

ICT AND FOREIGN/SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINING

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Abstract

This paper outlines how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can be used in the form of e-learning by L2 (second/foreign language) teachers. In this study, six language teachers took part in a blended learning course on computer assisted language learning. The study examined how ICT can be used to improve the teaching skills of second/foreign language teachers in Greece, through the incorporation of new technologies in their teaching practices. This article outlines the study that was carried out in the 2008–2009 school year and discusses the results of its implementation.

The Use of ICT in Greek Education

Internet usage has risen in all EU 27 Member States and in 17 European countries at least half of the population is now regular Internet users. Despite progress, countries' relative rankings have changed slightly. Best performers in 2008 were the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg while at the low end remained Romania, Bulgaria, Portugal, Cyprus, Italy, and Greece. As Internet use in the rest of Europe expands, some countries are being left behind including Greece (Commission of European Communities, 2009).

In spite of these low numbers for Greece, in Greek schools the networking infrastructure is quite high. According to a study carried out by the Greek Information Society Observatory in 2008, 78% of schools in Greece have a PC infrastructure and Internet penetration is almost universal (97%) (Greek Information Society Observatory, 2008). In spite of this, only 57% of teachers/professors use the Internet and if they do it is mainly for administrative work (60%) and even fewer use the Internet for common use between students and teachers (12%). Students use the Internet in 8 out of 10 schools and the use of the Internet among students is mainly related to learning about computers (75%), preparation of assignments (63%), and games (25%). Moreover, in 2008, the use of the Internet by students for cooperation with other schools and communication with other students/teachers was very low (Greek Information Society Observatory, 2008).

According to the same study, teachers mainly use the Internet for research/seeking material, for sending and receiving e-mail, administrative tasks and document handling, as well as lesson preparation. Approximately one out of two use it to organize personal work.

The Study

The purpose of our study was to examine how ICT can be used in the form of e-learning by L2 (second/foreign language) teachers. In our particular study, 6 language teachers took part in a blended learning course on computer assisted language learning. The course was designed especially for language teachers, but face-to-face workshops took place on a weekly basis for an entire school year. The purpose of our study was to improve the teaching skills of second/foreign language teachers in Greece through the incorporation of new technologies in their teaching practices. An e-learning environment was designed on Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) so that the second/foreign language teachers that participated in the course could:

- learn to use ICT in their own classrooms,
- design lessons using the material available on the Internet and
- improve their own knowledge of the language they teach.

This paper outlines the pilot study that was carried out in the 2008–2009 school year.

The Study as Part of Empowerment of Vocational Education and Training by Improving the E-Learning Competencies of Teachers and Trainers Project 2 (EVETE 2)

This study was carried out by staff at the Department of Primary Education, University of the Aegean in cooperation with the project EVETE 2. This project aims at providing teachers and trainers at Vocational Education Training (VET) organizations with understanding and competence in diversification of training based on individual expectations and abilities on how to manage training content. To achieve this, open and distance learning course modules based on learning objects that enabled VET teachers and trainers to apply new didactical and pedagogical approaches were developed.

The overall objective of this project was to provide possibilities for Teachers and Trainers (T&T) to transfer methodology used in EVETE 1 into the areas of their practice and to develop new curriculum on the basis of a competence framework. In reaching this objective, T&T became autonomous actors in their sectors, based on their teaching material on competence frameworks and creating and easily updating new curriculum based on their learners' needs. They also became T&T who are able to apply their own competences and work in different levels of educational institutions, and they will be trained on the basis of consistent

methodology developed in project EVETE 1 that meets the needs of EU priorities of T&T training policies. By reaching this general objective, the project will address the priority of Life-Long learning (LLL) program to enhance the project and facilitate the mobility of working trainees.

