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Learning Slovak in an E-Learning Environment: A case study

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Providing a motivating learning environment for learning a less commonly taught language is a challenge. Developing technology, societal changes, virtual mobility and networking create new demands for teachers and students of these languages. Growing needs for international mobility call for the adoption of new pedagogical approaches. It is the urgency of using more up-to-date, pedagogically acceptable computer-assisted teaching programs that led to the development of the e-learning course of Slovak reported upon in this article. The course is based on a socio-constructivist approach and its main aim is to promote the development of learners' communicative and cultural competence. This empirical study explores the learning of Slovak in an e-learning environment. The main focuses are on students' approaches to learning in an e-learning environment, on raising their learning awareness and on their experiences of e-learning. The initial research questions are whether and how Slovak is learnt in an e-learning environment and whether all four language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) can be learnt in such a context. Learners' agency – learners' degree of motivation and engagement as well as their conscious approach to learning – is reflected in the development of their communication competence and the growth of their learning awareness, which is manifested in their learning journals and reflections. One interesting outcome about learning awareness was the challenge of Slovak diacritics. Students' awareness of this challenge increased through pen-and-paper writing, not through the e-learning environment. Thus a contradiction emerged: between the new technologies that allow for distance language learning and the need for more traditional learning styles. This contradiction poses new challenges for the more personalized language learning environments. This article reports on the design and implementation of the e-learning course in Slovak, it outlines how students' impressions of the course were collected and analyzed

Keywords: Slovak, less commonly taught languages, e-learning environment, language skills, learner experiences of e-learning

1 Introduction and background

1.1 The Slovak language

Slovak is an Indo-European language that belongs to the group of West Slavic languages, together with Czech, Polish and Lower and Upper Sorbian. In addition to the 4–5 million Slovaks living in Slovakia, Slovak is also spoken in other parts of the world, with an estimated 2,742,400 speakers of Slovak outside Slovakia. Slovak is the official language of the Slovak Republic.

Studies of Slovak language and culture are offered by more than 40 universities around the world. However, the only academic institution of higher education offering Slovak studies in language and culture in Nordic countries is the University of Jyväskylä. This case study explores students' experiences with a Slovak e-learning environment developed especially for this university.

1.2 Context of the study

At the University of Jyväskylä, Slovak language courses have been offered since 1979. Since the beginning of the 1990s, a more extensive academic program of Slovak language and culture has also been included. Motivated by the uniqueness of Slovak studies, the desire to attract more learners and the urge for continuous development of curricula, this study aimed at exploring the acquisition of Slovak in a new language learning environment. In 2004, development work on the web-based module of Slovak became a project of the Finland's Virtual Language Centre. The integration of traditional class instruction and online communication resulted in the creation of the Slovak e-learning course.

1.3 Technology-enhanced learning of less commonly taught languages

Less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) are generally defined as all the world languages apart from English, French, German and Spanish. LCTLs are perceived as less commonly spoken, exceptional or even exotic (Janus 1997). In accordance with the Brecht and Walton classification of LCTLs (1994), Slovak belongs to the group of the *much less commonly taught languages*. Brecht and Walton's classification partly contradicts the concept of the so-called lesser-used languages (LULs) adopted in the European Union and which comprises any language other than the 23 official languages of the European Union. Thus, for example, Finnish, Czech and Slovak, and other official languages of the European Union are regarded as commonly used and spoken languages.

Technology-enhanced language learning and teaching, with its emphasis on interaction and authentic discourse, possesses enormous potential for language learning. Using technology as a tool for communication offers new possibilities of language learning through various forms of social networking, publishing and communicating online. The urgency of using the more up-to-date, pedagogically acceptable computer-assisted teaching programs and the latest technology is currently one of the major issues in the field of LCTLs. Various task-based learning materials aimed primarily at grammar and vocabulary have

been developed in different languages, but the gaps in teaching pragmatic and cultural competences are still wide. Integration of the latest pedagogical technologies into coherent teaching plans is part of continuous development and a great challenge, especially when technology is perceived as an instructional system, either primary or supplemental to the traditional language classroom. Learning less commonly taught languages is often limited to language learning at three basic levels (beginning, intermediate and advanced), thus the question of appropriate technologies and technology-enhanced learning materials at different levels is of high importance.

Systematic action research into language learning and teaching has been a departmental policy at the University of Jyväskylä Language Centre since 1993. The broad focuses have included the development of learner autonomy and the integration of new language learning environments into teaching and learning. The development projects have been aimed at applying multimodal approaches to all the teaching and self-access activities.

