

# NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS in FRANCE

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## **1. General introduction**

The aim of this report is to describe current situations related to New Learning Environments (NLE) for language learning<sup>1</sup> teaching in Higher Education (HE) in France, and which have resulted from Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Student and Staff Mobility (SSM). The interest of such is to more specifically identify the extent to which ICT and SSM are being exploited formally, and to know what the implications of New Learning Environments (NLE) are for the language learningteachingprocess in terms of shifting roles of learners and teachers, subsequenttraining, investment and needs, etc.

The descriptions are based both on readings of returned questionnaires and on interviews with actors involved in the field. While not accounting for every single HE establishment in France, the report attempts nevertheless, to show trends in the question of NLE brought about by ICT and SSM.

### **Introduction to French HE and NLE – 3 considerations**

As in a number of European countries and in the context of globalisation, France has the ambition of equipping its HE students with life-long learning and communication skills of which a working knowledge of a minimum of two foreign languages is a component. There is now question of two foreign languages being compulsory in order to obtain a university degree. It is, as a result, fair to say that more importance is now being given to languages than ever before, especially by actors other than teachers involved in education and learning.

Secondly, and again not unlike elsewhere, ICT is an inescapable everyday reality and, as such, the younger generation should be equipped for it (young people expect it). Not only are there directives to train and educate students for ICT at all levels (primary and upwards), aiming at 100% computer literacy, but ICT has also provided a new dimension in which the language learning process is proven to be played out effectively.

Finally, and partly linked to these two points, is the relatively recent emergence of mobility by students and staff, both real and virtual, particularly in the European space, and which has created new needs in terms of language and cultural preparation, while at the same time providing a new potential environment for more effective language learning to take place.

French Ministry directives for change and development are both reflections of, and driving factors behind, initiatives in language learningteaching in Higher Education in France.

## **2. Role of NLE in language learning**

New Learning Environments brought about by ICT and SSM theoretically only have a role in as much as they lead to effective language learningteaching. They should be at the service of learners and teachers alike and not vice versa.

One of ICT's role is surely to enhance learning through its capacity to promote self-directed learning; it provides the learner with access to materials, to practice opportunities, and in turn, with access to his/her own learning (the learner having agency here is of paramount importance in effective learning). It can lend itself to interactive contact with the target language in all its forms regardless of spatial or temporal considerations. These are the strengths of ICT, and the arguments for ICT as an environment conducive to quality language learning.

As for SSM, it should especially provide an environment for "real" communication interactivity, with an emphasis on implementation by the learner of strategies to resolve problems of communication – a "negotiating your meaning situation" par excellence.

## 2.1 Integration of NLE

### For language students

In the case of language students it would appear from three interviews that the traditional teacher oriented learning classroom persists but with more and more use of Internet for research purposes by students on an individual personal initiative.

### For students of other disciplines

For students of other disciplines the trend has been and still is very much towards the Multimedia Centre and Centre de Langues with its autonomous and self-directed learning of which face-to-face tutorials are a part, using off-the-shelf software designed for language learning and for other disciplines.

A large number of establishments have Internet, E-mail correspondents and Intranet facilities used in the framework of task-based activities where access is both to "outside" material and to institutionally-based (self-made) subject and/or language material. Task-based and thematic-based learning has developed, in relation to the prominent disciplines of the establishment (science, horticulture, etc.).

Where multimedia centres exist, the use of them is usually an integral part of the languages programme. However, 'newer' learning environments resulting from such ICT applications as computer mediated conferencing (virtual campus), video conferencing, and on the line platform are less common and as yet cannot be said to represent the norm.

As an example of where this does exist we should cite the ESINSA ([Leycuras@unice.fr](mailto:Leycuras@unice.fr)).

RANACLES, the French branch of CERCLES (Confederation Europeenne des Centres de Langues de l'Enseignement Supérieur), is an active association bringing together 40 HE institutions operating Language Centres (Centres de Langues) sharing and pooling ideas on how best to improve conditions of acquisition and language competence in the Language Centres; it aims to develop guided autonomy, distance learning, and new technologies and multilingualism and multiculturalism. RANACLES points the way for other HE institutions in terms of new learning environments Other HE establishments especially for non-specialist language learners may well follow and adhere to the ideas and guidelines set out by RANACLES.

Concerning SSM, the European Exchange Programmes have opened up new dimensions for both language specialists and non-language specialists, and this has been the case for some time now. This situation is continuing to have significant consequences on how HE establishments now view what could be loosely termed 'linguistic and cultural' preparation for the experience abroad. The 'bigger space' brought about by the arrival of exchange students and staff from Europe, however does not appear to be exploited in a formal structural way.

