# *INTERNET-BASED LEARNING ACTIVITIES. SHARING KTU EXPERIENCE AND IDEAS*

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**Abstract**

Work with the Internet is being successfully integrated into language learning at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU). KTU students have been participating in SIMULAB (Internet-based intercultural learning project) activities and in Grundtvig project eCOLE which offers on-line communication and learning activities together with students from five European countries. The article deals with the project experience and outcomes. The authors also share ideas about the application of virtual classroom Nicenet, which is an efficient tool in organising students'self-study work and exchanging information.

## Background

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

## Internet-based intercultural projects

*SIMULAB project*

Internet-based learning activities provide a number of possibilities for international communication and cross-curricular learning. The two projects, SIMULAB and eCOLE, that our University students are participating in can serve as good examples.

The idea of SIMULAB is to involve foreign language learners into real-life situations, simulations that reach beyond national borders. These simulations are run on the Internet within Telsi environment. The SIMULAB concept and Telsi environment are results of international cooperation between European adult educators. Telsi platform contains Documents, Mail, Chat, Help folders. (To see the environment, one can go to one of presently run simulations "Cultural Awareness". It is password-protected, the username is: *Observer*, password: *Obs*. A similar environment can be viewed in the eCOLE project, presented in the following part of this paper). Within Document folders the environment supervisor creates folders for the procedure of the simulation, instructions manual on how to use Telsi, and users' folders, in which they can create

their own documents. The documents can be created in plain text, hypertext formats, users can upload pictures, documents from their own machine, can create links. The environment is user-friendly and it does not require any programming knowledge. Our university students were highly motivated when participating in simulations "Cultural awareness", "European education", "The Will". Evaluation is the last step of every simulation: students and teachers reflect on their experiences during the activity, point out what they liked and disliked. Intercultural communication is the key element that motivates them to be actively involved in the activity. Students get really involved and the usual complaint they make during the evaluation is lack of time, as simulations are designed to be run in 5 – 6 weeks. The scripts of simulations mentioned above are shareware and can be found on the SIMULAB homepage (http://oyt.oulu.fi/tsimulab).

*eCOLE project*

A further development of the SIMULAB concept is implemented in the eCOLE project, dedicated to collaborative learning in adult education. This project is also run within Telsi environment. It has two models: website story writing (WSS) and cross-curricular problem solving activities (ACROSS). Both in WSS and ACROSS learners by joint efforts have to produce either a fictional text or write a report.

Let us focus on the ACROSS model. During the first round of the activity the learners representing five countries had to write reports on different energy sources used in these countries; during the second round information about different professions had to be collected in every country and reports summarizing the findings written.

While analyzing the procedure of the problem that learners had to solve (working in groups on a specific task, browsing the Internet, collecting and selecting necessary information, communicating with foreign partners to exchange or share information, impressions, writing reports and placing them in the environment), a constructivist approach to learning can be traced. "Constructivist learning theory predicts that knowledge encoded from data by learners themselves will be more flexible, transferable, and useful than knowledge encoded for them by experts and transmitted to them by an instructor" (Cobb, 1999). This view is supported by Ewing, Dowling and Coutts (1999), who consider knowledge as personally constructed through internal mental actions of the learner. The internal mental actions include organising, adapting, reordering, and inventing or reinventing. The same authors proposed a model for a constructivist approach to learning with ICT.

**Applying constructivism to learning with ICT**

Practical application of the proposed model can be illustrated by drawing a parallel between the principles of the constructivist approach and the eCOLE web-based collaborative cross-curricular activities:

1. *Learning should be context-based (make sense to real life environment; contextualized in authentic activities; links with existing knowledge; content has established links with past experience).* In reference to the project, the students had some general knowledge about the existing different sources of energy used either in their own or other countries; or had general

knowledge about different standards of living, employment situations in their own and other countries.