This case study on learning Slovak was part of the institutional action research carried out by the Language Centre from 2000 to 2010. The action research conducted in the first stage (2004–2005) aimed at integrating ICT into language teaching in a pedagogically viable way. In the second stage (2005–2009), the technology-enhanced instructional designs were generally adopted and tested for their contribution to the desired learning outcomes. One of the key issues was the quality development of teaching and learning and the enhancement of self-directed learning. With the integration of educational and communication technology into traditional instruction in the early 2000s, the instruction of Slovak also became more multimodal. Continuous development of the Slovak learning materials finally resulted in the implementation of the web-based module of Slovak language and culture. My main focus in the study has been on how Slovak is learned in the e-learning environment from the viewpoints of language production and learning process. This focus has also allowed me to look into the efficiency of the e-learning environment and the role of the teacher in the e-learning environment.

2 Teaching experiment: Slovak e-learning course

This chapter introduces the Slovak e-learning course – its pedagogical basis, course structure and layout – and the study that resulted from this teaching experiment. First, I discuss the pedagogical basis of the course, that is, the socio-constructivist approach to teaching and learning and the concept of the learners' communicative competence. This discussion is followed by a brief description of the course structure and layout, which is based on the metaphor of learning a new language as climbing a mountain. Finally, the study that was made of this teaching experiment and its main results will be briefly introduced.

2.1 The socio-constructivist approach

The course is based on the socio-constructivist approach. According to Vygotsky's social constructivist approach, learning is a collaborative activity and occurs in an environment that is close to the real world (Johnson 2004).

Learning occurs at any time and in any place, individually and within the group (collaborative learning). Technology works as a uniting factor (a student works alone but is still with the others) and thus enables the acquisition of a common learning experience for all the learners. As social constructivism in learning emphasizes problem-based instruction and peer collaboration between the learners, the main focus is on student activities and the development of their communicative (i.e. linguistic and pragmatic) competence.

Technology has been traditionally viewed as a conveyor of information and communicator of knowledge (Nanjappa & Grant 2003). However, when using technology as a tool, either for accessing or transferring knowledge, learners become engaged in a more meaningful process of knowledge construction: they become the designers and presenters of their personal knowledge. Technology may thus be used as a tool for providing a richer and more motivating learning environment. From the learners' viewpoint, technology may also support new skills through such cognitive and technological tools as the spreadsheets, collaborative learning environments, and other means aimed at the development of cognitive and metacognitive processes. "Constructivism is a doctrine stating that learning takes place in contexts, while technology refers to the designs and environments that engage learners" (Schunk 2000 in Nanjappa & Grant 2003: 39). As to the role of the teacher in the constructivist learning environment, the teacher is perceived as a facilitator and creator of a favourable social climate for collaborative learning.

2.2 Communicative competence

In this context, communicative competence may be equated with language proficiency. In accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), learners' communicative competence consists of the sociolinguistic, pragmatic (discourse and functional) and language (lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic) competence. Communicative competence is the learners' linguistic and pragmatic knowledge about the language and their ability to create meaning in the target language (language performance).

Learners' activities in the Slovak e-learning course are authentic tasks "where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (Willis 1996: 4). In accordance with the framework of task-based learning (Willis 1996) and learners' proficiency level, the tasks are aimed at listing and comparing (A1 level), problem solving, sharing personal experience and storytelling (A2–B1 level). The learning outcomes and respective proficiency levels correspond to the Common European Framework levels A1–B1 (CEFR 2009).

2.3 Course design: Mountain climbing metaphor for learning new languages

The structure of the e-learning course is based on the mountain range of the High Tatra mountains in Slovakia. The idea is to illustrate how learning a foreign language is like climbing a mountain. The course homepage features an

image of the Slovak mountain range. The starting point is the Base Camp, and ten mountain camps represent the stages of the course.



Figure 1. Layout of the Slovak e-learning course

Climbing is usually related to mountains or walls. It is an activity that demands caution and concentration from climbers due to various external dangers that may result in falling down. Definitions of climbing describes it as a process of reaching a summit (i.e. a goal) and thus they can also be used to underline the process of learning a less commonly taught language – proceeding slowly, with difficulties, however, with the aim to learn the language.

Climbing, like language learning, is a process that occurs in stages, and this e-learning course attempted to reflect that step-by-step progress. Thus, mountain climbing became, more concretely, a metaphor for one's progress through the course: learners proceed slowly, with difficulties, as they attempt to reach the summit, that is, to complete the course.

When climbing a mountain, the terrain may be dangerous but also challenging and exciting, particularly when moving in a completely unknown, often treacherous terrain – in this case, a new language. This terrain can consist of tricky grammar or lexical items and other aspects that make a language difficult. Good guidance embodied in the person of a mountain guide (the teacher) or in the written instructions of a climbing guide (the course description and instructions) is invaluable.