## 2.2 Policies

### 2.3 New Learning Strategies : introduction and promotion of independent learning

Probably the biggest challenge facing teachers, students and administrators alike, with regard to independent learning, is accepting and adopting the new pedagogical approach which is vital to effective autonomous self-directed language learning. It requires a substantial move away from traditional methods. Most HE institutions which integrate autonomy understand the importance of training learners to become autonomous, and have set up training sessions in 'learner strategies' for students, not only at the beginning but also throughout their autonomous learning experience. Such is the case at INSA Lyon- to quote one example [desc@insa-lyon.fr](mailto:desc@insa-lyon.fr).

It is significant that in two cases where learner training is not incorporated into the system autonomous learning has been abandoned with a return to the traditional classroom situation.

### 2.4 Facilities for independent learning

The current trend is for HE institutions to equip themselves with multimedia language laboratories, resource centres, computer rooms, to invest in DVD, Internet links or extension of such

## 2.5 Development of learning materials

Materials which are developed for a particular institution can be made accessible to other establishments, and there are moves to arrange such a sharing system. The comment was made several times that learning material development was time consuming.

Respondents to the questionnaires indicate that at present learning material is being developed in the form of multimedia files, software programs, digitalized video extracts, on-line resources, lesson databases.

## 2.6 Profiles of actors involved

### Teacher

There is most certainly a feeling that the teacher's role has changed; he is more of a 'tutor', a 'counsellor', a 'facilitator', checking and assessing students' progress. He is no longer the sole source of information as his purely teaching role is reduced.

### Student

The student is reported as now being more involved in his own learning process. He is providing more interaction and feedback, which in turn, interpellates the teacher. It must be said however, that it is difficult for students to acquire autonomous (the "process") skills. The student tending to be more committed to the business of learning goes hand in hand with his increased responsibility in the process.

### Institution

Institutional decision-makers appear to go along with the new learning environments, in the context of developing globalisation, of increased exchange agreements and of present-day needs of students for adequate preparation for professional life.

## 2.7 Training for language teachers

ICT and SSM induced environments have created a need for language teacher training in i) computer skills ii) in new technologies and iii) in the pedagogy adapted to these new environments. There is clearly a need felt for this by our respondents.

At the Université de la Méditerranée, Aix Marseille II, training sessions are organised for teachers of all disciplines in 1) how to create internet sites, 2) pedagogy and internet

## 2.8 Measuring proficiency

On 22 May 2000 the Ministry announced plans to introduce the C.L.E.S. – Certificat de Competences en Langues de l'Enseignement Supérieur – which will attest to the language competence level of students who are students of other disciplines, not language specialists. All HE non-language specialist students will be compelled, as part of their course requirements to demonstrate the level of their competence in two languages on a scale of three.

It is significant that mention in the official text is made of the "insufficient practice given to languages in French HE, and particularly in universities" (Bulletin Officiel n°25 au 29 juin 2000).

This CLES initiative will undoubtedly have consequences on language learning in HE institutions and especially on ICT since the text states :

“...les établissements auront à mettre à la disposition des candidats des dispositifs pédagogiques appropriés, faisant notamment appel aux nouvelles technologies de l'autoformation”.

This project is only at its pilot stage and involves five universities at present.

While waiting for CLES to become an integral part of HE, note has been made of the fact that ICT facilitates closer and more regular monitoring of students progress and proficiency, and that NLE allows auto evaluation to take place more easily than in the traditional learning environment.

Independent activity is itself evaluated as part of continuous assessment (by activity we should understand the 'process' as opposed to the 'product').

A number of respondents indicated that they intend to implement changes in their measurement system in the NLE in the future suggesting that proficiency measurement was something that was programmed but not a priority.

## **2.9 Action research**

The RANACLES organisation is committed to joint action research as one of its objectives, together with new technologies.

## **3. Promoting multilingualism & cultural diversity**

### **3.1 Promoting the learning of LWULTL**

Student and Staff Mobility has given rise to needs and desires to study other languages and cultures which were not particularly accessible in the past. It has also produced a perfect space for learning with i) the presence of representatives of these languages and cultures in French HE institutions, and with ii) Internet ('study buddies') and iii) CDROMs designed for language learning. Students are reported to be learning the following LWULTL languages, usually on an individual basis – Dutch, Romanian, Hungarian, Russian, and especially Portuguese. French as a foreign language has also experienced an increased demand.

