

Developing network-based language learning & teaching in Education and Teacher Training:

The MICaLL Project



www.micall.net

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Abstract

This paper reports on the design principles and development of the EU-project 'Moderating Intercultural Communication and Language Learning' (MICaLL).

The key objective of the MICaLL project is to promote the development of education for and dissemination of knowledge on teacher competencies related to designing and managing language learning arrangements involving distributed learners (network-based language teaching).

To this end an international network of pre- and in-service teachers and teacher educators are developing guidelines and course project modules for use in initial and in-service training.

A web portal is available for the project partners to facilitate the experiments on which the course materials production is based and to support groups of pupils and (student) teachers to collaborate in the execution of tasks while using the target language for communication and producing a collective result/product. The design principles for the MICaLL project and its web portal at www.micall.net are presented, highlighting the project team's views on tools and task design for transnational project teams of language learners. We summarize the evaluative research on the pilot projects carried out by the teacher educators and school based mentors participating in the initial professional development phase of the project. In the conclusion the implications of these results for the further development of the web portal and the course project modules are discussed.

1. Introduction

The project 'Moderating Intercultural Communication and Language Learning' (MICaLL) is supported as a Comenius 2.1 initiative within the Socrates programme³.

The main goal of the MICaLL project (2004 – 2007) is to contribute to the innovation of Teacher Education in general and the training and professional development of (student) teachers of Modern Languages in particular.

To this end a web portal and project course materials are being developed that offer (student) teachers experiential learning opportunities to develop competencies relevant for network-based language teaching. These facilities will enable partners and other participating professionals to carry out pilots involving task-based language learning in intercultural student teacher / pupil teams that collaborate on LanguageQuests and using social software applications such as Discussion Boards, Chat, Wiki and Weblogging.

Project Partners

The project is an initiative of the Utrecht University of Professional Education in the Netherlands and is coordinated by the University Autònoma of Barcelona, Spain.

The current project partnership of 15 members consists of a team of modern language specialists and teachers at Faculties of Education and affiliate schools in Spain, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany and France. The network is supported by a Dutch educational service provider and an Open Source Educational Application specialist who is responsible for the technical development of the web portal.

1.1 Why MICaLL?

The definition of the MICaLL project can be said to have been inspired by a combination of developments in modern language pedagogy, education and EU-related policies and initiatives⁴, teacher education in general and language teacher education in particular.

The importance attributed to intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in EU-policy documents⁵ and the recent start of the eTwinning Schools programme⁶ in relation to the local implementation of a competence based teacher education curriculum and the increasing relevance of workplace based learning (Koenraad et al., 2003) triggered the actual first steps to find partners and define the project.

Initiatives to promote collaboration between schools, such as supported by the EU eTwinning Schools programme, also aim at developments at the curriculum level.

³ More information on this action programme at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/socrates_en.html

⁴ For relevant documents consult: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/objectives_en.html#basic

⁵ Action Plan 2004-2006 for language learning and linguistic diversity, available at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/policy/index_en.html

⁶ More information at: http://www.etwinning.net/ww/en/pub/etwinning/about/what_is_etwinning.htm

Teacher and teacher educator competences in educational project management and the supporting web-based communication tools, groupware and/or e-learning platforms will need to be developed to support the envisaged synergy. Cf. e.g. (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003)

A convincing number of projects in the Socrates Action Programme show that the Modern Languages-domain is fertile ground par excellence for internationalisation, collaboration and project based learning in secondary education.

Although collaboration in the Modern Languages-domain offers opportunities many of the school based ICT projects on foreign language learning so far have concentrated on training of basic educational use of ICT in the foreign language classroom.

Meanwhile, innovative trends in modern languages teaching pedagogy, inspired by Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, support a move away from structural views of language and related instructional models and towards more constructivist, sociocultural approaches such as (post) communicative, collaborative and content and task-based language learning (Nunan, 2004: 6-16).

Also, with the accompanying focus on the development of learner autonomy, an awareness is developing of the need to address the potential of informal learning experiences.

