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FINAL PROJECT REPORT

SS4LL - Study Skills for Language Learning

Kirsten Söntgens and Juliet Laxton,  
University of Southampton

## Introduction

A large-scale evaluation of explicit skills training across a whole cohort of undergraduate students (300 students of German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and English as a Foreign Language) will aim to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of explicit skills training and portfolio learning to foster learner autonomy.

Considerable research has been conducted into implementing language learning skills training, advising and promoting learner autonomy (Ellis and Sinclair: 1989; Benson and Voller: 1997; Mozzon-McPherson and Vismans: 2001). However, few references have been made to the undergraduate language learning skills gap in UK HEIs including Southampton (Bannerman and Stevens: 2003), which these forms of support can most usefully target in the post-Nuffield context of widening participation. SS4LL was therefore implemented in October 2004 to address two main problems:

- to equip undergraduates with basic language learning strategies in which they were observed to be lacking
- to maximise learner take-up of the previously optional skills training and language advising services

SS4LL is a 10 week training programme which seeks to develop students' independent language learning skills. It forms an integral part of the languages provision for students on courses corresponding to Levels B1 and B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference. Its primary aim is to develop learners' ability to apply generic and language learning skills through increased awareness of and responsibility for the planning, management and evaluation of the language learning process. SS4LL combines interactive learning and teaching workshops, independent learning activities via an assessed portfolio and compulsory language advising sessions. Students are supported by language tutors and advisors in classroom, one-to-one and online contexts.

The training programme is innovative as it has been implemented across languages and assessed via a portfolio of learning with the support of technology-based media including VLEs.

## Literature review

In undertaking this review it is valuable to focus on large-scale projects in the UK Higher Education sector that have preceded the current project, but whose findings have informed the current research and practice. The TransLang project (transferable skills in language learning) (Translang 2000) was in the first instance aimed at developing

transferable skills in non-specialised language learners. A second phase followed that included specialist learners of languages, who study a language as part of their degree course (Fay 2003). While the first phase developed the TransLang methodology of explicit integration of skills into language learning tasks and led to the publication of the *The TransLang Guide to Transferable Skills in Non-Specialist Language Learning* (Pilkington 2000), the second phase included case-studies and recommendations for advanced specialist language learners. The current project has adopted the TransLang methodology in that it seeks to develop language specific and transferable skills in unison with language learning tasks.

Also of relevance to the current project is K. Söntgens' TransLang case study of portfolio-based assessment which shows how a transferable learning approach was adopted to an on-line environment designed around Kolb's (Kolb 1984) model of experiential learning (Söntgens, 2003), as the current project seeks to develop skills through the support of technology-based media including VLEs (virtual learning environments).

The current project also builds on the work of CIEL (CIEL 2000), which investigated good practice in the area of independent learning. CIEL confirms our view that *'ILL is most successful when it is integrated firmly into the language curriculum and is not just a bolt-on'* (CIEL 2000). Thus our integrated learner training program successfully combines interactive learning and teaching workshops, independent learning activities via an assessed portfolio and compulsory language advising sessions.

Papert wrote in 1996 that *'skills teaching is at the basis of independent learning and can promote the acquisition of autonomy in learning'* (Papert 1996). The context of the current project can be described as a 'blended learning' context, in which classroom learning and teaching, skills development and independent learning are integrated. David Little thus describes *'learner independence as a 'capacity' for independent action which is not confined to any one learning context'* (Little 1991).

Furthermore, we have adopted CIEL's definition of independent learning which is characterised by the following features:

- *Responsibility for one's own learning and acquisition of learning skills*
- *Development of transferable skills*
- *Active management of one's own learning*
- *Engagement in a structured learning programme involving action planning, reflection and evaluation*

(CIEL 2000)

At the heart of our structured learning programme is the portfolio of learning which constitutes the assessed piece of work for students. A portfolio is *'a structured collection comprising labelled evidence and critical reflection on that evidence. A portfolio is produced as a part of a process of learning. It is presented to show evidence of that learning[...]'* (Baum, 2001). A Portfolio has two principal functions, namely to document/showcase language learning (including prior learning) as well as a pedagogical function: To enhance the students' reflection on, planning of and involvement in the learning process. Kohonen explores the educational possibilities of the 'dossier' section of the ELP (European Language Portfolio) in which students not only present their learning materials, but also reflect on the process of learning (Kohonen, 2000). For further information and ideas on how to implement the ELP please see the *European Language Portfolio Guide for Teachers and Teacher Trainers, Strasbourg* (Little & Perclova 2001).