The work of the University of the Aegean included the following:

- participated in analysis of existing competence standards and suggested existing standards in new sectors,
- suggested T&T to transfer EVETE methodology to new sectors,
- developed curriculum on the basis of EVETE methodology and uploaded the material using EVETE tools,
- designed and created new curriculum in English on the basis of the learning units that were developed (each online course covered four Learning Units) on the basis of new selected competences,
- evaluated new curriculum and Competence Assessment and Trainings (CAT) and prepared reports for further improvements,
- improved new curriculum, translated it into national language (i.e., Greek) and adapted it to national needs, and
- were responsible for publishing national versions of project booklet.

Methodology

The research methodology of our study was action research (Waters-Adams, 2006). Action research was chosen as it can be used to understand one's own practice; understand how to make one's practice better; understand how to accommodate outside change in one's practice; and understand how to change the outside in order to make one's practice better (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The action research 'cycle' involves reflection, planning, action, and monitoring (Whitehead, 1985).

In this study the reflection stage began in the first face-to-face sessions where participants reflected on how their teaching practice could be improved with new technologies. In the planning stage, the information collected in the first stages was used to design a computer assisted language learning course using blended learning. At the action stage, teachers participated in the course both on-line and in face-to-face workshops. Monitoring took place throughout the entire course as

it was used to ensure that the teachers were able to carry out the tasks and assistance was provided by the instructors.

Data Collection

Data collection included a variety of means. Data collection was in the form of electronic portfolios (in the form of blogs), questionnaires, video tape recordings, structured and semi-structured interviews, photography, and e-mails.

Surveys

Four different questionnaires were used. One was provided by the project EVETE2 for feedback on the course and three were designed and used for the purposes of this study. The second questionnaire was used at the beginning of the study to record the profile of the language of second/foreign language teachers involved in the study, their methodology and the use of ICT in their classrooms. The third questionnaire was given during the course. It was an "I can do list" to determine what software they were familiar with and to what extent they used them in their teaching. The fourth questionnaire was given in learning unit three to show teachers how to assess the sites that they were finding on the Internet in reference to pedagogy, language teaching methodology, design, suitability, etc.

Interviews

Interviews were a primary source of information. There were two types of interviews: informal and formal. Informal interviews, where important feedback was received, were in the form of thematic discussions that took place during the workshops as the project was still in progress. During and after the discussions, the participants' comments were recorded.

Other than the informal interviews, which were semi-structured in that the situations were open and there was greater flexibility, formal interviews were taken. The formal interviews were structured with content and procedures organized in advance (Cohen & Manion, 1980). The questions were open ended. Teachers were interviewed formally at the end of the project's implementation and the interview was video taped.

Electronic Portfolios and e-Mail

Electronic portfolios in the form of blogs were used to post the participants' activities. Originally, the participants used the electronic portfolios to store their work and shared it with each other. A further source of information was the participants' communication via Internet in the form of e-mail.

Results

As the action research 'cycle' involves reflection, planning, action, and monitoring, data collection took place during all four stages of the cycle. In the first stage (i.e., reflection) questionnaires and interviews were used to collect information on the target group's profile, and, hence, to identify the teaching materials, the language learning methods and pedagogical approaches the second/foreign language teachers use, and to find out how ICT are used in their classrooms. These results are outlined below:

Reflection Stage — Target Group Profile

Six individuals took part in the pilot study, i.e., five female and one male. Four of the participants teach English, one teaches English and Greek, and one teaches French. The participants come from a variety of teaching backgrounds. One teaches in primary school, one in high school, one gives private lessons, and one works in a private school for the English language. Two do not teach at the moment. Four out of 6 teach various levels of proficiency (beginners, intermediate, advanced). With one exception, they train learners so that they can acquire foreign language certificates. Furthermore, five out six have teaching experience in the field for over 10 years. Finally, with the exception of one, the foreign language they teach is not their native language.