This calls for a different use of computers as the effectiveness of the computer's traditional tutorial role is restricted to the training of form focussed issues and memorization support (vocabulary, language chunks, grammar patterns).

And –even more important – it will greatly change the role of the teacher. As also Fitzpatrick (2003) points out ‘... it is necessary to move away from a ‘top down’ approach, which implies a uni-directional transfer of information from the teacher to the learner, to new pedagogical models which prepare them for co-operative, collaborative and life-long learning.’

Various didactical procedures and related formats (e-Tandem, WebQuest) and educational use of specific ICT-applications (Chat, MOO, WebLog) have been documented (cf. inter alia Pellettieri, 2000; Shield, 2003; Campbell, 2003) supporting approaches that integrate the use of Internet and/or involve language learning activities based on communication and collaboration between distributed language learners.

The relative ease of implementation of the WebQuest format has led to a rapidly growing number of pioneer schools and individual teachers that have adopted this way of integrating the use of Internet in their subject teaching. There are initiatives to customise the use of WebQuests specifically for language learning by developing criteria for task design to optimise effectiveness. See e.g. the TalenQuest project (Koenraad & Westhoff, 2003).

And the inclusion of dissemination activities on concepts and strategies involved in LanguageQuest and educational weblogging by the European Centre for Modern Languages in its 2nd Medium-term programme (2004-2007)⁷ can be seen as an acknowledgement of the relevance of these formats for foreign and second language learning and teaching.

In our view these formats are specifically suitable to support collaborative and content and task-based approaches. And –at the time of the project definition - for each enough professional literature was available to warrant inclusion and further exploration.

Although there are studies that demonstrate the feasibility of project work in networked language classes (see e.g. Warschauer, 1995; Donath & Volkmer, 2000; Felix, 2003) there is still comparatively little documentation of experiences and the related pedagogy in mainstream education. Among other impediments, the lack of teacher and teacher educator competencies at designing learning arrangements using web based tools and platforms is seen as a possible cause (Bonnet, 2002; Koenraad et al., 2003).

Besides, this scarcity of installed practice in mainstream education impacts heavily on the preparation of the next generation of teachers. Student teachers have, generally speaking, not experienced this way of working in secondary education or, for that matter, in their role as students during their language studies and consequently have not been confronted with related model teacher behaviour nor have they had opportunities to develop personal perspectives on language learning and teaching in such a context.

7 For more information on this programme see these ECML pages <http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/mtp2.asp>

Next to other obstacles to the use of the new media in (English) language teaching such as the digital divide (computer access) Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Dittfurth (2004: 143-144) state that *'One of the most pressing needs in this regard is the qualification of teachers in pre- and in-service training in combination with school development'*.

A recent study (Bonnet, 2002) involving 561 teachers in eight EU-countries showed among other things that:

- only a small percentage (less than 31%) of practicing teachers attend in-service courses
- internet and language learning software are very rarely used (reported by 47% and 64% of the respondents respectively)
- in a number of countries (Netherlands, Spain, Finland) the use of the target language in class is at a low level (e.g. 90 % of Dutch teachers use L2 half or less of the time during lessons)
- less than 50% make use of role-plays or communicative situations
- activities that involve L2 use in real situations are very rarely (70%) organised; only 4% report to sometime use internet based discussion.

Confronted with these findings a group of some 30 experts and policy makers at the conference 'Improving Language Education'⁸ focussing on 'Stimulating and maintaining teacher professionalism' reported a number of concerns and urgent needs for improvement (Westhoff, 2004):

- closer cooperation between teacher training institutes and schools (to address the theory vs. practice issue)
- adoption of innovative teaching methods (e.g. use of media, international exchanges)
- more cooperation and networking between teacher training organisations
- promotion of life long learning and participation in in-service training (e.g. by using e-learning)

In the majority of the current teacher preparation programmes students are at best informed about telecollaboration but they lack the practical experiences necessary for the development of the relevant teacher competences. Yet, to be able to meet the demands of the network-based classroom they will need the competences to arrange and facilitate project based student learning with the help of web tools and portals. For a description of practices in teacher education designed to address these issues see (Legutke, 2003)