2. *Conceptual learning is through active involvement (understanding through participation; knowledge construction is internal; knowledge grows from personal reconceptualizing; learning involves personal meaning; experience becomes part of the meaning).* The tasks that were formulated for the students enabled them to find and collate information from the web and other sources, and to put it into their country's report on energy sources or a certain profession in different countries. For example, in the activity "Energy sources" each participating country was responsible for collecting information and writing a report on a particular source of energy. The Danish group was responsible for finding out about the situation of wind energy use not only in their country, but also in their partner countries (Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Lithuania); the Norwegian group – about hydro energy; the Swedish – about thermal energy; the Portuguese – about solar energy; the Lithuanian – about nuclear energy. In another activity, "Job mobility", the students from the countries mentioned above were comparing the cost of living, cost of a supermarket trolley, aspects of social security, comparing and writing reports about five occupations (a politician, nurse, policeman/policewoman, cashier, student): what qualification is required for that job, what working hours are, salaries, etc.

3. *Learning is through collaboration with others (sharing knowledge and resolving misunderstandings; interaction for new knowledge; ideas available for comment; understanding from shared constructing; negotiation of outcomes).* Students had to negotiate in their groups on how to structure their task: what parts should comprise the report, who will be responsible for each part, what information to collect, how to put it into meaningful categories. In order to get information about partner countries, they had to exchange messages asking foreign partners questions for specific information, giving their own answers to the questions received.

4. *Learner should have personal autonomy and control over learning (personal decision making; deriving own learning strategies and own goals; learning event developing planning skills; teacher mediation depending on needs and skills of the learners).* When the tasks were distributed among the groups within national groups, each participant had the independence and responsibility for the completion of the task. The teacher acted as a facilitator in helping to move forward when the students couldn't solve the emerging problems themselves.

5. *Learning is personal growth (thinking on task to reach shared understanding; personal reflection on progress; argument leading to reflection helping refine concepts).* Class discussions on the progress achieved made the students reflect on the work they were doing, compare to others and evaluate. The process itself becomes very important.

6. *Learning outcome is a perspective and understanding (learning outcomes not specified; outcomes unique to the learner; task to help multiple perspectives; different approaches to understanding; no limit to relevance of resource).* In the process of the project, the students commented on the findings presented by other countries, they urged their passive peers for their input as they realized that the final outcome could be reached only in close cooperation. No restrictions were set for the students on where to look for the information in order to attain the final results.

Those who are interested in the project are welcome to eCOLE website addresses:

Round One WebSiteStory

ACROSS

Round Two: WebSiteStory 1

ACROSS 1

Each link will lead you to different simulations of the project. As the platform is password protected, a username and password for guests have been created. Username: *lurker*. Password: *ecole.* Under the Document folders students place their reports or stories. Folder Helpdesk on the left-hand side menu provides a user manual for TELSI platform. Folder Mail contains several lists: Café for general communication, Step 1, etc. are for discussions in a particular stage of a simulation.

**Virtual Classroom NICENET**

Another successful ICT "discovery" of recent years was the application of a virtual classroom Nicenet (http://www.nicenet.org) as an efficient course management tool. Nicenet, an Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA), was founded in 1995 by Internet professionals as a tool for providing services for secondary and tertiary education. The service space is provided by the California Community Colocation Project. It runs on a donated version of Macromedia ColdFusion. As the authors introduce it, "the system was designed not as a replacement for the classroom, but rather as a supplement allowing greater communication and sharing of information among students and between teachers and their students. However, Nicenet does not restrict the use of the ICA for any purpose". Our teachers find it very useful in updating language courses with the latest information as well.

The main advantages of the Nicenet classroom are that that it is very easy to apply, does not require any special skills or programmes, and is free of charge. The information on the front page of the website shows that it is a very popular tool: each week hundreds of new classrooms are created that are visited by thousands of users.