Teaching Materials

According to the results from the first questionnaire, participants use a variety of teaching materials in their classrooms, ranging from two to seven different types including audiocassettes, audio files, books, computer software, dictionaries, flashcards, material from the Web, slides, books, video files, videocassettes and worksheets. The interviewees normally use material from more than one source (minimum of two and maximum of four sources). The most common sources appear to be textbooks (5), own material (6), websites (3), and authentic material (3).

Language Learning Methods and Pedagogical Approaches

The respondents use a variety of pedagogical approaches in their classrooms. They use the target language (5) and prefer the communicative approach (4). Two persons report other language learning approaches such as task-based activities, portfolio-oriented approaches, etc.).

Four out of 6 consider that autonomy in learning is an acceptable means of student participation. The 4 teachers in the majority encourage students to work autonomously. Two participants consider that autonomy is good only after a certain level of knowledge has been reached.

The less enjoyable activity for teachers seems to be teaching grammar. They consider it a very boring part of their work. The most enjoyable activity seems to differ from teacher to teacher:

[T.1] Activities such as watching video, listening to music, logging on-line, especially when direct participation of learners is taking place.

[T.2] Teaching vocabulary through games and songs, practice everyday dialogues through drama.

[T.3] Reflecting with my students on what they have actually learned through a particular activity and most interestingly how they have reached that knowledge.

[T.4] Speaking and Grammar because I feel a bit proud when I see them use all grammar rules and proper structure they have learned and students feel so excited when they can express their thoughts clearly and communicate effectively.

The Use of ICT in Their Classrooms

Four teachers use information and communication technologies (ICT) to some extent. However, only one uses ICT systematically, while the other three have limited use. Two teachers do not use ICT in their classrooms at all.

All teachers welcome an introductory course in ICT for various reasons including: to acquire information on specific topics; to enrich their teaching with new techniques; and to acquire new ideas for a wider use of technology in their classrooms. With one exception, all the teachers seem to use ICT to prepare their lessons. Some of them, however, use ICT very little, e.g., to find images and lyrics.

Authoring packages do not seem to be very popular (two positive answers are recorded). Three teachers give their students assignments with ICT, but this does not seem to be very frequent. Use of ICT by teachers seems to be limited, ranging from none to a few hours per week.

The problems they encountered with ICT were mainly lack of technical support. In one case, the problems are dilemmas about appropriateness of ICT applications. They see a coordinator as one who will give them continuous support and will answer mainly technical questions.

Teachers believe that ICT plays an important role in reading and writing and is somehow less important in speaking and listening. Even in the latter two cases interviewees present some interesting uses:

[J.K.] Speaking and carrying out video conferencing activities on line with native speakers.

[K.H.] Students can repeat and use expressions and ideas given on the screen.

[H.R.] Listening to native speakers, music of the target language or even watching video files online which could be movies, TV series, or the news.

[M.N.] Students can be exposed to authentic listening texts on the spot other than the ones in their textbooks.

In reference to the use of ICT for assessment the results do not give any definite answer. Two teachers have a positive attitude while another three have a positive attitude with precautions. One declares “no answer.”

Planning, Action and Monitoring Stages of Action Research

In the planning and action stages of action research a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) course was designed to meet the needs of the language teachers. The teachers participated in the online course; however, face-to-face workshops were provided on a weekly basis in order to support the teachers and monitor their progress.

The Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) Course

The course was entitled “Introduction to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) for English language teachers” (Kourtis-Kazoullis, 2009).