Climbing generally takes place in pairs or in groups of three, just as learning often occurs in groups. Solo climbing, however, may also be an option, but when learning alone, the risk of falling down (dropping out) is greater. The climbing gear (the course tools) must be appropriate and it must fulfil all the safety requirements (learners must be provided with basic instructions and IT facilities).

When climbing alone, different climbing techniques (learning strategies) are employed. Whatever the case, the climber must be aware of the properties of the terrain (learning awareness) and must have a clear plan for climbing (learning path).



Figure 2. Slovak e-learning course: Camp 3.

The starting point of the virtual climbing is the Base Camp and the ultimate aim is the top of the mountain. Each camp consists of the following sections: text, vocabulary, grammar, listening assignments, and learners' own space for topic-related websites. In addition, the section called Treacherous Places is aimed at language-specific grammatical, lexical or pragmatic items and the section called Bonus, which offers complementary learning materials (e.g. lists of foods and animals) is included.

2.4 Theoretical background

This study uses Kern's and Warschauer's concept of the three waves of CALL (Kern & Warschauer 2001) and Johnson's model of SLA (2007) as a framework. In accordance with the Kern and Warschauer formulation of the three waves of CALL, the Slovak e-learning course is a typical product of communicative CALL.

The metaphor of computer-as-pupil (communicative CALL) has its origin in the cognitive approach. The main focus is on using the forms rather than on the

forms themselves. Grammar is taught implicitly and learners are encouraged to generate the language on their own. Depending on the learners' proficiency level, they are expected to take creative actions in the target language. While the learners at the beginner's level are expected to create simple dialogues, such as interviewing each other, writing and answering advertisements, describe something or someone, ask for information, order something, etc., the learners at the intermediate level are expected to employ their problem-solving skills and the skills of searching for required information, e.g. to plan a trip to Slovakia, tell and retell story, explain something and/ or express their opinion. The activities included consist of both, tasks with the immediate feedback, which are focused rather on the language forms and accuracy, and the collaborative practices (peer and group tasks) aimed at the increase of communicative competence. The assessment is based on the completion of the real world tasks and learner's active participation. However, the shift towards integrative CALL, which is based on multimedia technology, more authentic learning environments and computer-mediated communication (CMC), is also clear, because the focus is primarily on collaborative practices and exploitation of the web resources (group work, stimulating students' discussion or writing activities and thus promoting their critical thinking).

Johnson views second language acquisition (SLA) in terms of performance. In her work *A Philosophy of Second Language Acquisition* (2007), she presents a dynamic interrelationship between the social and individual plane. Learning a second language does not occur in the human brain, but in the interactions conducted in sociocultural settings. Her model may be traced back to the work by Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Bakhtin (1895–1975), who shared similar views on the role of society and culture in the development of language and communication. According to this model of SLA, the origin of second language competence lies in the language use which takes place in a real social context – in the interaction between language competence (knowledge of the language) and performance (the skills of using the language in real or almost-real life contexts). Definitions of competence have been continually developed. According to Newby (2011), three general hypotheses referring to the definition of competence may be perceived. The first is based on the general acceptance that language is a cognitive phenomenon and that the use of the linguistic code (performance) is stored in the speakers' minds. This view includes also the Chomskyan language-specific view of competence and the theories of cognitive linguistics. The second hypothesis is based on recognizing language not only as the subject of linguistic description but also as a part of a speech community and culture. The third hypothesis offers the view of language as a chain of interactional processes by which human discourse is created and maintained (language use).

Johnson's model is one variation to the constructivist-cognitive theories of e-learning, which emphasize the learner's key role in the learning process. In her model, the main focus is on learner's problem-solving cognitive skills and the skills of linking the acquired knowledge to the previously acquired knowledge and skills.

2.5 Learners as agents

As I explored the learning of Slovak as experienced by the learners, the concept of agency as a driving force emerged. According to van Lier, agency is one of the key concepts in learning. Van Lier perceives agency as a movement, as a change of state or direction or even as "the lack of movement where movement is expected" (van Lier 2010). Agency is not exactly the same as motivation or autonomy in learning, even though both autonomy and motivation may be seen as manifestations of learner agency. Significant progress (moving forward) in language learning may be observed only if the learner employs agency in more self-directed ways. The employment of agency significantly depends on the learning environment and on an agency-promoting curriculum. "The employment of agency depends on a learning conducive environment that allows and instigates a diversity of manifestations of agency at different levels. The creation of such an environment is a major task of pedagogy." (van Lier 2010: 5) Basharina (2009) views agency as an active approach to learning, as the learners' use of accountability, which may be defined as their responsibility to keep track of what they learn. This kind of accountability may be a synonym for self-directed learning (Chapelle, 1997 in Basharina 2009).

