

Chatting, Chatten or Chattare

Using a Multilingual Workspace for Language and Culture Learning

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U. Stickler

The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Abstract—This paper will describe the results of analyses carried out on multilingual chat sessions that took place in the context of LITERALIA, a 24-months long project funded by the European Union’s Grundtvig initiative to support: “Learning In Tandem to Encourage Reciprocal Autonomous Learning In Adults - LITERALIA”. An online workspace was created for the project that allowed learners to communicate with others in four different countries and to enhance their linguistic and cultural competence in four European languages: English, German, Italian, and Polish. Participation in the chat was voluntary and took place in an integrated Moodle workspace.

Index Terms—e-learning, language learning, independent learning, online collaborative learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

The past decades have shown an increased use of the internet in language teaching and learning and increased research in the area (Jung 2005; Liu *et al.* 2003). Recently, emphasis has shifted away from Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) packages to a use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) for authentic language learning and practice (Stockwell 2007; Warschauer 1997). Although speaking over the internet is nowadays state-of-the-art for Western educational institutions, this is by no means the case everywhere. In the absence of reliable and affordable audio or video conferencing systems, written communication has long taken a central role in CMC language training. Amongst other applications synchronous textchat has been seen as an option to prepare students for spontaneous thinking and speaking in the foreign language (Abrams 2003; Weininger & Shield 2003). Predominantly so far, research has been conducted on learners’ (i.e. non-native speakers) exchanges or on pairs of non-native speakers and native speakers (see e.g. Abrams 2003; Belz 2002; Blake 2000; see e.g. Kitade 2000).

There is little research in the use of multilingual environments in language learning or in the use of unstructured and un-moderated chat for language learning. This can partly be explained by the paucity of research data available and partly by the difficulty of research in such an environment. Researchers who are specialists in other disciplines than linguistics or language teaching tend to draw their data from mono-lingual or English language chats; language teachers – on the other hand – often pre-structure the learning situations they want to investigate. To fully appreciate the development and spontaneity of unstructured chat, it helps if the researcher is a participant (or participant observer (see Hammersley & Atkinson 1995)) in the chatroom; this participation in a “natural”

community also alleviates the ethical problems associated with research over the internet (Sheehy *et al.* 2007).

Internet use by language learners is rarely mono-lingual or even bi-lingual and more and more projects support the use of more than one “working” language. In a political climate that encourages multilingualism and online learning (see Council of Europe http://ec.europa.eu/education/index_en.htm and Lisbon strategy <http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c11049.htm>) research into the actual usage of online, multilingual workspaces becomes increasingly important.

Research presented in this paper is based on data collected during a European funded project (LITERALIA) that was set up to support language learning and intercultural skills development in adults.

II. THE PROJECT

A. LITERALIA

LITERALIA (“Learning In Tandem to Encourage Reciprocal Autonomous Learning In Adults”) was a project funded for two years by the Socrates – Grundtvig scheme for supporting adult education and mobility throughout Europe (Stickler & Emke 2008). Five partner institutions in four different countries took part in this project, the four native and target languages of the project were German, English, Italian and Polish. The project was based on the Tandem principle (Brammerts 2001; Stickler & Lewis 2003) where two learners of different mother tongues help each other to learn their language.

“Tandem learning takes place when members of two different language communities form a collaborative partnership with the aims of: a) learning each other’s mother tongue; b) learning about each other; and c) learning more about the culture to which each of them belongs. When working in Tandem, both partners alternate between learning a second language and acting not as teachers but as expert informants on their own language and culture.” (Stickler & Lewis, 2008, p. 238)

Tandem partnerships have a long history as face-to-face and as internet-based, autonomous learning method for authentic language and intercultural communication (Lewis & Walker 2003). However, as with all partnership or collaborative learning methods, there are a number of pitfalls and problems (see e.g. O’Dowd & Ritter 2006) that can lead to reduced communication between the learning partners or even to a termination of the partnership. It is therefore essential to select partners carefully and offer them support throughout their autonomous learning phases.