Further work on the use of portfolios across a wide range of language subjects within one institution has been carried out by Pilkington and Garner at the University of Central Lancashire in order to investigate the quality of learning experienced by students. They conclude that *'the portfolio cannot be assumed to be a certain guarantee of raising skills and learning awareness, nor of generating conditions of transfer and reflection'*. Of greater importance, in their view, is the extent to which tutors are able to engage with current learning trends and to communicate these to students (Pilkington & Garner 2004). As with all educational innovations there is no guarantee of success. However, our project findings support their finding that tutors are absolutely crucial in 'engaging students' in new learning programs.

Many other British H.E. institutions have introduced, or are in the process of introducing, some form of skills training for undergraduate language students. Researchers in the field of skills development confirm the importance of full integration of skills training into language learning and teaching. Marina Orsini-Jones writes that *'only the embedding of skills assessment into language specific tasks will make skills relevant to students'* (Orsini-Jones 2001). She reports on a curriculum innovation at Coventry University which has introduced a compulsory module for undergraduate linguists to develop academic and professional skills for language learning (Orsini-Jones 2005). There are considerable similarities with SS4LL in that Coventry's first year skills training is delivered in English, is supported through a VLE (WebCT), but also includes language-specific tasks. Orsini-Jones also maintains that the key to success of this

type of learning programmes is the alignment of teaching, learning and assessment advocated by Biggs (Biggs 1999).

Christine Penman reports on the introduction of accredited portfolios in introductory French courses in order to encourage more student involvement in learning and ownership of work produced. She concludes that students found portfolios generally useful to help them become more autonomous, but found that 'learning statements' to encourage reflection were not liked and that students need more 'scaffolding' for activities of independent learning (Penman 2005). These findings are again in line with our experience in that 'reflective' activities were far less valued by students and that students need more support in becoming independent learners.

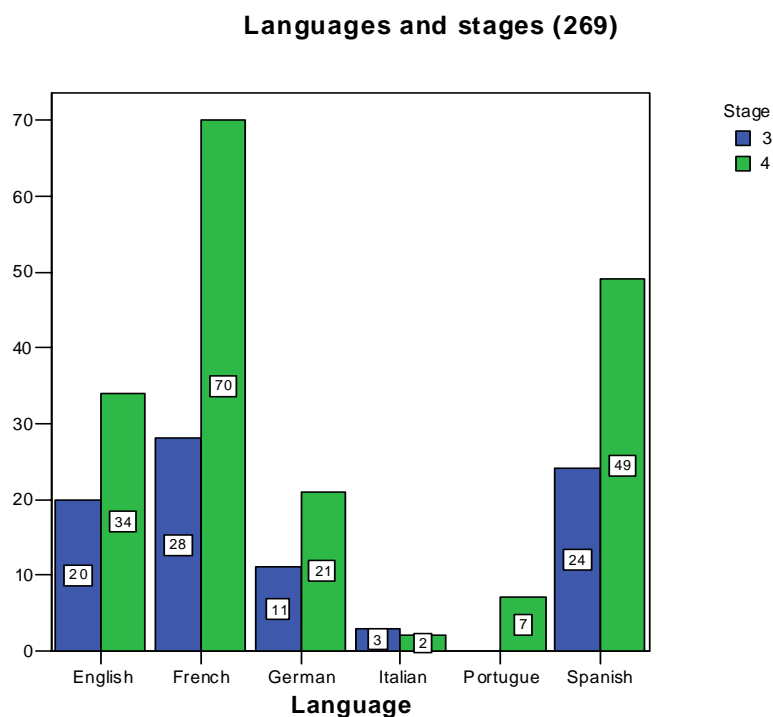
The *Guide to Good Practice for Learning and Teaching in Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies* presents an article on a strategy-training module taught at Newcastle University, which examines to what extent explicit strategy training facilitates independent learning, and tries to demonstrate how an observational approach to strategy research could be developed. The module is based on the book *DIY Techniques for Language Learners* by Fernandez-Toro and Jones, in which students select and apply appropriate learning strategies to specific tasks. Lessons learned are that students can learn to choose resources and strategies appropriate to their needs, and that they can apply specific strategies effectively, although the level of success may vary. As in our project self-assessment was found to be the students' weakest area (*The Guide to Good Practice for Learning and Teaching in Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies* 2005).

