

The Virtual Language School for university students



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Abstract:

This article deals with the setting up of a virtual language school and the production of its materials. On the basis of certain initial considerations, decisions were made regarding the classrooms, the courses and the materials. Reasons for the decisions are set out, and there is reference to the role of different participants including the publishers. Naturally, in a novel enterprise of this type, there are problems and these are also discussed.

1. Initial considerations

The UOC was set up as a wholly virtual university in 1996. It offers a number of official Spanish degrees and is involved in many joint projects to provide tertiary distance education.

In Catalonia Spanish and Catalan are co-official languages, and young people leave secondary school with a reasonable command of both. In 2001 the Catalan Autonomous Government decided to make ability in a third language a condition for obtaining a university qualification. To this end, the Inter-university Council of Catalonia (CIC) decided that each university should incorporate this requirement in their study plans. The Government, in order to provide the means to achieve this, formulated the following considerations:

- that pupils leave secondary school with an ability equivalent to the end of the Basic User (A2) stage of the Common European Framework;
- that, for study and career purposes, students needed to become Independent Users (B2);
- that this difference corresponded to levels 3 and 4 of the syllabus of the Official Language Schools;
- that, given a university population of some 200,000, provision of presential classes was out of the question; consequently a virtual offer was required;
- that the first offer would be English, since it is the third language of some 95% of the secondary school population;
- that the UOC had the most experience in organising and delivering virtual education.

On the basis of these considerations, the CIC, after negotiations to define what was needed, commissioned the UOC to create a language school as a service to the students of all the Catalan public universities as well as those private universities which sign an agreement with the CIC. In other words, the Virtual Language School for University Students serves all Catalan universities equally, as can be seen from the open portal:



Since this was a public offer, the course fee per credit had to be the same as for all other public courses, which are subsidised by the government. Given the high cost of the infrastructure, this meant that the fixed fee would not also cover teachers, so the basic course would have to be of the self-study type. The school also decided to offer complementary courses with a teacher, also at public prices. The complementary courses are: writing, speaking off line, speaking on line, or a combination of these. ("Speaking off-line" means that students send voice attachments and listen to those of other students, whereas "speaking on-line" means conversation in real time.) In order to implement this range of offers, the school had to create self-study on-line materials as well as a campus that allowed the different types of interaction.

Parallel to this, the CIC decided to commission a specific examination system, which is being prepared by a commission drawn from all of the universities. These exams will cover listening, reading, speaking and writing.

2. Materials: preparations

As for the materials, I was entrusted with the leadership of a team of four authors, all of whom had experience both of writing ELT (English language teaching) materials and of teaching virtual courses. Even though we were all experienced, we began by spending two months in preparations. These included:

- analysing the syllabuses and exams of the Official Language Schools;
- visiting all existing virtual language schools and studying the materials there;
- consulting relevant conventional courses;
- drawing up lists of possible topics;
- planning the course structure: the number of units, the sections, and the duration of each;
- devising an exercise typology.

3. Syllabus

The syllabuses of the Official Language Schools are quite comprehensive, including objectives, pronunciation, vocabulary, topics and functions as well as morphology and syntax; they have served us well as a checklist. However detailed a syllabus is, it can always be implemented using either a synthetic or an analytic approach. In other words, one can either start with the linguistic elements and go on to synthesise these in contextualised use, or one can start with texts (both oral and written) and analyse them to see their linguistic components.

We decided that our syllabus approach would be analytic. The reasoning behind this approach is that our target students have already been exposed—often several times over—to syllabuses that purport to be a "progression" of grammatical structures. In other words, we argued that they would already have met all the basic structures; what they now need is to experience them in use, both receptive and productive. Our task, therefore, was to look for suitable texts and to build interesting thematic units around them, allowing language work to arise out of the texts that we had chosen. (Curiously, early feedback from students is that they are more interested in a grammatical approach than we had anticipated.)