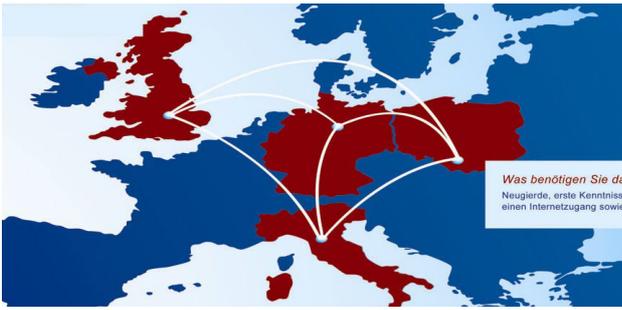


Figure 1. The LITERALIA project partners

The LITERALIA project started as a bi-lingual partnership between Germany and the UK. The German students were learners at the “Volkshochschule Ostkreis Hannover” (VHS), an adult education institution where learners are traditionally mature and of very varying educational background. The English partners were students at the Open University (OU), a distance learning institution where students are used to independent and self-motivated learning (Baumann 1999). In the pilot-phase, learners used predominantly email as a means of communication with the option of one organised face-to-face meeting per year when the English students were visiting Germany for their summer school. The project was extended after successfully arranging and supporting internet-based Tandem partnerships for two years.

The inclusion of additional native and target languages (and cultures) made it crucial to find a common focus for internet work to avoid the danger of isolated dyads of learners who then would be overly dependent on their one Tandem partner. An online workspace or “meeting place” for learners could help students to support and encourage each other, taking responsibility off the organisers or teachers. Thus the project set up a website (www.literalia.eu) and a Moodle-based workspace for learners, teachers and organisers to use. This online workspace allowed learners to communicate with others in four different countries and to enhance their linguistic and cultural competence in four European languages: English, German, Italian, and Polish.

The LITERALIA project officially started in August 2006 and ended on 31 July 2008. Overall, 180 learning partnerships were established in six language combinations. The project organised four transnational and six bilateral face-to-face meetings for learners, teachers and organisers. All languages of the project (Polish, Italian, German, English) were used to a higher or lesser degree, depending on the experience and knowledge of the participants. English served as the main communication and working language at project level.

B. Moodle Virtual Learning Environment

The LITERALIA website was established during the first project year (2006-07) and translated into all four project languages. Learners and the general public could access the website for information about the project, for latest news and to download worksheets and guidelines for Tandem learning.

For the exclusive use of project participants, a Moodle workspace with CMC facilities was created. The workspace was separated in two areas (Moodle “courses”): one for organisers and one for learners. The organisers’ space was used to log details of learners and

match suitable partners in a partnership wiki; to exchange information and documents via forums and resource areas; and to plan upcoming events collaboratively. The learners’ space was used for communication, news announcements, forum discussions, as a storage space for worksheets and as a meeting area for synchronous online chats.

Moodle is a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Learning Management System (LMS) that allows course writers or teachers to prepare learning activities for remote access by students. Moodle was chosen as the platform, not only because of its familiarity to several project members but also for its flexibility and constructivist principles (Dougiamas 1998). The idea that learning takes place when the learners actively “construct” ideas rather than when knowledge is “transmitted” from an expert to a novice forms the basis of constructivist learning theory. In the socio-constructivist variant of this theory, learning is explained as being made possible through exchanges with others who can either help (“scaffold”) or co-construct knowledge. This learning theory, where learning is an active, creative and social process (Rüschoff & Ritter 2001), fits well with language learning in autonomous settings.

Moodle as a learning platform is very suitable for language learning (Brandl 2005; Robb 2004) as it can be accessed independently by learners, it encourages the learning through enquiry and autonomous experimenting, and it allows organisers or course creators to provide a more or less structured meeting place for collaborative learning events between students. In a Moodle workspace, activities can be tightly structured, e. g. along a timeline or „study calendar“, or the workspace can host a loose collection of materials and tools for students to use more or less independently. Organisers or course writers can choose which tools are available to students, when particular activities become available or should be completed and how much feedback is provided to students.

C. The LITERALIA Workspace

In the LITERALIA learners’ workspace (see Fig. 2), students had access to a number of tools (or “modules”): a list of participants, a forum for general use, an events calendar, one wiki for frequently asked questions and one wiki for intercultural comparisons, a resource area for worksheets and guidelines, and a number of different chatrooms for online synchronous chats.

