

Chapter 33

Life–Long Language Learning Strategies for a Brave New Digital World: Collaborative Design and Delivery of an Online Module

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this case study is to report and reflect on the design, implementation and fine tuning of the Peer Supported Online Language Learning Exchange module, known more simply as OLLE (Online Language Learning Exchange) which was developed in 2013 and is delivered in collaboration with students at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China. This module seeks to give students in all three University Campuses (United Kingdom, China, and Malaysia) the opportunity to continue to learn a foreign language together, blending, where this is geographically possible, face to face learning opportunities with online learning. It strongly emphasizes language learning as a lifelong learning skill and seeks in particular to develop students' skills in learning to learn a language in digital realms and to develop a strong set of digital literacies for language learning.

THE ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING EXCHANGE (OLLE): PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Language Learning Strategies in a Brave New Digital World

The digital age has brought along a plethora of new exciting avenues to learn, teach and practice a foreign language: from the access to seemingly unlimited authentic multimedia resources in almost any target language, to the availability anywhere anytime, at the click of a button, of a native speaker with whom one may communicate for free, in writing or virtually face to face (or voice to voice). One could

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easily say that learning a foreign language has never been so easy, so accessible, so exciting, so enticing. Learning outside or without a classroom has also become a potentially much more feasible achievement from anywhere with an internet connection. Yet, no research points to a substantial improvement in foreign language competence, few teachers would say that learners today progress faster than they did some twenty five years ago - in truth as Rebecca Oxford points out, language learning effectiveness, off or online, rarely occurs by magic but rather as the result of a complex interplay of parameters, among which the development of relevant language learning strategies is an important contributor to success (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990, 1996; Cohen and Macaro 2007; Griffiths 2008). Following on from the questions raised in language learning strategy research since the early 1980's, OLLE, the online course reviewed in this paper, seeks to explore how one could support learners in developing their panoply of personally relevant digital language learning strategies and in empowering themselves to make the most of the affordances of digital learning. Can an online platform with media rich instructional content and collaborative co-construction of knowledge be a successful and sustainable option?

Local Context and Background

The University of Nottingham (hereafter UNUK) has a long tradition of internationalisation and places a high priority on international student mobility. With two campuses abroad (Ningbo in China, UNNC, and Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, UNMC) and a Language Centre in each campus, it also seeks to promote foreign language skills as essential in the skillset of a global graduate in the 21st century. Each campus however, has to meet different needs and requirements in terms of language provision and to offer access to language learning to students who may not wish or be able to fit this within their degree credits. At UNNC, in China, 90% of students are currently domestic students from the People's Republic of China, the remaining 10% come from a wide range of countries bringing numerous foreign languages in addition to English or Chinese. In the UNNC Language Centre, very few students have any prior experience of learning of a third language and almost all are already studying in their second language (English) which they may also feel the need to further improve. International Higher Education for them is often intimately linked with the opportunity to meet and learn from others both culturally and linguistically. This constitutes a strong appeal but also another promise that does not always quite materialise by magic. The Language Centre is a key locus of the successful actualisation of this international experience, through formal delivery of courses, organisation of extra-curricular activities and crucially through a strong engagement with students as change agents. The Online Language Learning Exchange was first born as an experiment trying to bring together students who were keen to learn together informally and it was subsequently proposed and jointly developed as a formal Nottingham Advantage Award (NAA) following a student initiative.

At all three Universities of Nottingham, students may take up to 20 additional extra-curricular credits in a given academic year of study; these are known as Nottingham Advantage Awards (NAA). These modules have been designed to focus on enhancing students 'employability and life-long learning skills and they offer an invaluable opportunity for academic staff to explore how notions of employability or learning skills may best be articulated within the context of a specific discipline or indeed through an interdisciplinary approach. Not surprisingly, these modules tend to be an exciting laboratory for those keen to experiment with new Teaching and Learning ideas. NAA assessment instruments also allow for creativity and exploration: students simply pass (complete) or fail and no marks are awarded.

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