NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
in ITALY

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Note: The reports should take into account that New Learning Environments did not just emerge as a result of the introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in language teaching and learning: New Learning Environments can equally well come into being because of the availability of human resources (i.e., visiting students or staff members).

I. General introduction

In order to meet the communicative needs arising from mobility and co-operation in the European Union and taking into account that some forms of multi-lingual and intercultural competence constitute an important aspect of European citizenship, HE institutions can and should play a role of pivotal importance in promoting and maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity. This will be accomplished by taking on responsibility for a wide range of programmes, for research and development activities and for the provision and exploitation of learning environments of specific relevance to the language issue.

HE institutions are aware of the many expectations surrounding them and have come to realise that the challenges they meet today will be even stronger in the future, as the new technologies will allow learning to take place regardless of time and space.

In addition to making access to education and training easier, ICT can also improve the quality of the education provided, by having the contents presented in ways which can enhance the students' motivation and make learners become active participating actors in the learning process. In fact, the contribution of ICT in a didactic perspective is focussed on learners and personalised learning (learner-centredness) and this results in a pedagogical situation in which there may be an integration of different learning modes. Alongside classroom learning with the help of the computer, there may be autonomous learning led, monitored and evaluated by the learner. The traditional teacher may thus give way to a new kind of teacher, as a mediator who facilitates the path of the learners.

It is clear how ICT systems are nowadays seen not as an alternative to the teacher, but as a necessary resource for all language teachers and learners. In fact ICT is a powerful tool for students' learning by doing, as they can assemble and modify their ideas, access and study brand-new information. ICT makes possible the instant exchange of information between individual students; it allows instant access to databases and online information services and provides multimedia technical resources, such as interactive audio and video exercises. ICT also allows for the repurposing of pre-existing educational materials across media formats: print, static illustrations, still and digital photographs, digital audio, still and motion video, animations, computer graphics and hypermedia can all be accessed and combined in novel ways, thus providing useful training that might serve as preparation for professional life and for acquiring new and flexible skills.

Undoubtedly ICT has become a powerful tool for higher education institutions both on and off campus. However, it must be born in mind that the technology is there to meet the needs so that the objectives can be reached. In the learning process the technology itself should not be the driving force and the institutions should not lose focus on their main objectives. It is of paramount importance for HE institutions to define their objectives first, then define the needs to reach these objectives and then find the most adequate way and the most adequate technology to meet those needs. It should not be forgotten that today's most sophisticated technological solutions could be history tomorrow. Thus, flexibility when defining how to meet the needs should be kept in mind.

In fact, innovations in educational technology, especially those like ICT, which offer challenges not only to the established roles of teachers and learners, the nature of materials and the organisation of classrooms, but indeed to the language curriculum as a whole, need to be provided with an educational rationale if they are not to become fashionable instruments of self-promoting *avant garde.* It is therefore important to try and integrate the use of new technologies in the *curriculum,* in order not to have to sacrifice quality for glossy content.

The present report is meant to talk about the implementation of New Learning Environments in Italian universities. Nevertheless, since only few questionnaires have been returned, out of the many that were handed out, this report will inevitably present a partial, unfortunately not exhaustive, description of the Italian situation.

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
   for language students
- for students of other disciplines
- as a preparation for professional life.

To a certain extent if we refer the definition 'New Learning Environments' to the availability of human resources, especially foreign staff members, we could say that New Learning Environments have been in use in Italian Universities for quite a long time. In fact university language courses for language students have a two-fold organisation in Italy. They include content courses taught by University Professors and/or Research Fellows on various aspectslprinciples underlying the foreign language, concentrating i.e. on discourse and genre analysis, and on the analysis of historical, sociological and cultural features. The aim of these courses is to empower students by providing them with deeper insights of the multi-faceted features of the foreign language, in the attempt to prepare them for their future jobs, offering tools of analysis that could be referred to also in further learning and research.

