

Chapter I

Understanding E-Skills in the FLT Context

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ABSTRACT

The research we report is a pilot study carried to test English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' reception of an electronic foreign language teaching (FLT) task. In doing so, our aim was to collect information that can allow us to refine our own e-skills model, a model that adapts to the specific learning context of our students by focusing on the objectives, competence, and learning activities that our students engage in, in their everyday learning experience. In this way, our e-skills model is field-specific and context-survey-driven. The factor analysis results suggest that, although our four-factor solution explains much of the variance, the original dimensions of e-skills in our FLT context should be reformulated and further adjusted.

INTRODUCTION: PUTTING E-SKILLS IN THE BROAD PICTURE

Within the context of the European Union (EU), e-skills have become one of the main areas of discussion of the so-called ICT Task Force, which was created in June 2006 to foster a debate on the use of information and communication technologies in all major types of activities across the EU. In

the words of the European Commission, the ICT Task Force is “one of several actions undertaken to create a more favorable EU business environment under the Growth and Jobs initiative proposals for specific actions, such as designing a long-term e-skills strategy and promoting interoperability.”¹ A report produced by this group in October 2006 stated that a “steadily growing demand for people with ‘e-skills’ (ICT skills) is a long-run trend for

business of all sizes and sectors [where] non-ICT related professions will increasingly require at least basic user e-skills.”² There is, therefore, a strong link between a “knowledge-based economy which has made education and training a lifelong process rather than a one-off activity”³ and “technology-enabled learning (e-learning) [which] can significantly contribute to lifelong learning and make it a reality.”⁴

Although e-skills have been successfully implemented in other professional and academic areas, it remains to be seen what the potential for foreign language teaching (FLT) is. In 2003, the European e-Skills Forum was established by the European Commission to promote the effective use of ICT and its successful introduction in all major areas of human activity, especially in the business and industrial sectors. As the focus is the promotion of enhanced labor policies, education and training are key factors in this process. In the European E-Skills 2004 Conference⁵ held in Thessalonica, Greece, e-skills were defined as encompassing a wide range of capabilities (knowledge, skills, and competences) whose dimensions span a number of economic and social areas. However, the ways individuals interact with ICT vary considerably, depending on the work organization and context of a particular employer, or home environment, as the *Synthesis Report of the E-Skills Forum* reckons. This notion of variation will precisely be of great interest in the following paragraphs as we want to shed some light on adjacent or related terms by surveying the FLT and CALL literature that has dealt with them. Moreover, we want to create our own model of e-skills, a model that adapts to the specific learning context of our students by focusing on the objectives, competence, and learning activities our students engage in, in their everyday learning experience. In this way, our e-skills model is field-specific and context-survey-driven.

One of the major challenges of our research is to try and narrow down the usefulness and epistemology of the e-skills term in our field by:

(1) analyzing existing work, (2) submitting our e-skill frame proposal to the learners’ evaluation, and thus (3) in the future, building a data-driven construct that can serve as a starting point for future research. Concerning the first area, once we have discussed mainstream FLT practices, we want to make an effort to outline a notion of e-skill in FLT on three different well-defined areas: (a) new curricular needs and the transformation process (Timuçin, 2006), (b) the well-known normalization issue first introduced by Bax (2003), and (c) the new model for communicative competence (Kenning, 2006) and the need to establish a social context for the adaptation of ICT skills to continuous change. This component of our research is distinctively part of a theory-informed process which seeks to define problems explicitly (Widdowson, 2003).

Regarding the second item above—submitting our e-skill frame proposal to the learners’ evaluation—we want to feed on the discussion above to later on submit to our Common European Framework (CEF) Level C1 university learners of English a framework for the understanding of e-skills in their learning process. Our drive here is to adapt an e-skills scheme that meets the specific needs of the students mentioned previously. This scheme goes beyond the widespread *user skills* approach that covers the utilization of common generic software tools and the use of specialized tools supporting functions within industries other than the ICT *industry*. We will first stay on more familiar ground by going deeper into the research carried out in the field of FLT and CALL.

BACKGROUND

FLT Mainstream Context

Existing terms such as *skill*, *strategy*, and *computer expertise* have traditionally been and still are of paramount importance to the field of language learning and teaching. In particular, the concept

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