### Presentations of findings

SS4LL is a 10 week training programme which forms an integral part of the languages provision for students on courses corresponding to Levels B1 and B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference. In the academic year 2004-5 this constituted 300 undergraduate language students. SS4LL combines interactive learning and teaching workshops, independent learning activities via an assessed portfolio and compulsory language advising sessions

The research aims of the project are to investigate the student & staff experience of the skills workshops, portfolio learning and assessment, the role of technology and language advising and their integration into classroom learning and teaching. Qualitative and quantitative tools were used for data collection and collation. An on-line student questionnaire

was distributed to all participants (300) and received 269 responses, 6 students took part in a focus group and 9 staff returned the staff questionnaires. A spreadsheet was then used to collate open-ended data from the student questionnaire. The statistical software package SPSS facilitated the analysis of quantitative data.



**Diagram 1: Languages and stages**

Diagram 1 shows the number of returned questionnaires for each language and stage; French having the largest number of students, followed by Spanish, English as a foreign language, German and the two smaller languages.

SS4LL is assessed via a portfolio of independent learning which consists of needs analysis and action planning, evaluation of the learning process, as well as 5 set and 5 free tasks. All tasks afford the students considerable scope for independence in either choice of resources and/or task completion.

Diagram 2 shows how students evaluated the usefulness of needs analysis and action plan and can serve as an example of how polarized views on the portfolio are:

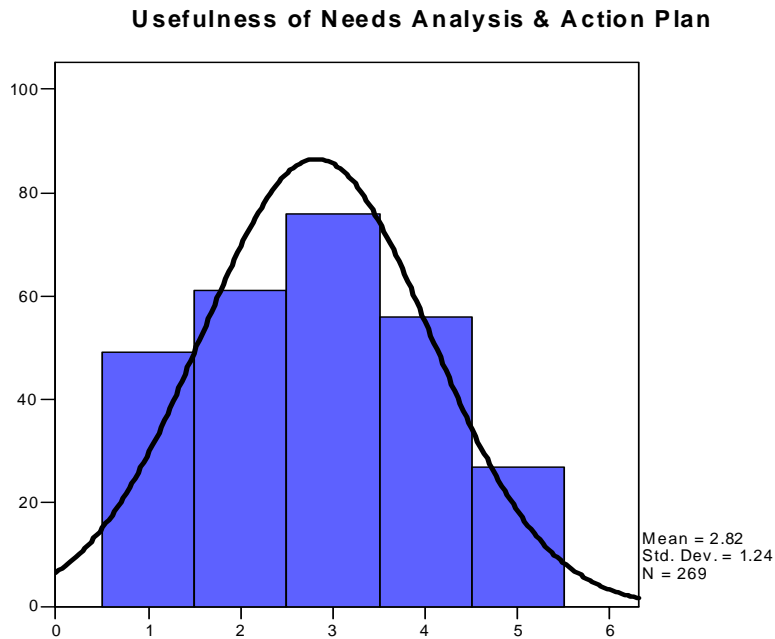


Diagram 2: Usefulness of needs analysis and action plan

The superimposed black line indicates a normal distribution, in which most of the observations are close to the mean and the frequency is high around the mean. In contrast, we have many observations that are much greater (positive) or much smaller than the mean (negative), thus clearly stressing the polarized views of our students.