Overall 230 users were registered on the workspace, 25 of them trainers, organisers or teachers. Moodle automatically tracks activity on the workspace and regis-

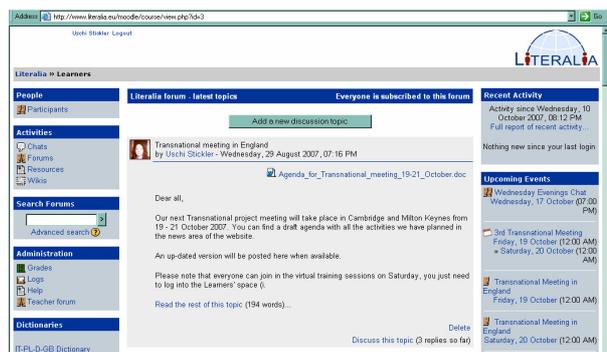


Figure 2. The Moodle Workspace

ters when a user last logged in. 83 of our registered users never used the workspace at all, this is almost one third of all participants. These learners still participated in the Tandem exchanges, using their own private email accounts but chose not to take part in additional activities online.

D. Use of the Forum

Of the four forums set up in the LITERALIA learners' workspace only two were used: a "social forum" was used once in project year one for an enquiry by a learner about the face-to-face meeting; after that, the "learners' forum" became the sole focus for discussions. Overall 46 people contributed to the forum, 34 of them were learners, 12 organisers or teachers. The learners' forum was used by organisers to announce details of upcoming events, e.g. the transnational meetings or chat sessions, and to invite comments on the agenda or plans for these events. For a limited time during the project teachers also tried to start discussion strands on particular topics (e.g. favourite food, pets, the art of complaining). Due to a lack of response from learners, this activity was dropped and learners continued to use the forums independently, starting their own topic strands. Learners initiated 13 new discussions overall, as opposed to 44 discussion strands started by organisers or teachers. However, 147 responses came from learners as opposed to just 99 from organisers and teachers. The highest number of responses was received by a student-initiated discussion on plays on words (40 responses). The frequency of messages increased around the time of transnational meetings. The overall number of messages was 303.

E. Use of the Wiki

The LITERALIA learners' workspace contained two wikis set up by the course writers. The wiki for "frequently asked questions" was originally intended for students to collect answers to questions set by other students. However, this particular wiki was only ever used by organisers who provided helpsheets and tips for using the workspace. If learners wanted to share technical advice, they did so in the forum or during chat sessions.

A second wiki, the "intercultural wiki", however, was used frequently by learners to create entries about aspects of the four cultures, e.g. on famous authors, typical food items, or things that might offend in different countries. Although the wiki was divided into four different culture spaces (Living in the UK, in Poland, in Italy, and in Germany) entries were not always in the equivalent language and learners wrote entries on any culture they could contribute to.

F. The Synchronous Chat

The Learners' workspace of the LITERALIA website contained five different chatrooms, four identified by place names (locations of participating institutions) and a general "learners' chat". Participation in the chat was voluntary and in addition to Tandem email exchanges between teamed pairs of learners. In the second project year chat sessions were organised weekly with participation of tutors and organisers, however, learners could also access the workspace and initiate chats independently at their own convenience.

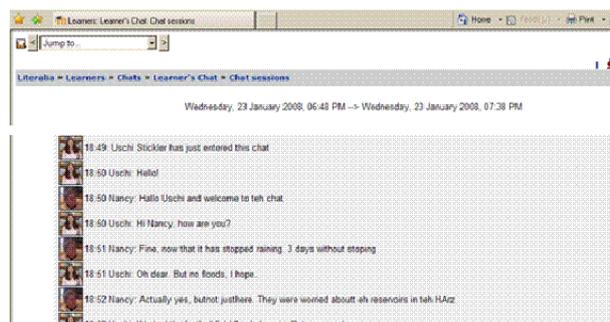


Figure 3. A Moodle chat-log

The Moodle chat (see Fig. 3) has basic text features and a limited number of emoticons. As it is linked to the workspace and users have to log in, it shows the user's profile image next to his or her text entries. Entries are timed and all chats are logged on the workspace.

Over the 24 months of the project more than 140 chat sessions took place in the workspace. The majority of them took place in the general "learners' chatroom", however, all the chatrooms were used to some extent.

The chat served different purposes, amongst them: training sessions in the use of the online workspace; bi-lingual, pre-arranged Tandem meetings; multilingual, multi-user online sessions; and bi-lingual organised online chat events. Chat sessions also had different functions: as ICT training events they built up the confidence of novice computer users; as language practice events they encouraged learners to use the L2 spontaneously and creatively, and as social occasions they furthered social cohesion between groups of learners.

