



**Verband Österreichischer
Volkshochschulen**

**EVALUATION-REPORT
OF A SELECTION OF LANGUAGE-ONLINE-TOOLS
FOR THE EU-PROJECT POLIGLOTTI**

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Testing procedure

Aims of the evaluation

The main aim of the evaluation was to gain some insight into the diversity of ML-tools in the internet by evaluating approximately 20 online-tools which enhance learning and teaching different languages against a list of criteria. The aim of the evaluation was to gain user-friendly descriptions of online-tools. They should enable language-learners, as well as language-teachers, to obtain a pool of easily-applicable and accessible, virtual materials which they could use in and outside the classroom.

Method, testers and timeline

The language department of the Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen¹ was asked by the project-partners to carry out the evaluation. As a first step, an initial evaluation framework was set up and a list of criteria was drafted in November 2011. This outline was presented to the project-partners at the beginning of December. After receiving a positive feedback, the selected ML-tools were tested from January to March by experienced teachers working in Austrian adult education centres in Linz and Vienna. Some of them had already used several of the tools with their students and were pleased to share their know-how. A moodle-course was installed where all the evaluations were collected and made accessible to all the people involved.

As the lists of criteria were filled in by most of the teachers in German, Amanda Wiesenegger, a language-tutor at the VHS Salzburg and native English speaker, translated them into English.

The collaboration with the partners from the two adult education centres as well as the work with the language-tutors and the translator was an extremely positive experience. All the partners involved were highly motivated and all the set deadlines could be perfectly met. Astrid Divischek (VHS Linz), Petra Reidl (VHS Meidling, Vienna) and I had two face-to-face meetings and two skype-conferences where we discussed open questions, deadlines or further procedures.

Selection of online tools

One of the biggest challenges we encountered was the question as to which online tools we should choose. The worldwide web contains such a vast number and variety of resources that the decision was not easy at all. The POLIGLOTTI project partners had already determined that the research should contain examples for the three following areas: teaching, learning and further resources and they suggested several, randomly-chosen tools we could use for the evaluation. After discussing the matter in detail we decided to adhere to the following criteria:

We wanted to make sure that we facilitate tools for a variety of languages such as English, French, German, Italian, Russian and at least 2-3 tools for the lesser taught languages. Some of the tools should be free of charge, others fee-based services and they should comprise all the different levels of the CEFR. We tried to assess all types of tools and not just best-practice examples. Last but not least, it was also important for us to find tools with different source languages.

¹ Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen is the umbrella organisation of all Austrian adult education centres (Volkshochschulen=VHS). For further information please refer to: www.vhs.or.at

After finishing the testing, it turned out that it would have been useful to establish “age-group” as another criterion for the selection. As our institution provides adult education, most of the online tools, which have been collected, are mainly tools for adults.

Based on the testing-results of the individual evaluations and according to the initial schedule, the evaluation report was composed in April 2012. It is meant to give an overview on the evaluation procedure, to compare the tested ML-tools against the list of criteria (see appendix) and to reflect on the types of tools or functionalities that might be missing or only inadequately available.

Languages available

German	English	Spanish	French	Italian	Portuguese	Hungarian	Russian	Slovak	Croatian
Deutsche Welle source-l.s: Arabic, Chinese, EN, CR, F, GR, Hindi, Indonesian, PL	English Grammar Online source-language: DE	Cervantes source-language: ES	Babbel also available: EN, DE, ES, IT, PL, PO, SW, NL, TR & Indonesian	Babbel source-languages: D, EN, F, IT, PO, ES, SW	BabelLand.de also available: EN, ES, FR, PL, IT	eMagyarul source-language: HU (no other language!)	Russian-online.net source-language: German	slovak.eu source-l.s: EN, DE, FR + Esperanto	Byik – learn fast, know forever source-l.: EN
Deutsche Grammatik online source-language: DE	English Club (Teaching + Learning) source-l.s: EN	v-lang also available: EN, DE source-l.s as target-l.s	Tell me more also available: EN, DE, ES, FR & NL	Tell me more source-languages as target-languages			5 mls.com (Russian) also available: ES, IT, EN, FR source-l.: DE		
Sprachtraining Fachunterricht und Beruf source-language: DE	Randall's ESL cyber listening lab source-l.: EN	Studyspanish source-language: EN	Dynamots source-l.s: IT+FR	ILUSS source-l.: IT			Busuu also available: EN, DE, ES, FR, IT, PO, Ar + Jap source-l.s as target-l.s		
			Busuu also available for EN, DE, ES, IT, PO, RU, Arabic + Jap source-l.s as target-l.s	podclub ch also available for EN + DE source-l.s: FR, DE, IT			Russland-journal source-l.s: DE+EN		

