

NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS in LITHUANIA

Jurate Zdanyte
Kaunas University of Technology

1. General introduction

As has been stated in the final report of TNP1, the two essential developments that have led to recent changes in language learning/teaching environments in higher education in Europe are the rapid emergence of new technologies and the strong increase in student and staff mobility.

The aim of the present survey was to find out whether these changes are taking place in Lithuanian higher schools and to what extent, as well as to define how the new learning environments affect the language learning/teaching process.

At present there are 15 state higher educational institutions (10 universities and 5 academies) in Lithuania:

| Institution | Number of faculties | Number of teaching and research units |
|---|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Kaunas University of Medicine | 5 | 68 |
| Kaunas University of Technology | 12 | 75 |
| Klaipeda University | 7 | 51 |
| Law University of Lithuania | 5 | 18 |
| Lithuanian Academy of Music | 4 | 35 |
| Lithuanian Academy of Physical Education | 5 | 22 |
| Lithuanian University of Agriculture | 5 | 5 |
| Lithuanian Veterinary Academy | 2 | 33 |
| Gen. J.Zemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania | | 10 |
| Siauliai University | 7 | 31 |
| Vilnius Academy of Art | 3 | 17 |
| Vilnius Gediminas Technical University | 8 | 72 |
| Vilnius Pedagogical University | 8 | 70 |
| Vilnius University | 12 | 110 |
| Vytautas Magnus University | 7 | 47 |

Data as of September 1,1999 provided by the Dept. of Science and Higher Education under the Ministry of Education and Science

Universities provide education at all the three levels of higher education. They train specialists taking into consideration the needs of the State and labour market.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania the principles of autonomy, academic freedom and integration of research and higher education are enforced.

Undergraduate study programmes are intended to provide a theoretical basis for a profession and to form professional skills necessary for the future career. As foreign language skills are of great significance in present-day world, foreign language (English, German or French) courses are generally included in the curriculum of Bachelor degree studies.

There is a great demand for foreign language specialists, therefore Philological faculties of Universities have Bachelor and Master degree programmes for training specialists in the most widely used foreign languages - English, German, French - as well as other, less known languages. Doctoral studies are also provided.

Although at a slower rate than in Western countries, information and communication technologies are being introduced in Lithuanian higher educational institutions.

2. The role of new learning environments in language teaching and learning

2.1 The integration of New Learning Environments in language teaching and learning

Interviews with language teachers from different universities have shown that the process of ICT integration in language teaching/learning is gradually developing in Lithuania. However, most universities do not have any institutional policy concerning ICT implementation in language learning/teaching, and any progress made in the area is based mainly on individual initiative and enthusiasm of language teachers.

Due to scarce resources, the introduction of new technologies in the area of foreign language learning/teaching is rather complicated. The existing computer labs are usually used for computer science related courses. All students acquire computer literacy skills during the introductory course in the first year.

In recent years several universities (Kaunas University of Technology, Klaipeda University, Gen. J.Zemaitis Military Academy, Siauliai University, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Vilnius Pedagogical University) have opened specialised computer laboratories for language teaching/learning.

The leader in introducing ICT into language teaching/learning is Kaunas University of Technology (KTU).

The University with the student body of over 12,000 has its computer centre, 25 computer laboratories, a video conference hall, a distance learning centre, different service facilities.

In 1997 two specialised computer laboratories for teaching/learning languages were opened and the Centre of Foreign Languages (61 academic staff) started introducing ICT into the area of language learning/teaching. The Centre is the pioneer among Lithuanian higher schools in integrating new technologies into language learning/teaching and has been acknowledged as the most active group working in the area.

The first software acquired was several sets of commercially available CD-ROMs (Grammar ROM, Let's Do Business, Issues in English, etc.) purchased thanks to the financial support from TEMPUS project.

Methodological recommendations for the programmes were prepared by a group of teachers, a balanced combination of class time and laboratory time was worked out and the computer programmes became an integral part of different language courses.

Regular surveys of students' evaluation of the computer programmes have always shown positive or even enthusiastic results, and this is the main encouragement for further work and experimentation in the area.

