation:
Basically ... get all teachers (even dissenting ones) using the same tasks and material and to work from there. This is what I call ‘working out of the same box’. This gets people speaking the same language and it challenges them to think. It's important, too, to get teachers thinking in terms of a holistic teaching sequence.

(Willis & Willis, 2007: 183)

These remarks were made in the context of using traditional media (primarily course books) for TBLT, but they may be even more relevant for the use of VLEs in this context. Teachers participating in a course may be given time and place independent access to the task outlines, course materials and tools for the course. Added to this are easy-to-use editing facilities, which make it possible for them to contribute to the course themselves (one reason for selecting VLEs rather than general web pages for these purposes is ease of use). Provided the course syllabus reflects principles of TBLT design, using VLEs in this sense may thus contribute to furthering innovative, task-based practice in language pedagogy. The importance of VLEs for course design makes them an important subject for teacher training.

A key point of this discussion is that these practical uses of technology for distributing course materials and providing access to resources and tools may help to facilitate innovative language teaching practices (even though they can not enforce them). Using VLEs for “utilitarian” purposes, such as the ones described above, is not in and of itself evidence of traditional modes of teaching and may also greatly benefit teachers embracing contemporary views on language learning such as TBLT.

7.2.3 TBLT-informed uses

After these general observations on the utility of VLEs for language learning, we will now turn to how VLEs may contribute to achieving the prerequisite links between meaning focus and form focus at the level of the task-based
curriculum, an aspect that is arguably more central to TBLT pedagogy than the utilitarian functions described above.

In section 6.2, it was shown how using meaning as the starting point for language teaching and learning and introducing form as a secondary aspect can be operationalised at the level of task design. Following proposals from Willis (1996), it was illustrated how attention to form can be made relevant to the “problems / needs that learners encounter in carrying out the task.” (Samuda & Bygate, 2008: 208) and the role of technology in the process, particularly of tutorial programs focusing on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, was considered. When tasks thus designed are integrated into the curriculum, this attention to form may appear rather haphazard and explicit instruction in or recycling of language material presented earlier in the task-based context may be hampered because of this. In addition, in formal educational contexts, the teacher has “the responsibility of ensuring that through an appropriate sequencing of tasks the appropriate ‘formal curricula’ are covered” (Nunan, 2004: 16). This normally entails taking into account which linguistic aspects will have been covered by the end of the course. Using an outcome-based framework, such as the CEFR, for assessment not only provides guidelines on what learners can do with language in a particular setting, but also on how well they can do it in terms of e.g. grammatical accuracy, vocabulary range, vocabulary control and phonological control (Council of Europe, 2001: 108-118).

This question on how focus on form may be built into task-based language courses systematically is an important issue for TBLT researchers and practitioners.
Ellis (2003) proposes to resolve this issue by conceiving of the task-based syllabus\(^{11}\) “as two entirely separate modules – a communicative module and a code-based module” (p. 236):

The communicative module constitutes the main component of such a syllabus. It consists of linguistically unfocused tasks, selected and graded with reference to the criteria outlined earlier in this chapter. Students work their way systematically through this module, which provides opportunities to develop fluency, accuracy and complexity through message-related activity.

The code-based module constitutes the secondary component of the syllabus. It consists of a checklist of linguistic features that are potentially difficult for learners to learn and serves a ‘remedial’ purpose by helping learners to acquire features that prove resistant to learning ‘naturally’.

(Ellis, 2003: 236)

Just how the code-based module is to be taught is open to discussion: Ellis argues that either a traditional form-focused approach built on principles of PPP might be employed, or the relevant formal aspects might be covered through a series of focused tasks, i.e. tasks specifically designed to elicit the linguistic features. Ellis suggests that no links between the two components at the design level are necessary and that it should be left to the teachers to establish the links as the course unfolds.

Willis and Willis (2007) present a slightly revised version of Ellis’s proposal, which considers the implementation of this modular approach in the language

\(^{11}\) Ellis (2003) uses the term ‘syllabus’ to describe what is to be taught; the term ‘curriculum’ is broader and includes the actual materials and procedures of teaching.
learning context in greater detail. Not only does this revision make more explicit recommendations on how to achieve the desirable connections between the two modules, but it also provides a basis for defining the roles of teachers and students in this context and conceptualising how a relevant body of linguistic content for the code-based module may be created. Their proposal is represented in Figure 25 below. We will use this proposal to describe how technology may be supportive of implementing such a modular approach in the task-based curriculum.

The communicative module provides the backbone of the task-based curriculum. At the beginning level, language learning is primarily meaning-focused and lexically driven; attention to form gradually increases as learning passes through the intermediate to the advanced levels of teaching. This shift in balance is reflected in the diagonal dividing the two modules in Figure 25 above.

