HUMLab

Nätverket för Informationsteknik i Akademisk Språkutbildning
ITAS

Evaluation Report

Project Evaluator

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Executive Summary

This report evaluates the ITAS project since the end of 2002. Overall, the project appears to have been well managed and to have achieved all its aims as well as allowing the project team to identify areas which require development. The evaluator has only identified one minor area where further work might raise the profile of the project for existing and prospective participants. ITAS is both innovative and creative, but will need continued support to maintain its impetus and to make a real contribution not only to Swedish tertiary language teachers but as a model for others to draw upon, both nationally and internationally.

1. Background

ICT has been used in language learning for approximately two decades, primarily in the areas of Computer Assisted Language Learning [CALL] and, more recently, Computer Mediated Communication [CMC]. In the former category, research has tended to concentrate of 'drill and kill' programs that provide learners with exercises to drill and practise specific language structures and vocabulary use. In the latter, there has been much work in the use of email and other primarily asynchronous, text-based technologies to allow learners to communicate with each other either in a tandem situation (groups of learners of each others' first language communicate according to the principles of reciprocity, bilingualism and autonomy) to complete tasks or in groups where all participants have the same target language [L2].

Although the last decade has seen increasing interest in the use of synchronous technologies such as chat to support language learning purposes, little investigation has been made of the potential of virtual worlds - particularly graphical and audio worlds – to support language learning in a way that goes beyond 'chat', partly because of a lack of knowledge about and/or experience of such technologies by language teachers at all levels.

1.1. The international context

The need for some sort of training and/or information source for language teachers wishing or needing to use ICT as part of their routine learning and teaching work is widely recognised both nationally and internationally. At this point, it is perhaps important to mention the ITAS network model has recently attracted the attention of language teacher trainers in Norway who believe that it may be appropriate to their own needs. They are currently investigating ITAS further.

At a national level, within the UK at least, the government has funded large scale projects such as the *Virtual Teacher Centre* which has a section specifically aimed at language teachers (http://vtc.ngfl.gov.uk/docserver.php?temid=9). At international level, funding has been provided to support large EU projects like *Information and Communications Technologies for Language Teachers* [*ICT 4 LT*] (http://www.ict4lt.org) and *Linguanet* (http://www.linguanet-europa.org/y2/). What all these projects appear to have in common is that they offer static training documentation, lists of ICT-related resources or both as well as some degree of asynchronous discussion. Neither synchronous communication nor virtual worlds is mentioned as a topic for discussion or use, and this suggests that ITAS is breaking new ground, albeit with a different constituency – tertiary level rather than all language teachers.

In the commercial world, some organisations do provide courses that aim to train language teachers in using both synchronous and asynchronous applications in their work (e.g. *Netlearn Languages* – http://nll.co.uk – offer the *Certificate in the Online Teaching of English* [COLTE]) while increasing numbers of generic online tutoring courses are being developed by Higher Education providers (examples in the UK include the Universities of Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam, Birmingham, the Open University and the Institute of Education, University of London). These offer courses in online tutoring ranging from postgraduate Certificate to Master's level, and competition for students is fierce with demand increasing. The very existence of such courses underlines the importance of ITAS to tertiary level Swedish courses, offering them, as it does, a unique opportunity to engage with innovative and creative uses of ICT, while evaluating their appropriateness to their own learning and teaching practices.

As I have already pointed out, virtual worlds have been very little used in mainstream language learning and teaching, although researchers such as the Brisbane-based truna aka j.turner and an increasing number of Israeli teachers have begun to investigate the possibilities of one of the tools employed by ITAS - *ActiveWorlds*; in the world beyond education, however, groupware of this sort is becoming increasingly ubiquitous; virtual worlds allow participants to create their environment and community in real time as well as to take risks in their learning and examine "what if?" scenarios without fear of dire consequences; these applications are unlike discussion forums which, through their very asynchronicity tend to support a more reflective approach to learning and teaching.

ITAS is, therefore, by its very nature, innovative in terms of both its target contstituency and its conceptualisation.

1.2. ITAS

ITAS was conceived as a project whose purpose was primarily twofold; firstly, to initiate thinking about and using information technology of all types in academic language learning, but in particular creative and innovative uses of information technology in this area; secondly, to develop and support an infrastructure to bring together and support language teachers – particularly at tertiary level – in their use of such technologies for language learning and teaching..