It has been generally agreed that the available educational software, although charming by its novelty at the beginning, often deserves criticism for being not flexible and not always adjustable to the existing course materials.

Therefore, future plans for ICT integration development include creating computer programmes by the University teachers that would extend and supplement the provided language courses.

In 1991 the International Studies Centre was established at Kaunas University of Technology. All the lectures at the Centre are delivered in English, German, French or Russian. Students from 9 different countries study together with Lithuanians. After two years of basic and general courses in the foreign language, students either continue their studies in Lithuanian in the chosen branch in whatever appropriate faculty at KTU or they may apply to study at any of eight west European universities in accordance with the TEMPUS project. A Bachelor degree study programme of Export Engineering is offered at the Centre.

Local and visiting professors widely use new technologies in teaching different subjects.

In Lithuanian higher schools student and staff mobility programmes depend on the established international contacts of the particular university departments. TEMPUS, Socrates Erasmus and other international programmes have contributed to expanding the number of international student exchange.

2.2 Policies underlying the integration of New Learning Environments

Official documents stress that one of the main goals of Lithuania is to develop cooperation with the European Union, Council of Europe and UNESCO and to support integration of Lithuanian higher education and research institutions into European and global academic community, thus facilitating the mobility of people and ensuring their right to work and study. Different HE reform programmes aim at modernization of higher education curricula, drawing them closer to Western standards and improving the quality of certain courses, foreign languages and information technologies among them.

However, there is no concrete administrative policy concerning new learning environments in HE on the national scale. There is no coordinating centre, and the Ministry of Education and Science has no information about the status quo.

As universities are granted autonomy by the Constitution, their governing bodies determine priorities in the modernization of curricula and university development, Innovative ideas, however, are often hindered by financial problems, shortage of technical facilities and skilled staff.

Most universities consider participation in international projects a major priority, and a considerable contribution into developing new learning environments has been made by the European programmes, such as Tempus, Phare, Erasmus, Socrates.

2.3 New learning strategies: the introduction and promotion of independent learning

So far, independent language learning with the help of computer programmes has been a subject for discussions and a future direction for higher education development.

2.4 Facilities for independent learning

Due to scarce facilities, resource centres for independent learning are only among future visions.

2.5 Development of learning materials

The first attempt to present the course material using new technologies was made by a young English teacher at Siauliai University - Vytenis Koncius has developed a website for his students: www.geocities.com/vkoncius

In close cooperation with the British Council, English teachers of Vilnius University have developed computer-based materials for the course 'Corpus Driven Language Learning' at the Faculty of Philology.

Staff training in developing Internet-based teaching materials has started at Kaunas University of Technology upon the basis of the programme "Hot Potatoes" designed at Victoria University, Canada. The principles of using the programme for developing individual teaching materials, exercises and tests were explained and demonstrated to language teachers from other higher schools in Lithuania during a seminar in January, 2001.

A computerized English language course for correspondence students is under development at Vilnius University and Kaunas University of Technology.

2.6 Redefining the profile of the teacher

The issue of the changing role of the teacher has been discussed at different Republican conferences and seminars. Learner-centred approach, which is gaining recognition, requires a change in the role of the teacher and increasing learner autonomy. The teacher's role is changing from that of an instructor to a facilitator and adviser.

2.7 Training programmes and courses for language teachers

Special computer training courses for the staff of the Centre of Foreign Languages started at Kaunas University of Technology in 1997 - over 20 teachers acquired the main skills for working with computers. Since then seminars and courses have been organised regularly.

Fixed weekly hours have been planned for teachers' self-study at the computer lab, thus encouraging them to get familiar with the available materials and to search for new resources. A number of teachers participated in on-line seminars as well as seminars and workshops organised by the British Council or the America Center.

In 1999-2001 the Resource Centre of the British Council held a series of seminars "Internet in ELT Classroom" for secondary and higher school teachers of Lithuania.

Vilnius University hosts the Language Corpora Centre to promote the use of corpora in foreign language learning and teaching. Since spring 2002 the Centre staff have been running a series of workshops for the English language teaching community in Lithuania.

