LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

Technology Supports Cross Cultural Education

LEARNING

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN ELNET

This case study is based on the findings of Professor Graham Davies, ELNET External Evaluator at the Polytechnic of West London. It focuses on language acquisition in the context of ELNET.

Introduction

Any evaluation of ELNET as an instrument of language acquisition must address a series of fundamental questions:

- the fostering of communication and the need for a firm language base as a prerequisite to effective communication
- structured activities on ELNET
- the importance of the human network
- quality and authenticity of language exchanges on ELNET
- learning benefits
- recommended improvements.

Language Acquisition in the Context of ELNET

ELNET should be evaluated in the context of its primary objective, that of promoting communication across international frontiers.

The main difficulty of language training is that, while it is relatively easy to teach an individual to utter and understand a set of key phrases and to test his or her knowledge and ability to use them in the right context, there is no guarantee that trainees who pass the test will be able to communicate effectively. Coping in a foreign language, even at the lowest level, may suddenly demand a knowledge of unusual vocabulary and an ability to understand a strange dialect that can only be expected after years of experience. In other words, language

training can only be built on a firm base. ELNET can therefore only be used effectively amongst students who have already reached a certain level of proficiency.

In the UK, for example, only those UK students already studying 'A' Level languages were able to derive benefit from ELNET. Less experienced linguists were quickly out of their depth. This highlights the problem of disparity of language levels amongst the participating ELNET partners in the three countries.

Structured Activities within ELNET

The fulfilment of ELNET's aim of fostering cross-cultural group learning depends significantly on student-centred activities. The ELNET conferencing system provides the technical framework, rather than tightly structured, teacher-directed activities.

The student-centred approach was successful when pupils with adequate language skills were using the system. Those without the necessary language skills continued to require a more structured approach.

An excellent example of effective teacher-directed activity is the EURODESK simulation, a competition in which students had to digest material presented in a variety of languages on ELNET and produce a succinct report for would-be exporters. EURODESK gave students the opportunity to display their expertise across a variety of skills:

- use of electronic communications systems as a means of storing and conveying up-to-date information
- understanding texts in a foreign language
- selecting relevant factual information and collaborative writing.

2

The EURODESK simulation owed its success to intensive activity on the part of the ELNET team and all the participants.

It is clear, however, that it is not always necessary to set up elaborate structured activities in order to stimulate communication. The Euroquizzes, consisting of sets of simple questions, proved very popular. Similarly, a student-initiated quiz, in which the UK students asked their French partners to provide translations of a set of computer terms, was responded to very quickly and accurately.

The Human Network

The building of a human network is a vital first step in the success of a project such as this. Even the most elaborately planned and best structured activity depends on the commitment of all parties involved in its execution.

ELNET has made a major contribution to establishing an international human network with a common interest in languages and communications technology. Any weak links are more than compensated for by the strong ones.

The two international conferences held in Caen, November 1990, and in Würzburg, October 1991, revealed the commitment, dedication and enthusiasm of the staff involved in the ELNET project. They also demonstrated that effective communication in a mixture of three languages is a reality.

Quality and Authenticity of Language

Some of the best examples of authentic communication took place within the less tightly structured conferences, namely those in which the students were allowed to respond independently once the theme had been introduced.

Conference Successes

The informal atmosphere of the Café conference is indisputably authentic and involved students in a range of dialogues covering anything from discussions about national characteristics to reports on visits abroad. Equally successful was the conference which addressed the question of nuclear energy. This involved students comparing the scenario in their own country with that of other participants. Other fruitful areas of political debate were the reunification of Germany, the Channel Tunnel and the situation in Yugoslavia.

In all these cases, pupils were able to engage in an open and lively exchange of views.

Recommendations

ELNET has broken new ground and there are a number of lessons that have been learned. Future initiatives should build on the success achieved so far.

An international conference should be set up at the beginning of a project and at the beginning of each subsequent year. This would establish the human network from the outset and could incorporate basic training, strategic planning, etc.

Teachers involved in the project should have a more generous time allocation.

Overseas partners should receive adequate funding in return for their commitment to the project.

Students should be assigned to activities appropriate to their language level.

More structured, teacher-directed activities should be introduced, aimed at different language levels. This would help overcome the problems caused by any disparity in language proficiency in different countries.

There should be a clear statement of the aims of each conference item.

Timing of activities should take careful account of school and college holiday periods.

Conclusion:
The Learning Benefits
Achieved through ELNET

A project which has as its main aim the fostering of cross-cultural group learning is difficult to evaluate. Traditional teaching methods, with their use of audio and video materials and language laboratories will never be entirely superseded. However, these media make no provision for an essential catalyst to learning: direct contact between peer groups, independent of time and space. This is the most significant and enduring success of the ELNET programme.

The project also fostered cross-cultural group learning amongst teachers, something that will filter down in the longer term.