

Internet-Based Collaborative Language Learning: SIMULAB, eCOLE and COLTT Projects

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Abstract

Work with the Internet is being successfully integrated into language learning at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU). KTU students and teachers have participated in a number of European projects: SIMULAB (Internet-based intercultural learning project) activities, eCOLE (which offered on-line communication and learning activities together with students from five European countries), COLTT (a project on collaborative learning in teacher training). The experience from these projects is further implemented in a new Grundtvig 2 project of learning partnerships. The paper presents experience and outcome of these projects.

1. Introduction

Since 1997 new technologies have become an integral part of language teaching/learning at Kaunas University of Technology. Different language courses have been supplemented with CD-ROM materials or addresses of websites containing most recent information on the topics studied, and worksheets have been prepared. The potential of ICT in language courses has been enthusiastically welcomed both by teachers and by students. Surveys have shown that web-based tasks as well as the classes spent in the computer laboratory have been very highly rated by the students.

In this paper we would like to present our experience in web-based collaborative language learning projects activities that have contributed most to making our English courses more attractive and efficient. The projects we are going to discuss further include SIMULAB project on Internet-based intercultural activities – simulations (it has been awarded two European labels for Innovative language Learning), KTU joined the project network in 2000; next was eCOLE Socrates Grundtvig 1 project on cross-curricular learning and creative writing activities in 2002-2003; then as an outcome of the previous project followed Socrates Grundtvig 1 COLTT project on collaborative learning in teacher training in 2004-2006.

2. Internet-based collaborative language projects

2.1 SIMULAB project

SIMULAB was the first in a series of European projects on Internet-based collaborative learning [1]. The model explored through the Simulab project was based on the use of role-play as a tool for language learning. The model was awarded the European label for Innovative Teaching and Learning in 1999 (Norway) and 2001 (Denmark).

SIMULAB is a concept for Internet-based communication between language students across national and cultural borders. The communication is based on a specific simulation script. Simulations are problem solving role-play situations in which students have to communicate to negotiate an issue on the basis of a fictional but realistic manuscript. The concept allows for a great flexibility in the length of the activity, the theme and the number of participants, but it does depend on a predetermined

structure. The simulations scripts can be adapted to different languages, themes, levels or specific language needs.

All student groups from different countries (3 or 4 in each simulation) are presented with a problem that has to be solved by the whole network. Each group gets a "group identity" that will differ from that of the other groups. Within each group the students will then have to choose and define their own personal identity, which will be identical with the role they play in the simulation. Since both the group's and the individual identities will be placed within the frame of the culture pertaining to the target language, students will be faced with the need to find relevant information about that culture, thus enhancing the language learning. During this phase, most of the activities will be centred around discussions in class. Computer communication will be used only as a source of information.

Once the individual identities have been established, the students will start the communication with the other groups in the network, by introducing themselves in their new personalities. The second phase of the activity can then start: the students in each group will discuss among themselves what will be their first suggestion for a solution of the problem presented to the network. Once they have agreed on a strategy, they will communicate it to the other groups. On the basis of those suggestions negotiations can begin. There is a need for a good structure and a firm guidance by the teachers involved, if the activity is to be successful.

KTU students have participated in the following simulations: The Will, Cultural Awareness and European education.

SIMULAB is based on such recognised pedagogical principles as student autonomy and collaborative learning. Individual creativity is just as important as the capacity to communicate both within the local group and with representatives of other cultures.

2.2 eCOLE project

In eCOLE (*Internet-based Collaborative Learning in Adult Education*) two models based on the principles of Collaborative Learning (learning through group interaction, learning from discussion with your peers, student autonomy, etc.) were tested.

The models were: ACROSS – a model for cross-curricular problem solving activities; and WebSiteStory (WSS) - a model for creative writing in foreign language learning.

The "stories" in the WebSiteStory model focus on intercultural issues, each country adding its chapter to the "story". One group (in Country A) is presented with the initial sentence of a "story" and is asked to complete the first chapter. After a certain deadline, Country A is denied access to the document and a new group (in Country B) is asked to continue the "story". Different "stories" can be under preparation in the same Internet environment at the same time, each group writing a chapter of each of the "stories" as the process evolves.

Five classes from five different countries (Norway, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden and Lithuania) created five different stories together: Autobiography, Future Life, Love Story, Shipwrecked, Detective Story.

ACROSS is a model for cross-curricula problem solving activities. The fact that the activity can involve several subjects (Mathematics, Biology, History, Art, etc.) is both a strength and a challenge. The aim of the model was testing different instructions scripts for this type of activity, with a special emphasis on evaluating the pedagogical effects of underlying structure (time frame, group structure, organization of the Internet platform, etc.).

One of ACROSS topics was Energy Sources. Students from each of partner countries participated in writing a report, concentrating on their share of the title. Each country gathered information about energy in Europe and each country wrote a report covering the situation for their particular chapter. E.g. Lithuania was to make a report on nuclear energy in European countries - not only in Lithuania.

Therefore, Portugal had to report on nuclear energy in Portugal to contribute to the report from Lithuania. The reports dealt with various aspects of the situation of energy: Technology, national discussions including resistance and political decisions, etc.