In addition to this, university language courses for language students also include tuition courses in the various languages, taught by native speakers, with varying duration – for instance at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, students are offered 100 hours of tuition, per academic year, in their chosen foreign languages.

Since almost all university courses require at least the study of a foreign language to fulfil the final objective, the same policy, with a reduced number of hours, also applies to students of other disciplines, provided there are credits allotted to the course. Often in these cases the emphasis is mainly on the teaching of reading strategies in the foreign language, as professors want their students to be able to read specific texts in the FL.

Several years ago, right in order to meet the needs of a growing student population, that it was decided to establish Language Centres in a number of Italian universities. When language centres were first established, they were the place for New Learning Environments in Italy (as mentioned by Vittoria Tessitore in her report for the SIGMA Scientific committee on Languages). There students could (and still can) attend courses and follow self-access programmes based on multi-media technology which, more frequently than not, include specially designed didactic software, and which imply an active participation on the part of the learners.

In some universities (University of Urbino, for instance) there are special courses organised to help students learn how to exploit the new technologies for didactic purposes; in other universities (Faculty of Arts and Humanities - University of Modena and Reggio Emilia) there are also courses to make students acquire computer literacy and courses which prepare students for the ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence).

2.2 Policies underlying the integration of New Learning Environments

It can be said that in Italy there is a strong national policy to support the integration of New Learning Environments, and that the emphasis is on students' empowerment in the attempt to endow them with useful skills to be used in life-long learning. Since it is believed that education should focus on the needs and the demands of the students, rather than those of the providers of education, New Learning Environments are seen as a tool to an end, namely students' empowerment.

In order to provide a useful framework for student mobility and to promote European co-operation, HE institutions are moving towards the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference levels to describe the competence required from their students, both when they enter university and at the end of their courses.

For students who fail to meet the required pre-requisites, preparatory courses will be organised, taking advantage of the potentialities offered by ICT.

As to the policies underlining the integration of New Learning Environments, it is worth underlining that at the 'Universita per Stranieri' in Siena there is a university committee who has been appointed to devise strategies and undertake all the necessary technical measures aimed at improving the quality of the learning process.

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

Although self-access does not necessarily ensure learner autonomy, it may provide the practical means whereby learners can take a more active part in determining their own objectives and their own learning programmes, by allowing for direct contact with a wide variety of media and materials and for active use and exploration of the target language to accomplish desired ends.

On the other hand, it is also true that computer-mediated self-access language learning can lead to dependence on a limited range of strategies and materials and a narrowing of perspectives, and that if unassisted, learners could resort to strategies that might impede their effective understanding. In other words, the transition from self-access to self-directed learning must be accomplished and it must include a preliminary phase in which learners are helped to absorb the principles of autonomy in a gradual way, since paradoxically, autonomy grows out of interaction and dependence, as a consequence of the social-interactive roots of learning.

Independent/Autonomous language learning is seen as a goal to be attained, which does not necessarily coincide with 'learning on one's own', i.e. without a teacher, as constant efforts are being made to endow students with the necessary skills that will allow them to carry out their learning autonomously (cf. the relevance of life-long learning).

Due to the possibility of having students organised into small groups, the use of New Learning Environments (with particular reference to ICT) is often integrated into curricular courses, as a component of the language-tuition classes taught by native-speaker teachers. This implies that students may at times be given assignments that they have to carry out outside class hours inside the self-access laboratory, or they can concentrate on activities (such as developing a web page, getting in touch with foreign students via the Tandem Network or using particular CMC programs like FirstClass) when the teacher is in the laboratory with them. In these cases the aim of the teacher is to develop learners' autonomy, but also to make them get acquainted with possible job-related activities.

To such an extent it is worth mentioning the on-line course on how to create a web-page organised at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities - University of Modena e Reggio Emilia, and the course held at the Faculty of Political Sciences – University of Bologna (www.spbo.unibo.it/pais/bonaldi) where the foreign language and ICT are used to make students feel closer to activities that will be part of their life once they leave school.