Even after the official end of the project in July 2008, the chat sessions are still continuing.

III. CHATTING IN THE LITERALIA SPACE

Chatting in the LITERALIA workspace was an additional and voluntary activity for learners on the project. All participating institutions organised training sessions for chat use to introduce their teachers and learners to chatroom conventions. Most of these training sessions could be held in a face-to-face environment with technical help at hand, however, as the Open University is a distance teaching institution, only virtual training sessions were available for English students.

For some learners the training sessions were the only time they entered the chatrooms. They did not choose to return independently at a later date (see Fig. 4). These users have been disregarded in the numerical data analysis.

At the beginning of the project chatroom use was encouraged by organisers and teachers but the arrangement of online synchronous meetings was left entirely to the self-organisation of Tandem pairs or groups of learners. From July 2007 onwards, organisers set up a "jour fixe" for online chat sessions: every Wednesday evening the learners were invited to a synchronous, multilingual chat session. This arrangement proved successful and led to a continuity of chat sessions on Wednesday evenings.

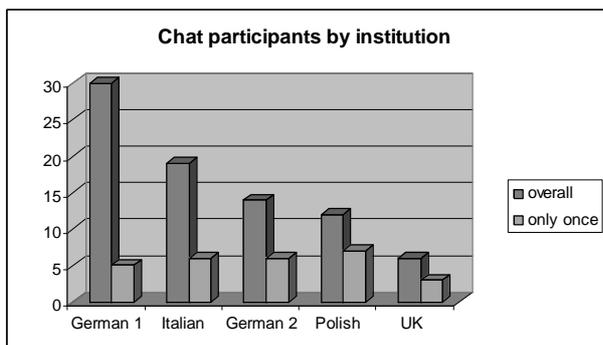


Figure 4. Chat participants by institution

When the classtimes of some Italian learners overlapped with the Wednesday slot, bilingual German-Italian and English-Italian chats were arranged for Thursday evening from December 2007 onwards.

A. Numbers

81 people overall took part in at least one chat session with other learners, teachers and organisers, 29 learners participated regularly.

The highest proportion of consistent chatroom users comes from the VHS (German 1 institution); after intensive training sessions for all their learners, 25 out of 30 learners, teachers or organisers returned to the chatrooms at least once. For Polish and English participants, the training sessions did not prove so inviting, only about half of the users logged into the chat sessions subsequently.

As could be expected, organisers were amongst the most frequent visitors to the chatrooms (see Fig. 5): they set up the Wednesday evening meeting and tried to be present at least for the start of the chat sessions. For one institution, however, the Italian adult continuing education organisation, only learners were amongst the three most frequent users, one learner topping the chart with more than 50 individual log-ins into the chatrooms.

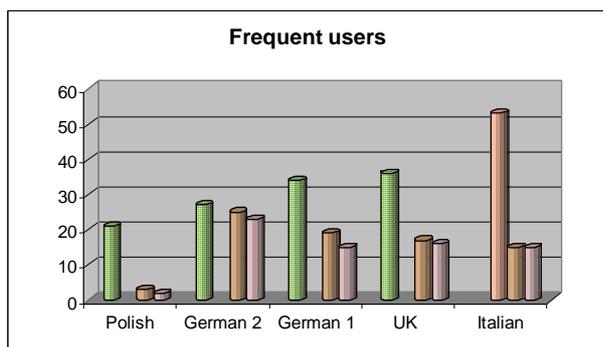


Figure 5. Frequent chat users: Checks = organisers; stripes = learners

Investigating only the 29 regular users (learners only), the combination of languages spoken and learned seems to reinforce the usual assumption that English is THE online language: in our learning environment 19 of the 29 regular users had German as their native language, six Italian, and two each English and Polish. However, approximately two thirds of the chatroom users had chosen English as the language they intended to learn. The English speakers had German as their target language and a minority of German native speakers were learning Italian in the chat.

