

Chapter XXXI

Language Teaching in Live Online Environments

Christian Swertz

University of Vienna, Austria

Rosa Schultz

University of Vienna, Austria

Katharina Toifl

University of Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports the concept development and evaluation results from the project LANCELOT (LANguage learning with CErtified Live Online Teachers). LANCELOT is funded by the Leonardo da Vinci program of the European Commission. LANCELOT, a training program for live online language teachers, covers the technological, methodological, and intercultural aspects of live online language training. Concepts for the use of current online communication technologies and suitable language teaching methods in a virtual language classroom have also been developed within the project. These concepts are integrated by means of an innovative pedagogical concept for online teaching and learning called Web-Didactics. In order to verify that it is ready for the market, the training program recently underwent thorough testing and evaluation.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, numerous new technologies have been developed that have opened up opportunities for innovative language teaching and learning.

One of the most interesting developments for computer assisted language learning (CALL) is synchronous communication technologies such as audio or videoconferencing. Since synchronous communication plays an important part

in language learning, the new opportunities are obvious. However, there is a lack of training programs for teachers entering the market of live online language teaching, which takes into account the range of possibilities that these new synchronous communication tools have to offer. At the same time, there is still a lack of teaching methods that describe how languages can be taught with the help of synchronous online communication tools and that also take into account intercultural aspects.

In LANCELOT, we have developed a teacher training program to meet the growing demand for adapting language teaching methods to synchronous online environments, taking into consideration technological possibilities and intercultural aspects by focusing on the following four research questions:

1. Which online tools are available and suitable for synchronous language training?
2. Which language training methods are appropriate for online language teaching with synchronous tools?
3. Which aspects of intercultural communication have to be taken into account?
4. How can tools, language training methods, and intercultural aspects be integrated in an online teacher training program for synchronous online communication?

Tools, methods, and intercultural aspects, explored in research questions 1 through 3, each belong to different knowledge domains. Thus, the fourth question addresses the need for a concept that is capable of integrating the three other concepts. Our thesis is that this can be accomplished by the innovative Web-Didactics ontology that was used in LANCELOT.

Tools in Online Teaching and Learning

Technological developments in the last years have brought forth an abundance of innovative online

communication tools. In this regard, it is of particular importance that synchronous technologies are now accessible to a considerable number of people. LANCELOT has addressed the question of how these tools can be used effectively to support the communicative setting of a live online language classroom, and what knowledge needs to be conveyed in the teacher training program to apply them accordingly.

Synchronous online interaction makes numerous ways of communication possible. Finkelstein (2006) defines the following five functions, which are served by synchronous online settings: instruction, collaboration, support, socialization and informal exchange, and extended outreach. In synchronous online teaching, the language trainer has to keep these functions and their realization in mind. This can be accomplished with the support of a wide range of tools, both synchronous and asynchronous, that can be applied in online language teaching and learning. Apart from the Web conferencing environment that lies at the center of synchronous online teaching and learning, other asynchronous and synchronous tools may be used to support and guide the learning process. Some of the most frequently used synchronous tools are instant messaging and voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP); asynchronous tools often include e-mail and fora. These tools serve as alternative spaces of communication and support the actual virtual classroom. However, this heterogeneity of a constantly changing selection of tools leads to a research problem: since each of these tools specifically has a structure, features, and thus an impact on learning, the trainer needs to be aware of the nature of each tool in order to be able to choose the appropriate one for the respective teaching method.

Our understanding of this impact of tools on learning is based on a specific media theory. According to this theory a medium is material substance used as signs by humans. From this point of view, computer technology is a medium, but it cannot differentiate between the sign and the matter. (While people know the difference

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