It takes only a few minutes to create the class and to join it. The procedure is the following:

- Go to the Nicenet website: http://www.nicenet.org
- Click on "Create a Class"
- You will be asked to choose a username and a password, then a name for your class and some contact information.
- You will be assigned a "key" for your class that you will give your students so that they can create their user accounts and access your class.
- Your students click on "Join a class", enter the class key and get registered by filling in their personal data on the registration page. After that, the class can be entered just by printing in the username and the password.

The menu of the classroom consists of several sections:

**- Class members**. Here all the names and e-mails of the class members are listed, so the teacher can easily check who has registered for the class.

**- Class schedule**. This section is of great help for the teacher as well as the students, because all the topics, tasks and deadlines can be registered here, thus making the structure, the content and the requirements of the course clear to those who may have missed some instructions.

**- Documents**. Both students and teachers find it very easy to publish their documents here by using a simple "copy and paste" technique, following the detailed instructions presented on the page. No knowledge of HTML is needed. Besides, the section gives a possibility to edit the published documents and to send an answer or a comment to the author. The documents are accessible to all the members of the class, therefore all the participants have a chance to familiarize themselves with the materials and the teachers can paste any additional texts or exercises needed for the course actually in a few minutes.

Students' essays can be easily classified with the help of the sub-section "Online assignments", where different topics can be turned into a specially defined space. This is very convenient when the classroom is shared by several groups of students, each group having their own "pocket" for their assignments.

**- Conferencing**. This forum enables the students to discuss the topics studied during the course. Here the class members can respond to each other's comments, express their ideas on the subject under study or suggest another topic for discussion. We do not use this Nicenet section as it would be quite artificial to have discussions on the net with somebody whom we meet several times a week in the classroom, however, it could be especially helpful in cases when students do not have many contact hours or in distance learning education.

**- Personal messages**. The section is similar to traditional e-mail, but restricted to the usage among the class members, where the students and the teacher can exchange their ideas or inform others about the latest news. All the members of the class are informed about the new messages as soon as they enter the classroom. When sending messages you are asked to mark those who you wish to send the message to: either tick "All members" or select some particular person(s), and the information reaches the desired addressee.

This communication section was especially popular among our students. Their messages added a personal touch to the exchange of views and ideas, some of them encouraging others to join a discussion or urging peers to keep to the deadlines of presenting essays. Some students who were not very active in classroom discussions turned out to be quite at ease in expressing their thoughts by e-mail.

**- Link sharing**. This part provides a possibility to link your classroom to the abundance of Internet resources. It also gives an opportunity of introducing a variety of documents in different formats, as the other sections have quite a monotonous layout. All the links that are related to the

subject under study as well as any materials relevant for self-study can be listed here. The Nicenet informs the class members when a new link has been added.

The application of Nicenet has surpassed our expectations: students were very interested in the new way of communication and acquiring information. The networked learning environment resulted in increased collaboration among students and new positive changes in teacher-student relations. A students' survey confirms that active involvement and networking in language learning leads to higher motivation and satisfaction. It is also a great possibility for teachers to update course materials and make them accessible to the class in a simple way. Nicenet has been successfully implemented in both General Language Practice and ESP courses. For several years a substantial list of Internet resources has been recommended as a supplement for Business English course and the Virtual Classroom has given a perfect opportunity to present those websites as links in the "Link Sharing" section which gives direct access to the additional materials.In both Business English and General Practice courses students are given different tasks – to make summaries and submit them in the "Online Assignments" section, to work with Webquests according to the detailed instructions sent by the teacher, or to express their opinions on the topics under study via "Personal Messages".

Those who are interested in the structure of the classroom and the activities of our Business English course, are welcome to join the class (Class Key H49246B79).

In conclusion, we may say that integration of web-based activities into language courses have considerably enhanced students' interest in language learning and their motivation. The knowledge constructed by the learners themselves is usually most appreciated by them. The process of learning and communication is also of great significance.

**References**

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