TABLE I.
CHAT PARTICIPANTS' L1 AND L2

L1 \ L2	English	German	Italian	Polish
English (2)		2	0	0
German (19)	14		5	0
Italian (6)	4	2		0
Polish (2)	2	0	0	
	20	4	5	0

B. Use of the L2 and L3

As a general principle, when learners of the same mother tongue met in a chatroom they tended to use the L1 for communication. Sometimes a word or phrase in another language was introduced but the chatroom was not used for language practice of the L2 or L3 in any systematic way. However, there were some brief chat sessions where learners of the same native language used the L2 for practising and quite often, when teachers and organisers were present in a monolingual chat session, the L2 was used more frequently. This could be seen sometimes as an encouragement to learners, sometimes to mark the space as a multilingual learning environment. Example 1 shows the second type of usage in a training session for teachers and organisers at the VHS.

Example 1:

Pontedera chatroom, Monday, 5 March 2007
 [...]

11:09 Nancy: hello everyone, let's speak English

11:09 Martina: Nice try, Nancy

11:09 Hans-Herbert: ach mensch, martina, du versuchst ja auch noch ins gespräch zu kommen!

11:10 Nancy: On pourrait parler Français

11:10 Martina: Klar, ich geb's nicht auf, Hansi

11:10 Hans-Herbert: Si tu veux

11:10 Martina: si qui veut?

11:10 Nancy: d'accord

11:10 Hans-Herbert: o un po d'Italiano???

11:11 Nancy: espagnol

11:11 Silke: ok, let's move to the forum... ;)

11:11 Silke: 😊

Apart from the general Wednesday evening chats, some learners also arranged meeting their Tandem partner online for language practice. These chat sessions were usually one-to-one or sometimes one-to-two. The purpose of the sessions was clearly practising the L2 and generally, learners did use both the languages being learned. Example 2 shows part of a practice session between a German-Italian Tandem pair.

Example 2:

Learners' chatroom, Wednesday, 27 June 2007

23:43 (L) Regina: come va in Italia? Non sei troppo stanco al lavoro quando ti trovi sull'ora di fantasma nel internet e chat???

23:45 (L) Riccardo: no non sono molto satanco. . . und du ? bist du müde ?

Occasionally, when learners met up with speakers of a different native language, the negotiation of language to use can become quite tricky. Example 3 shows such an occasion where a German native speaker enters the Polish chatroom.

Example 3:

Bielsko-Biala chatroom, Thursday, 12 July 2007
(Polish Training session)
Text only:
19:21: (L) Christina has just entered this chat
19:22: (L) Christina has left this chat
19:22: (L) Christina has just entered this chat
19:23 (L) Christina: Hello - is anyone in this chat?
19:24: (L) Mateusz has just entered this chat
19:24 (L) Mateusz: guten tag
19:25 (L) Christina: Guten Tag Mateusz, where are you live?
19:25 (L) Mateusz: bielitz polen
19:25 (L) Christina: Lernst Du Deutsch oder Englisch?
19:26 (L) Mateusz: italienisch
19:26 (L) Mateusz: und du
19:26 (L) Christina: Englisch - ich versuche es zumindest
19:27 (L) Christina: Aber offensichtlich sprichst Du bereits Deutsch. Ist Italienisch Deine zweite Fremdsprache?
19:28 (L) Mateusz: aufviedersiehen ich muss gehen
19:28 (L) Christina: Guten Abend!

In a multilingual environment, users are not limited to use either their native language or the language they have signed up for. Very often they will have at least basic skills in a third language and can employ this to communicate with others (as in the example above) or practise it. The negotiation to write in the L3 can be encouraged by teachers, who are used to the slightly artificial way of using a language for practice purposes even if it is not the simplest way of communicating at that moment. The following example shows such an “encouragement”.

Example 4:

Learners' chatroom, Thursday, 31 January 2008
[...]
19:17 (L) Jessica: Mein Englisch ist echt schlecht
19:18 Uschi: Hast du Lust zum Ueben?
19:18 Uschi: Just joking. You are here to practise Italian, aren't you. . . .
19:18 (L) Jessica: Warum nicht!
19:19 Uschi: I think there is Italian chat going on in "Pontedera".
19:19 (L) Jessica: Yes but I don't say no when anyone will write in english with me
19:19 Uschi: Okay, I don't mind....
19:21 (L) Jessica: At the moment i dont't find anyone will write in italian. At my first time in the chat I write with an italian english an italian, it was funny
[...]

In this brief extract, Jessica also mentions another occasion when she used English to communicate with an Italian native speaker.

Use of the L3, the language not selected by the participants as target language, can have different reasons: English is often chosen as the default language when chatroom users are not sure what the L1 or L2 of other participants is (see example 3 and example 5 below).