4. Course structure

Regarding the course structure, the CIC had stipulated two levels which would correspond to a total of some 240 hours of tuition. We decided to divide each of the two levels into two courses, and each course into 15 units. Each unit would thus provide four hours of tuition, and these 15-unit courses would correspond to a university semester of about 15 weeks. We also decided that there would be 3 progress tests for each course.

As for the structure of each unit, although we did not want it to be too rigid, we decided on the following guidelines:

Listening - 35 minutes

Reading - 35 minutes

Speaking - 40 minutes

Writing - 40 minutes

Grammar - 30 minutes

Vocabulary - 20 minutes

Self-study - 22 minutes

This last point requires an explanation. When we had subtracted the time devoted to the tests, the time available for each unit was 222 minutes. We chose to allot the odd amount to self-study, which is based on the Internet links provided in each unit. Some of these links are to sites dealing with aspects of the topic of the unit; some of them with the grammatical aspects that are covered there. In general, we have to admit that all the specified times, both for sections and for individual exercises, are guesses rather than the result of field research.

5. Exercise types

When it comes to exercise types, the restrictions were severe. Although our brief was to provide practice for all four skills, the technology largely limits exercises to closed answer types. In addition, we had to allow for students (a) working individually and (b) without a teacher. For the listening and reading sections, we begin with a task which is designed to arouse interest in the topic and to get the students to marshal their resources. This is followed by general comprehension and then by detailed comprehension exercises.

For example, in the reading section of the unit on films, the first exercise is a user poll, where the students have to make selections about their favourite types of film, how often they go to the cinema, etc., which serves to activate useful vocabulary. The second exercise, which has limited time, is to simply decide which of two film reviews is the more favourable; this is designed to give the students a general idea of the two texts. The third exercise, which is not limited in time, consists of more detailed questions on the two review texts. If students find a question too difficult, they can click on a hint button, which indicates the part of the text where the "solution" is to be found.

In the speaking section, there is practice of words from the unit, both singly and in sentences. Then there is dialogue practice, both scripted and with a certain degree of freedom. In these exercises, the student can listen to the dialogue, then take either role, and finally listen to dialogue with the student in the role that she has taken. The final speaking task is based on what has gone before and is a task that the student sends to the classroom as a voice message. As for the writing, there is a variety of semi-writing exercises leading up to the final one, which is again to be sent to the classroom. In the case of these texts that are sent to the classroom, the student can listen to (or read) a model answer, though clearly their version does not have to be identical.

For example, in the writing section of the unit on tourism, the final question is:

Think about a memorable place that you have visited. Write a description of the place. Remember to say where it is and what you can see there. Make your writing interesting by using adjectives and adverbs.

The model answer is:

One of my favourite places in India is Fort Cochin, in the south-western state of Kerala. Situated at the end of a peninsula jutting out into the Arabian Sea, you reach it by ferry. The town is small, and it's a pleasure to walk around the quiet streets.

The architecture in Fort Cochin has a European feel to it, with houses built by wealthy British, Dutch and Portuguese traders. In the centre of the town you come across a typically English scene—a village green where children play cricket. Only the blazing sun reminds you that you are in India! In a corner of the green stands the church of St.

Francis, built by the Portuguese and the first European church in India.

On the northern shore of Fort Cochin there is a lively fish market. Long wooden boats arrive with the day's catch, which is noisily sold by auction. Further along the shore you see the huge elegant Chinese fishing nets, introduced to the region by Chinese traders. These nets are worked by at least four men, and are an unforgettable sight.

6. Collaboration with the publishers

The material has gained greatly from the close collaboration between the authors and the publisher Eurecamedia. At all stages we have been able to match our pedagogical aims with the design and technical means that are necessary to realise them. One of the most thorny problems was how to simulate speaking. It was our publishing colleagues that suggested this design for dialogue record exercises:



This dialogue consists of 8 exchanges which the student can hear using the listening buttons (A). The student then chooses one of the two roles (B); she can choose a level (C), which gives her more or less written help (D). Now, using the speaking buttons (E), she can record her version, listen to it, save it, and listen to herself taking part in the dialogue.