To monitor learners' agency, Entwistle's model of Approaches to Learning (Entwistle 2001 in Basharina 2009) was adapted. Entwistle claims that agency may be manifested through the use of deep, surface or strategic approaches to learning.

Entwistle's Approaches to Learning Model (2001)

Deep approach: Seeking meaning	Surface approach: Reproducing	Strategic approach: Reflective organising
Intention – to understand Ideas for yourself, by:	Intention – to cope with unit requirements, by:	Intention – to achieve the highest possible grades, by:
Relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience	Treating the unit as unrelated bits of knowledge	Putting consistent effort into studying
Looking for patterns and underlying principles	Memorising facts and carrying out procedures routinely	Managing time and effort effectively
Checking evidence and relating it to conclusions	Finding difficulty in making sense of new ideas presented	Finding the right conditions and materials for studying
Examining logic and argument cautiously and critically	Seeing little value or meaning in either unit or tasks set	Monitoring the effectiveness of ways of studying
Being aware of understanding developing while learning	Studying without reflecting on either purpose or strategy	Being alert to assessment requirements and criteria
Becoming actively interested in the unit content	Feeling undue pressure and worry about work	Gearing work to the perceived preferences of lecturers

Figure 4. Entwistle's Approaches to Learning Model adapted by Basharina (2009)

In the context of this study, deep approaches to learning underline the socio-constructivist approach to learning through building knowledge on previously learned matter, searching for patterns, being aware of one's learning process and finally becoming interested in learning a new language.

3 Research questions and methodology

3.1 Research questions

The research questions address the learners' experiences of learning Slovak in an e-learning environment, learners' views on the acquisition of all four language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) and their views of the teacher's role in a technology-enhanced learning environment.

1. Do the learners of Slovak experience that they are acquiring language in the e-learning environment? How do they experience their learning?
2. What are the learners' views on the acquisition of all four language skills in an e-learning environment?
3. How do the learners perceive the role of the teacher in the technology-enhanced learning environment?

3.2 Data collection

This section provides the information on the data collection and analysis. The teaching experiment was implemented with two groups of students: 22 students of Slovak at the University of Jyväskylä in 2008–2009 and 15 students of Slovak at the University of Helsinki in 2010. The demographics of the groups were as follows. At the University of Jyväskylä, 21 students were female, 1 was male; 20 were Finnish and 1 was Polish. All of them were language students without any previous knowledge of Slovak. Their e-learning efforts were monitored for a period of one academic year. At the University of Helsinki, 8 students were male, 7 were female; 13 were Finnish, 1 was French and 1 Japanese. All of them were students of Slavic languages without any previous knowledge of Slovak. Their e-learning efforts were monitored for a period of one academic term.

The purpose was to obtain the maximum amount of information about their learning – what and how the learners learned. To capture the overall learning process, students were asked to keep learning journals.

The data were collected through pre-, on- and post-course questionnaires, interviews, content analyses of the learning journals, course feedback and teacher reflections. A pre-course personal questionnaire was used to gather information about the personal and professional background of the students.

3.3 Data analysis

The data were interpreted by means of thematic analysis, a conventional practice in qualitative research used for the interpretation of small-size research topics (Braun & Clarke 2006). After the collected data were described, the items were

divided into the themes and their meanings were interpreted. The themes were then grouped as pre-, on- and post-course themes. By means of a thematic analysis, something important in relation to the research, even though minor in size, may be spotted, reported and interpreted within the given data set. Braun and Clarke (2006) offer a model of a six phase thematic analysis:

1. Data description
2. Sorting items into proto-/sub-themes
3. Creating thematic maps
4. Defining the themes (detailed analyses)
5. Reporting on themes and
6. Communicating and interpreting the meaning of each theme.

4 Findings

In this chapter, the findings of the study are reported. The findings are presented under the themes (pre-course, on-course and post-course themes). The concepts related to the themes are determined in the context of interpretation of findings.

4.1 Pre-course themes

The pre-course themes were related to the learners' concept of Slovakia and the Slovak language, concept of learning with a special focus on web-based and independent learning, learners' expectations of the course, as well as their beliefs about themselves as e-learners.

4.1.1 Slovakia and Slovak language

All learners had some basic knowledge of Slovakia and the Slovak language. They knew that Slovak belonged to the group of West Slavic languages and that independent Slovakia was born after the partition of Czechoslovakia in 1992. All respondents wanted to learn Slovak because they found learning a new language generally challenging. Slovak was perceived as a distant, however, a challenging language

Two respondents knew that Slovak was considered to be a lingua franca of Slavic languages and the reason why they decided to learn Slovak was to learn other Slavic languages through Slovak. Apart from one respondent who favoured the challenge of coping with a less commonly taught and a thus a more difficult language, Slovak was chosen without any special reason. Apart from one, all respondents believed that they would be able to use Slovak in the future either for work or leisure purposes.