While it is obviously possible to implement this proposal in a conventional setting without the use of technology (the model is valid irrespective of the
pedagogical procedures for implementing it), there may be considerable advantages in using technology to support it.

If a VLE is used in support of a course, the main course outline implemented by the syllabus tool, course organiser or some similar device, represents the series of tasks constituting the course. The tasks are obviously specific to the course and different courses are made up of different sets of tasks. Tasks might involve a considerable element of classroom interaction or they might be almost entirely conducted out of class, as suggested in the previous chapter. The code-based module, on the other hand, rather than consisting of PPP-based lessons or teacher-led focused tasks (as suggested by Ellis (2003)) or form-focused activities and text analysis (as proposed by Willis and Willis 2007), could very well be implemented as a set of computer-based resources and exercises requiring very limited classroom interaction. It would include the online dictionaries and other reference works and the tutorial programs discussed in chapter 6, for which links would be provided at appropriate points from the tasks constituting the main learning path of the course.

In line with our recommendations on encouraging independent student learning in the use of specific language learning tools and resources, some of these links would be available to students during the entire pedagogical sequence in which tasks are embedded. These would be pre-programmed by teachers during task design. Other links, particularly those arising from the problems and needs that task performance brought to the fore, would be supplemented by the teacher as the course unfolds.

For some languages, particularly English but also for other commonly taught languages, many suitable resources and practice programs are available on the Internet for free. After careful selection of resources that might be appropriate in support of the TBLT syllabus, teachers would add the resources as links to an appropriate folder structure set up in the VLE and
supply links from the tasks as needed, either at the time of compilation or at the time of running the course.

An important aspect of the code-based module is that, unlike the tasks, the components would remain fairly stable across different courses. Although teachers might prefer to make some components unavailable to specific groups, in most cases modifications would be in the area of supplying appropriate links from the tasks into the code-based module. This has great benefits in terms of re-usability of course materials. In the context of a VLE, this process could be implemented by copying the relevant content to different courses or by using a content-management system to show the content at appropriate points in the course.

Since this is yet another example of making course materials and web resources available online, it might be argued that this once more constitutes an instance of utilitarian use of ICT. It should, however, be noted that implementing such a scenario with traditional media and methods would have been much more complex, if not impossible. Using paper-based dictionaries to support it would have made direct referencing much more difficult, using paper-based exercises would not be appropriate for practice involving listening and speaking, not to mention the problems of logistics in bringing these traditional media together, ideally in a way that meets individual students’ needs and problems.

In the INTUIT project (see chapter 4) an attempt was made to develop communicatively oriented syllabuses along the lines suggested above. The project distinguished two main strands: a main learning path, based on the activities to be performed by students, and a supporting “Language Tool Box” consisting of teacher-selected tools and resources to which students had recourse at any point during the course. Although not strictly informed by TBLT, this approach showed considerable potential for pushing the use of ICT for language learning ahead. The proposals in Ellis (2003) and Willis and
Willis (2007) provide further direction in complementing this strategy with principled approaches to language learning. This will inevitably lead to further blurring of the concepts utilitarian use and pedagogically innovative use, suggesting once more how the former may serve to create essential conditions for realising the latter.

Willis and Willis (2007) particularly associate the code-based module with their proposal of setting up a “pedagogic corpus”, which they describe as a specifically prepared collection of texts which can be used as the basis for form-focused activities and text analysis. The tasks from the communicative module provide the basis for assembling such a corpus, but the corpus could include texts (both spoken and written) from other courses as well, which would help learners “to build up a more and more complex and precise picture of the way the language works even though they may not be able to explain the rules which lie behind their language behaviour” (p. 189). This is one way in which the recommendations in Doughty and Long (2003) about providing “well-constructed input archives in the form of audio, video, and text-based corpora, the components of which are tagged for task complexity and perhaps controlled in terms of learner access” (p. 62) could be realised.

The corpus is regarded as providing input for language learners, in a conception where learning is seen as “a growing awareness and sophistication in the ability to process text and learn from it” (Willis & Willis, 2007: 191). Inevitably, this requires the responsibility on the part of the learner to take on this form of learning. This brings us back to the theme of learner independence, which we have seen to be an essential condition of technology use in a task-based context in chapter 6, for as Willis and Willis (2007) claim: “This is something that will be encouraged by a methodology which prompts learners to look at language for themselves” (p. 189). In other words, it is not just left up to the teacher to establish the links between the communicative and the code-based module, but learners activated through analysis and practice assignments should be stimulated to make the appropriate
connections themselves. As indicated by the relative importance of the communication module and the code-based module at different levels of teaching, this is particularly relevant at the advanced levels (e.g. the C1 and C2 levels of the CEFR).

