Towards ICT-integrated language learning
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Chapter 9

CONCLUSION

The gap between the potential and practice in CALL is mainly due to problems of implementation. This study has tried to shed light on this distance between the promise of use and the reality of use by confronting the implementation of ICT for language learning and teaching with principles of TBLT, as a contemporary framework of learning, together with the CEFR, as an influential framework of reference for language teaching, and the Flexibility-Activity Framework, as a more general learning technology implementation framework with specific focus on implementation within the institution.

The framework was used to assess both previous and current technology-enhanced practices in the Netherlands (as evident from language teaching innovation projects) and elsewhere (as evident from a survey administered worldwide) and to consider in greater detail the attested potential by discussing critical aspects (in terms of technology, pedagogy and institutional environment) of various technologies used in support of language learning tasks and the task-based curriculum.

The discussion demonstrated that there are considerable advantages to the use of technology irrespective of the pedagogical model embraced. This was also confirmed in the survey administered to language teachers worldwide, who appeared to appreciate the use of technology both for general benefits and for its potential for realising innovative pedagogical practices. The survey also revealed that language teachers today typically use many combinations of technology applications, including tutorial applications often associated with traditional teaching practices. This confirmed the patterns of use observed in the projects discussed in this study.
The historical account showed a stronger emphasis on innovative practice and broad implementation in the use of technology today than in the past, at least in the Netherlands. This trend toward large-scale implementation and innovation is reinforced by growing standardisation of technology in institutions and the use of overarching pedagogical frameworks such as TBLT and the CEFR. At the same time, there is a rapid increase in the availability on the web of all kinds of resources and tools that may be used for (language) learning (exemplified e.g. by the growing number of Web 2.0 technologies).

Our analysis of these tools and the pedagogic functions that they may serve in the language learning process indicates that it is possible to design effective language tasks by combining institution-based and externally available tools and resources along the vertical and horizontal axes of integration. Our analysis also suggests that the overarching pedagogical frameworks are best regarded as reference points, not as standards for learning and teaching. A realistic conception of the CEFR and TBLT is to regard them as offering guidance, not as imposing externally determined standards for language pedagogy. This is the true purpose of the CEFR and as, Samuda and Bygate (2008) have suggested, the most viable conception of TBLT. Our examples have shown how these frameworks and the technology used in support of them may be used in assisting teachers in task and curriculum design and helping students understand essential principles of language learning better.

It is not the technology that makes teaching innovative but the ideas and philosophies that support it. The innovative practices developed in the context of the projects reported on were initiated by teachers and departments open to reconsidering the ways in which they teach and in which their students learn languages. Some guidelines were provided, based on consultation of the Flexibility-Activity Framework and related insights by TBLT researchers and practitioners, on how institutions may go about getting innovative pedagogical practice off the ground and sustaining it by instituting appropriate technology infrastructure and support.
The second part of this study confronted the use of technologies more directly with principles from TBLT and the supporting frameworks CEFR and Flexibility-Activity Framework. This revealed that the use of many technologies (including tutorial software) falls in readily with teaching-oriented frameworks of TBLT, but that critical aspects of language learning must be addressed by a careful design of the tasks in which these technologies are integrated. The actual design of the task is much more critical for language learning than specific properties of the technology itself.

The web is commonly applied as a source for (multimodal) input in language learning, but it is essential to design tasks in which attention to formal language aspects is built in, both at the time when students explore the web during meaning-focused activities and after exploration when a stage should be planned for explicit focus on language. There is considerable potential for using technology here, e.g. in the form of online reference tools and tutorial programs, or in applications which combine aspects of both.

CMC, the technology that is most directly related to interaction, a defining process in TBLT, offers alternative modes of discourse which appear to be used less frequently in contexts where face-to-face interaction in the classroom is the default mode for language learning. Nevertheless, CMC holds great potential for realising interaction outside the classroom, not only for extra, potentially enhanced practice between students from the same class, but particularly for interaction with or participation in the target language and culture. The potential of second-generation CMC applications in this context is currently being explored by CALL pioneers (as evidenced by the current focus at conferences on virtual worlds, gaming, and Web 2.0 technologies more generally). Of these, weblogs and wikis seem to be well positioned to make it into implementation more generally, while, for the time being at least, key factors for implementation bode less well for large-scale application of multi-user virtual environments (virtual worlds).
Of crucial importance for language learning in the HE setting targeted by our study is the fact that online interaction, no matter which form, is best regarded as a complement, not a full replacement of real interaction in the classroom. Few teachers and students would be willing to forego the opportunities for face-to-face exchanges in the classroom, if only because of the opportunities for ‘social presence’ that the classroom provides. And there is strong support from TBLT that classroom interaction offers unique potential for student performance and teacher guidance and intervention. The strong restrictions on classroom time will, however, motivate more and more teachers to investigate how they can engage students in activities for learning outside the classroom. It is clear that this need not be a solitary experience if supported by ICT, although unfortunately many forms of out-of-class technology use appear to be still focused on individual interaction with the computer.