Five main areas were proposed in the document *Program för utveckling av IKT-användning I akademisk språkutbildning* (Svensson & Klingeman) 22 November 2002. These were distilled into 8 major objectives for the project (see Appendix A). The outcomes of ITAS during 2003 suggest that while all these objectives have been addressed by the project, many lessons have been learned by the project team and some new and some different directions from those originally envisaged have been identified. It is now vital to build further upon the successes of ITAS, as well as to investigate some areas in more depth to ensure the optimum outcomes for all stakeholders in the project in terms of a sustainable infrastructure to support innovative and creative uses of ICT in language learning and teaching

2. About the evaluator

This evaluation was carried out by Lesley Shield, Lecturer in Language Learning and Technology at the Open University, UK, an educational technologist, digital literacist and specialist in online language learning and virtual worlds. She is also a member of the EuroCALL Executive Committee, Responsible for the Toilthèque database of resources for researchers in languages and ICT of the Revue Apprentissage des Langues et Systèmes d'Information et Communication [ALSIC] and a member of the Specialist Advisory Group for the Learning and Teaching Support Network [LTSN], Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, UK.

3. Methodology for evaluation

The project evaluation was carried out during the period September-October 2003.

The methodology adopted for the evaluation was as follows:

- Initial contact and email discussions between the Evaluator, Project Manager (Patrik Svensson) and Project Coordinator (Therese Örnberg), both of HUMLab at the University of Umeå, Sweden.
- Email communication with Associate Project Manager, Ulrike Klingeman of Stockholms Universitet.
- Analysis of web-based papers and other project-related artefacts supplied by the Project Coordinator
- Individual synchronous (real time), in-world, text-based discussion with the Project Managers and Project Coordinator
- Follow-up email communication with the Project Manager, Associate Project Manager and Project Coordinator.
- Analysis and evaluation report writing

4. Project management

Overall, the ITAS project would appear to have met its objectives by producing a range of outputs and activities of the sort defined in those objectives (Appendix A).

These included: engaging teachers of lesser-taught languages in the project, online conferences and panel discussions including international experts in the field of online (language) education, log files of the synchronous conferences and panel discussions that could be accessed after the event, streamed events, and an asynchronous discussion forum.

Interviews with the Project Manager and Associate Project Manager revealed a high level of reflection the project's early phases and a willingness to learn from its less successful aspects while celebrating its successes. A willingness to learn from their own experiences and from those of others investigating the educational use of communications technologies around the world has led to a thoughtful integration of aspects of good practice into ITAS, strengthening the project as a whole

Taken together, the outputs and activities of ITAS, as well as the reflective approach taken by the project leaders support the proposition that this is a well-managed project.

5. Analysis by project aims

An analysis of the outcomes of the project in terms of its aims reveals that it has achieved all of these, despite having encountered some difficulties. The project team has taken a reflexive approach and has learned as much from initial setbacks – which have been addressed as a result of this approach - as from immediate successes.

5.1. To stimulate and encourage forward-looking use of ICT among Swedish academic language teachers

The outputs of ITAS have included an asynchronous discussion forum where participants are able to post questions and share their views about the uses of CALL and ICT for language learning and teaching purposes. Although the Project Manager, Associate Project Manager and Project Coordinator independently agreed that the forum was not an immediate success in terms of the amount of traffic it generated, it has recently been relaunched with a reworked moderation model which, they believe, will address the shortcomings that were identified in the original. The project team described the issues that arose with the evaluator and are addressing these on two fronts: firstly, their new moderation model, where there are several moderators or 'hosts' who are each responsible for their own 'thread' as well as for the overall forum; secondly, they are actively investigating the work of experts in the moderation of asynchronous discussion fora such as Gilly Salmon, a researcher based in the UK and whose work is internationally acknowledged as being at the forefront of the field.

The project also offers tertiary level language teachers in Sweden information about and experience of different ways in which to use ICT in language learning and teaching, allowing them to learn about the technical and pedagogical aspects of different tools and to take risks, if they wish to do so, within a secure and supportive environment of their peers.

5.2. To provide members of the network with a sustainable platform for discussing and reflecting on the use of ICT in language education.