Example 5

Pontedera chatroom, Friday, 18 May 2007, 01:21 PM --> Friday, 18 May 2007, 01:25 PM
13:22 (L) Regina: Hello - is there anybodz there?????

In this chatroom two German native speakers who were learners of Italian were present. The ensuing conversation was conducted in Italian.

An L3 can also be chosen as an alternative practice opportunity if there are no L2 speakers present (see example 4); or as a compromise to accommodate chatroom users who are not sufficiently confident in the L1 or L2 of the other participants. In the latter case, the *lingua franca* chosen is often English.

The L3 can also be introduced in small doses to either make speakers of that language feel welcome or to “teach” novices at least a few basic phrases of the other language. The following example shows both functions, the English organiser (German native speaker) introducing a Polish phrase and the Polish organiser saying good-bye in Polish.

Example 6:

Learners' chatroom, Wednesday, 9 April 2008
20:41 Uschi: @Lucym, what does "Z seren" mean?
20:41 Anne: Lots of local authorities are looking for Polish speakers
20:41 Lucyna: @Uschi I was trying to make out if it was a piece of German or Polish bit:with cheese
20:42 (L) Peter: @ Anne: Why?
20:42 Uschi: @Anne: Yes, quite, my local shop had these Piroshki and it said "z seren" on them.
[...]
21:00 Lucyna: Dobranoc meaning Good night to Everybody

C. *Chatting as Social Event*

As mentioned above, chat sessions have different functions: some learners emphasise the practice and learning function whereas others are motivated to log on for social reasons. An indication for this different intention can be seen when learners are not particularly keen to use their L2. However, the chat has also been used to plan and organise events and to exchange ideas for the transnational and bilateral meetings. Occasionally, organisers used the chat to discuss upcoming tasks and some learners used meetings in the chatroom to give feedback or pass on requests to organisers.

Example 7

Learners' chatroom, Wednesday, 20 August 2008
20:34 (L) Peter: @Uschi: Gareth sagt, er habe seine Zugangsdaten noch nicht bekommen
20:34 Uschi: tscha... da muss ich noch mal mit Silke mailen

There were numerous examples of chatroom use for purely social purposes. Here is just one short excerpt.

Example 8

Learners' chatroom, Wednesday, 9 April 2008
20:05 (L) Karin-Sybille: @Jessi, habe dir Apfeltee aus der Türkei mitgebrauch
20:06 (L) Jessica: danke wie war der Urlaub?

Particularly as the project developed and learners had gotten to know each other personally through the transnational meetings, the social chat between speakers of the same language increased. In bilingual or multilingual chats, social and language learning functions can, of course, not be so clearly distinguished. As stated in the definition (see above), Tandem learning combines elements of linguistic, personal and intercultural knowledge.

D. *Chatting as a Learning Event*

Chat sessions are a means for Tandem partners to practise their L2 in a faster mode than email exchanges. The accuracy of spelling or grammar are not deemed important in chatrooms, the emphasis is rather on speed and keeping the “conversation” flowing. This feature of textchats is one reason why they have been used frequently in language teaching (Abrams 2003; Kitade 2000). Telecollaboration, a term American scholars use for more structured forms of Tandem learning, has also received high attention for language teaching and learning, whether from an intercultural perspective (Thorne 2005), as socio-cultural events (Belz 2002) or for language gain and focus on language form (Lamy & Goodfellow 1999; Ware 2008).

The LITERALIA chat has been used by Tandem learners for just such “telecollaborative” learning events, whether with their own Tandem partners or in larger groups. Example 9 shows the first synchronous online meeting of a Tandem pair.

Example 9

Learners’ chatroom, Thursday, 21 February 2008
 19:33 (L) Britta: Ciao Riccardo, hab mich bereilt musste noch lange arbeiten, damit ich heute im chat bin
 19:35 (L) Riccardo: @Britta kanst du English? mine Deutsch ist nicht so gut
 19:35 (L) Britta: @ja, aber ich hab schon viel vergessen durch das italienisch lernen
 19:36 (L) Britta: bist du mein neuer Tandempartner??
 19:39 (L) Riccardo: Lycu do you speak any German?
 19:39 (L) Riccardo: ops .. Lucy
 [...]
 19:40 (L) Britta: i am happy about my new tandempartner
 19:40 Lucyna: Unfortunately no German. But I Think I will leave you to it as you are tandem partners and will come back later .