The opportunities the second-generation web technologies offer (Godwin-Jones, 2003) to remedy constraints in current language education provision are being emphasised by an increasing number of second language acquisition researchers. Illustrations of, respectively, educational and motivational aspects in this respect are Vogel (2001) who states that *'... The problem of teaching intercultural communication in the classroom is that it almost impossible to model experiential learning in role-plays. Students who have not experienced the difficulties in co-operation with people from other cultures usually do not see the need for this type of exercise. Internet projects where they have to co-operate, to work on a common goal with learners from other cultures could eventually replace role-plays and give the students the chance to experience authentic co-operation.* And Kees de Bot quoted in (Marsh, 2002:31)⁹, indicating that for many students speaking a foreign language in a setting where all interactants share the same mother tongue is still awkward and unnatural: *' Only through international activities for which the foreign language needs to be used on a daily basis in natural conversational (including virtual / internet based) settings can the students be intrinsically motivated to keep using the language in the school setting.'*

Seen in a wider perspective this approach would be in line with trends in education in general where the importance of development of attitudes and competences relevant for professional life and global citizenship is stressed (e.g. intercultural understanding, collaboration skills, multiliteracies) (Working Group 'ICT in Education and Training', Progress Report 2003)

Supported by recent studies (e.g. ICC, 2003) Fitzpatrick (2003) concludes in his article in which he pleads for ' a shift in emphasis in future training of teachers from learning to use to using to learn.': *' ... Perhaps the chief challenge for us today is to provide learners with approaches which prepare them*

⁸ The Netherlands hosted this working conference as part of the Dutch EU-presidency in 2004. It was attended by professionals, experts and representatives of Ministries of Education from almost all EU Member States

⁹ This study (Marsh, 2002) is about the relevance of innovation of modern language education for the development of the European community by the introduction of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

for the future use of media, linking the use in institutional contexts to more individual applications which harness the diversity of ICT to authentic, real-world encounters with a target language and culture.'

2. The MICaLL Project: Design principles and development.

2.1. Pedagogical and didactical approaches

As indicated above project models and materials are needed to support a Teacher Education pedagogical approach which allows experiential learning for (student) teachers. Tasks and activities will be designed that will involve all participants in practical experiences with forms of networked language learning and teaching. Participants will be introduced to the new learning environment and related collaborative processes by carrying out collective pilots. A 'blended learning' model is envisaged where local, teacher educator led f2f sessions are combined with independent e-learning activities and peer-to-peer student events such as participation in international LanguageQuest-teams or shared blogwriting.

The module content production will be based both on selecting and remodelling available relevant practice reports, research results and guide lines (cf. inter alia Linthout, 2004: 123-140) and the evaluation of experiments focussing on task design for and management of pilots using LanguageQuest, Chat, WebLog, Wiki and e-Tandem. Validation of module content will be based on practice based activities by project team members and participants of the in-service course projects. In line with educational views on participatory roles for students in higher education (Collis & Moonen, 2001; HvU Education & ICT knowledge platform, 2003) student teachers will be involved in the developmental process.

2.2 Competence development: integration of language, ICT and didactic skills

The ambition is to design the project module materials in such a way that the virtual contacts and collaborative activities and the related authentic materials can offer a rich learning environment for the development of language skills and intercultural communicative competence, if adequately supported with just-in-time, language and cultural awareness raising activities and/or reflection and situated training aimed at the development of multi-literacies (Mangenot, 2005).

Although the formats primarily focussed on are different they share elements that are relevant at a generic competence description level such as: the use of an e-learning platform, designing and coaching learning environments that promote independent learning and learner autonomy, supporting the development and use of language learning strategies, the development of a teacher-moderating interventions repertoire for computer supported collaborative learning-contexts, organisation skills (e.g. partner finding, planning projects) etc.