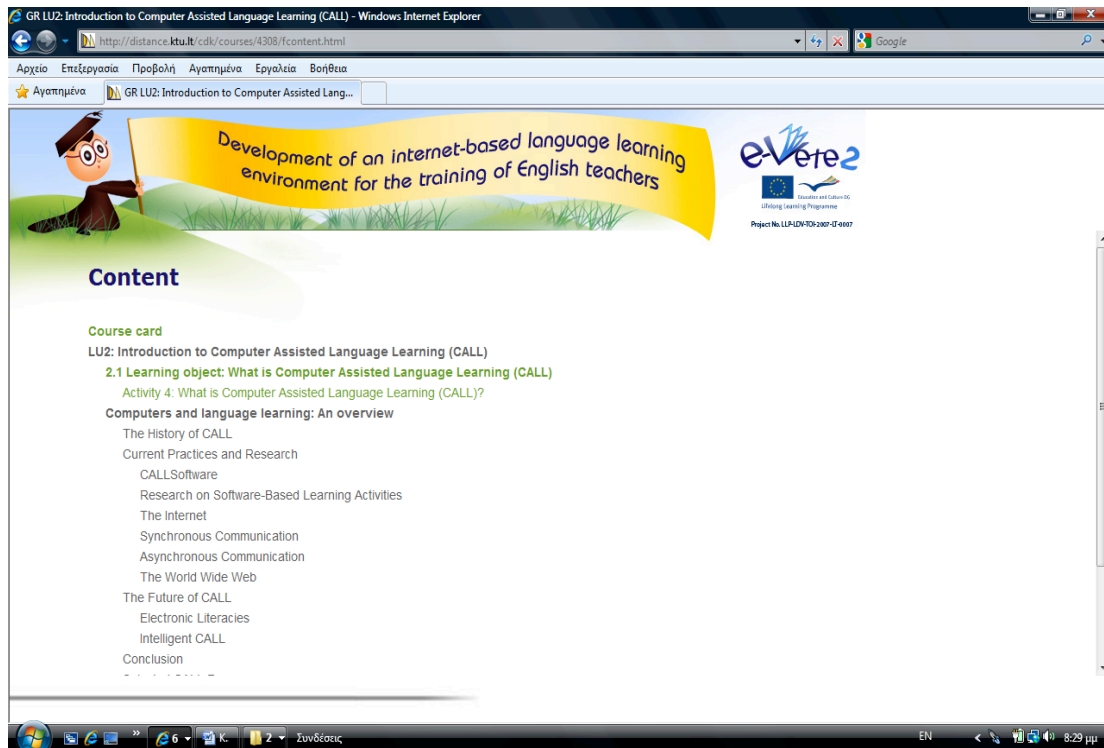
The course consisted of four units:

- Gr LU1: Introduction to the course
- Gr LU2: Introduction to CALL
- Gr LU3: Using CALL in the language classroom
- Gr LU4: Computer safety and evaluation

Each unit included readings and activities. Before each unit, the course author sent an e-mail message to each of the participants with explicit instructions as a form of further support. During each unit, a workshop was conducted in the computer lab at the Department of Primary Education, University of the Aegean. The participants also communicated with the instructors by e-mail.

A community of learners was created. Each participant introduced himself to each other and discussed the reasons why they applied for the course as well as what their anticipations were. The teachers filled in two questionnaires assessing their prior knowledge of the field to be studied and their anticipations. Questionnaires available on the site for CALL managed by Graham Davies (2009) were used. (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Development of an Internet-Based Language Learning Environment or the Training of English Teachers



Questionnaire 1 was designed for users to analyze their own situation and their ICT Training needs. Questionnaire 2 is an ICT “can do” list for teachers of foreign languages.