As has been pointed out in section 6.8 above, Willis and Willis (2007) discuss KWIC (keyword-in-context) concordancing as the primary technological aid for consciousness raising. They propose to use KWIC as a way of exploring the pedagogic corpus. This involves “treating the learners as corpus linguists”, “involved in a process of discovery” (p. 192). The teacher intervention on which the selection of texts is based and the relevance to the task at hand defuse much of the criticism of Doughty and Long (2003) against such an approach (“Training language learners to use concordancing programs and corpora for the metalinguistic study of language samples is not at all what is proposed here” (Doughty & Long, 2003: 62)) and KWIC on the basis of the TBLT guidelines proposed by Willis and Willis (2007) is definitely a way in which consciousness-raising activities may be implemented. Such analysis and practice activities, as has been shown above, may be served by a whole range of other tools and programs. In addition to KWIC to make texts accessible, online dictionaries and other reference works could be used to further students’ understanding of lexical, grammatical or phonological aspects arising from their performance of tasks. Spoken texts could be complemented by recording facilities, possibly embedded in “communicative activities” in the sense of Nunan (2004) above. In short, a whole range of tools would be available to heighten the learners’ awareness of linguistic features and to help them in acquiring these once they are developmentally ready for them. In this context, VLEs are not only particularly convenient in providing access to relevant input (whether or not organised in the form of a pedagogic corpus), but also in providing access to the whole range of tools available for making this input more comprehensible to learners.
One of the applications of the CEFR that lends itself for use in the context of the pedagogic corpus is in providing descriptors for the corpus. Together with tools for indexing and searching, these could then be used as metadata which would allow users (teachers and students) to find suitable content from the spoken and written texts (and possibly also the exercises based on the corpus) on the basis of target levels, activities, domains, communicative competences, etc. Suggestions on how such a metadata system might be realised have been given in Corda and Jager (2004) in the context of developing Ellips, the web-based authoring and practice system for language exercises described in chapter 4 (see Table 10 above).

It should be noted that this conception of providing access to a range of effective pedagogic materials and the use of tools which allow learners to go beyond initial noticing crucially relies on the pivotal role of the teacher in the process. Access to the resources and tools is mediated by the teacher, but an important aspect is to promote the use of these resources and tools by students themselves. It will be remembered that the views on language pedagogy that found the highest support in the IILL survey were “For language learning to be successful it is essential that students take responsibility of their own learning” and “A primary role of the teacher is to help students learn how to learn” (cf chapter 5, section 5.4.3 above).

The role of the teacher in the context of the pedagogic corpus has been summed up by Willis and Willis (2007) as follows:

1. to provide a pedagogic corpus made up of texts which contain sufficient and appropriate raw material for learners to generate the insights they need about the target language to enable them to operate effectively as language users. So texts need to contain appropriate vocabulary which covers the domains in which learners are likely to operate. They need also to illustrate the grammatical knowledge learners will need to acquire;
2. to provide learners with guidance, or instruction, to help them make appropriate generalizations about the language they are exposed to;

3. to provide activities which encourage learners to analyse the language they are exposed to in a way which will enhance learning and make it more efficient; and

4. to encourage learners to practise the language they have been exposed to.

(Willis & Willis, 2007: 189)

The use of tools remains implicit in this list of typical tasks for the teacher, but, as pointed out, examples are given of how KWIC activities may be helpful in promoting student learning in this context. The actual number of tools available for supporting consciousness raising and language practice is, as has been demonstrated, much more varied and in actual fact considerable use is already made of such tools. In addition to the guidelines on task design, the proposals on curriculum design help to underpin this use of technology with methodological principles rooted in TBLT research and teaching practice.

7.3 CEFR-tools in support of the curriculum

7.3.1 Role of the CEFR

In the preceding chapter, the relevance of the CEFR for technology use in the context of designing tasks has been touched upon. It was indicated that the use of web resources offers potential for linking into the real-world domains defined by the CEFR. The use of communication media (CMC) is promoted by the CEFR because communication increasingly makes use of such media. Possibly the greatest potential of CMC from the CEFR perspective is for intercultural communication and understanding, which are at the heart of the Framework. It was also shown how ICT plays an important role in fostering
learner independence, which is another core element of the CEFR. It was also pointed out that the CEFR may provide the basis for metadata that can be used to store and retrieve language materials, such as the texts in the pedagogic corpus proposed by Willis and Willis (2007). At the level of task design, therefore, several relationships between ICT and the CEFR have already been identified. The relevance of the CEFR for task design follows naturally from the CEFR being akin to the TBLT tradition.

