

Developing online self-access materials for subject specific language courses at an advanced level (SAM Project)

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The Language Centre at the University of Bristol is committed to providing students with up-to-date and innovative learning opportunities. Over the course of the academic year 2004-2005 the applied foreign language team developed a range of online language learning materials in French, German, Italian and Japanese for Engineers, Scientists and Social Scientists studying language at advanced and intermediate levels.

The principal aim of the project was to integrate e-learning into the curriculum and to expose students on the Study in Continental Europe programme to more innovative language learning strategies. By creating bespoke online packages generated through Course Genie authorware, students were given the opportunity to further develop, through autonomous learning, the essential academic skills required to function effectively in an academic environment abroad e.g. note taking, presentation skills, graph analysis.

The paper will focus on the rationale and development of the project, provide an insight into the collaborative methods used to develop the materials across the different languages using the University's virtual learning environment and analyse the primary evaluation of the project to date.

One of the principal aims of the Language Centre is to respond to changing educational and commercial environments and to enhance the University's reputation as a major provider of high quality language education and training. Operating in the six key areas of English as a Foreign Language, Applied Foreign Languages (AFL), Lifelong learning, multi-media facilities, testing and assessment and External Language Services, the Centre delivers a wide portfolio of activities to a diverse and growing base of students. A distinct feature of the Language Centre's profile is the provision of AFL training across a range of levels, and to all faculties and departments at the University. Six foreign languages are taught on a range of fully accredited undergraduate and postgraduate units which include the Study in Continental Europe Programme, a range of undergraduate open units and intensive language training on the postgraduate MSc in East Asian Studies.

E-learning

The departmental approach to teaching is largely based on a mixture of face-to-face tuition and self-directed learning with a growing emphasis on the inclusion of e-learning in the mainstream curriculum. In line with the University's e-learning strategy, the department has always strived to apply learning technologies in a principled way that would lead to improvements in the quality of the delivery of language courses so as to foster better working practices and enhance the student learning experience. Over the years, the promotion of the use of new technologies has aimed to support existing programmes, promote independent learning and to offer alternative course delivery. Looking at the department's different areas of activity, the diversity of e-learning application is wide and for some years staff have been encouraged to take a lead in developing, delivering and integrating e-learning into teaching programmes. Lunchtime show-and-tell sessions feature regularly in the staff development calendar to give a platform to e-learning and to encourage staff to promote and share good practice. Recent initiatives completed by the AFL team have included the development of online

diagnostic tests, online assessment and the development of a unit including online support for the European Language Portfolio (ELP).

The Self Access Materials Project (SAM)

This paper focuses on the AFL team's most ambitious e-learning project to date, namely the development of online self-access materials at advanced level, known as the SAM project. The driving force was to develop on-line learning resources for the self-access multi-media facility in the Language Centre, to support teaching on second year French, German and Italian advanced units and on Japanese Open Units at intermediate level. The French, German and Italian courses are specifically designed for students on the Study in Continental Europe programme from all faculties from across the University. The curriculum in each language is tailored to meet the needs of Engineers, Scientists, and Social Scientists preparing for the period of study abroad which consists of three hours of timetabled face-to-face tuition per week in the first and second years of an undergraduate degree.

The Language Centre has a designated multi-media facility and students are encouraged to use it on a drop-in basis to support their language learning. The SAM project aimed to encourage advanced level students to make more use of the facilities on offer, giving students greater opportunities to support their learning outside of class contact time, exposing them to alternative language learning strategies and fostering a greater awareness of how language skills develop. By creating bespoke online packages generated through CourseGenie software, students now have the opportunity to further develop the essential academic skills required to function effectively in an academic environment abroad.

Funding to develop this bank of materials was allocated by the Learning and Teaching Group of the Education Committee to support new learning and teaching initiatives. The project was subsequently developed by Language Centre staff throughout the academic year 2004-2005 and materials were made available to students in October 2005-2006.

The themes and theories illustrated by this project were wide reaching. As this paper will demonstrate, whilst the overarching aim was to generate a bank of online materials at intermediate and advanced level, the scope of the project required a new approach to project management and collaborative work and presented staff with significant staff development opportunities.

Project management

As stated, the project was designed to be completed over the course of an academic year. The size of the project, the timescales and the number and different types of staff involved, meant that it needed to be well planned and managed in a transparent way. All staff involved were either full-time or part-time hourly paid teaching staff, so there was a need for robust planning with well defined roles and responsibilities, as well as realistic deadlines that could be met within the constraints of an academic year. In order to facilitate this, staff were divided into three distinct teams, namely managers, content editors and content developers (see Fig 1). As illustrated, in total the project involved ten members of staff. It was led by the Deputy Director for AFL and managed by an E-Learning Coordinator. The development teams in each of the four languages consisted of a content developer (part-time tutor) and a content editor (full-time language coordinator).