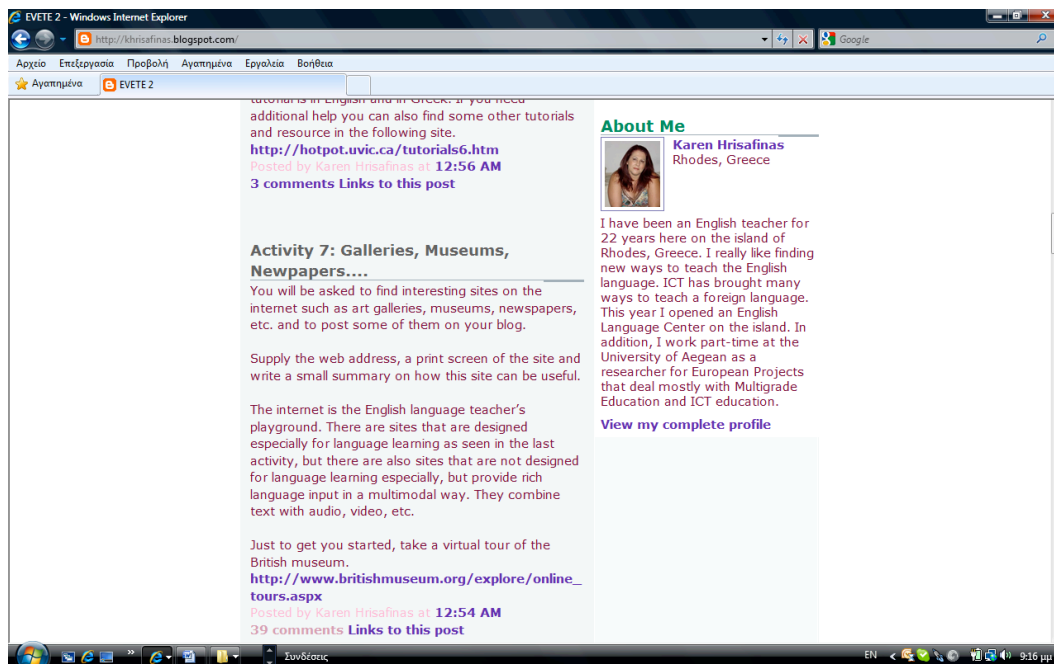
Gr LU1: Introduction to the Course

In the introductory learning unit, all participant teachers created their own blogs. Blogs were used as educational diaries or learning portfolios where the activities in each of the units were uploaded (see Figures 2 and 3). In this way, the instructor had the chance to monitor the progress of the participants and the participants could share ideas with each other. They were encouraged to visit each other's blogs at regular intervals and post comments and suggestions. In this way, the participants could monitor their own progress by reading their own blogs and the comments of others.

Figure 2: Participant Teacher Blog



Figure 3: Participant Teacher Blog



Gr LU2: Introduction to CALL

Included the following learning objects:

- the history of CALL
- current practices and research
- CALL software
- the Internet
 - synchronous communication
 - asynchronous communication
- the World Wide Web
- the future of CALL
- electronic literacy
- intelligent CALL
- selected CALL resources
- recent books
- journals
- organizations
- Internet resources
- references

Gr LU3: Using CALL in the Language Classroom

CALL in the English classroom was designed to help the participant teachers find material on the Internet, but also to create their own language learning material. Whereas the second learning unit dealt with discovering what the Internet had to offer, the third dealt with using the material in the classroom. It contained the following learning objects and activities:

3.1 Learning Object: Using web pages in the English classroom

Activity 5: Accessing and assessing web pages

3.2 Learning object: Electronic dictionaries and automatic translation

Activity 6: Using electronic dictionaries and automatic translation

3.3 Learning object: Finding and creating your own material

Activity 7: Finding and using appropriate language material from sources not designed to teach English

3.4 Learning object: How do I create my own exercises and activities?

Activity 8: Creating electronic exercises/activities

For example, in activity 5, the participant teachers were asked to experiment with electronic dictionaries. They used special dictionaries such as rhyming dictionaries to write poetry, using poetry such as e. e. cummings' "anyone lived in a pretty how town," as a guide.

Gr LU4: Computer Safety and Evaluation

Computer Safety and Evaluation dealt with precautions to take when using the Internet in the language classroom. In this unit, participants were asked to read the material given and discuss safety issues in their blogs.

Assessment of Course

Both during and after the completion of the course, participants were asked to assess the course and make suggestions for further improvement.

[T.1] The course was very interesting and I believe a lot can be gained from it. In the effort to touch a rather expanded field, which is language teaching through modern technologies, the basic points are all analysed. I would like to discuss the possibility on focusing on the on-line teaching of other subjects other than language, e.g., online teaching of maths, history, science, etc.