The polarized views become even clearer when one looks at how students evaluated the 'language' tasks in contrast to the 'planning and evaluation' tasks of the portfolio:

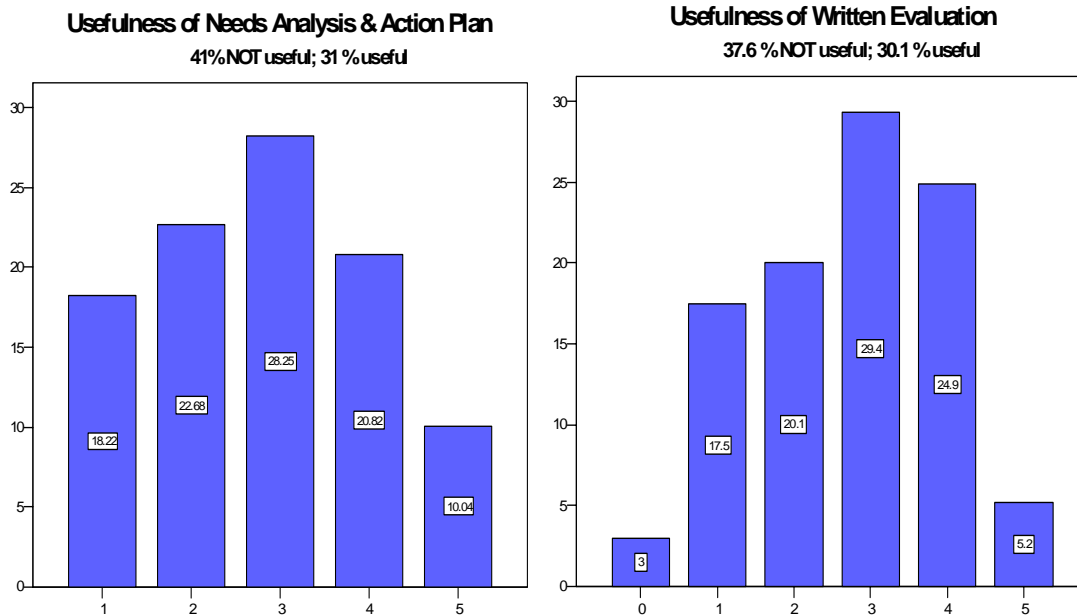


Diagram 3: Usefulness of needs analysis & action plan; usefulness of written evaluation