Similar experiences have also been piloted in other universities (cf. for instance the University of Padova, where FirstClass is used to simulate job interviews and make students create their own web-page, with the teacher giving students assignments, interacting with them and getting feedback even from those who feel extremely shy when confronted with standard face-to-face interaction)..

2.4 Facilities for independent learning

In most Italian universities it is possible to find laboratories equipped with multimedia resources and software tailored to meet the students' needs, which can be used by learners for self-access (in the hope that sooner or later, possibly with the help of an adviser, the shift from self-access to self-direction will take place) and which can also be used by language teachers (native speakers) during their lessons with the students. This applies for instance to the Language Centre of the University of Urbino, to CLIFO (Forli-based Language Centre of the University of Bologna), to the Language Centre of the University of Sassari, to the Faculty of Economics - University of Cagliari, to the University of Bergamo, to 'Universita per Stranieri' in Siena, to the Language Centre of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, to the Language Centre of the University of Trento, to the University of Verona, to the University of Padova and to the Advanced School for Interpreters and Translators (SSLMIT) of the University of Bologna − to mention just the ones that answered the questionnaire that was submitted to faculties and departments all over Italy.

2.5 Development of learning materials

Most universities use ad-hoc materials tailored to the needs of their students (see for instance the Language Centre of the University of Urbino, the Language Centre of the University of Sassari, CLIFO Forli-based Language Centre of the University of Bologna, the Faculty of Economics - University of Cagliari, the Faculty of Political Sciences - University of Bologna, 'Universita per **Stranieri'** in Siena, and the Advanced School for Interpreters and Translators (SSLMIT) of the University of Bologna, that have been developed by their teachers either using currently available authoring programs, or with the help of Information Scientists.

Among the materials developed by the universities that answered the submitted questionnaire we can mention:
- 'Pedro Navaja' developed at the Faculty of Political Sciences - University of Bologna
- Software for language learning designed mainly to be used on-line, including entrance-level tests (in Arabic, French, English, Portuguese, Spanish, German, Italian), exercises at various levels of Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish and Russian developed at CLIFO (www.clifo.unibo.it);
- self-learning courses (CD-ROMs) in Spanish, French, English and Russian developed at CLIFO.

In some cases also software already available on the market is used, and Internet is often referred to as a resource pool for interesting sites (which are looked at by the students) and authentic materials which are employed by the teachers as a starting point for devising tasks that will see the active involvement of the learners. Corpus linguistics is also becoming more and more important, as a tool used by students to improve their knowledge of the FL, and the consultation of corpora available on the net (for free or against payment of a subscription fee, like the Bank of English and the British National Corpus, for instance), is being introduced into university lessons (cf. University of Verona and the Advanced School for Interpreters and Translators, SSLMIT, of the University of Bologna

Since in self-access learning the materials take on, in a way, the role of the teacher, if we want to promote learners' autonomy it is of paramount importance to make sure that the materials are not directive and do not impose on students the so-called 'magister mode' (one of the possible working modes with computers and multimedia materials).

2.6 Redefining the profile of the actors involved

Defining autonomous language learning is not a simple matter of pulling a straightforward definition from the literature. Yet, most definitions have in common three essential components of autonomous learning: structure, control and responsibility. Simply put, learners must be operating within a structure which enables them to exercise control over their learning and to assume the responsibility that this entails. To illustrate this, there are several principles which would characterise the structure of an autonomous learning environment:
- an emphasis on learning through the active use of exploration of the target language to accomplish desired ends
- direct contact with the target language through interaction with a wide variety of media and materials, so that choice becomes a key element of learner control
- learner management of choices and assessment, empowering learners to determine their own pace and make decisions based on personal need, learning style and interest.

Of course the above mentioned aims can be attained both inside a classroom and when the student is learning on his or her own, for instance in a laboratory endowed with multimedia facilities. What really matters is that the roles traditionally assigned to the actors involved in the learning process should change. For instance, the teacher should not any longer be in tight control, transmitting content and knowledge, selecting and directing activities, while his or her counterparts, i.e. the students should be sensitised towards autonomy.