In example 10, two Tandem pairs meet up in the same chat session. One of the partnerships is learning in a German-Italian combination, the other in an English-Italian combination, but with one German student substituting for an English native speaker.

Example 10:

Pontedera chatroom, Thursday, 10 April 2008
 19:18 (L) Riccardo: Hallo Jessica
 19:18 (L) Jessica: Hallo riccardo
 19:18 (L) Riccardo: wie geht's?
 [...]
 19:22 (L) Claudia: Mit den Kindern ist es anstrengend, weil sie nicht drauen spielen knnen

19:22: (L) Silvia Lari has just entered this chat
 19:22 (L) Claudia: Scheint die Sonne in Italien?
 19:22 (L) Silvia: Hallo to all!!
 19:22 (L) Jessica: hello silvia
 19:22 (L) Silvia: How are you?
 19:22 (L) Claudia: Hello Silvia, nice to see you. Il sole si va vedere in Italia?
 19:23 (L) Claudia: Hello Silvia! Il sole si fa vedere in Italia?
 19:23 (L) Riccardo: @Claudia wie hasit "erkaillet" aus Englisch?
 19:24 (L) Claudia: I have got a (bad) cold
 19:24 (L) Silvia: @Claudia: mica tanto.. non ho pi voglia degli stivali, ma qui non si decide a fare bel tempo. .
 [...]
 19:54 (L) Riccardo: @Alle ... vogliamo parlrre un po' in Italiano... cosi Jessica fa pratica
 19:54 (L) Silvia: Ok!!

Regina is a native speaker of German practising with her Italian Tandem partner Riccardo. In this session a second Tandem pair, Claudia (L1 German, L2 English, L3 Italian) and Silvia (L1 Italian, L2 English) had joined them. In their next one-to-one meeting, Regina and Riccardo discuss the previous chat session that had ended up being multilingual.

Example 11:

Learners’ chatroom, Wednesday, 27 June 2007
 23:40 (L) Regina: Ieri - chi era quella Silvia ???
 Non ho potuto pi scrivere perch la mia TASTATUR non ha funzionata piu
 23:40 (L) Riccardo:  una mia compagna del cosro di inglese
 23:41 (L) Regina: Per ho potuto leggere che anche lei studia tedesco? Anche con te nel corso
 23:41 (L) Riccardo: no. . lei stdia inglese, ma la sua tandem patner parla anche tedesco

Riccardo explains that, although Silvia is learning English, her Tandem partner also speaks German.

Although there is little evidence in the LITERALIA chat sessions of corrections between learners (i.e. “peer feedback”), vocabulary items are sometimes queried or the L1 or L3 is used to express unknown words. Learners also mention using external help (e.g. dictionaries) to aid their textchat.

IV. AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN AN ONLINE SPACE

A. *Online Communities*

Online communities are formed when members meet regularly for a particular purpose. Jennifer Preece (Preece 2008) identifies four stages in community participation from first experience, to returning and contributing, becoming a regular contributor and finally becoming a leader. The success of an online community hinges on its ability to attract a sufficient number of regular contributors and leaders to keep the momentum of the online environment going. Only if the content of a website or workspace changes often enough will visitors return; only if their contribution is valued and adds to the community, will they feel encouraged to make the effort to create entries or write messages.

In contrast to “communities of practice” or online interest groups, learning environments are usually more highly structured and contain implicit and explicit learning activities and guidelines for users. They also very often make a distinction right from the start between experts or teachers and learners. The LITERALIA workspace can be seen as somewhere in-between an independent online community and a structured learning environment. Although the learning activities are built into the workspace and sometimes made explicit by input and guidance from organisers and teachers, it is not impossible for learners to achieve the role of experts in their own right: not only are they “experts” in their own language and “informants” on their own culture, they can also bring to the project expertise in the use of ICT, they can develop skills in the use of the workspace for language learning and they can choose topics for discussion where their own expertise can be displayed in either the L1 or L2.

For example, a number of learners chose the topic of food for forum discussions and wiki entries. At one of the transnational meetings learners and teachers organised a “Tandem cooking event” with recipes from all four participating countries. In the aftermath of the meeting, recipes were exchanged and deposited online, in the chatrooms, forums and wiki (see Fig. 6 for one example).