### **3.2 Promoting cultural understanding and intercultural awareness**

Using ICT broadens the learner's exposure to target cultures through Internet, satellite TV, DVD films. It was pointed out however that in working in a multi media centre there was a risk that real contact with the culture, traditionally in the form of the teacher- native speaker or not- was in fact reduced. This risk no longer exists where the programme includes contact hours with teachers and/or other native speakers. Most HE institutions include such 'contact' time thus allowing for cultural awareness and understanding to develop, even if informally.

At the Centre de Langues at l'Université Lyon II exchange students are engaged on a voluntary basis to attend and animate 'conversation workshops' which run parallel to the semi-autonomous learning programmes. These students require training in communication activities which is provided by the teachers in the centre. The teachers are satisfied that both language competence and cultural awareness are improved.

### **3.3 Accessing authentic resources & materials**

ICT naturally brings a wealth of authentic resources and materials, as does SSM. (see 3.2) , thus providing much diverse cultural input. The Centre de Langues at l'Université Lyon II reports having introduced a system of assignments focusing on aspects of the targeted culture, increasing interaction with it and thus enhancing awareness.

### **3.4 Student and staff exchanges**

(See 3.2)

## 4. Role of NLE in training programs for language and language related professions

### 4.1 NLE & training of language teachers

### 4.2 NLE & training of translators & interpreters

## 5. Role of NLE in continuing education

At l'Université Lyon III Service de la Formation Continue a pilot computer mediated conference (virtual campus) course is being run. A suggestion was made that Continuing Education was usually the forerunner of new ideas.

## 6. Using ICT for promoting European cooperation

### 6.1 In development of programs

### 6.2 In delivery of programs

## 7. Needs in the area of NLE in relation to:

### 7.1 Language learning & teaching

New Learning Environments in language learning and teaching have created very specific needs and have amplified existing ones.

First and foremost, there is a need felt for shared reflection and discussion about the potential of the new learning environments, to be followed by training in and development of a pedagogy that embraces these new environments. Such a change in pedagogical approach can represent a significant personal and professional investment which in turn, represents an investment of time.

A need was also expressed for pooling of material and resources, and for training in computer skills, and new technologies, as was the need for technical back up in the form of sufficient and reliable equipment and a permanent technical service.

The most frequently expressed need, however, was the need for :

- time to attend training sessions,
- time to develop materials,
- time to make inventories of commercialised materials and of authentic materials and resources accessible through ICT,
- time to develop the networking between items necessary for effective independent learning.,
- time to carry out the increased work load which results from the individualised learning process inherent to new learning environments.

Finally, the need was expressed for acknowledgement from the institution for the specificity of this relatively new type of learning process, together with a degree of flexibility with regard to the objectives, means and evaluation of the process.

### 7.2 multilingualism & cultural diversity

There is a need to continue to promote and support 'exchanges' between different cultures through European and other exchange programmes and through ICT, with emphasis on increased mobility of staff. Support needs to be at an infrastructure and logistic level as well as a financial one. As a principle and a practice, cultural and linguistic awareness needs to be developed in France at a regional level too (Brittany, Corsica, etc).

### 7.3 Promotion of European co-operation

### 7.4 Provision of language learning to students with special needs

Apart from access to ICT and a relatively easier use of the mouse as opposed to pen for motor handicapped persons, and for visually impaired students with possibilities to integrate Braille, it was admitted that insufficient thought had been given to the question of accommodating students with special needs. A suggestion was made that looking into such needs may give rise to a totally unexplored new learning environment from which other students with no special needs could benefit.

## 8. Measures to be taken at

### 8.1 Institutional level

Measures should be taken by teachers to pool and share resources at an interdisciplinary level in their respective establishments.

Institutions should make time and resources available (material and human) for the development and operation of new learning environments: equipment, materials, technical and pedagogical expertise and back up, training and research facilities.

Decisions for acquiring material and equipment should be taken after consultation with the Languages staff.

At the institutional level consideration should be given to the specificity of the independent learning process, and should be accommodated accordingly at the assessment and evaluation stage.

### 8.2 Regional level

### 8.3 National level

At a national level it is necessary to ensure that all HE institutions are equipped in ICT, and are able to fully engage in student and staff exchanges. It is equally important that decisions concerning these measures are taken in the interest of the learners and not purely on economic grounds.

Measures must be taken to ensure that there is adequate on-going training in computer skills, in new technologies and their contribution to language acquisition and cultural awareness, and in the methodology which is specific to ICT and SSM.

A new teacher profile is emerging as a result of these new learning environments and it is important that this be officially acknowledged and recognised.

### 8.4 at European level

## 9. Examples of good practice