Learner autonomy is one of the most critical factors for successful out-of-class learning. The affordances of technology for making place, time and teacher independent learning possible will not be used fully if students are not encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. This requires an active role of teachers in making such learning possible. Simply making a range of links available to students will not do. These materials have to be integrated into contextualised language learning tasks that are meaningful and relevant to students. Students will have to be guided in learning how to use these materials. This requires them to understand their roles and capacities as language learners, to which the CEFR, and instruments such as DIALANG and the ELP, can make a contribution. But CALL also encompasses a whole range of other, often more mundane aspects, such as knowing how to use a specific feature of a computer program. Although instruction in such aspects can be delegated to supporting technology (e.g. an instructional video or online help system), teachers who have designed tasks involving the use of technology should be prepared to provide guidance in such aspects of technology too (even if they cannot always offer the required assistance
themselves). This may well require demonstrations or hands-on practice in the classroom, which is one of the many reasons to integrate regular classroom encounters into the design – provided of course such encounters are possible in the institutional setting of teaching and learning.

An important role for teachers is to design the language learning activities and integrate the various forms of technology as the situation requires. In order to perform this role successfully, teachers should be equipped with appropriate instructional design skills, possibly beyond the language-focused TBLT framework outlined here. VLEs, supplemented with other tools, as has been argued, may be a valuable tool in supporting such activity-based designs, providing linkages with the many supporting resources, not as lists of random links, but as pedagogically integrated tools which are indispensable for carrying out well-defined and well-designed language learning tasks. VLEs may also be of great value in supporting the actual design of such tasks by allowing teachers to work together and to consolidate the materials in a medium that is accessible and easily modified, so that further contributions to developing learning tasks can readily be made.

This study has offered suggestions for developing a comprehensive framework for implementation of IILL in which aspects of technology, pedagogy and the institutional environment are considered. The framework is based on the insights gathered from the literature, a survey conducted among language teaching professionals world wide, and past and present experiences with technology-supported language learning and teaching (often in the context of projects). The need for such a framework was suggested because current practices of CALL often seem to be out of tune with the attested potential of CALL. On the basis of recommendations made by Willis (1996) and Willis and Willis (2007), it has been shown that in an area where this disconnection comes most to the fore, the use of tutorial applications, there is considerable leeway for endorsing the use of tutorial software by principles from TBLT. Following proposals made by Samuda and Bygate (2008), it was
suggested that a fruitful way forward for getting TBLT accepted is by reconceptualising the role of tasks in the language learning curriculum. And on the basis of Collis and Moonen (2001), guidelines for implementation in the institution were given which can be used for enhancing chances of eventual acceptance. Several of these suggestions were made on the basis of the empirical support they found in the related theory and research findings and in the survey administered as part of this study, while some suggestions were more tentative or intuitive and not based on empirical evidence. It was indicated that none of the projects reported on in this study, although encompassing elements of the framework, were grounded in the implementation framework proposed here. The most important suggestion that we can make at the end of this study is therefore to follow it up with research in which implementation of the IILL framework proposed here is put to the test. Some topics that suggest themselves for further study in this context would be:

1. To what extent can the pedagogical task cycle due to Willis (1996) stand the test of encompassing all aspects of technology in task-based work? Which modifications are needed or desirable?

2. How does this use of technology relate to factors of task complexity? Can general instructional design frameworks assist in sequencing language learning tasks on the basis of complexity?

3. With a view to implementation in the institution, what are essential differences between language pedagogy and pedagogy for other disciplines? What are the implications for technology support?

4. If TBLT does not necessarily mean that tasks are used as a basis for all the activities that students perform in the learning context, how can a mix of task-based work and other work (presumably including form-focused work) be achieved? Has a role for technology already been identified in the proposal for using it in combining a meaning-
focused module with a form-focused module? What other options are there for providing multiple entry points to the same activity?

5. Which combinations of tools and resources do students use during autonomous task-based work? How can technology assist in discovering the frequencies and patterns of use?

6. Does the focus on designing for activity and computer-mediated interaction (rather than content and computer-interactive work) not shift the problem of insufficient time for development to the problem of insufficient time for feedback?

7. In view of the importance of autonomous learning, how can VLEs be used as a basis for individual learning paths, in which diagnostic testing (i.e. based on the CEFR) is linked to the provision of language learning materials appropriate to the level (possibly learning style) of the students tested?

This study has shown the complexity of achieving ICT-Integrated Language Learning. Hopefully, it has also provided some direction for developing a framework of implementation in greater detail and conducting studies that are needed to make claims about aspects of the framework with greater confidence.