7. Campus and classroom structure

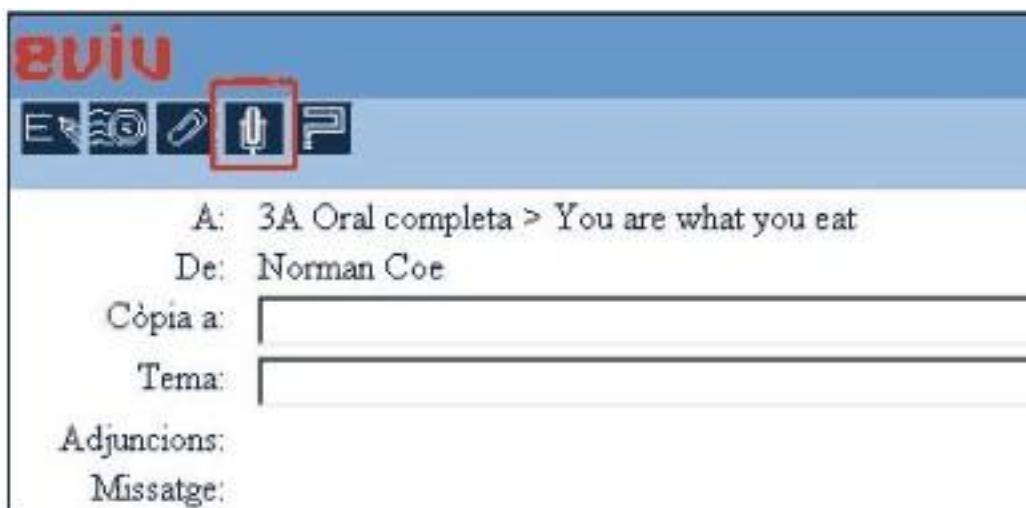
Although it is not under my control, clearly the campus has to be designed to allow these courses to work. In particular, the voice components were a new departure. Briefly, there is an open site which anyone can visit at <http://www.eviu.com/>^[url1]. It obviously contains information directly related to the courses as well as a level test, the result of which can be stored for later retrieval. But the site contains several other things: different sorts of cultural information, games to play and a question of the week.

Once the course has begun, the student can enter the "reserved" campus, which includes the classroom, the material and a range of forums for everybody, as well as all the things already mentioned. The structure of the classroom varies according to the course that the student is taking. All the classrooms include the material, a class list (showing who's connected), a chatroom (for written chats) and forums that are created as necessary. Typically, a teacher will create one forum that serves as her noticeboard (read-only for the students) and a separate

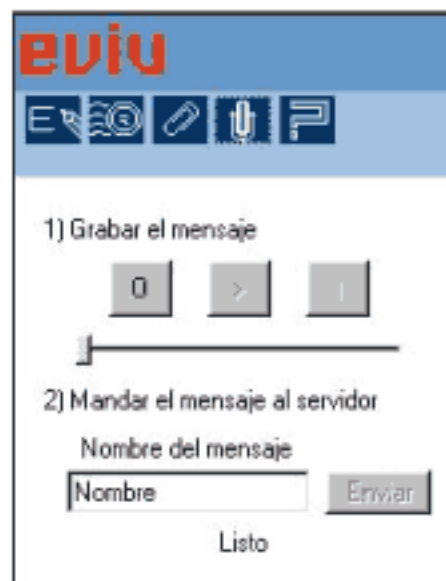
forum for each weekly task (read and write), for example:



It is to these specific forums that students send their written or spoken contributions, which are always related in topic to that of each unit. As distinct from the classrooms of the UOC, these allow attachments of voice files, which is achieved by clicking on the microphone icon:



When you click on it, you get the buttons to record and save your message:



Classrooms that include on-line conversation obviously have a voice chatroom as well. These conversations obviously take place in real time, so the teacher has to previously agree suitable times with the students. One requirement for these chats is that everybody uses a head-set with a microphone. This allows everyone to maintain a suitable volume level and also avoids positive feedback, which typically occurs when loudspeakers are used.