As indicated in chapter 2, both Nunan (2004) and Willis and Willis (2007) have argued that the CEFR may be supportive of curriculum design. Applying the CEFR in TBLT provides a starting point for designing a performance-based curriculum. In this section we will explore how technology tools that have been specifically designed in support of the CEFR may contribute to the task-based curriculum.

Using the scales of descriptors and the levels of proficiency defined by the CEFR may be helpful in organising tasks at increasing levels of difficulty in relation to the context of language use and by reference to the learners’ general and communicative competences. In a survey on the use of the CEFR in the Council of Europe member states, Martyniuk and Noijons (2007) found that respondents valued the CEFR primarily “for the planning and the development of curricula/syllabi” (p. 5). Its use for testing and assessment was rated similarly, while the usefulness for teacher training was rated slightly lower (p. 5). This perceived usefulness has had a significant impact on national policies in this area, and several Council of Europe member states have already related or adapted national curricula and examinations to the CEFR, while most other members are planning to do so in the near future (p. 6). In the Netherlands, for instance, new language curricula and exams for higher secondary and pre-university level education based on the CEFR will become effective in 2010 and 2011 respectively (CEVO, 2008). In chapter 4, it was discussed how the CEFR has been used for defining curriculum outcomes in language teaching in universities in the Netherlands since 2000,
and is beginning to affect educational practices in this context (self-reflection, learner autonomy, etc.).

This is not to say that the introduction of the Framework is not without issue in the Netherlands or other countries. Stoks (2009) warns that the CEFR, although intended as a reference, is more and more interpreted as a standard for teaching, which may leave teachers little freedom in organising their own teaching; Little (2007) points to problems of use with young learners and is concerned about the growing influence of testing institutes on the CEFR; Hulstijn (2007) observes, among other things, that the CEFR scales are based on teacher judgements, not on empirical learner studies; Broeder and Van Wijk (2009) likewise state that the scale-level descriptors are intuitively based and need to be revised on the basis of insights from linguistics and psycholinguistics; Westhoff (2007) regrets the limited impact on language pedagogy, which he attributes, among other things, to the fact that the CEFR does not provide much guidance in encouraging innovative pedagogical practice in teaching grammar. However, each of these critics also notes positive aspects of the CEFR (e.g. the promotion of plurilingualism), and the Framework, as has been argued above, continues to be of growing importance for the teaching, learning and assessment of languages in Europe, and beyond.

Against this background, the focus in the next sections will be on two technology instruments specifically designed on the basis of the CEFR, and the extent to which these may contribute to supporting aspects of language pedagogy in the curriculum. The first is DIALANG, a self-assessment program for language learning, and the second is the European Language Portfolio (ELP), a portfolio model developed by the Council of Europe, which is now available in digital formats.
7.3.2 Using DIALANG

DIALANG (http://www.dialang.org) is an adaptive self-assessment program which provides test takers with scores related to the CEFR. It is available in 14 European languages. DIALANG has the form of a downloadable Java program connected to a central database which provides test items remotely through the Java interface. The system offers tests for listening, writing, reading, structures and vocabulary. No tests are available for speaking (spoken production or spoken interaction) and writing is tested by closed answer or short answer items only, not by free production. A description of the program can be found in Alderson and Huhta (2005). The descriptive scales used for self-assessment and feedback have been included as an appendix to the main text of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001: 226-243).

DIALANG works as follows. After an introduction, users select the language and skill to be tested. Thereupon a placement test is offered in which the user is asked to distinguish between existing and non-existing words of the language. This Vocabulary Size Placement Test is used to determine at which of the three available levels the test should be administered (Alderson & Huhta, 2005: 303). The placement test is concluded by advisory feedback, based on the user score, which provides global information on the user’s knowledge of vocabulary. Next, if the skill selected is listening, reading or writing, a self-assessment section is started, in which test takers are asked to reply “Yes” or “No” to Can-Do statements of the form “I can read correspondence relating to my fields of interest and easily understand the essential meaning,” which is a statement for the reading skills at level B2 (see also, Council of Europe, 2001: 231-234). No self-assessment is available for structures and vocabulary. After completion of the self-assessment part, the test for the skill selected is presented to the learner at the appropriate difficulty level. Compared to a test which would cover all CEFR levels,

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12 Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Icelandic, Irish, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish.
adaptive testing based on placement and self-assessment makes the test more meaningful to the learner, increases accuracy and speeds up delivery (Alderson & Huhta, 2005: 305).