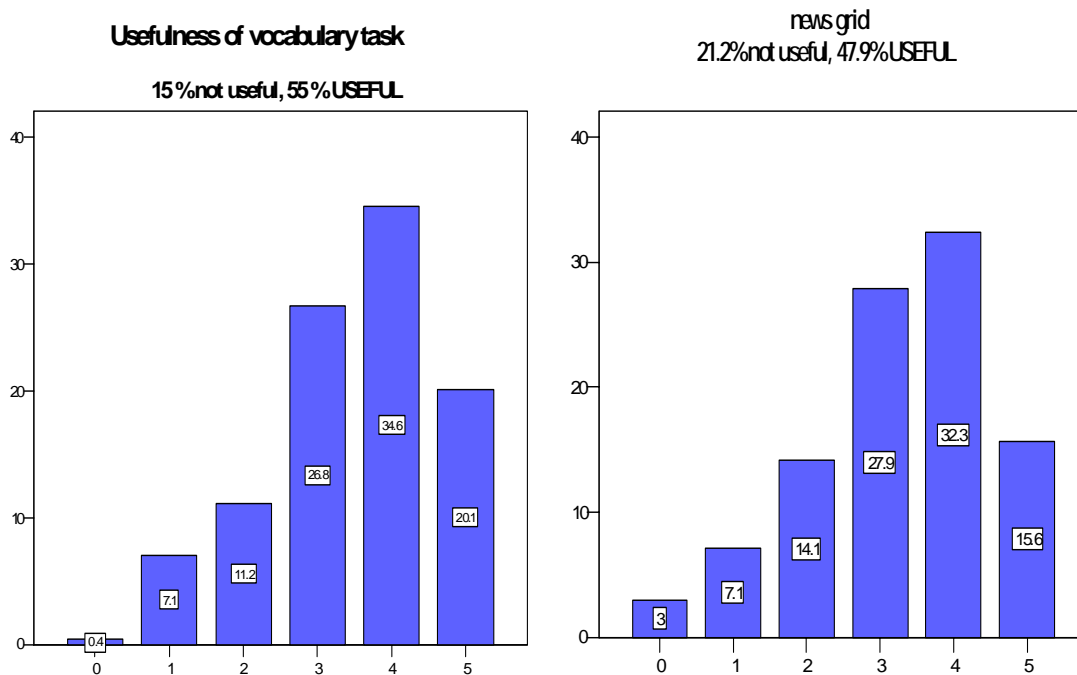


Diagram 4: Usefulness of vocabulary task and news grid

While the majority of students did not see the usefulness of the planning and evaluation tasks for their learning, they did find the language tasks useful. We must thus conclude that we have not succeeded in convincing students of the value of being able to plan, monitor and assess their learning. This is, to a certain extent, confirmed by the qualitative data gathered. The highest number of comments referred to the learning,

remembering and recycling of vocabulary (87) and the listening tasks (57). However, when students did comment on 'learning skills, planning and evaluation', comments were generally positive, in that students realized how useful it is to determine one's own strength and weaknesses. Only 6 students did not find the entire portfolio useful.

These findings seem to mirror those of the CIEL project (2000:4) *'We might bear in mind that an element of a course which places too much emphasis on skills development may appear to avoid the perceived main purpose of the course. However, skills development as an integrated part of independent learning will progressively enhance the process of language learning.'* and

Orsini-Jones (2001) *'It is important to prepare students for independent learning, as, if properly integrated within the language curriculum, academic and professional can enhance students' motivation in language learning and support the acquisition of subject-based knowledge.'*

The message is clear, that only with proper communication of the aims and integration of skills training will students perceive the usefulness of skills training for language learning.

Pilkington and Garner identify a common problem associated with portfolios as that of 'time as a burden as well as a reflection of commitment to portfolios' (Pilkington & Garner 2003). Qualitative and quantitative data on this project support this view. 43 students commented on time and workload issues. However, looking more closely at the statistical data, it appears that the perceived burden in terms of time commitment is not borne out by actual figures. The portfolio guidelines stipulate that students should spend 1-2 hours on each task. The student questionnaire confirms that this is exactly what they did do, i.e. spend an average of 1-2 hours on task completion, only the news task took longer, an average of 2-3 hours. We thus need to work on the perception of students that portfolio learning is time intensive and help them with planning and time management.

Qualitative and quantitative data shows that students found the free tasks more useful than the set tasks, because they 'suit individual learning styles, are more enjoyable to choose oneself, are useful in devising one's own tasks, focus on weaknesses and suit own preferences, needs and interests'. 16 students even wanted to do more free tasks. Tasks were chosen in the following areas: Reading (247) vocabulary (231) listening (222) grammar (220). Other areas students would like to see covered more explicitly in future portfolios are grammar (36), essay

writing (19) and oral discussion (15). A very encouraging finding is that for further support students went first of all to their peers (124), then to advisers (99) and language tutors (90). This seems to support claims that independent learning does not have to be a 'lonely activity', but can and should be collaborative.

Diagram 5 shows what students felt they had learned by doing SS4LL.