This entails developing the learners' self-awareness as language learners and their awareness of learning goals and options, helping then to come to terms with their strengths and weaknesses, to learn a language efficiently in ways which are compatible with their personalities. As a consequence of what has been stated above, it is necessary for the teacher to shift his or her role from purveyor of information to facilitator of learning.

In this way the traditional teacher gives way to a new kind of teacher, as a mediator who facilitates the path of the learner, not only with regard to language learning, but also in the hope that he or she will be able to learn how to learn and develop those abilities which will eventually enable him or her to carry on learning autonomously.

On the basis of the answers to the submitted questionnaire it is possible to mention the presence of a language adviser at the Language Centre of the University of Sassari, at the Language Centre of the University of Padova, at the Language Centre of the University of Bergamo and at the Language Centre of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

2.7 Measuring proficiency: assessment and self-assessment

The present situation in Italian universities is not homogenous, as there are some universities which can count on better infrastructures than others. Anyway, all in all it can be said that almost all universities are taking into account the need to pay greater attention to learners' needs and are at present referring to the levels and descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference to define the entrance (pre-requisites) and exit level of language competence required from their students.

In line with these principles AICLU (the Italian Association of University Language Centres) is at present developing a standardised test, called CERCLU, to be used in Italian universities, to test and certify the mastery of the basic requirements in FL competence for university students. The need for such a test is made even more urgent by the new University Degree programmes in Italy, which have established obligatory language requirements in ALL HE education courses. As far as the English language is concerned, the basic required level of competence is B1 − Threshold level of the Common European Framework of Reference.

In addition to this, in order to place more emphasis on such concepts as 'standardisation' and 'learner-centredness', several Italian universities are now planning to use the European Language Portfolio with their students, in line with what was done at the University of Calabria, whose staff was the first to devise a personalised version of the Portfolio.

ICT is also being employed for tests that are currently being administered at the University of Bergamo and at the Language Centre of the University of Trento.

2.8 Action research on the implementation of New Learning Environments

Action-research is used to refer to teacher-initiated investigation which seeks to increase the teachers' understanding of teaching and learning processes and to bring about change in traditional classroom practices. Action-research typically involves small-scale investigative projects and consists of a number of phases which often recur in cycles including:
- planning
- action
- observation
- reflection

New Learning Environments are used as a tool in action-research (especially as far as the establishment of new learning modes is concerned), in that they can encourage the adoption on the part of the students of multiple approaches and can favour the acquisition of new and flexible skills, thus providing useful training that might serve as preparation for professional life.

Consequently they can contribute to creating a pedagogical situation in which there may be an integration of different learning modes. Alongside classroom learning with the help of the computer, there is autonomous learning led, monitored and evaluated by the learner.

To such an extent it is worth underlining that the Faculty of Political Sciences − University of Bologna took part in a bi-lingual project, called 'Migration Project', aimed at the implementation of New Learning Environments (www.quipo.it/internetscuola/progettoemigrazione).

3. Promoting multilingualism and cultural diversity

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

Software for language learning has also been devised (at the present stage mainly to be used on-line (cf. www.clifo.unibo.it) to promote the learning of less widely used and less taught languages such as: Arabic and Russian (and Catalan at the Language Centre of the University of Sassari).

3.2   Promoting cultural understanding and intercultural awareness

For what concerns the promotion of multilingualism and cultural diversity, to be accomplished by means of the establishment of New Learning Environments, it is to be stated that in Italian universities native speakers have always been actively involved in teaching language tuition courses to all kinds of audiences (students majoring in languages, students of other disciplines, translators, interpreters, teachers) thus allowing for the enhancement of the learners' intercultural awareness.