All in all, **25 tools for 10 different languages** have been tested (Babbel and Tell me More have been tested for French and Italian in one evaluation). Seven of the tools can also be applied in other languages (e.g. Japanese, Dutch or Arabic). For example, the learning-programme Babbel doesn't only exist for English, German, Spanish, French and Italian but also for Dutch, Polish, Indonesian, Swedish and Turkish. Busuu is also available for Arabic and Japanese and Tell me More also offers Dutch-courses. All together the tools can be **used in 16 languages**, including the ones listed above, as well as Arabic, Dutch, Indonesian, Japanese, Polish and Turkish.

In regard to the source languages, the variety is not that large. However, the offer Busu makes it quite remarkable. This programme offers all the language-training in as many source languages as target languages. The "Deutsche Welle" (German Wave) also stands out with an impressive number of source languages, such as Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Greek, Hindi, Indonesian or Polish. The programme Slovak.eu, is also worth mentioning. It can be studied with the source languages English, German, French and Esperanto. The approaches made here, in the above mentioned programmes, are quite unique and excellent examples for multilingualism – unfortunately they are the only ones.

As I could experience myself, it can be more than difficult and demotivating if the source language is the same as the target language and the learner is a beginner (N.B. eMagyarul for level A1-A2 with no other language than Hungarian!).

Most of the other tools offer English or German as source languages. We have to bear in mind, however, that this is partly due to the fact that our teachers know those two languages the best. Certainly the results would have been different if, for example, a Spanish language school had selected and tested the tools.

There is **one tool, Jing**, which doesn't appear on this list but which seemed to be of relevance to our research as it is a fantastic tool to foster language teaching and learning: Jing is a programme where you can snap a picture of your screen, record a video of onscreen action and share instantly over the web, IM or email (see: page 12).

Tools for teachers and learners

Altogether there are 10 tools for learners only and one which seems to cater merely for teachers. 10 of them offer material for learners as well as tutors and three of them (Cervantes, podclub-ch and Russlandjournal) can be used as extra material in the classroom (brought in by the tutor) as well as additional reading/listening exercises by the autonomous, advanced learner. **The only tool explicitly created for teachers is "Sprachtraining für Fachunterricht und Beruf" (= special language training for specific professions).**

The special sections for teachers with extra material, worksheets and tutorials in the Deutsche Welle, Babel.Nation or Studyspanish offer are liked by some people. With Tell me More the tutor can create an individual learning-programme for each of his/her students according to their special needs.

Iluss also provides a large collection of language tools and resources for teachers and academics. With BableLand.de/Portuguese teachers can easily develop work-sheets to give their students as e-homework. English Grammar online also contains a separate section for teachers and provides some resources and worksheets. There is a discussion forum where teachers can exchange ideas, ask for and give advice.

Costs

Free of charge	Fee-based service
Podclub	
Deutsche Welle	
5mls.com	
Slovake.eu	
BabelLand	
eMagyarul	
Russlandjournal	
Sprachtraining für Fachunterricht u Beruf	
English club	
English Grammar Online	
Randall's ESL cyber listening lab	
v-lang	
Dynamots	
Cervantes (general materials)	Cervantes Spanish-online course (costs unknown)
studyspanish	Studyspanish (camino de éxito learning-programme) premium membership: € 14,95/ month
Deutsche Grammatik online	Deutsche Grammatik online: online course with tutor: € 52-80/month
Russian-online (small area)	Russian-online Vocab-trainer: € 25/month
Biki (small area)	"de luxe"-version: € 69,95/month
Busuu (small area)	Busuu: premium-membership: € 71,88/year
	Babbel: € 9,95/month, : € 6,65 /month for 3 months
	Illus: € 36/ month, € 190/ year
	Tell me More (€ 29/week, € 75/month, € 390/year

When selecting the online-tools we wanted to ensure an even balance between websites which are free of charge and those with fee-based services. It was interesting to see that the selection of tools is enormous and you could find numerous pedagogically-valuable online-tools free of charge which

the learner can use on his/her own or the teacher can use as material in the classroom as well as extra material for homework.