[T.3] I found this course very interesting but due to my getting a second job and being pressed for time I wasn't been able to complete my work on/in time. Sorry!!

[T.4] I did this course in order to refresh some of the things I have learnt about using CALL in the language classroom and also to enrich this knowledge... I believe the course met my needs.

[T.5] I believe that the course helped me understand strategies and techniques of using CALL in ELT environments. As a consequence I am able to implement what I have been taught in my teaching-learning situations.

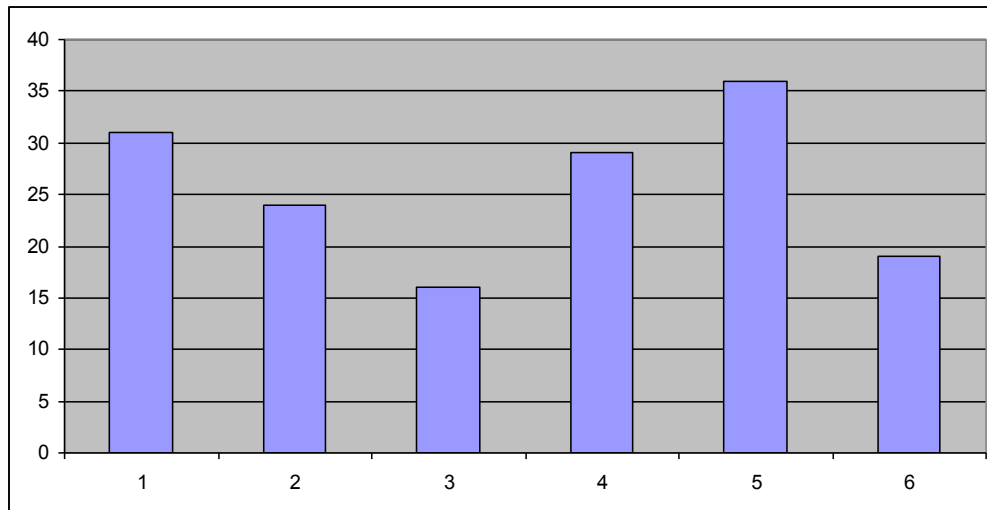
[T.6] I think this course offered a lot of input in the use of ICT in my teachings and how I can use these skills with my students. It has given me the opportunity to learn new software that I wasn't aware of and how to implement them into my teachings.

Feedback Questionnaire

All six participants, five female and one male, filled out the questionnaire. All of them had a university degree; three held a Masters Degree and one a PhD. The content of the course was connected to the educational background and the work of all of the participants. In the feedback questionnaire, four declared that they taken part in a distance learning course before. In answering the question "Which of the following would encourage you to attend this course? (Please mark the three most appropriate boxes.)" all of them chose the contents of the course and the relation to their work. Their confidence in Distance Learning was examined

with a system of questions (Question 8) and a mark was allocated to each of them (see Figure 4). All but one that did not comment found the course very helpful.

Figure 4: Confidence of the participants in Distance Learning
(Values relative to each other — max 36, min 0)



Conclusions

The purpose of our study was to examine how ICT can be used in the form of e-learning by second/foreign language teachers. The teachers who took part in the study were familiar with the Internet and used it personally, but used it in their lessons on a limited basis. A blended learning course on CALL was designed for the purposes of this study to improve the teaching skills of second/foreign language teachers in Greece. Using new technologies in their teaching practices, the teachers who participated claimed to feel more confident in using ICT in their own classrooms. The e-learning environment designed on CALL tried to (a) support language teachers in learning how to use ICT in class; (b) help them to design lessons themselves using material available on the Internet; and (c) to assist them in improving their own knowledge of the language they teach. The pilot study carried out in the 2008–2009 school year provides useful information on how an e-learning course could be improved and how more language teachers can take part in further applications.

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