By relating the specification of the course module objectives to the EU-document '*European Profile for Language Teacher Education and Teachers*¹⁰ and the results of the EU-projects 'uLearn' (Admiraal et al., 2003) and 'uTeacher' (Midoro et al., 2005) the project aims to contribute to the convergence and harmonisation of Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development across Europe. The project also aims to promote the change agent potential of teacher students in school development and the innovation of school subject teaching through the use of ICT by enabling a participatory role and offering opportunities for practical experiences in networked (language) learning and the actual use of web platforms through workplace related experiences and reflections.

2.3 Selection and design of supporting technology

A variety of considerations (educational, technical, strategic) have led to the choice of 'Plone'¹¹, a Zope-based Content Management System (CMS) as the basis for the project web platform. Next to standard functionality for communication and collaboration the system has a number of features that make it very suitable for Computer Supported Collaborative learning (CSCL) approaches and project-

¹⁰ Available for download at: <http://www.lang.soton.ac.uk/profile/report/index.htm>

¹¹ For more information on Plone and other (educational) applications of this CMS see: <http://plone.org/>

and case based learning, the usefulness of which is widely recognised in higher education (see e.g. Simons et al., 2000).

The fact that it is Open Source, applies open standards and has a modular structure makes this platform highly customisable. The availability of a large collection of so called add-on products among which e.g. Chat, Wiki and WebLog makes a plug-and-play launch of a first version portal possible and, even more important, provides the user with a consistent interface across these various web tools.

Another crucial feature is the language versioning facility. This, plus the fact that the system is scalable and affordable, makes its use attractive in Education and particularly in countries or regions with less widely used languages. Also, the software is supported by a global community of users and developers (in business and academia) and is flexible enough to support e-learning based professional development in a wide variety of settings (for both organisations and individuals) and other content areas.

A general principle for the further development and customisation of the system is that the portal itself should mirror the constructivist approach in learning it supports (= the medium is the message). Adequate functionality (e.g. user management facilities, personal workspaces) is available to also support independent learning and thus making students and individual teachers less dependent on the software provision of their TT-provider and/or at their placement and workplace schools. Especially in a competence based curriculum model this independence is essential as it offers users possibilities to experiment with web based teaching regardless of the presence of (or access to!) a local VLE. Contents can be published into a database which is searchable with a dedicated search-engine, facilitating reuse of educational content. Teacher educators, for instance, can use the resources on network-based language teaching to support their language pedagogy courses and use the portal to offer students practice in e-moderating projects during their school practice. All this will also help to disseminate the project as there are no administrative obstacles for teachers and trainees of other organisations in the European member states to start participating.

Finally, implementing portal software will also provide us with practical experiences with the use of portal software in (secondary) education and thus contribute to data collection for research that is considered important as reported in the progress report of the EU Working Group 'ICT in Education and Training' (2003: 23) : *'Portals can be launch pads for the effective use of Internet in Schools at both primary and secondary levels (...) However little is known of the use of such portals'*

2.4 Project Development

In the general planning of the project critical features of successful professional development approaches in the ICT-E domain have been taken into account. Elements are: learning by doing, enabling 'design & try-out & evaluate'-sequences, needs based, on-the-job elements promoting reflection and feedback (also in networks of teachers), collaboration between schools and teacher education organisations and universities (van Eck et al., 2001)

As the project is quite elaborate and the features 'practice based' and 'field tested in different contexts' are central to the pedagogical approach and related quality assurance ambitions extensive professional development will be needed in the first phase of the project. This training period will involve experimental peer-to-peer try-outs as the didactic procedures involved are highly innovative (definitely in secondary education and relatively new in teacher education contexts). For these try outs a first version of the project module input materials will be available. Most of the participating teacher educators will also participate at this stage as they cannot be expected to have acquired all competences in the domains of e-learning, editorial roles in a Learning Content Management System and the specific language learning formats addressed in the project. These experiences will also provide data for the development of the teacher's manual and the usability research of the first version of the portal, tools and editors.