After completion of the test, users are provided with feedback on the results of the test, followed by advice which will help them interpret the level scored and assist them in moving to a higher level. The feedback information on the level obtained reports the scores according to the overall scales in the CEFR (see Council of Europe, 2001: 235-237). An example for Reading level C1 is:

Your test result suggests that you are at level C1 in reading on the Council of Europe scale. At this level people can understand long and complex factual and literary texts as well as differences in style. They can understand “specialised” language in articles and technical instructions, even if these are not in their field.

(Council of Europe, 2001: 235)

The feedback section on self-assessment compares the self-assessment score to the test score obtained. This is supplemented by additional information, in which extra advice is given about possible mismatches between test scores and self-assessment, together with other awareness-building information (Alderson & Huhta, 2005: 305-306). Detailed information, including an option to review the item, is available for each test item, grouped by the subskill which it is intended to test.

In the “Advice” section, the focus is on the level obtained in relation to the levels below and above this level. Proficiency at these levels is captured in terms of the text types that the user can understand, what they can understand, and the conditions and limitations that apply. This information is helpful in making users make sense of where they stand as L2 learners. An example of the scales for a user at Reading level C1 is presented in Figure 26 below. The advice is presented in the language selected by the user when
starting the program (in line with the general strategy promoted by the CEFR to provide instruction texts and feedback in the L1).

From this screen additional advice is available that assists users in setting learning objectives for getting to the level above the current level. An example of this type of information is shown in Figure 27 below:
In a task-based syllabus where the CEFR is used as a basis for curriculum design, these extensive advisory feedback features may be of great value to the learner. The richness of information and the combination of self-assessment with objective testing is unmatched in any other program (not to mention the availability in 14 languages!). The program helps to make the curriculum outcomes meaningful to language learners both in terms of what the levels entail and in terms of what is expected of the language learner in attaining them. Alderson and Huhta (2005) indicate that awareness building is one of the primary functions of the advisory feedback: “The aim of this is to encourage learners to reflect on what language learning involves, and whether they can recognize themselves in the descriptions” (p. 306).

In DIALANG this feedback is exclusively directed at the learner. This conceptual design focus on the learner rather than the teacher is also reflected in descriptions such as “it [DIALANG] gives the learner responsibility for the
assessment process, and the results and feedback are reported only to the learner” (p. 302). This pedagogical decision has contributed to a technical design where teachers or other supervisors have no direct access to the results obtained. In addition, test-takers have no options for printing or saving the diagnostic and advisory information. After closing the program, they cannot revisit the test either to review previous results or resume the test if it has had to be interrupted for some reason (in the face of the time needed to complete the test, this is not an unlikely scenario). In an institutional setting this poses a challenge for teachers and other supervisors, who cannot exert their roles of guides to the learning process without taking additional measures to overcome these program limitations.

In terms of the IILL model of integration, from the point of view of pedagogy, DIALANG offers syllabus designers a highly appropriate tool for helping students understand the CEFR, the syllabus outcomes related to it, and their own language proficiency expressed in terms of it. It may thus contribute to establishing a needs-based, student-centred pedagogy in which individual differences between learners can be taken into account. On the basis of the advisory feedback, students may be referred to different entry points in the task-based curriculum (implemented in the institutional VLE). From the point of view of embedding the program into the institutional environment, however, the primary focus on the learner and the program design based on it may pose a significant problem for successful implementation. In addition, other aspects of the program may also hinder sustained use in the educational context (see below).

Extensive use of DIALANG in the context of the INTUIT project (see chapter 4) confirms that the program may indeed be used effectively for the pedagogical purposes for which it has been designed. An account of how the program has been used in this project is provided in Example 6 below. This also demonstrates how some of the barriers to successful integration in the educational setting may be overcome.
EXAMPLE 6: DIALANG IN THE INTUIT PROJECT

Promoting the use of the CEFR by means of technology was one of the primary objectives of the INTUIT project (for an introduction to the project, see chapter 4 above). DIALANG was extensively piloted in the context of this project. This has helped the University of Groningen, one of the partners in the project and leader of the DIALANG piloting scheme, to establish a position for DIALANG as a structural element in its Business and Economics curricula. Use of the program is considered most beneficial if it can be made part of a course (rather than preceding a course, or being offered as a stand-alone self-assessment test), since this offers the best opportunities for integrating DIALANG with general course objectives, course activities, and outcomes referenced in terms of the CEFR. It also facilitates advance preparation for the test and following up the test by meaningful tasks based on the results and feedback obtained.