At the end of project activities students were asked to evaluate different aspects of the project work. The most the liked about the project was teamwork within the groups and outside formalized groups. They liked communicating with the students from other countries, searching for information on the Internet, writing the report and presenting it nicely. The students report that they have enhanced their command of the English language in that they have increased their vocabulary, writing skills, and knowledge of grammar. Time pressure was indicated as the negative aspect in the project.

Both SIMULAB and ECOLE project web-based activities took place on the TELSI platform. It had been created by language and IT specialists at Oulu university, Finland.

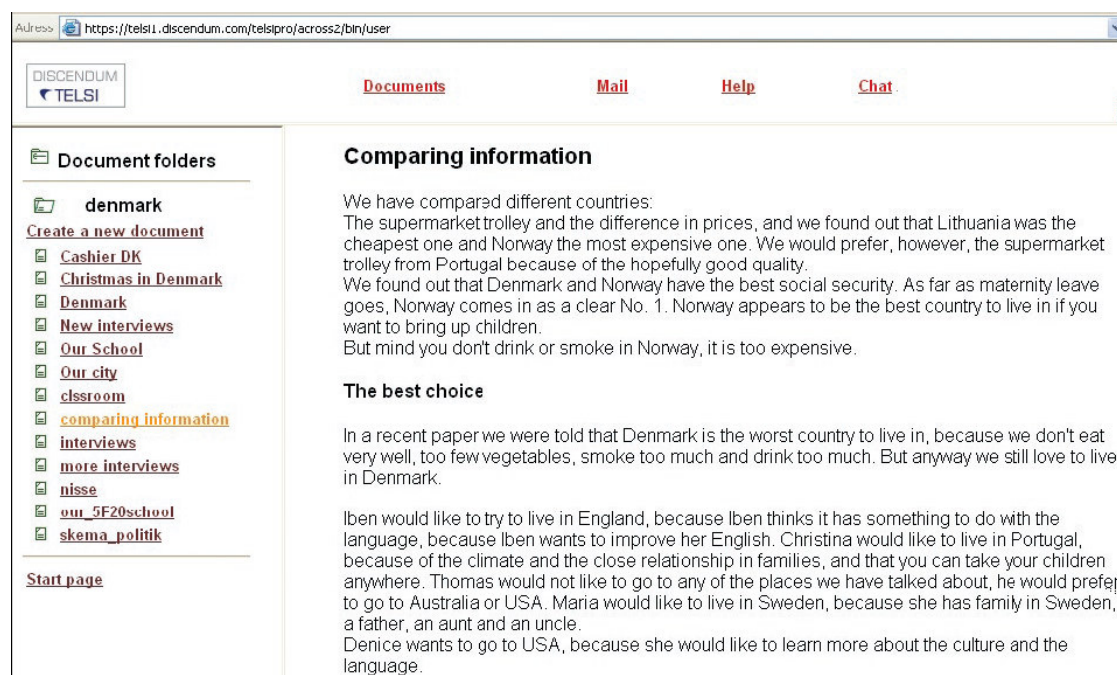


Fig. 1. A picture of the TELSI platform used.

2.3 COLTT project

The aim of COLTT (Collaborative Learning in Teacher Training)was to help teachers overcome their difficulties in the use of ICT for cross-national collaborative communication and to provide teachers with a new approach to a fruitful and multi-faceted collaboration for the teaching of adult students in formal and non-formal educational institutions [3], [4].

The project objectives were to collect the experiences of educators that have been involved in ICT-based collaborative learning, to compile a handbook for teachers and trainers on how to implement ICT-based collaborative learning in short term class-room based activities, to validate this handbook through its use in a series of Grundtvig 3 courses, to ensure the dissemination of these results through the inclusion of Grundtvig 3 courses in the course offer of different European institutions.

The project ran three Grundtvig 3 courses on „How to work on a web-based platform with a view to integrating ICT in collaborative teaching and learning – preferably across borders“. The pilot course was conducted in Florence (May 2005), and Grundtvig 3 courses were conducted in VOX, Oslo,

Norway (5-9 April 2006), in KTU, Kaunas, Lithuania (2-7 May 2006), in CVU Copenhagen, Denmark (13-17 September 2006).

At the end of the project period COLTT project was presented at the international conference in Denmark focusing on collaborative learning, task-based learning, autonomous learning and the use of electronic logbooks.

3. What next?

The experience gained and networks established in the projects mentioned above have still been applied. The pedagogical principles and structure of learning activities have been transferred to a new Grundtvig 2 Learning Partnerships project "European Historic Turning Points Reflected in Art" (2006/2007) [5]. The project partners are from Denmark, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain and Turkey. Students of the partner countries study and jointly share information about important historic turning points in their countries. They focused on such themes as: Democracy and Art – how the democratic changes in Europe are reflected in art, Conquest – to conquer or be conquered and its consequences for the creation of each nation's identity and culture.

Students' activities are organized in a similar way like in Simulab or eCOLE projects: activities are divided into steps with certain tasks, deadlines are set. As the old TELSI internet platform is no longer available, the project consortium uses a new virtual learning environment Fronter.

During partners' meeting, all students jointly made a PowerPoint presentation, a poster and wrote a joint logbook. In a new meeting in October, teachers and students will evaluate the results achieved and decide for the new tasks for forthcoming period of the project.

References

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