The acid test for the success of an online community is its independent survival over time. In the case of LITERALIA it is too early to tell. Although all the stages of participation can clearly be identified amongst our learners (from first time participants to leaders), they have altogether only had 24 months at the most to use the workspace and make it their own learning environment. The Moodle workspace has certainly proven flexible enough to accommodate a growing, developing and changing community of learners, and it has encouraged students to make use of the advantages of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2005) by contributing to, commenting on, and co-constructing knowledge.

B. Choice of Tool - Choice of Mode

Language learning in an online environment allows students to get in touch with native speakers of their target language easily and frequently. Working in a multi-faceted online workspace provides them with a choice of tools and pre-structured learning activities. In the LITERALIA workspace, for example, learners could choose whether they work asynchronously or synchronously, whether they collaborate in a wiki or discuss in a forum, whether they meet at a set time or organise their own meetings, and whether they meet their own Tandem partner or choose other learners for conversational exchanges.



Figure 6. Use of the LITERALIA wiki

This is by no means the end of choices: because of the multilingual nature of the workspace, learners could even choose which language they would use online, whether it was predominantly their L1, L2, even an L3 or a *lingua franca*. Learners would determine whether their chat was mainly social or served as language practice for them, whether they wanted to meet up online for organisational purposes or just to keep in touch with people and with what was happening in the project. Learners could choose the topic of their conversations, any supporting materials they want to use and the type and extent of feedback they give to their learning or conversation partners.

Autonomy is one of the key principles on which Tandem learning and the LITERALIA project as a whole is based. This can seem daunting under certain circumstances: autonomy can be seen as freedom on one hand but as a lack of guidance on the other. The learning environment itself, the workspace, helped in structuring the LITERALIA project to some extent, more structure was introduced by the organisers gradually, e.g. the themed forum discussions, the “jour fixe” for chat sessions. Even so, not all LITERALIA Tandem learners found the online workspace a worthwhile addition to the project and some preferred to keep their learning in a dyad (Tandem partnership) and focus on the use of email supported with the occasional face-to-face meeting. Of those learners using the workspace, some visited it only once or a few times and then decided to focus their efforts elsewhere. But a small number of users found a suitable learning and communication environment ready made for them in the LITERALIA workspace and dedicated considerable time and effort in contributing to its success.

C. Outside the „Space“

From feedback received after the project end, it has become clear that some LITERALIA learners found other means of communicating online, for example Skype or msn messenger. One student wrote that he used Skype via the Internet. “This enables us to make free video & voice calls from PC to PC. We will continue to work outside the LITERALIA framework.”

Learners also met their Tandem partners in face-to-face meetings outside those events organised by the project. They travelled to the country independently, arranged to meet their learning partner, and often established a firm and lasting friendship with them. This can be seen as more important than the original intention of learning a language and improving intercultural communication or computer skills. As another learner expresses it: “I like the idea that Tandem Learning improves language, IT and communication skills, but friendship and getting to know someone that you might otherwise never meet is far more important for me. Thanks for this opportunity.”

V. CONCLUSIONS

In 2006, the European Parliament and Council of Europe recommend eight key competences for every citizen to function in a knowledge society. Competences include communication in the mother tongue and in foreign languages; digital and technological competence; learning to learn; and intercultural and social competences.

The LITERALIA project as a whole is a convincing example of life long learning: the mixture of

interculturality, autonomy, and ICT skills practised through participating in the project, let alone the workspace, help learners to take control of their own learning, to find their own way and method of working together with others in a multicultural, virtual environment.

As with all learning situations, LITERALIA learners' stories are by no means an unmitigated success. Participants can give up for a number of reasons, including technical problems, lack of ICT or language skills, disappointment by their Tandem partner or discouragement by other users. Of those who succeed in using the workspace and particularly the chatsessions not all appreciate the multilingual and multifaceted aspects of the LITERALIA space. They might choose to take the principle (and their Tandem partner) and use a different tool for their online learning.

What can be seen from observing and participating in the workspace is that the virtual learning environment works for some but not for all learners; that face-to-face meetings support and reinforce use of the virtual space; and that language learning often takes backstage to personal, authentic communication in which ever language comes to hand and can be used by a majority of the participants.

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AUTHORS

U. Stickler is a Lecturer in German at the Open University, UK, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, United Kingdom (e-mail: u.stickler@open.ac.uk).

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