There are, of course, also ample, fee-based provisions on the market. The most expensive one on our list is Tell me More, which is often bought by language-schools or adult education institutions which offer the programme as a treat, under special conditions, to their learners. Tell me More is then followed by Illus, Babbel and Busuu. The costs for these services vary a lot, also depending on the range of possibilities provided (language-levels, tutorial, additional material, text sorts, cooperative forms of learning etc.).

Target-group/s

The target-groups of the chosen online-tools are mainly adults and teenagers. Only Russian online and English club also offer activities for younger learners but of course, there are numerous online-tools for younger learners as well. As mentioned above, the focus of this evaluation was on adult learners as these are the main target-groups at Austrian adult education centres.

Usability and multimedia

All of the evaluated online-tools require an internet browser and relatively new software. In most cases the user has to have more than basic computer knowledge, as well as practice in using sometimes somewhat confusing or not at all self-explanatory websites. Information on technical requirements is not always provided.

Most of the evaluated online-tools make use of a rather friendly optical design and the majority are well-structured. The only negative examples regarding this are the homepages of Cervantes and Russian-online which are criticized for being too overloaded.

Navigation is not always easy and it might take some time for you to find your way around when you are on the site for the first time (e.g. Busuu).

Advertisements are a big challenge. It can also be even more than irritating if they pop up all the time (e.g. English Grammar Online) or a huge banner ad comprises one third of the screen (Busuu).

It is quite remarkable that the multimedia-quality is good to excellent in most of the tools (exceptions: 5mls, Studyspanish and Deutsche Grammatik online). It seems that this area has recently undergone considerable improvement (in comparison to earlier products).

Contents

Themes

Most of the tested online-tools tackle general topics which are mentioned in the CEFR such as asking for directions, every-day life, shopping, family, health, travelling and leisure activities. Deutsche Welle stands out with their huge variety of different, up-to-date themes. Podclub.ch also offers a great variety of different reading and listening texts in ever-varying formats, such as audio-diaries, reports, tales or articles.

Cultural themes are covered in almost all the tools with a focus on history, sight-seeing, geography and the arts. The broadest overview in this respect is offered by the Cervantes homepage, which provides an up-to-date insight into cultural events, traditions, activities etc. in Spain and in other Spanish speaking countries. It is also worth mentioning Slovak.eu which gives a good insight into Slovak society. Illus is also noteworthy as it uses videos to create an authentic picture of the target-country and provides constantly updated links on interesting Italian topics.

Unfortunately, explicitly intercultural activities could not be found in any of the tools (e.g. activities triggering a reflection on the differences between one's own culture and the culture/customs in the country/countries where the target language is spoken).

Four of the tools have a focus on business language (English Club, English Grammar Online, Tell me More and of course "Sprachtraining für Fachunterricht und Beruf").

The types of texts

The prevailing formats are reading and listening texts. Most of the programmes also work with photos, flash-cards and films (apart from podcast.ch, Cervantes, 5mls.com and BabelNation).

English Club and Deutsche Welle promote the usage of authentic texts by offering the latest news stories from magazines and newspapers from around the world – unfortunately the links in English club don't work. Apart from those two, only Illus, Cervantes and Tell me More claim to offer authentic reading and listening texts.

Randall's ESL cyber listening lab offers ample different types of listening activities with only one drawback: it is mostly Randall himself speaking and the learner doesn't hear a variety of accents e.g. British, Scottish, different regions in the States or Canada etc.

Cervantes broadcasts their own TV-programme which might be a treat for advanced learners of Spanish.