During the next phase participants are expected to further explore the implications of running educational pilots in their schools (curriculum, themes, technology and time constraints e.g. for synchronous activities etc..). Teacher trainers in the various countries will try out the adapted version of the concept materials by including them in their regular methodology courses. This will involve transnational activities between the student cohorts such as teams designing a webquest for a specific target pupil group, using the target language and discussing design and SLA-principles in the process

of completing this task. These experiences will be used to further adapt the course materials and the manual. Along the same lines a course module for in-service teachers will be developed.

In the final year further scaling up will take place in terms of the number of p2p and team based student teacher pilots and activities and also in terms of the formats and languages being used. School based activities will consist of inter-school projects run both by student teachers and in-service practitioners. The in-service course project module will be run in 2007 for participants recruited from the project partners' networks.

2.5 Anticipating the sustainability issue: Consortium development & Community building

As the actual, personal experience of (student) teachers with telecollaboration is central to the pedagogy in this teacher training and development approach it is obvious that for the realisation of sustainable project results structural collaborative relationships between Teacher Training Organisations and their affiliate practice schools are needed. So it is vital that the participating organisations are interested in and prepared to invest in continuing collaboration beyond the project period.

This means that soon after the end of the project a consortium should be formed which is, also financially, supported by management of the participating organisations. Tasks and responsibilities (e.g. for maintenance of content areas, the project/tasks database and general resources) should be defined and a modest collective fund must be made available for portal hosting and maintenance. One of the goals of the partnership should be to try and extend the consortium with more members if only to create more flexibility in the organisation of intercultural project activities for all concerned.

To promote the dissemination and enhance the chances of future consortium extension the partners aim to deliver the results as a *turn-key project* for teacher education.

The ambition is to provide a facility that holds all the things needed for the off-the-shelf execution of a curriculum module (including the use of the necessary web tools) in Teacher Education. So it is envisaged that all an educator would have to do is get in touch with the current project partners or bring in other international partners his organisation already has working relations with, make bi-lateral arrangements on what module-elements to collaboratively run through, get portal accounts and realise the selected course project elements. And as the portal will be published under a GPL-licence parties could even consider hosting a corporate version of the MICaLL portal or even adapting it to local needs.

3. The MICaLL Project: Outcomes and deliverables

The following deliverables have been specified:

- a course/project¹² module on network-based language teaching
- a web portal that holds the teaching materials of this module and can function as a Laboratory/Sandbox and operational collaborative learning environment (CLE) as it offers the tools and enables the very processes that are 'studied' in the module and can be used by participants to use in Teacher Ed. and in internships at practice schools.
- A Teacher's manual on using the project module

In the following paragraphs these items are described in more detail.

3.1 The Course Project Modules

Course project materials will be produced for pre-service teacher education and in-service teachers. The site will hold repositories of input materials on networked language learning and more specifically on the language learning formats mentioned in the form of:

- (multi-media) hypertexts
- annotated links

¹² A project module is defined here as a collection of materials for teacher education that facilitates work to be done by students in project form.

- articles on underpinning second language acquisition theory
- descriptions of related methodological procedures
- project and task descriptions for classroom use
- support documents for relevant moderating skills
- example student/pupil products and project results

3.2 A Portal site

A multi-lingual, member / community based, Learning Support System will be made available under a General Public Licence¹³, offering the functionality to support schools and teacher education organisations in their endeavours to realise transnational, collaborative language learning and/or to realise local implementations of modules and provision of in-service course projects.

The system has standard functionality which includes:

- Shared, moderated functionality: forum, calendar, news, central document publication, course project areas.
- Personal workspaces for portal members
- Team spaces to run classrooms and organise projects

3.3 Teacher's manual

Authorised members can access a teacher's manual that will consist of suggestions on input routes and sequences and specific project activities for the target groups identified.

A model scenario will be available that supports a 'relate – create – donate' approach in which the course participants familiarise themselves first with each others' teaching context and with the portal through inter-group collaborative activities targeted at digesting the input materials. Instructional materials will be provided to coach participants in preparing, designing and running an intercultural language learning project in their own training or job context. The manual is inclusive of a portal user guide with instructions on how to technically activate and use the add-on tools and editors for the didactical formats mentioned.