Since the year 2000 seminars on New Technologies in Language Learning have been held at Centre of Foreign Languages, Kaunas University of Technology, with the support of the British Council.

The growing interest in information technologies among English teachers of Lithuanian higher schools has led to the establishment of IT SIG (Special Interest Group), supported by the British Council. The participants of the inaugural meeting on 11 May, 2001, agreed that the main objective of the group is to share experience and disseminate information in the area of ICT integration into language learning/teaching. Since then, the SIG members have been exchanging new information by e-mail and regular meetings have been held.

Two English teachers from Kaunas University of Technology participated in the International ICT Teacher Trainers Workshops in Prague (July, 2001) and Poznan (May, 2002), organised by the British Council. The workshops developed into an on-going project. During the dissemination stage of the project the participants gave seminars to English teachers in different regions of Lithuania, thus increasing computer literacy among language specialists. The project group has been active in sharing ideas and training materials via mailing list.

2.8 Measuring proficiency: assessment and self-assessment

A computer programme of self-assessment in the English language course for correspondence students is under development at Vilnius University.

3. Promoting multilingualism and cultural diversity

3.1 Promoting the learning of the less widely used and less taught languages

Vilnius University, Department of Scandinavian Languages, were working on Socrates-Lingua project INTERLIDA with Danish and British partners (1999 – 2001). Coordinator – Frit Oplysningsforbund, Institution of adult education, Denmark.

INTERLIDA was a project for developing an interactive Lithuanian-Danish and Danish-Lithuanian language course on a CD-ROM. The course serves as a teaching tool at educational institutions as well as a source for self-access studies.

At the Philological Faculty of Vilnius University new programmes for studying less widely used languages (Bulgarian, Czech, Finnish, Latvian, Polish, Slovenian, Serb-Croatian, etc.) have been introduced in recent years in close cooperation with the countries of the target language.

At Vytautas Magnus University students can take courses of the Italian, Swedish, Arabic, Greek, Latin, Polish, Russian languages.

3.2 Promoting cultural understanding and intercultural communication

European programmes, projects and grants for student and staff mobility have served as the most effective promotion of cultural understanding and intercultural communication. In many cases the partnership initiated by an EU-supported project develops into successful long-term cooperation, thus expanding international contacts and bringing educational institutions of different countries closer.

Introduction of new technologies into language studies has also brought new possibilities of multicultural communication.

In autumn 1999 several students' groups of Kaunas University of Technology joined the SIMULAB www-based communication project, offered by Oulu University, Finland. Different student groups discussed the scripts presented in the project: "The Will", "Cultural Awareness", "European Education" with Polish, Norwegian, Danish partners. The evaluation results showed that students were highly motivated to participate in the project, therefore the University renewed subscription to the project for the year 2001.

The most valuable feature of SIMULAB is its orientation towards developing students' cultural awareness and an attractive way of getting students involved in searching facts about other countries' characteristic features, cultural standards, places of interest, educational establishments. Students' communication with peers from other European countries also develops their understanding about cultural diversity.

The idea of Internet-based collaborative learning has been continued (since 2001) within the framework of Grundtvig project ECOLE in which students of Kaunas University of Technology discuss intercultural issues with students from Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden and Portugal.

3.3 Accessing authentic resources and materials

Abundant Internet resources are considered an important facilitator in foreign language studies. Surveys have shown that students are computer-literate and greatly interested in the Internet as a source of general information as well as materials for their studies.

Initially, the Internet resources could not be used in regular classwork because of technical hindrances: the logging in was too slow, the connection was not always reliable, therefore CD-ROMs were given preference in classwork, leaving the work with the Internet resources for students' self-study. However, the situation is improving in most higher schools, and those that have good access to the Internet in their computer labs introduce varied Internet applications in language studies.

Internet resources are used widely at the Centre of Foreign Languages, Kaunas University of Technology. In different language courses work with the World Wide Web is part of the activities in the computer lab or self-study assignments. A great advantage of the Web is that students can individually find something that is appropriate for their interests at their level. Preparation of reports or essays based on Internet materials both increases the students' interest in Internet resources and improves their language skills.