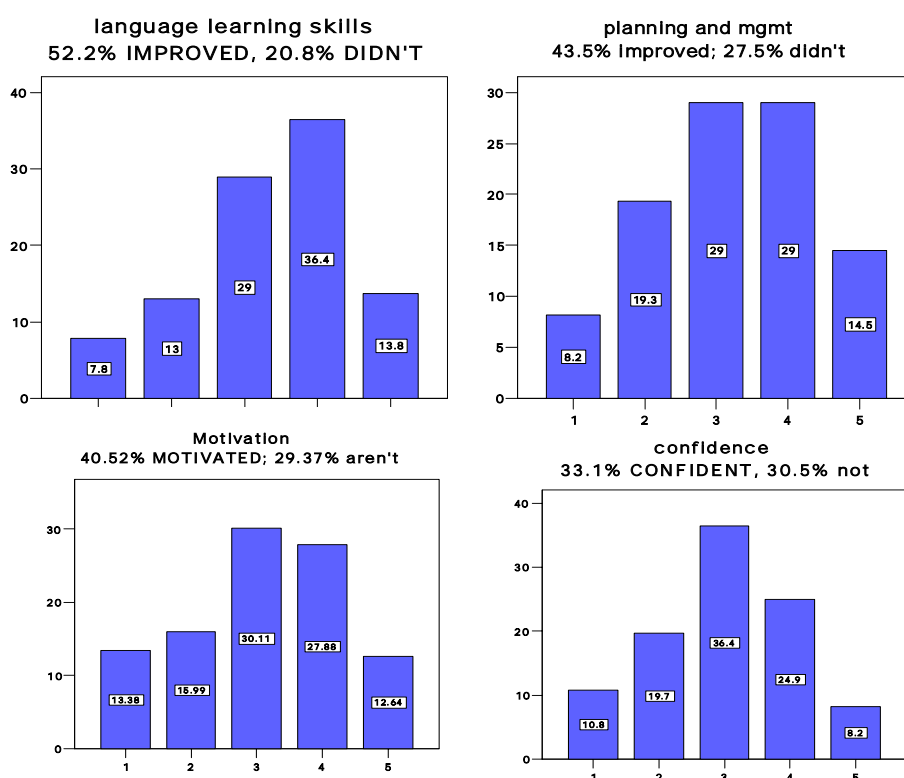


Diagram 5: How independent and portfolio learning helped

The largest number of respondents thought that they had improved their language learning skills (52.2%), followed by planning and time management (43.5%), motivation had also increased for 40.52% and confidence for 33.1% of students. In fact, a statistical test shows a significant correlation between improvement of language learning skills and confidence. Furthermore, those students who were strongly motivated by SS4LL (motivation = 5) also showed improvement in language learning skills and improved confidence (see diagram 6: language learning skills, confidence and motivation)

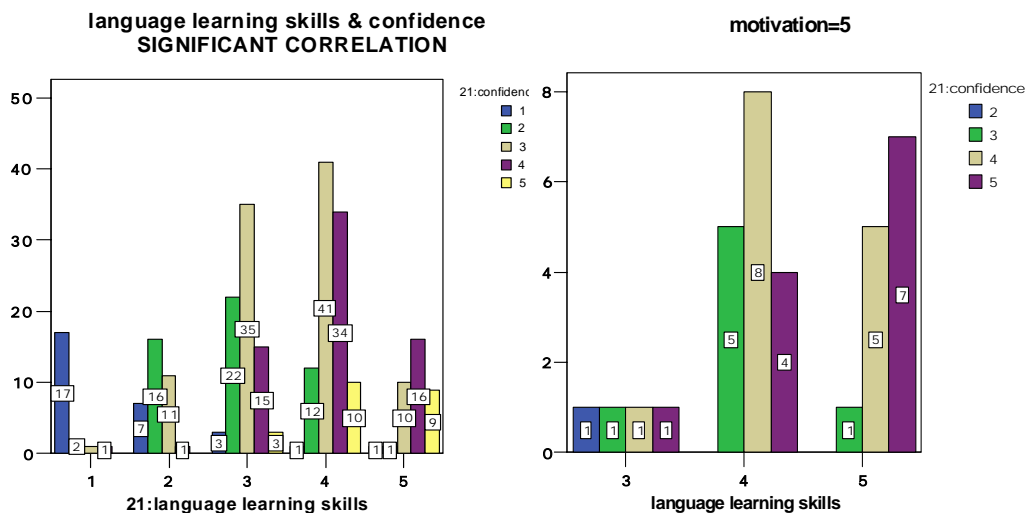


Diagram 6: language learning skills, confidence and motivation

These results are confirmed by the qualitative data. 37 students commented on how useful independent and portfolio learning had been for time management, planning (25) and transferable skills (19). Skills acquired have been used in 'other language classes' as well applied to their specific learning classes, a few transferred learning to portfolios in other subjects. 16 students did not find SS4LL helpful for their learning.

42 Students found independent learning 'good/useful/interesting':

"I have been able to transfer a few of the ideas over to my French lang. Unit"

"has helped me to take a better approach to language learning and I will continue to fill my portfolio!"