4.1.2 Web-based learning/ e-learning

Web-based learning and e-learning are often used as interchangeable terms, yet these concepts represent slightly different types of learning. Web-based learning or online learning is associated with materials delivered in a web browser or in

some other way that is readily accessible on the computer (Tsai & Macado 2010). Web-based or online learning does not necessarily require the use of the networks (Internet). On the other hand, the e-learning is associated with activities that involve both computers (resource-based learning) and networks simultaneously. However, in this study, web-based learning is regarded as a synonym to e-learning. Students themselves used the terms web-based learning and e-learning interchangeably.

All respondents expected e-learning to be more flexible as well as more challenging than traditional learning. Apart from one, they all believed that they would be able to learn a significant amount. Students estimated their weekly amount of learning hours to be approximately three to six hours.

Despite the strong belief in themselves as e-learners, the students doubted that they might be able to develop their speaking and pronunciation skills without contact classes. The teacher's physical absence was considered to affect their learning negatively. They all expected the teacher to facilitate their learning and provide them with immediate feedback.

The learners' expectations of the course were high, and their belief in their own learning skills was strong. The use of a new learning environment was seen as a valuable addition to traditional learning.

4.2 On-course themes

The **on-course themes** were related to the development of e-learning skills and strategies and the raising of the language learning awareness. A special focus was on the new skills learnt, e.g. the skills of time management and planning, motivation for e-learning and rewarding oneself, as well as the skill of coping with stress (Clarke 2008). Skills for self-assessment, self-reflection, collaboration and research were also regarded as highly important. These themes are exemplified below with extracts (1)-(21) from the students' journals.

4.2.1 Time management

According to Clarke (2008), one major e-learning skill that is crucial for successful completion of a course is the skill of time management: balancing different priorities, reflecting on learning preferences and searching for good learning practices. Next to the skill of time management is the skill of planning.

One major benefits of e-learning is the freedom of time. The structure of conventional courses is often fixed and supportive. However, Clarke (2008) considers the structure of conventional courses to be limited. By offering the freedom of time, e-learning courses reduce the supportiveness. One of the greatest risks of e-learning courses is falling behind or even failing.

The problem of time management and planning occurred frequently.

On the one hand, the learners longed for a fixed period of completion for the course tasks. On the other, they found the e-learning stressful due to the deadlines and the lack of planning skills.

- (1) *"Clear deadlines should be set up. Learning should become a daily routine..." "Shall I complete the course within the schedule?"... "I've got the panic as to the deadlines..."*

- (2) *"Too much work... Perhaps I took up a too big mouthful when planning my spring studies... I will not give up, unless I get a total burn-out"...*

Learners faced the stress caused mostly by the lack of proper planning or lack of experience in e-learning. To solve the problem, group discussions aimed at identifying the cause and removing the stress were offered.

4.2.2 Motivation and reward

Motivation and the reward for the achieved goals were mentioned frequently. Even though the goals were set at the beginning of the course, the stress caused by the lack of time evidently affected the learners' learning process. To solve the problem of stress, which often resulted in a decrease of motivation, the teacher tried to help learners find the balance between studying and personal life. The mechanism of self-motivation (i.e. rewarding oneself for the effort) seemed to be an efficient activator.

- (3) *"It would be nice to travel to Slovakia and try in real what I have learned on this course..."*
- (4) *"I have learned something new! Today I happened to sit next to a Slovak exchange student and I asked him "Ako sa voláš?" (What's your name) ..."*
- (5) *"To motivate myself, I decided to book a weekend trip to Slovakia..."*

4.2.3 E-learning styles / strategies

In accordance with Clarke's description of e-learning styles (Clarke 2008), there are plenty of preferences about the way learners like to learn. E-learning provides opportunities to learn visually (visual learning), learn through listening (auditory learning), learn through doing (kinaesthetic learning, making choices, interacting with the content and working with others through communication technologies).

The learners of Slovak recognized the specific and positive impact of the e-learning environment on their learning strategies or learning styles.

- (6) *"Web-learning requires specific learning strategies. I am used to learning from the books. I guess I just have to find my own way of learning..."*
- (7) *"Learning is easier due to the contact sessions and short-time objectives."*

However, some learners did not find any remarkable difference between e-learning and traditional learning.

- (8) *"Everything I found difficult on this course, I also found difficult on other language courses... No special learning strategies are required..."*

On this course, an effective learner was expected to acquire at least basic ICT skills. Despite the teacher's efforts to make the learners feel comfortable in the e-

learning environment by encouraging them to participate in the online activities and providing them with continuous support, at some times the learners got frustrated due to various technical problems, especially in relation to writing. The Java editor, enabling the writing of Slavic diacritics, was not available in all participants' home computers. Nowadays, this problem has been overcome by means of various writing facilitators and other specific features offered by almost all major computer systems.