In addition to this, also software for Computer Mediated Communication can be resorted to, in the setting up of cultural exchange projects for intercultural communication, with countries as far away as Japan (cf. the experience of the University of **Padova**). These projects can evolve from a simple electronic exchange to the nurturing of understanding through a valuing of difference.

Most universities (see for instance the Faculty of Political Sciences – University of Bologna) take actively part in the Tandem Project (www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/tandem).

At the 'Universita per Stranieri' in Siena an intercultural room will soon be available, where students will be able to listen to music, cook and perform other kinds of practical and experimental activities.

At the Language Centre of the University of Macerata, a project called CRONOLANG is being piloted, aimed at promoting, in the area of student mobility (cf. for instance incoming and outgoing Erasmus students) and mobility tout *court,* the knowledge of foreign cultures and languages, in the attempt to favour the integration process. An Internet Forum will contribute to the dissemination of the project results and of sample materials. Furthermore, the project includes, among its objectives, also the creation of a corpus or corpora containing instances of cultural and linguistic performances of different origin.

3.3   Accessing authentic resources and materials

Internet is often referred to as a resource pool for interesting sites (which are looked at by the students) and authentic materials which are employed by the teachers as a starting point for devising tasks that will see the active involvement of the learners. Corpus linguistics is also becoming more and more important, as a tool used by students to improve their knowledge of the FL and the consultation of corpora available on the net (for free or against payment of a subscription fee, like the Bank of English and the British National Corpus, for instance), is being introduced into university lessons. This is often the case at the University of Verona and at the Advanced School for Interpreters and Translators (SSLMIT) of the University of Bologna, where corpora are part and parcel of most language courses. Teachers of this university refer not only to the Bank of English and the British National Corpus, but also to other data bases available on-line or to the ones that have been organised by other colleagues.

3.4   Student and staff exchanges
Staff exchanges are now becoming part of Italian universities life, and students are offered to explore new possibilities in the field of language learning.
Staff exchanges are practised under provisions such as bilateral agreements between universities or short courses offered by visiting professors. Community programmes are very popular with students. Students are encouraged to take part in the exchange programmes to practise the FL while studying other subjects, rather than taking specific language courses.

4.   The role of New Learning Environments in training programmes for language and language related professions

4.1   New Learning Environments and the training of language teachers

As far as teacher training is concerned, at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities - University of Modena and Reggio **Emilia** - a project is currently under way, which should bring to the development (together with the University of Stirling) of a web site (divided into three areas) for primary language teachers training (both in-service and pre-service).

The implementation of a website is seen as an essential tool for the dissemination of the project results and of sample materials. The website will include three different sections:

1. on-line grids and checklists for language assessment and needs analysis
2. on-line papers on classroom management language
3. an interactive section

with a two-fold focus:

a) focus on teacher's mastering of language for classroom management
b) focus on teacher's mastering of language for professional self-development.

The language level required may be referred to as an intermediate stage of proficiency (ALTE's independent user) which should more or less correspond to the level B2 (Vantage) of the Common European Framework of Reference. As far as the teachers' self-evaluation is concerned, the website could be used to submit teachers on-line grids and checklists that could help them assess their competence as to communicative language competence and linguistic competence both within the classroom and for professional self-development.

These grids and checklists should encourage the teachers to reflect upon the accuracy of their self-assessment and above all provide feedback and advice, by making links available for further improvement (for instance links to reference tools such as data-bases and library resources). But above all they should encourage teachers to access section 2 and 3 of the website.

Section 2 of the website will consist of on-line papers on the topic of classroom management language which contain both expository parts and other parts which require the teachers to take a more active role. Their function is to provide the teachers with some theoretically-oriented background for their interaction with the learners, to stir their curiosity and interest and to promote their active involvement.