3.3 Implementation of project results

The ambition is that all partners have implemented the project module both for initial and in-service training and that partners have formalised their collaboration at institutional level.

3.3.1 Initial Teacher Education

Implementation here implies that the MICaLL module has been integrated in an existing course or that a part of the current curriculum has been replaced by the MICaLL module. Also, *ideally*, the execution of the course is no longer dependent on an individual teacher's personal decision to run it but it has a fixed position in the curriculum. A number of colleague teacher educators (especially those responsible for language teaching pedagogy and methodology) have been trained to run the course. At course level the necessary planning for running the MICaLL module (synchronisation, student tasks and activities, target groups, moderating activities etc) with a consortium partner has taken place well in advance (= before actual rosters are made for the partners involved)

Alternatively: where synchronisation at course level between partners is not feasible teacher educators collaborate to make small scale intercultural projects or even individual arrangements at student-teacher level possible. Or, in case an international run of the module cannot be realised:

- local student teams can be formed during the course to try out the various tools and team based tasks.
- Or students who want to specialise in e-moderating skills do their internship in a local MICaLL partner school to help run school based international projects

3.3.2 In-service Training

Ideally partners agree on running an in-service course during a fixed period of several months every year. This can be organised as a EU-funded activity as participants can get a Comenius Grant to

¹³ See for more information: <http://www.gnu.org/home.html>

attend. A face-to-face start is therefore feasible but not mandatory. A local f2f support infrastructure however is necessary. So each partner organises a number of meetings in his/her each country for local participants. Virtual teams are made up on a mixed nationality basis so that tasks can be done first in a p2p-context. Teacher participants can then also decide to do specific activities collectively with their own classes.

Alternatively, if no consortium partners are interested individual partners might offer the course locally with an e-learning component.

4. MICaLL: Phase 1 evaluated.

4.1. Results

The focus in the first 9 months of the project has been on preparatory activities like:

- project team development
- detailing project module contents and production planning
- content development for training of project members and model projects
- affiliate local school network development
- an introductory f2f meeting of all partners
- f2f training in the use of the portal
- introduction to relevant theory, pedagogical approaches, methods and formats
- virtual workshops on the formats Chat, LQuest, Weblogging and e-Tandem.

A first version of the project materials mentioned in paragraph 3.1 and 2 (course module, portal) and a framework for the production of the teacher's manual have been produced.

All project members including some student-teachers from the participating countries attended the virtual workshops in the teams they had formed at the f2f meeting.

These workshops were run by teacher educators who had familiarised themselves with the format; typical tasks included:

- Activating, personalising and exploring the use of the portal products needed (e.g. the weblog or chattool) in one's own workspace.
- Exchange of ideas on application of tools in local and project contexts
- Collective design of tasks for use in primary and secondary education

By way of illustration the 'idea-exchange' task for the chat virtual workshop:

Would you kindly consider the following points with your chat partner?

- How you feel Language Learning may be enhanced through using chat
- What contributions chat sessions can make to your learners' real life needs
- What type of interaction chat sessions may allow your learners to have that otherwise might be impossible (advantages for language learning)
- What are the inconveniences of using chat sessions for language teaching and language learning

Followed up by the instructions for the construction of chat tasks:

At the end of the chat sessions could you share, with colleagues, a chat task you'd like to give to your students? Please, give some detail (as much or as little as you like) about the following:

- Learning objectives
- Skills of interaction and expression
- Description of activity: Pre / During / Post- Chat (material required, time needed, etc.)
- Teacher's + Learners' role (during the three phases mentioned above)
- Age range + Number of learners in a chat session
- Outcomes (what learners are expected to learn)
- Time needed to prepare / Time needed to complete
- Resources needed: Pedagogical / Technical
- Choice of language
- Additional comments
- Evaluation
- Is the task for a specific language or can it be adapted for use with other languages?