Enhancing Teaching and Learning

It was disappointing to find out that the main kinds of activities offered in online-language training seem to be gap-filling exercises, answering questions, vocab training and multiple choice exercises. Only a few of the programmes researched offer writing activities, dialogues or other, more creative sorts of activities (the exception being the Deutsche Welle).

It goes without saying that in all the programmes the reading skills and vocabulary knowledge of the learner can be improved. All the tools, apart from Deutsche Grammatik-online, 5mls, Slovak.eu and byki, offer listening activities enhancing the ability to be able to understand native speakers. Deutsche Grammatik-online focuses explicitly on grammar. It proclaims a rather traditional, somewhat old-fashioned approach to language learning.

In 15 of the programmes learners get enough practice opportunities, in the others they could do with more. Quite a number of the tools lack a variety of activities and/or balance of the four skills (exceptions being English club, English Grammar Online, Deutsche Welle, Tell me more, Busuu, Illus and Dynamots).

English Club, for example, offers lots of exercises to practise the various grammar chapters. But they mostly follow the same principle. So there is no revision in different settings.

Collaborative Learning

Opportunities for cooperative forms of learning and interaction are offered by 14 programmes. Four of them host a forum as well as a chat-room. Five offer only a forum and one only a chat-room. Babel also provides an e-Tandem and Randall has got a blog. In v-lang the learner enters the virtual world of Second Life and can thus talk to, share and cooperate with whoever he/she wants to.

Eight of the tools don't offer any possibilities for collaborative learning. As mentioned above German Grammar online is a classical grammar programme, Sprachtraining für Fachunterricht und Beruf is similar. Dynamots only offers a forum to learners at the Italian university, it was designed for. With 5mls a forum or a chat-room probably wouldn't make much sense, as it was created for (real) beginners, though an eTandem, for example, might have been a good idea.

Independent Learning

In the majority of programmes the learner can decide how he/she wants to progress (14 programmes). For instance, in English Grammar online the learners can decide which section of grammar aspects they want to choose according to their individual needs. The exercises and reading texts are labelled with dots which indicate the level of language. In Dynamots the learner can choose from various options to obtain a clearer picture of himself as a learner, to develop effective learning strategies and to become more autonomous.

Only two programmes follow a strict core curriculum (Illus and 5mls). Dynamots is characterized by a high level of flexibility between progression according to the core curriculum and random progression. Tell me More, Babel and Busuu work in a similar way.

Learning Progress

It can be stated that all of the programmes build on the former knowledge of the learner in one way or the other (either the programme offers a test or the autonomous learners can choose according to their preference on their own).

Seven of the programmes offer a grading test at the beginning and three (Babel, Dynamots and Tell me More) identify learning aims and needs.

Five tools predefine learning outcomes and 14 offer some sort of progress (self-) assessment.

16 programmes offer correction immediately when clicking the "check" button. With Busuu you can send your results in and receive the correction from an online-tutor. Illus offers online training-lessons with a tutor for an extra fee.

Motivation

This section is obviously the most subjective one and the one open to most speculations as the answers show the individual opinion of the tutor carrying out the evaluation in question. Some of the evaluators have not felt up to answering all the questions on motivation.

12 tutors have ticked that the respective tool creates a very pleasant learning environment, 8 say it is pleasant and one says it is not, one says it is not at all pleasant.

8 say that the programme they tested leads to much higher learning efficiency, 10 say it leads to a higher level and 2 say it does not lead to higher learning efficiency.

7 tutors state that the tool tested by them raises a lot of curiosity, 9 say it raises curiosity. Two say it does not raise curiosity at all.

The surprise effect seems to be rather low in most of the tools: 3 evaluators rank the tool as having a lot of surprising effects, 6 say it has a surprising effect, 7 say it doesn't have many surprising effects, and 2 say it has none at all.

The answers get even more negative when the level of amusement is at stake: 2 say it makes them laugh a lot, 6 consider their programme funny, 6 don't think it very funny and 3 don't think it funny at all.

And last but not least, creativity is a criterion quite a number of tools seem to lack: 6 say the tool boosts creativity a lot, 4 say it boosts it, 5 say their tool doesn't boost creativity very much and 3 say it doesn't boost creativity at all.