Section 3 (the INTERACTIVE section of the website) will be organised like a FORUM, with all the necessary tools: for instance it will be possible to have written and oral contacts, synchronous communication at fixed times, shared boards. In the forum teachers can all access and download some materials on the central server (stored in the area called: NOTICE BOARD) and then hand in their comments. The NOTICE BOARD can be used to store case-studies andlor lecture presentations that can demonstrate strategic behaviours, pose problems and arouse interest and discussion. Starting from a few sequences of the corpus on classroom discourse, or maybe from one of the actual transcripts, it will be possible to show teachers several case-studies, asking for their feedback

The common Exchange Conferencing area (organised as a discussion list) will provide a sense of working as part of a community, giving instant access to messages from the group facilitator and information about other members of the group. Teachers will have their own private mailboxes to send messages to any individual in the group, while open discussions on particular topics take place between all the members of the group in the Exchange Conferencing area.

Messages in both the mailbox and the Exchange Conferencing area can be sent as written text, audio recordings (to promote teachers' spoken productive skills) or a combination of the two.

In-service meetings on new technologies and language teaching have been organised by the Faculty of Political Sciences – **University of Bologna** for secondary school teachers' self-development and by the Language Centre of the **University of Modena and Reggio Emilia** for native speaker teachers.

4.2 New Learning Environments and the training of translators and interpreters

The **University of Bologna's** Advanced School for Interpreters and Translators(SSLMIT), has the standard language laboratories and booths for simultaneous interpretation and is also equipped with three ICT labs, all containing computers linked up directly to the Internet to help locate texts, normally of a technical nature, essential for the work of the translator and interpreter. As well as this basic service, the SSLMIT has on-line access to up-to-date dictionaries and electronic corpora, of both a general and a specialised technical nature, in various languages and is presently working on the construction of other corpora of use for teaching and research purposes. There is also a terminological laboratory in which students carry out research for their theses and construct and extend terminological databases in specialised areas to be used by translators and interpreters. Constantly updated software tools are employed for linguistic analysis and to facilitate work on, for example, computer-aided translation in fields where often a set phraseology and standard lexis is used, as in the translation of instruction manuals. The emphasis on technological training and knowledge, and the technical nature of the subject matter dealt with on both the translating and the interpreting side, has ensured a constant interest in

SSLMIT graduates by firms in the economic, industrial and commercial field both in Italy and abroad. Indeed, many students and ex-students are accepted by such firms for further on-site training or find employment with them.

7. Needs in the area of New Learning Environments

7.1 Seen in relation to language teaching and learning

On the basis of the concerns expressed in the previous sections of this survey, it can be stated that higher education needs to:
- be flexible and able to move beyond the sequential nature of traditional classroom teaching/learning;
- be able to individualise instruction and make it interactive, allowing for negotiation about course content and choice of materials;
- give interaction a role of prominence;
- combine natural exposure to the target language and instruction, to account for the mastering of more complex rules, metalinguistic awareness and self-assessment/self-monitoring procedures.

In her keynote address on Learner Autonomy, on occasion of the AILA 12th World congress of Applied Linguistics, Anita Wenden noted that while the social forms may differ, autonomy is a universal goal of human development. She then explored the field to date by contrasting two main approaches to the promotion of autonomy in language learning, one inside the classroom and the other taking place outside the classroom, being associated with self-access centres. In the next part of her address Wenden gave examples of ways in which the two approaches have converged in recent years. For example she referred to the development of the twin goals of learner strategies and self-direction within the classroom and the trend towards the institutionalisation of learner training for learner autonomy. She also explored a number of recent theoretical refinements, such as new awareness of the role of beliefs and affective factors in language learning, and a new understanding of the role of the teacher as both teacher and adviser in the language learning process.

As far as the situation in Italian universities is concerned it is of course to be hoped that in the future this tendency towards learner-centredness that seems to be part and parcel of the new reform which is due to change our university system will actually gain more and more ground and will ultimately lead to the establishment, once and for all, of New Learning Environments in which the main driving force will be the learners' acceptance of utter responsibility for their learning process.

Moreover, HE institutions will have to promote the organisation of national and international workshops and conferences to favour the integration of New Learning Environments in language teaching and learning.