(9) *"It is incredibly difficult to get myself on the Internet.... The Web is definitely a desirable environment for language learning..."*

(10) *"Help! All the diacritical marks got lost!"*

4.2.4 Independent learning

Learning independently without any obligatory lessons is generally the secret of popularity of e-learning or web-based courses. E-learners are expected to be more responsible for their learning activities but they are also provided more freedom of how and what to learn. The initial e-learning experience produces a conflict: There is excitement over doing something new, but at the same time, there is also the uncertainty of having actually learned something, of having acquired the knowledge.

(11) *"The course has been interesting, even though 'learning on one's own' is very demanding..."*

Sceptical attitudes towards e-learning existed as well.

(12) *"Are there any other language students, who would take up the e-learning course and LEARN the language?"*

4.2.5 Specific language issues

The focus of this study was on the process of acquiring the target language (i.e. on how the Slovak is learned) in an e-learning environment. Learners' interaction, their use of the language was continuously monitored. Learners continuously evaluated themselves and reflected on their learning process in the learning diaries. Because all respondents were students of languages, special attention was paid to various specific language issues (e.g. the phonological system of Slovak, pronunciation, the diacritic system). E-learning diaries were the only channel for interpreting their learning experiences when encountering the new language. The phonological and grammatical system of Slovak was regarded as a great challenge. Of these, the Slovak diacritic system was considered to be the most difficult.

Phonological and grammatical aspects

The Slovak sound system consists of long and short vowels and hard and soft consonants. The acute mark (in Slovak "dlážňa", "prolongation mark") indicates a

long vowel, for example í /i:/ á /a:/, é /e:/, etc. Another special diacritical mark is the circumflex ("vokáň"), which exists only above the letter "o." - ô. The caron (in Slovak "mäkčeň", "palatalization mark" or "softener") indicates either palatalization or a change of alveolar fricatives into post-alveolar, for example, č, dž, š, ž, ň, ľ, ď, ť. In addition to palatalization, the differentiation between the soft, hard and neutral consonants also has a grammatical function. This turned out to be one of the most challenging issues, especially for those students who had not learnt any other Slavic languages apart from Slovak.

A number of issues related to spelling and pronunciation puzzled the learners. These issues included the abundance of consonants and the phonemic principles of Slovak spelling (e.g. the assimilation law, which states that the forms derived from the same stem are written in the same way even if they are pronounced differently), as well as the grammatical principle, according to which there is a difference in writing (but not in the pronunciation) between the basic singular and plural form of masculine adjectives.

(13) *"I have never ever bumped into such a diverse palatalization, is this the symptom typical for all the Slavic languages?"*

(14) *"What a great number of words with plenty consonants and no vowels!?"*

Pronunciation exercises were offered in the introductory unit (Base Camp). The exercises aimed at listening and speaking were included in all units.

Like all Slavic languages, Slovak is an inflected language. It means that the endings of nouns, adjectives, pronouns and numerals change depending on the grammatical gender, the grammatical number and the grammatical case.

(15) *"I finally learned how to differentiate between the endings of feminine and masculine substantives..."*

The grammatical category of aspect related to the flow of time was perceived as one of the greatest challenges by the Jyväskylä students in particular.

(16) *"The aspect in Slovak is extremely difficult. I am not able to figure out the future tense of Perfective verbs!"*

Pragmatic aspects

Expressing different degrees of politeness by means of modal verbs and pronouns (the use of the polite form of 'you') did not cause any significant problems, as it also occurs in other languages.

(17) *"Polite 'you' may be found in other languages, so it was not difficult to understand the main idea..."*

Learners had the opportunity to practice grammatical and pragmatic matters in two ways – through traditional 'computer-as-tutor' exercises, without teacher's feedback, and through various activities aimed at the use of the language in real or almost real-life contexts.

4.2.6 Writing and language learning awareness

Awareness of learning plays an important+ role in the process of learning a new language and serves as an efficient motivator. The concept of phonemic awareness – the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken words and understanding of sequences of speech sounds (Yopp 1992) – is essential for reading in the alphabetic system of a target language. However, the development of writing awareness (writing with computers) was not successful. The learners of Slovak failed to internalize the diacritic system of Slovak through electronic writing (i.e. writing with computers).

Interestingly, it was not the computer-enhanced practice but pen-and-paper writing that developed the learners' knowledge of diacritics as well as their language learning awareness. They were encouraged to produce the written texts and save them in their folders. Some learners wrote with the computer and either totally or partly ignored the diacritic system. Others delivered their handwritten texts to the teacher and peers on paper. This mix of approaches, making use of the technology or writing by hand, resulted in a compromise – scanning of the hand-written texts and downloading them in learner folders. Those who preferred writing by hand claimed that the method had a direct impact on the increase of their awareness of learning Slovak.