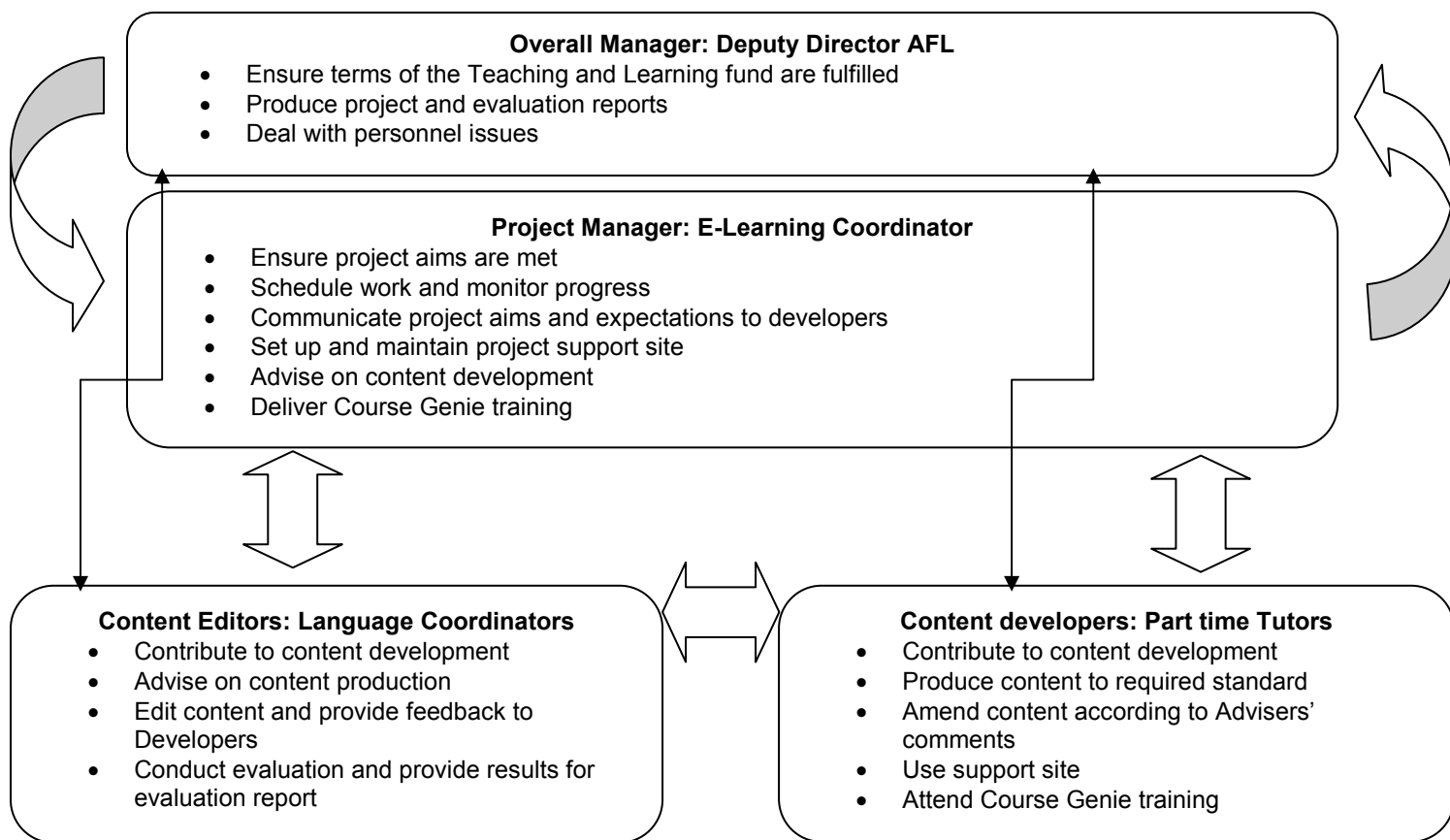


Fig 1. Members' roles and responsibilities

Project plan

The project was divided into five stages (see Fig. 2). To maximise the funding available, face-to-face meetings were kept to a minimum. An initial meeting was organised for editors and developers to collectively discuss the pedagogical approach to the project, followed up by a second meeting to finalise topics and content. The project was then run entirely through Blackboard, the University's virtual learning environment (VLE).