Participation in the Internet-based European projects mentioned above develops on-line communication skills and enhances students' motivation.

Students are encouraged to use the Internet for finding information on different subjects, e.g., a mini-conference "European Union – for or against?" was based on the Internet materials about the European Union compiled by the students of International Studies Centre.

In order to make the web search easier, teachers have prepared lists of Internet addresses for different courses: Business English, American Studies, or self study. Lists of useful website addresses for teachers of English have been prepared and regularly updated.

At Law University of Lithuania the Internet materials are used in language teaching in various ways: students are given downloaded or printed texts of accessible Internet materials, or lists of websites addresses with appropriate tasks to them, or they are asked to find relevant Internet materials on particular subjects for further discussions or essay writing.

3.4 Exchange of students and staff

Student and staff mobility programmes in the area of foreign languages exist in a number of higher schools:

Gen. J.Zemaitis Military Academy: teachers of foreign languages have participated in language programmes in Texas Defence Language Institute, USA, Bundessprachenamt Hurte, Germany, Rosfor Military School, France, Language School of Canadian Military Forces.

Kaunas University of Technology started student and staff exchange programme (Erasmus) between the Faculty of Humanities and Pedagogische Academie in Vienna, Austria in 2001.

Vytautas Magnus University, Department of Foreign Languages is participating in the Partnership Project of German Language Departments GIP. Project coordinator – DAAD (Academic Exchange Service of Germany)

Vilnius Pedagogical University is participating in exchange programmes with:

Erfurt University, Germany – teachers and students of English and German,

Heidelberg Higher Pedagogical School – teachers and students of German, English, French;

Goettingen George August University – teachers of general linguistics;

Uppsala University, Sweden – students of the Swedish language;

Katho Catholic Seminary, Belgium – students and teachers of English and French

Vilnius University, Philological Faculty:

According to Erasmus exchange programme, students study in different hogher schools abroad: in Brussels, Antwerpen, Belgium; Utrecht, Holland; Uppsala, Sweden; Helsinki, Joensu, Turku, Finland; Cork, Ireland; Berlin, Frankfurt/M, Leipzig, Germany, etc.

Department of English Philology has been collaborating with Uppsala University, Sweden and Joensu University, Finland, Bradford University, Reading University, UK, for the last several years.

Department of Translation Studies is a participant in Socrates exchange programme for teachers and students, their partners being Higher School of Management in Gent, Belgium and Aarhus School of Business, Denmark.

4. The role of NLE in training programmes for language and language related professions

4.1 New Learning Environments and the training of language teachers

Future language teachers, present-day students of Philological faculties of Lithuanian universities, are usually given only an introductory computer course during which they acquire the basic skills of work with computers.

A new computer laboratory for language learning/teaching started operating in Vilnius Pedagogical University in 2001, and the faculty are determined to introduce computer-assisted language learning methods into teacher training curriculum in the nearest future.

At Siauliai University an optional course "Computers and language teaching" is given to 3rd year students of French.

As mentioned in 2.5., the first attempt to create a website for students of English was made by a young teacher of this university: www.geocities.com/vkoncius

4.2 New Learning Environments and the training of translators and interpreters

Vilnius University has been providing courses for interpreters and translators since 1994. In 1997 the Department of Translation Studies was established. It offers two-year courses at MA level and one-year courses at Diploma level. Interpreter training forms part of the promotion of Lithuania's candidacy for accession to the European Union in terms of establishing conference interpretation training on a professional basis at the highest possible level.

In 1999-2000 the Department cooperated successfully with Aarhus School of Business, Denmark, in carrying out the joint project "Reinforcement and consolidation of the education of translators at Vilnius University" and with Copenhagen Business School, Denmark, in the project "Development and consolidation of the education of conference interpreters in Lithuania."

At present the Department is carrying out a joint project with Gebert Ruef Foundation, Switzerland, in the area of fiction translation, and project "VINETA" with Flensburg Higher Technical School, Germany, dealing with lexicographical data input into distance learning software. Close contacts are maintained with the EC conference interpreters' service SCIC, interpretation service of the European Parliament, TAIEX, etc.