At the University of Groningen, DIALANG is administered a few weeks after the start of a course. This allows for DIALANG to be “embedded in a longitudinal learning scheme in which the CEFR is introduced through the production of several pieces of work over a period of time” (Comadina, Haines, & Veenkamp, 2007: 4). This includes familiarising students with the principles on which the course is built (“Become your own grammar teacher”), writing reflective reports and memos, etc. DIALANG is administered in a week during which there are no taught classes and the focus is entirely on self-directed work supported through Blackboard (‘Nestor’). The DIALANG test components used are restricted to reading and writing, because these are most relevant to the course and provide a reliable diagnosis of overall language ability (although students are warned that scores for more complex productive tasks may be lower than those given by DIALANG). An example of the instructions given to students taking the test can be found in Table 48 below.
During this Nestor Week, write a reflective summary (one page A4), in which you:

- Reflect upon your strengths and weaknesses in English, making specific reference to the feedback given by DIALANG. The following questions will help you:
  1. What are your linguistic strengths (what can you do) according to DIALANG?
  2. What are your linguistic limitations (what do you find difficult?) according to DIALANG?
  3. To what extent does the feedback provided by DIALANG fit in with your image of your English language ability? Is it consistent with your previous experiences of learning English?
  4. On the basis of the DIALANG test and your previous experience with English, what learning objectives do you set yourself (in order to improve your reading, writing and listening)?
  5. How will you achieve these objectives? Be as specific as possible about what you plan to do and when you plan to do it.

Make sure that all the above materials are included in your portfolio with the reflective report.

Table 48: Instruction provided to students using DIALANG at the University of Groningen

To facilitate use, DIALANG is available on any PC in the university network. In addition, a special module has been developed in Blackboard for use by students at the time of taking the test. This module comprises general information on the program and how it is to be used. It provides students with pre-test, test and post-test instructions, implemented as “learning units” in Blackboard, which take students step-by-step through the test-taking process. The test instructions include information on how to make screen captures and save them for later reference. In addition, the information from the advisory feedback screens in DIALANG is made available as MS Word-documents. On the basis of the results in DIALANG, students are referred to the corresponding sections in the documents, which they can copy to their personal portfolios for ease of reference on subsequent use. The opening screen of the DIALANG Plus module is shown in Figure 28 below:
During the piloting phase, test-taking was arranged in the form of scheduled test sessions. Approximately 350 students participated in the test thus arranged. As indicated in Comadina et al. (2007), questionnaires administered to this group revealed that students responded positively to the way in which DIALANG was embedded in the course. Although the test procedures and instructions needed improvement on some points, students generally agreed that DIALANG had given them a better insight into their level of English and had increased their understanding of the CEFR and provided them with appropriate feedback on moving to a higher level.

Similar results were obtained in other universities where DIALANG was introduced for self-assessment, awareness building and familiarisation with the CEFR. It was also found that if DIALANG is supported by the supplementary instructions and delivery method described, scheduled supervised use is not strictly necessary. This has led to the program
being used by students independently at home or in self-access in the participating institutions (including the University of Groningen). This is obviously in line with the rationale underlying the original design and capitalises on the potential of ICT for supporting independent learning more generally. To facilitate use in other institutions, the Groningen Blackboard module comprising the instructions and additional documentation was exchanged through a simple export and import system set up in the context of the INTUIT project. The module is now generally available from the INTUIT project site (http://www.intuitproject.nl) to prospective users in any institution.

The description in Example 6 above illustrates how DIALANG, in spite of a number of inherent limitations, may be used true to its pedagogical purpose in the institutional setting and how VLEs may be instrumental in supporting this use in the ways described in section 7.2 above.

It should also be noted, however, that the arrangements described cannot deal with some other obstacles hindering widespread acceptance of DIALANG in the institutional environment. The most serious of these is the fact that 6 years after its release, the program is still only available in a beta version and has suffered from extended periods of server downtime over the past few years. Institutions firmly committed to using the CEFR as a basis for syllabus and curriculum design may not be inclined to use DIALANG on these grounds. The strong commitment of the Council of Europe and the European Union to the program expressed by its inclusion in the main document describing the CEFR and substantial funding during the development phase of the program have proved insufficient for securing a permanent basis for implementation of the program in educational institutions across Europe. In addition to the other aspects of the institutional environment highlighted in this section, this is yet another illustration of the vital importance of the environmental component for integration.
7.3.3 Use of the digital ELPs

The European Language Portfolio, or ELP for short, (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/portfolio/) is another potentially useful instrument in support of task-based curricula referenced by the CEFR. It was developed under the aegis of the Council of Europe as a tool to help learners record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences. It may be used to support users, theoretically at least, throughout their lives as language learners in both formal and informal language learning situations. Portfolios modeled on the ELP consist of three distinct parts:

- **Passport**: The passport gives an overview of the owner’s proficiency expressed in terms of the CEFR, including statements of formal qualifications and certificates.

- **Biography**: This part describes the owner’s experience in different languages and has been specifically included to assist them in reflecting on current abilities and planning further progress.