This period (February – July, 2005) has served as professional development for the actors involved and as part of the preparation for future placement periods for the student teachers. After the plenary conference student teachers from the Czech Republic visited the Dutch partner school and contributed to the Newsletter¹⁴ by reporting their experiences. Further exploration of the possibilities for collaborative transnational projects has revealed the need for extension of the partnership (insufficient matches in age groups, target language and competence levels). Efforts to involve more partners have resulted in the participation of two new teacher education organisations with affiliate schools. An American affiliate partner has participated with his students in one of the courses of the Spanish partner.

The portal

The functionality and interface offered to portal users are based on the rights associated with the role they have in the project. So young learners and coordinators, by way of example, are confronted with different screens and workspace options.

An online HTML-editor is available so that through-the-browser web editing is as comfortable as word-processing. Other features of the current workspace functionality provide (student) teachers & trainers with the options to activate and use:

- an online editor for the task format LanguageQuest
- communication & publication tools such as Weblog, Forum, Chat, Doc etc.
- virtual class- & project rooms for starting and managing telecollaborative projects.

Members can choose to keep the content they develop in their workspaces private (e.g. a concept version of a

LanguageQuest or a personal blog) or make items accessible or even editable for other portal members. A publication option is available to present personal content to the internet public at large. In this way, with the help of the related URL, a finished LanguageQuest can be reached, also by non-members. All published weblogs are presented to the general public in a 'portlet' on the frontpage of the portal.

A HelpCentre is under development holding Howto's, tutorials and flash-animations to support members when using the various portal functionalities.

4.2 Discussion

Most of the planned activities have been realised. Thanks to an early first project team meeting, planned well ahead in anticipation of possible EU-grant allocation, and the benefits of an operational web platform from the very beginning of the project, the team could present shared ideas on goals and content of the project to all participants at the plenary conference in January 2005. By then, only 4 months after the start of the project, a variety of content materials for the professional development



¹⁴ This issue of the Newsletter is available at: <http://www.micall.net/Members/TonK/News/letter1>

phase was available and could be used during the f2f training. The conference evaluation results¹⁵ testify of the school teachers and students' interest and motivation. However, not all goals, outcomes and deliverables¹⁶ of the consequent virtual workshops have been realised. Intermediate problem analysis has led to the following conclusions:

- Considering the fact that many participants after some time reported to have only limited computer skills and not to meet the MICaLL participant profile¹⁷ the central task in all workshops of familiarising oneself with new web tools and related pedagogical ideas while at the same time collectively design tasks for future pupil projects has been too demanding.
- the quality and quantity of the e-moderation by most trainers, who had no or little experience in running a virtual workshop, has probably been inadequate, given the competence levels of the participants in areas as self directed learning, telecollaboration, professional reflective skills and pedagogical knowledge. In practice the participants, once they had left the f2f plenary conference, suddenly found themselves in a traditional, first generation distance learning context.
- With an average running time of 5 weeks and members changing teams and dyads for each of the 4 virtual workshops insufficient time was available for group autonomy to develop
- the work on designing tasks for pupils by the distributed dyads and teams has also been hampered by the heterogeneity of the participants' work contexts (school types and organisations, curricula and available technology)
- besides, most virtual workshops were confronted with a number of problems (technical challenges, different academic calendars) also reported elsewhere (e.g. cf. Fuchs, 2003).
- For example, next to (anticipated) synchronization problems in the chat workshop (members not turning up at the agreed time) contacts sometimes also failed as chat partners did not pre-arrange to meet in a specific chat room and logged off after fruitless attempts to locate each other¹⁸.

These experiences have shown that:

- The online phase of the introduction to the virtual environment needs to be improved by adding explicit training in the skills involved in the project/module (technical, telecollaboration)
- The initial virtual experiences of distributed teams need to be supported by local, f2f-sessions. Life interaction seems to be needed at this stage to promote reflection and get the professional dialogue on (new) pedagogical approaches and methods going (blended model).
- To remedy possible lack of motivation due to the uncertainty about role in and/or relevance of the initial project activities for the personal work context tasks should be more structured and/or adapted to local, more immediate interests. Cf. Lockhorst (2004: 204)

Furthermore we believe that EU-projects would benefit from formal contracting of partners in an early stage of the project as this would provide project management with instruments to have schools include project activities in the regular, annual task allocation of participating mentors and thus promote their commitment.