8. Student tracking

What we also needed in order to check the progress of students, especially those in the self-study groups, was a system to record and store information related to the students' actions. For the moment, what is recorded is:

- the last time they connected;
- the exercises done;
- how many times each exercise is done;
- the time spent on each exercise;
- the degree of success.

The display looks like this:

EVIU Administration

Classroom Student

Last Sync 29/12/02 - 4 days ago

Unit 1

Annotations

Category	Date	Exercise	Tries	Score
Reading	13/12/02	2	1	1
Reading	13/12/02	3	1	1
Reading	13/12/02	4	1	0
Listening	13/12/02	1	1	1
Listening	13/12/02	2	1	1
Listening	13/12/02	3	4	0
Listening	13/12/02	4	1	0
Listening	13/12/02	5	1	0
Grammar	12/12/02	1	1	1
Grammar	12/12/02	2	1	0
Grammar	12/12/02	3	1	1
Grammar	12/12/02	4	1	0

Category	Date	Exercise	Tries	Score
Vocabulary	12/12/02	1	1	0
Vocabulary	12/12/02	2	1	0
Vocabulary	12/12/02	3	1	1
Vocabulary	12/12/02	4	1	0
Vocabulary	12/12/02	5	1	0
Speaking	13/12/02	1	1	1
Speaking	15/12/02	2	1	1
Speaking	21/12/02	3	3	1
Speaking	21/12/02	4	2	1
Speaking	21/12/02	5	1	1
Speaking	22/12/02	6	1	1
Speaking	21/12/02	7	1	1

One facility for the students is that they are allowed to download the material and work off-line. What happens in this situation is that the data for the student's record is stored on her hard disk, and this is automatically transferred to the school database each time she connects to the classroom or the material. At the very least students have to connect in order to take each of the three progress tests, and obviously the system also stores this result.

As in all storage-retrieval systems, it is fast retrieval of appropriate information which is the key issue. At the moment we have a lot of information, but we are only just now designing the analyses which will provide suitable displays for teachers or the school. Out of the mass of information, the data immediately available to the teacher will be that referring to cases that need to be dealt with urgently. Less important information will be kept at a second level, and the teacher will delve deeper if she needs more details. The authors will also have displays of relevant data, not least the time that students actually spend on different exercises—to compare with the guesses we have made.

As well as storage and retrieval, the system also needs to generate messages to students. Again, we are in the planning stage, but the idea is that the system should generate one message per week per student, to be sent on a Friday, for example:

Dear Sara

We notice that you have spent over three hours on the material this week and that you've sent a message to the forum. Well done! Remember that your needs analysis showed that you needed listening practice; there are links in this unit that take you to extra practice.

We hope you are enjoying your studies.

In any case, the student already gets feedback from the material. When she asks for the answers, there are usually explanations why the wrong options are wrong. She also has a detailed display of which exercises she has completed and with what success. Moreover, she

sees the results of the tests, whose material is drawn from the units that have been covered. In the second version of the material, hints will be included in all relevant exercises to help students who are doubtful or who first choose a wrong answer.

It must be admitted that there are technical problems: the "fluency" (= lack of transfer discontinuities) of on-line chats, if the connection is not very fast, is affected by various factors including the overall volume of traffic. And it remains to be seen how difficult it will be to define the conditions for the different messages so that the system doesn't generate either rubbish or irrelevant information.

Since the objectives of the project included the teaching of speaking on-line and without a live interlocutor, our task was virtually impossible, but it has been fascinating to accept the challenge and to struggle to come as close to the impossible as possible.

URL list:

[url1]:<http://www.eviu.com/>

Related links:

- ➡ Netlanguages:
<http://www.netlanguages.com>
- ➡ Global English:
<http://www.globalenglish.com>
- ➡ Englishtown:
<http://www.englishtown.com>
- ➡ NetLearn Languages:
<http://www.nll.co.uk>
- ➡ Bell English Online:
<http://www.bellenglish.com/courses/fce>
- ➡ Peak:
<http://www.peakenglish.com>

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