- (18) *"When writing (by hand), I am aware of learning and I am aware of what I am learning. I know I am learning, for example, I can learn the vocabulary far better than when I write on the computer."*
- (19) *"When writing by hand, I am learning. I am getting aware of the signs (spelling), even of the grammar..."*
- (20) *"When I write in Slovak, it feels like painting. I enjoy it. I cannot do the same on the computer."*
- (21) *"I am a slow learner. I have to be fully aware of what I am doing. The only way to learn how to write is to write by hand."*

Not only writing by hand, but also reflecting on one's learning process enhanced the increase of learning awareness. Reflecting is an important learning skill in all forms of learning (Clarke 2008). To gain the maximum benefit, reflecting should be approached in a systematic way. The learners were asked to reflect on their learning process in their e-learning journals. They were encouraged to write regularly, even though the entries were short. They were also encouraged to reflect on their colleagues' entries. Thus the learning journal served as a learning tool for raising the awareness of learners' learning in general.

4.3 Post-course themes

The **post-course themes** are related to synchronous, asynchronous and blended learning, to learners' approaches to learning, specifically e-learning, and to the evaluation of the course. Student voices are presented in extracts (22)-(31).

4.3.1 Asynchronous, synchronous and blended learning

Apart from several hours of guided discussion, learning was mostly asynchronous and blended.

Asynchronous e-learning (e.g. emails, discussion boards) is a learner-centred teaching method that uses online learning resources to facilitate the sharing of information free from time and place. Asynchronous e-learning is considered to be a key component of efficient e-learning due to its flexibility (freedom from time and space) and thus essential for collaboration. Learners enter the e-learning environment at any time and thus spend more time on accomplishing their tasks and other learning activities. According to Robert and Dennis (Robert & Dennis 2005 in Hrastinski 2008), asynchronous communication increases learners' ability to process information and thus supports learners' cognitive participation.

Synchronous learning (e.g. chat, videoconferencing, face-to-face learning) takes place in a learning environment in which everyone participates at the same time. Synchronous e-learning is perceived as a more social activity, in which learners are participants rather than isolated learners, which often results in an increase of commitment and motivation (Kock 2008 in Hrastinski 2008). Synchronous e-learning primarily supports the learners' personal participation.

A blended learning approach is the combination of face-to-face classroom instruction and computer-mediated activities with an aim to form an integrated instructional approach.

The e-learning course discussed in this case study was considered to be highly appropriate for synchronous and asynchronous learning. However, the students saw blended learning (face-to-face classroom tutorials and computer-mediated activities) as the best option for learning a less commonly taught language.

(22) *"Learning without the contact classes would have taken me the ages! I have learned plenty of small (and big) things in the contact classes, the things I would not have noticed when learning completely alone..."*

(23) *"Tutorials were very useful I got much information and new passion to get ahead..."*

The respondents claimed that without the regular contact classes (face-to-face tutorials) they would not have completed the course.

(24) *"Learning a completely new language in the e-learning environment is very difficult. I learn most on the contact lesson. When the teacher is physically present, my motivation to learn Slovak is far stronger."*

4.3.2 Attitudes towards e-learning

Students generally considered e-learning to be highly motivating and challenging due to the lack of time constraints and lack of pressure. Flexibility was regarded as the highest priority.

- (25) *"I think that I have learned on the e-learning course as much as I would have learned in the class. The only difference between an e-learning and traditional course is that the schedule is more flexible."*

With respect to the students' way of life and their learning styles, the e-learning course was considered to be the right option. However, learning Slovak, as well as any other language at the beginner's level in an e-learning environment, was experienced as being very demanding.

- (26) *"I would not have ever believed that learning a completely new language might be so difficult! When I started with English, German and French, some words and expressions were already familiar. As to the Slovak, I had no idea how the words would sound like..."*

- (27) *"Web-learning requires specific learning strategies. I am used to learning from the books. I guess I just have to find my own way of learning..."*

The necessity of acquiring the new skills and specific strategies for e-learning was recognized. Breaking the old habits of learning from books was also acknowledged.