15 For details see: <http://www.micall.net/management/wp010/news/newsletter1/evalu>

16 E.g. School mentors could be expected to feel confident about coaching a student teacher in a telecollaborative project using the portal in the next academic year. And a number of project ideas and tasks would be available for school based projects.

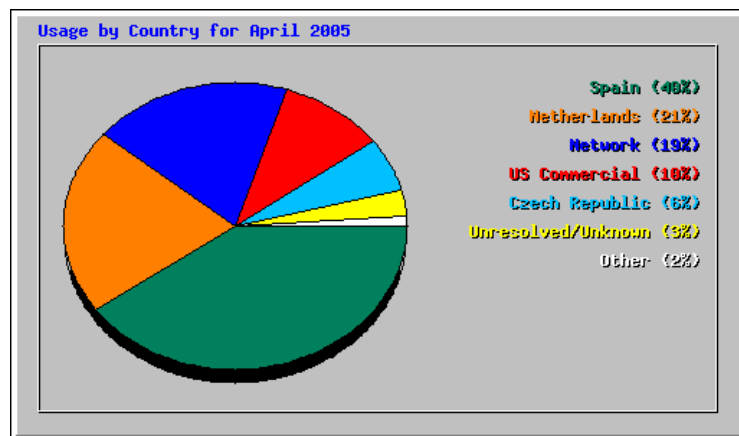
17 Project partners were expected to involve educators, mentors and students that were : ICT-literate and had practical knowledge of modern language pedagogy and some experience in Web Enhanced Language Learning/Teaching

18 Members apparently did not realise or lacked the skills to make the chat tool that they had activated in their personal workspace more accessible by personalizing and publishing it or providing a link to it from their homepages.

The portal

With an average of some 5000 visits per month¹⁹ portal use has been relatively intensive during the first 8 months of its existence.

The pie-chart below shows the the distribution of visits from the various countries in April. The relative large portion of US-hits is largely due to the fact that during this period the affiliate American partner participated in one of the courses of the Spanish partner.



Yet, first reactions and focus group reports indicate that the concept 'web portal' and the related functionality offered to individual members in personal workspaces is new to most users. Some report to consider websites essentially to be places where information can be found and therefore need time to get accustomed to the idea of being

personally 'in the driving seat'. The extent of available functionality and spatial orientation seem to be the most problematic issues although further confirmation is needed from the results of the usability research.

Sustainability strategies

We have come to realise that the sustainability issue also has implications for the portal design. Ideas should be developed on possible additional²⁰ portal functionality that could contribute to the educational relevance, the quality of the course and the willingness of parties to continue collaboration and to contribute to hosting and maintenance costs of the portal site.

One of the suggestions being explored at this stage is a WikiBook-style resource²¹ on network-based language teaching, developed and maintained by the partnership. The assumption is that it could function as a public interface to the knowledge and experiences that are and will be documented in the portal by the current and future partners. It would also be in line with other MICaLL goals such as promoting competence-based teacher education, resource based teaching, knowledge sharing and international professional community development and the related design principles:

- Provision of opportunities for tasks and challenges that are professionally relevant and authentic both for students and teachers by participation in content production for the Wiki and the sharing of moderating duties and responsibilities
- Contribution to the accessibility of the content that will be developed in the portal over time. Links can be made to Information and learning objects in the Resource collection or didactic and technical Howto's in the Helpcentre or even to distributed, unstructured items in members' workspaces.
- Avoidance of static content
- Accommodation of differences in national and local curricula and educational contexts

¹⁹ More and up-to-date details are available at: <http://www.micall.net/stats>

²⁰ Other features than those specified in the present development plans

²¹ For more information on WikiBooks see: <http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wikibooks:About>

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