- **Dossier**: This part consists of personal work (documents, audio or video recordings, etc.) which is used to demonstrate the achievement documented in the Passport or Biography sections of the ELP.

Models of the ELP, validated by the Council of Europe, have been developed for different languages and different educational settings. Currently almost 100 accredited models of the ELP are listed on the Council of Europe portfolio site. Most of these have been designed to be used in print format, but digital versions are now becoming available.

As Baten and De Sweemer (2006) point out, in portfolios pedagogical functions and reporting (or documenting) functions are combined and portfolios may be used for purposes of presentation, reflection and evaluation. The ELP covers aspects of each of these functions and uses.
Primarily designed as a tool for the learner, it meets general requirements of independent, life-long learning, but in the institutional setting the reporting and evaluation functions also give it particular relevance as a tool for teachers. It may provide teachers with useful information on the background and language learning experience of students, thereby contributing to needs-based, individualised forms instruction. Similarly, students’ reflection reports and work submitted may be the basis for interaction with and feedback by the teachers as courses unfold.

These aspects make portfolios fit in well with task-based pedagogy, which encourages needs-based approaches to language learning, promotes the assessment of language development over time, fosters learner independence, learner reflection and awareness raising, but also establishes the crucial role of the teacher in assisting the learner in the language learning process. Both Willis and Willis (2007: 222) and Nunan (2004: 160-161) argue for the use of portfolios in giving students a sense of their own progress. Nunan (2004) states that portfolios should contain a “self-introduction”, “samples of both spoken and written language”, “evidence of growth and development” and “evidence of reflective learning” (p. 160). All these aspects are covered by the ELP, which, by being modeled on the CEFR, helps to establish a link between personal development and the performance-based language learning curriculum.

Digital implementations of the ELP seek to capture these pedagogical and reporting functions of portfolios in electronic format, as e-portfolios which offer distinct advantages to their paper-based counterparts. They offer several types of flexibility argued by the Flexibility-Activity Framework to be important for the acceptance of technology for learning-related purposes. First and foremost perhaps they save students and teachers the trouble of carrying around piles of paper-based dossiers. But they are associated with a number of other advantages as well. A second advantage is in greater versatility with regard to spoken language. By recording and storing audio and
video files, portfolio owners can also present evidence of spoken language achievement. This makes it possible to cover a greater range of skills and communication aspects (in the case of video, this may include aspects of non-verbal communication) in one integrated archive. It also affords a way of integrating CMC recordings (section 6.9 above) into the portfolio. A third advantage is in the facility of sharing the portfolio with others (teachers or peers), which may be essential if the portfolio is used for evaluation purposes. The same portfolio may be shared with more people at the same time, which is more difficult to achieve with traditional portfolios. A final advantage is that the digital portfolio can include features not available in analog formats, such as automatic calculation of self-assessment scores and linking to CEFR levels, or integration with learning resources appropriate to the levels and skills of the portfolio owners. Once again, most of these advantages of using e-portfolios rather than paper-based portfolios relate to logistic (‘utilitarian’) aspects of technology, but the point of departure is language innovation on the basis of the ELP, which technology can help to carry further.


The development of e-portfolios modeled on the ELP is still very much work in progress. Currently, only two digital models have been officially accredited by the Council of Europe (out of almost 100 validated models). These are the EAQUALS-ALTE ePortfolio, developed jointly by the
European Association for Quality Language Services and the Association of Language Testers in Europe, and Europeestaalportfolio.nl, developed by the Dutch National Bureau for Modern Languages. This does not necessarily mean, however, that these are the options of choice for institutions seeking to introduce digital portfolios in a CEFR-based curriculum. Like the paper-based models listed on the Council of Europe site, these portfolios have been designed for specific educational settings and levels. The validated model of Europeestaalportfolio.nl, for instance, was designed for “adult second language learners”. This makes it suitable for our target group of HE students. However, following the CEFR line of thinking that reflection about learning the L2 is best supported by using the L1, Europeestaalportfolio.nl originally provided only support for Dutch as the language of the user interface and Can-Do statements. This made it less useful in a HE climate of growing internationalisation, where English is used as the language of communication and teaching. This is yet another aspect of the institutional environment which has been argued to be essential for implementation. In the case of Europeestaalportfolio.nl, this situation was remedied when an English language interface was added to the site later on. Similar considerations no doubt apply to the usability of any of the other digital versions of the ELP, both accredited and not (yet) accredited.