As indicated above, ITAS has provided stakeholders with a discussion forum in which they are able to exchange views, experiences and opinions as well as reflect upon the established and possible uses of ICT in language education. They have also had the

opportunity to join synchronous meetings in different types of established virtual world (*ActiveWorlds* and *Traveler*) and are able to access archived material from the project at any time via its website.

5.3. To reach out to as many teachers as possible

As part of its remit, ITAS has disseminated information about the use of ICT in language education, initially at a face-to-face conference and then online both asynchronously and at synchronous text-based and streamed events.   This has recently been followed up by a mailshot to all languages departments in Swedish universities.

This objective is partly related to that listed under 5.8 below; all ITAS activities are archived on the project's website and accessible to stakeholders at any time. In this way, teachers who join the project as it progresses are able independently to review material that may be of particular interest to them or simply give them access to discussions and activities that are current in the project when they join.

5.4. To encourage interdisciplinary discussion

ITAS has included a series of real-time, in-world presentations by international experts from outside the immediate world of language learning. These include Bonnie de Varco (USA), an independent educational technologist and Bryan Alexander (USA), a literature specialist with a focus on digital media. In its relaunched format, two of the hosts for the ITAS discussion forum are drawn from the areas of literature (Mona Sandqvist) and mathematics (Christian Huldt), thus emphasisng that the project team is drawing upon cross-disciplinary expertise from both domestic and international arenas.

5.5. To promote real experience and experimentation with technology

The project has offered stakeholders the opportunity to participate in real-time conferences and discussions in virtual worlds. Fewer teachers than had been expected took advantage of this, although they were offered real-time training sessions as well as web-based information about using the technology. While this is disappointing, it is not an unexpected outcome; many projects in the area of innovative uses of ICT report a lower take-up than expected. Recent experience at the Open University, UK [OU], for example, has had the same outcome – neither students nor teachers took up the opportunities offered for training in the use of specific ICT applications in the numbers anticipated, even though they were encouraged to do so. Partly, this seems to be the result of lack of time, partly over-confidence by some end users in their degree of ICT competence, partly scepticism on behalf of some participants about the efficacy of online learning and partly because the training was not compulsory.

Continuing to invite teachers to participate in the discussions is essential to the success of ITAS, since, as the Project Coordinator pointed out, those teachers who are persuaded to take part in discussions and training tend to remain with the project and to "spread the word" to their colleagues. Expanding networks of this sort is time-consuming and requires dedication and patience on behalf of both participants and sponsors. Although the expansion may be slow, it is necessary to continue to maintain and support the network in order to achieve the initial objectives.

5.6. To be internationally situated and to have a collective good-quality international network of people affiliated with ITAS.

As indicated above (point 5.4), international experts have been involved in ITAS. As well as inviting presenters and subject matter experts from the USA, ITAS has attracted participants from Australia and the UK, all of whom have expertise in distance and online language learning. This has resulted in an ongoing network of international experts who have taken part in the project over a period of time and in more than one event, both in the online environment and in face-to-face presentations which have been streamed (and archived) for those who cannot attend in person. The retention and expansion of an international audience of this sort demonstrates the inherent interest and importance of the concepts underlying ITAS.

5.7. To give representatives for the so called "small languages" an opportunity to cooperate with one another.

Teachers of Russian and Italian, both of which are lesser-taught languages in Sweden, have already been involved in ITAS, participating in sessions in *Traveler*, a virtual world that supports real time audio conferencing in a graphical environment. Recently, invitations to take part in the project have been sent out to all teachers at university language centres in Sweden, thus offering the opportunity for teachers to meet and to exchange and reflect upon their experiences virtually. Work has already begun on investigating possible uses of *Adobe Atmosphere*, a presentation tool that teachers will be able to use from January 2004 in order to make their own presentations to a national and international audience.

5.8. To create an archive with collected material and reports for members to be able to access at any time.

A comprehensive website for the ITAS project can be found at: (http://www2.humlab.umu.se/itas/default.asp). This includes an archive of all ITAS materials. All live ITAS sessions have been logged and archived as text, audio or video files as appropriate. Summaries of the online conferences are provided for those who were unable to attend the live sessions. Discussion forum contributions are also archived.

5.9. To try out and evaluate different platforms for online activities.

During 2002-2003, there have been two live conferences held in Active Worlds (December 2002 and May 2003), a streamed seminar (March 2003), the discussion forum has been relaunched and teachers of Italian and Russian have been involved in working with *Traveler*.