Altogether it can be stated, however, that the positive aspects prevail and motivation, in general, is stimulated by most of the tools. Once more, Deutsche Welle impresses with a programme that obviously boosts motivation enormously and is followed by Tell me More and v-lang. 5mls definitely comes last with rather negative remarks in all of the categories.

Usage in the language-class

In this section experience is shared and tips are given in regard to the usage in class. In most cases the programmes can be used to concentrate on specific skills learners are having problems with. Teachers can also select (grammar) chapters to give for homework or download extra resources or worksheets for topics they want to deal with in class.

Randall's ESL cyber listening lab, for example, provides ample listening activities which the learners can do on their own or the tutor can exploit in class (they also contain various open questions for brainstorming and discussion).

Deutsche Welle contains so many materials that a whole course could be designed with them. There is something for every learner (type of learners), every subject (general language, business language etc.) and every level. You can find a telenovela there as well as a crime-story, a spoken message, authentic material such as newspaper articles or an atlas with different dialects – the amount and quality of different materials is auspicious.

Some of the sites such as Cervantes or podclub.ch are especially recommendable for classes with learners at higher levels. They contain ample interesting, up-to-date material which can be brought into class or used as further reading outside the language class.

The online-tool **Jing** has a special position. It uses new technology which revolutionizes cooperative, virtual teaching and learning in a rather spectacular way by adding visuals to online conversations. It is a tool which can be used by teachers as well as learners. Jing snaps pictures of your screen, records videos of onscreen action and enables you to share instantly via the web or e-mail. For example, Jing allows tutors to record their (oral) feedback as they grade papers, or take a snapshot to share with their class. Students can even use it to collaborate, send in oral homework or ask questions.

Missing or inadequately available tools

The assignment of the agreement for this investigation was to evaluate approximately 20 online-tools. As this is a rather small number in comparison to all the ML-online tools existing on the web, it is not possible to draw any general conclusions about ML-online tools as such. All the following remarks can only refer to the tools which have been tested. Any other suggestions would be vague and, therefore, unscientific.

In this respect it is not possible for us to say if there are any tools missing. To gain a relevant answer to this question, it would have been necessary to choose a different setting for the investigation. Our research has not encountered any missing tools. We can, however, positively assume that there are more tools for frequently-taught languages like English, Spanish, French, Italian or German on the European market than there are for lesser-taught languages such as Greek, Hungarian or the Slavic languages. However, the tested programmes show that programme-developers for the languages mentioned in the first place seem to use pedagogically more up-to-date methods and materials than those mentioned afterwards (NB: e.g. Byki, Russlandjournal or eMagyarul).

Obviously the quality of the online tools varies enormously. This does not necessarily have to do with the fact that they are free of charge or fee-based.

It goes without saying that a programme for beginners that uses only the target language is doomed to failure if there is no tutor to guide the student along (or unless the student is extremely persistent).

Additionally, usability, optical design, sound quality and consumer-friendliness constitute other indispensable qualities of a good online-tool. Here it might be worth mentioning again that advertisements can be extremely annoying and disturbing for the learner and must be regarded as one of the biggest disadvantages of open source materials.

Recommendations

It would be desirable if editors of online-programmes could find a way to design their tools in a well-structured, clear and self-explanatory manner. Of course, everybody has a different taste and may find a site attractive or not. So the individual layout, usage of colours, images etc. is an extremely subjective matter. It seems that in this respect everyone has to find the sites they like best.

One big disadvantage of open programmes which are free of charge is the abundance of advertisements. It would be great, if the web-designers could find a solution to place them somewhere less disturbing. But of course, that is also a financial question.

Furthermore, it would be recommendable if editors developed more creative sorts of activities. Gap-filling exercises, multiple-choice tests or vocab-lists might not be the latest novelty in modern language teaching. Nowadays, the net offers such a vast range of possibilities. It seems that most of these new options have not really been thought about and not put into practice yet when producing on-line language tools.

And last but not least, most of the programmes could do with some more witty or humorous elements which make learning more fun as well as more rewarding. Language-learning is such a life-long activity that it seems more than important that new ways of stimulating as well as motivating the learner should be continually looked for. Humour, variety, curiosity and creativity are definitely some of the best ways to keep on going. ☺