Another aspect worth noting relates to the technology component of our model of integration. The technologies used for implementing the digital ELPs are widely divergent and based on designs which may not necessarily meet the pedagogical requirements of educational institutions not originally involved in the development of the e-portfolios concerned. Some digital implementations of the ELP have been designed as stand-alone applications (DiLaPort, EAQUALS-ALTE e-ELP, and eELP), others have been set up as dedicated portfolio websites (e-Pel and Europeestaalportfolio.nl), and yet others have been integrated into the VLEs used in the educational institutions (LOLIPOP, the eportfolio described in Baten and De Sweemer (2006), and LinguaFolio documented in Cummins (2007)). These designs have been
implemented with typical learners (and teachers) in mind in each of the settings in which the portfolios are used.

Which technology works best for which group cannot readily be decided on general grounds. Since only part of the portfolio owner’s language learning career will be spent in the same institutional environment, there may be distinct advantages in positioning the portfolio outside a specific institutional setting as a stand-alone tool or separate website. But web access may be preferred if easy access of teachers to the portfolios is prioritised. Integration with a VLE may be the preferred option if close links with the language learning course are targeted (Baten & de Sweemer, 2006). In fact, many VLEs have built-in portfolio functionality, which students may also use for other disciplines. This may promote their use for language learning. These implementation issues are essentially aspects of the “horizontal” and “vertical” dimensions of integration (Levy & Stockwell, 2006) in which portfolios, as tools owned by independent learners interacting with teachers in different teaching contexts, have to be situated. The selection of any one system is complicated by the fact that technology standards for portfolios (e.g. IMS ePortfolio, http://www.imsglobal.org/ep/epv1p0/imsep_bestv1p0.html; Open Source Portfolio, http://www.theospi.org/) are not yet applied as a basis for digital ELPs, although some publications and presentations made in the wake of development projects point to plans for implementing technology standards in the future (Landone, Vrasidas, Christodoulou, & Retalis, 2004; Stevens & Lawrence, 2004). The adoption of such standards would benefit the prospect of long-term sustained use of portfolios. In this respect, the technology used is not yet capable of fulfilling the role of a transversal tool spanning the user’s entire language learning career.

For the time being, however, digital ELPs appear to be used primarily as pedagogy tools in the context of individual courses. This is evidenced by reports at the project web sites listed above and the ELP section of the site of the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education.
A judicious approach to promoting their use as life-long learning tools is to establish their pedagogical use at this level and develop strategies for wider acceptance at the same time. In addition to addressing the issues of technology pointed to above, this would also involve developing policies which help to establish the ELP as a language learning tool across courses and beyond educational institutions.

7.4 Summary

A summary is given in Table 49 below of the main aspects of implementation for the technology tools discussed in this chapter:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogy:</th>
<th>VLE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitative of innovation (not necessarily innovation itself);</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key tool in providing teaching presence in learning, e.g. by options for communication and information in the learning context;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single course entry point, providing access to task descriptions, tools and resources;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>May be used for promotion of learner autonomy and differentiated learning content;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allows for multiple pathways through learning content; this may provide an option for integrating communicative and form-focused aspects of language learning (combining communicative module with code-based module (Ellis, 2003; Willis and Willis, 2007);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Potential for incorporating re-usable, searchable pedagogic corpus (Willis, 1996; Willis and Willis 2007);</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIALANG</td>
<td>Combination of self-assessment and objective testing on the basis of CEFR scales;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourages awareness-raising of CEFR and personal proficiency levels; and provides suggestions for improvement;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment of listening, writing, reading, structures and vocabulary; calibrated for communicative skills;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May contribute to a needs-based curriculum (differentiation) and makes curriculum outcomes meaningful to learner;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Digital ELP</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Encourages awareness-raising of CEFR and personal proficiency levels;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Documents formal and informal learning experiences;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Useful for presentation, reflection and evaluation purposes;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May contribute to a needs-based curriculum (differentiation) and makes curriculum outcomes meaningful to learner;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Environment: VLE | • Flexibility of use: primary tool for time, place, teacher independent learning (e-learning) across institution;  
| | • Focus for teacher training and support;  
| | • May be helpful in emphasising design relative to all elements of learning environment;  
| | • Medium for collective design and consolidation of learning content;  
| | • Facilitate re-using the same learning resources (e.g. dictionaries, references on grammar and writing) in different task contexts;  
| DIALANG | • Support of CEFR across languages; CEFR used in educational environment;  
| | • Intended for personal rather than institutional use; no teacher access to student performance;  
| | • Used on substantial scale across Europe (vested interest);  
| | • May be used in institution and at home;  
| | • Insufficient guarantee for continued support;  
| Digital ELP | • Life long learning tool, often restricted to single course context;  
| | • Validated by CoE; competences targeted well-defined;  
| | • Tailor-made to institution needs, intended for specific levels/domains; general use may be restricted as a result.  

Table 49: Aspects of implementation for curriculum-related technology tools