In response to the current social demands, a Bachelor's degree studies programme "Translation and Editing of Technical Language" started at Kaunas University of Technology in 2000. The programme comprises both engineering courses and language-related subjects as well as courses devoted to developing translation-interpretation skills. The aim of the programme is to train qualified translators of technical literature and skilled interpreters for scientific conferences and business meetings. This is a novelty in itself, because so far translators and interpreters in Lithuania had only humanitarian education.

TRADOS software was obtained for training future specialists, and work with computer programmes or the Internet resources is incorporated in different practical courses.

5. The role of NLE in continuing education programmes or courses

Kaunas University of Technology and Vilnius University have Distance Learning Centres.

Both Centres give courses in other, non-language related subjects.

Vilnius University is in the preparatory stage of an English language course for correspondence students.

Distance Learning Centre at Kaunas University of Technology started providing courses of English MEBA(elementary – pre-intermediatelevel) in 2000.

The course for distance learning MEBA – Modern English for Adult Education – was developed as a part of Phare project in cooperation with experts from Cambridge College.

Its goal is to develop English speaking and writing skills. The target group is adults who have some basics of the English language and want to refresh and to develop their language skills. There is a considerable need of such programmes in Lithuania because a great number of secondary and higher school graduates had studied English at school but forgot it after not using for a long time.

The course, which can be split into 3 parts, consists of 13 modules.

The complete course duration is 9 months, estimated for 300 hours of distance studies and 34 contact hours. Consultations by phone or e-mail are also included.

6. Using Information and Communication (ICT) for promoting European cooperation

6.1 Using ICT for cooperation in the development of programmes

So far, no information has been obtained about the development of such programmes.

6.2 Using ICT for cooperation in the delivery of programmes

No information has been obtained.

7. Needs in the area of New Learning Environments

7.1 Seen in relation to language teaching and learning

Higher educational institutions should be provided with an infrastructure that meets the needs of modern language learning/teaching.

Teacher training and retraining in the area of ICT implementation in language learning/teaching is required at all levels of university studies and in-service.

Methodological recommendations for efficient integration of CALL into the language learning/teaching should be worked out.

User-friendly authoring environment allowing teachers to design their own teaching materials is needed.

Coordination and/or consultation centre for exchange of information and experience is necessary.

- Administrative as well as technical support for teachers involved in developing and implementing CALL materials should be enhanced.

More active participation in international cooperation and European projects in the area of languages is desirable.

7.2 Seen in relation to the promotion of multilingualism and cultural diversity

The essential needs are the following:

Authentic communication with native speakers or other learners of the target language.

International cooperation among higher education institutions, joint projects.

More student and staff exchange programmes.

Support for developing ICT-based language programmes promoting less taught, less used languages.

7.3 Seen in relation to the promotion of European cooperation

Closer ties among higher schools of different European countries.

Cross-national networks for international cooperation and its promotion.

8. Measures to be taken to meet the needs identified

8.1 At institutional level

Additional resources should be found for developing the infrastructure for modern teaching/learning methods.

A clear vision of ICT integration into language learning/teaching process should be developed at the administrative level.

The administration should support and encourage teachers involved in CALL.

International contacts, exchange programmes and projects should be supported and encouraged.

Close cooperation between technological experts and language specialists should be ensured.

8.3 At national level

The Ministry of Education and Science and universities should find additional financing resources for new modern laboratories to ensure easy access to ICT in language learning.

A future vision of ICT integration into language learning/teaching should be worked out.

A course of *ICT in language learning/teaching* should be included in the curriculum of future language teachers.

An efficient network or centre for advising, consulting, exchanging information and experience in the area of language studies and ICT should be set up.

Methodological recommendations for CALL should be prepared and disseminated among higher schools.

8.4 At European level

A European network for training teachers in CALL and providing information in the area should be organised.

International web-based communication programmes for language learners should be developed.

Language learners should be given an easy access to learning materials on the Internet.

Promotion of the existing computer language programmes should be enhanced.

Student/staff exchange programmes and international projects should be encouraged and supported by the EU institutions and other organisations.

Compiled by Jurate Zdanyte

Kaunas University of Technology