6. Future directions

As indicated in the preceding evaluation, the work of this project is both innovative and important. Its major aim – to provide a network for tertiary language teachers in Sweden so that they can share and discuss their experiences with ICT and language learning and teaching as well as try out innovative approaches to using ICT for such purposes – has certainly been met.

Areas that require further work have been identified. These include:

a. **raising the profile of the project among the target group**. This is a major task and will require continuous efforts by the project team in both the virtual and physical arenas to persuade teachers of the usefulness of the project to their career development. One way in which this could be achieved is for the project team overtly to locate ITAS in the context of ICT and language learning by providing participants with a reading list about the field. This could become part of the archived materials on the project's website, and, like the rest of the website, would require regular and ongoing updating to achieve and maintain its purpose. However, it seems to the evaluator that this might be a worthwhile, though time-taking task since it would raise the profile of ITAS in the eyes of prospective and existing participating by demonstrating exactly how innovative this project is.

b. **maintaining and continuing to develop the network**. Steps are currently underway to extend the membership of the network. However, as I have already stated, such expansion requires dedication, time and support to succeed.

c. **maintaining and extending the international perspective.** A network of international contacts has been begun. This now requires expansion, perhaps especially in the area of interdisciplinarity with possible inclusion in the network of experts from Human-Computer Interaction, digital literacy, web design and usability, graphic design and so on.

d. **providing a discussion forum for tertiary level language teachers in Sweden to share and reflect on their knowledge and experiences of ICT in language learning and teaching contexts** It is interesting to note at this point that the initial failure of the discussion forum to take off is something that has also been identified in other major teacher training and development projects. For example, the EU project *ICT 4 LT* includes in the *News* section of its website the following announcement:

> We have closed down the ICT4LT Discussion List and the ICT4LT Bulletin Board due to an almost complete lack of contributions sent to either list during the last six months

The approach taken by the ITAS team – to try a different moderation model and to develop the community aspects of the group – shows a willingness to address problematic issues face on, and this can only be commended.

e. **continuing to investigate innovative and creative uses of technologies.** As noted above, although synchronous technologies of various types are increasingly used outside education, language teachers have rarely been offered the opportunity to use innovative technologies, either as part of their professional development or as part of their learning/teaching work. ITAS has provided them with that opportunity and the project team will need to continue to investigate and disseminate new technologies and uses of technologies as these become available and apparent.

7. Summary

The innovative aspects of ITAS – investigating possible uses of virtual worlds for learning and teaching purposes, the involvement of tertiary level language teachers, the emphasis on interdisciplinarity and the willingness to try new approaches to solve problems – are all now underway. If the project is to have the intended impact on the tertiary level language teaching community in Sweden, the impetus must be maintained and the aims of the project widely disseminated and integrated into the work of its constituency. The importance of the project cannot be stressed enough; there is little similarly innovative work underway in the language learning and

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teaching world and ITAS has the opportunity to raise the profile of both the innovative and creative use of learning technologies and of the innovative and creative nature of language learning and teaching research currently taking place in Sweden.

Lesley Shield
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Appendix A

OBJECTIVES FOR THE ITAS PROJECT (2003-2004)

1. To stimulate and encourage forward-looking use of ICT among Swedish academic language teachers; there is a focus on innovative and structurally important use of technology in academic language education.

2. To provide members of the network with a sustainable platform for discussing and reflecting on the use of ICT in language education.

3. To reach out to as many teachers as possible through pooling resources, using technology, disseminating widely and through creating acceptance for the importance of this field.

4. To encourage interdisciplinary discussion and going beyond the language learning community.

5. To promote real experience and experimentation with technology; not least through introducing technological applications to the members of the network so that they can try them out for themselves.

6. To be internationally situated and to have a collective good-quality international network of people affiliated with ITAS. The focus is not on single events but on creating long-term alliances (with seminar speakers for instance). This international orientation should also be reflected on the web site – thus helping members to orient themselves.

7. To give representatives for the so called "small languages" an opportunity to cooperate with one another. This is a group that has been identified nationally as an important group to target.

8. To create an archive with collected material and reports for members to be able to access at any time.

9. To try out and evaluate different platforms for online activities: online conferences in Active Worlds, live-streamed seminars with integrated chat, discussion forums, online meetings in Traveler with student groups.