15 students did not like independent learning:

" I do not like learning how to learn and having to document everything, see it as a waste of time..."

"I feel the course was rather unnecessary for second years, ..., we should know how to study appropriately ..."

" ... independent language learning is very important..., however I think this should be left to the individual"

The focus group revealed that very little organised independent study had been taken place before the introduction of SS4LL. The following student comments highlight the need for more integration of SS4LL into learning and teaching:

*'integration needs to be handled better, perceived as additional work'  
focus away from 'normal' teaching', want more traditional coursework'  
Useful techniques, but no time to implement them'  
'good knowledge of resources and staff'  
Finalist: 'we already have all the study skills we need'*

There seems to be a realization that independent learning will enhance skills, but is not yet part of an internalised learning process.

Recommendations then must be to make planning & evaluation easier and less onerous, perhaps by using the on-line facilities of Blackboard and by helping students learn to evaluate, by providing more scaffolding for learning tasks and through collaborative evaluations and ultimately to make SS4LL more meaningful to students through better integration into learning and teaching.

The role of ICT

SS4LL was conceived with a view to integrate ICT into the learning and teaching of languages. The primary means of achieving this was through the use of Blackboard, a virtual learning environment.

There was considerable uptake of Blackboard by students to access materials for SS4LL:

BLACKBOARD: 61.3% overall

Spanish: 54/73 (74%)

German: 23/32 (71.8%)

French: 65/98 (66.3%)

English: 22/54 (40.7%)

Blackboard can thus be seen as a major integrative force in SS4LL and lends greater cohesion to the development of the autonomous learning process and facilitates the integration of portfolio elements into the heart of the individual language course units. Staff also named Blackboard as the facility they employed most often to display documentation, internet links, activities and examples of good practice for SS4LL.

The following forms of ICT were used by students in the compilation of their portfolios:

Web-based media: 236

Blackboard: 168

Language learning websites: 138

Language learning software: 129

E-mail: 64

Text/voice chat: 21, Video conf: 8

Although these figures indicate the acceptance and use of ICT for language learning, they also show that students mainly use 'familiar forms' of ICT, such as the Internet and Blackboard, but do not exploit the potentially more 'exciting' and 'rewarding' ICT facilities. Like J. Wyburd, I would like to stress the importance the tutor(s) play in encouraging the students to try out different forms of ICT, such as chat, Moos, Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts etc., which provide students with the opportunity to exploit collaborative authentic means of communication.

*'Tutor recommendation or requirement of exploitation is still the most effective motivator.'* (Wyburd, Alladin 2001).

Further evidence on the integrative nature of ICT and the role tutors and advisors can play was found in the qualitative data on the advisory sessions. Apart from ideas, clarification and direction students stressed that they received valuable advice on the use of ICT in the form of:

- On-line grammar exercises
- Departmental software
- Digital lab for listening
- Use computers for reading
- Internet sites/web addresses
- Independent learning exercises on-line

However, students also commented on the difficulties they perceived with technology, especially in relation to the oral task, which required the recording of a digital audio clip:

*'too focused on media'*

*'technology needs to be more reliable'*

*'Dialogue was a good idea, but need more guidelines how to assess ourselves'*

Although students found the oral task useful in focusing on pronunciation, fluency etc., they found the technology somewhat distracting as well as needing more help with the evaluation of their performance.

To conclude, Blackboard played an important part in integrating SS4LL firmly into the learning and teaching of languages. ICT also affords students the opportunity to actively 'engage' with authentic materials of their choice. It has the potential to make learning more visible through the collaboration on learning tasks and collaborative reflection on-line. The new e-portfolio feature of Blackboard will further help in this area. In the future it is envisaged that tutors will encourage the full use of ICT capabilities we can offer at Southampton university:

<b>Digital Cassette/CD recorder/player</b>	<b>Interactive Whiteboard</b>	<b>Melissi Digital Classroom</b>
<b>VLEs Blackboard Moodle</b>	<b>Video Conferencing</b>	<b>Personal media and audio players</b>
<b>Wireless tablet PCs</b>	<b>Satellite TV</b>	<b>Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts</b>

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