4.3.3 Approaches to learning

Learners' agency (i.e. their active approach to learning) was monitored by means of Entwistle's model of approaches to learning (Entwistle, 2001). Apart from one student, all respondents regarded themselves as independent learners who employed the deep approach to learning. Their participation in the course was based on their personal interest and group commitment, which resulted in deep learning and minimum dropout. In compliance with Entwistle's model, all learners made a constant effort to understand the language system of Slovak and to learn as much as possible, what Entwistle (2001) calls the "intention to understand ideas by oneself". They constantly built on their previous experience of language learning, comparing the target language to previously acquired languages. Entwistle (2001) describes this process as "relating ideas to previous knowledge...looking for patterns and underlying principles". They sought patterns, generalizations and linguistic principles, especially when learning grammar and vocabulary. Along with the development of their learning awareness, they also became sensitive to Slovak culture, which was reflected in their written compositions on various issues related to Slovak history, culture and language, the approach Entwistle saw as "becoming actively interested in the content".

The learners' reflections on their learning process revealed the evident increase of learning awareness and their belief in having learned a lot. Entwistle

viewed this crucial aspect as “being aware of understanding developing while learning”. They viewed learning as a stimulating activity.

- (28) *“I had a great time on the course! This is for me more like a hobby than any “obligatory” study...When I am learning, I can feel how all what is getting saved deeply somewhere in my mind. That is learning. In the contact class, it is the teacher who generally provides the answers to the questions but on the e-learning course it is the learner who tempts at getting the answers...”*

Learning a new language at the beginner’s level was regarded as difficult and the teacher’s presence at the initial stage was seen as inevitable. The teacher was perceived as a facilitator, supporter and motivation initiator, a view that is in line with the socio-constructivist image of a teacher as a facilitator, motivator and creator of positive social climate (Nanjappa & Grant 2003).

Independent web or e-learning was considered to be better suited for more advanced learners.

- (29) *“I think that learning a new foreign language independently by means of an e-learning course suits better for the more advanced learners. Is there anything more important than teacher’s presence and encouragement? I noticed that I learned most on the contact sessions, my motivation was at its best at those times...”*

- (30) *“ Learning a completely new language in the e-learning environment is very difficult. I learn most on the contact lesson. When the teacher is physically present, my motivation to learn Slovak is far stronger.”*

The learners were continuously monitored and evaluated by the teacher and themselves (self-evaluation). They participated in the course without any intention of getting the highest possible grade, but they did aim at getting the highest possible number of credits (4–5 credits ECTS).

4.3.4 Assessment of the e-learning course

The e-learning course was continuously evaluated and developed by the learners and the teacher. The course was evaluated from the viewpoint of clarity, authenticity, functionality and relevance. The e-learning environment, based around the mountain metaphor, was perceived as one of the major affordances for learning Slovak and as a valuable addition to traditional learning. In their opinion, in addition to practicality and clarity, the learning environment should also be pleasant and motivating, particularly when the target language is a less commonly taught language and if there are not many learners of the target language.

- (31) *“ The structure of the course is good and the idea of climbing is motivating and encouraging...”*

The primary purpose of the course was to inspire learners and to arouse their interest in Slovak studies. The aim was to develop their communicative and

cultural competence: to learn how to use the language in a real life context and thus also to enrich their knowledge of Slovakia and its culture.

5 Concluding remarks and implications

The initial research questions of this study were whether and how Slovak is learned in an e-learning environment and to what extent a good command of all four language skills, especially writing and speaking, may be acquired.

The findings showed that a less commonly taught language (in this case Slovak) may be learned in a new language learning environment as any other language. However, not all language skills may be acquired at an equal level without contact classes. However, the results show that this particular learning environment promotes the feeling in students that they have learned Slovak. Based on their reflections, the learners showed clear progress in their receptive skills (reading and listening), but had difficulty in developing their productive skills (speaking and writing). Furthermore, the new e-learning skills, such as research, content creation and collaboration, were highly appreciated. Blended learning – face-to-face classroom tutorials and computer-mediated activities – was used to compensate for the lack of spontaneous speaking. The problem of electronic writing was solved by a compromise –hand-written texts were accepted and the learners were given the freedom to choose the writing medium.

The difference between learning the less commonly taught and more commonly taught languages in an e-learning environment is in the availability and development of web-learning resources. While the Internet offers numerous ready-made learning materials and sophisticated learning spaces for major languages, very few efficient web materials may be found for lesser commonly taught languages. It is often the teacher who is the course designer and developer for his/her own course. Current developments and innovation in language learning and teaching underline the use of learner-centred pedagogies in new learning environments. Thinking about the future of less commonly taught languages, I see informal learning and Personal Learning Environments (PLE), that is learning in different contexts and situations, as an option to current e-learning approaches. Rapidly growing mobile technologies and the use of social media will offer new learning platforms for the development of all areas of communicative competence.

The current study on learning Slovak in an e-learning environment offers insight into the long history of the so-called small languages and thus contributes to the general pedagogy of less commonly taught languages. Nevertheless, some issues related to the use of effective pedagogical tools and appropriate technologies for teaching Slovak continue to present a challenge to teaching.

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