Stage	Date	Aims
1	Nov 04	First meeting to decide on the basic outlines of the five prototypes
2	Jan 05	Second meeting to finalise the prototype topics and content outlines
3	Jan-Mar 05	Produce the prototypes , evaluate them and modify accordingly (1 prototype produced per language)
4	Apr-Jun 05	Produce versions of each prototype in each language (4 packages produced per language)
5	Jul-Aug 05	Produce tutor notes and project report

Fig 2. Project plan

Prototypes and packages

In full consultation with the content developers it was agreed that the essence of the SAM project was to produce four prototypes which could be used to create self-study packages in the chosen languages. A developer and an editor in one language area would produce one prototype in English which would then be shared across the other language teams. In other words the four language teams developed one prototype each in English, shared their work with each other and subsequently produced four self-study packages in their own language.

What is a prototype?

Essentially, a prototype is a template, i.e. a set of objectives, design elements and outlines written in English (See Fig 3). As stated, the main advantage of a prototype is the fact that it can be shared across language teams. It was agreed that the template would contain the following elements:

- title, objectives and topics
- text of the introduction and aims sections
- text types
- task outlines and exercise types
- further study task

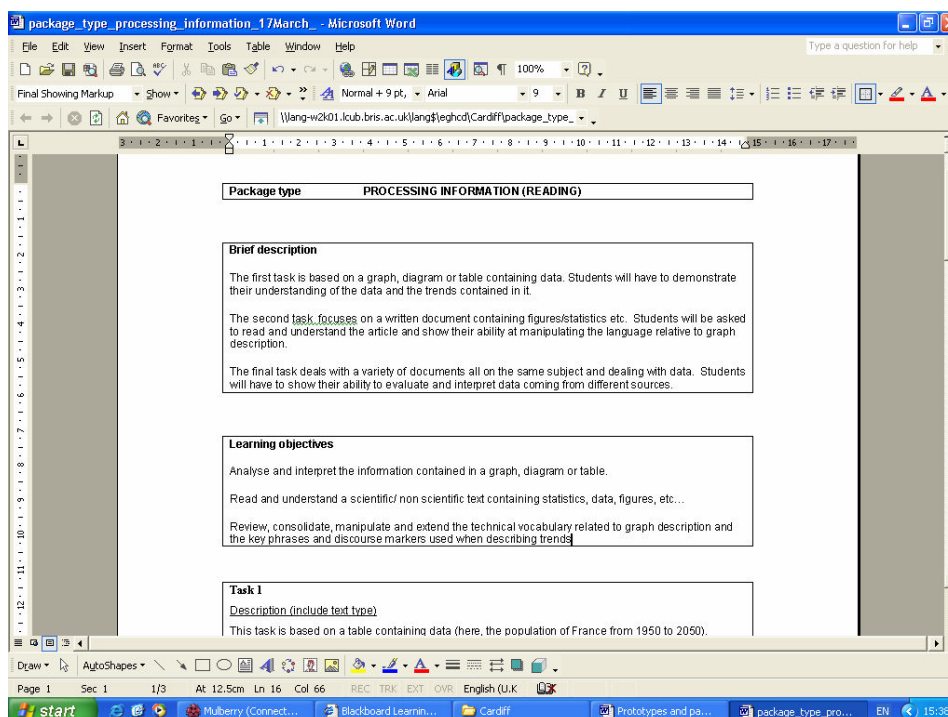


Fig 3. Screenshot of a prototype

Why use prototypes?

Creating prototypes served several purposes. First of all, it ensured variety of content and style across the packages, which cover a wide range of language and skills. It also ensured consistency of materials across languages and supported quality of content since developers initially concentrated on one set of materials only. Experience shows that a large proportion of the development of a project on this scale tends to be spent on researching ideas and concepts. Creating prototypes thus enabled developers to share the workload, and produce an important volume of material in a limited timescale. Using prototypes, therefore, helped save resources and avoided duplication of effort.

Once the four prototypes were created, developers then set to work on producing self-study packages in accordance with the agreed framework.

What is a package?

Each self-study package contains the following sections (see Fig 4:)

- **an introduction** which aims to explain to students the relevance of the package to their language studies;
- **a set of aims** which explain what language areas, linguistic and non-linguistic skills students will be studying;
- **a set of 3 tasks** consisting of instructions, media and interactive exercises (generally 2 or 3);
- **a further study task** providing students with an opportunity for language production and additional study on topics or language areas of interest;
- **related resources** in the form of web links or non-computer based resources in the self-access centre.

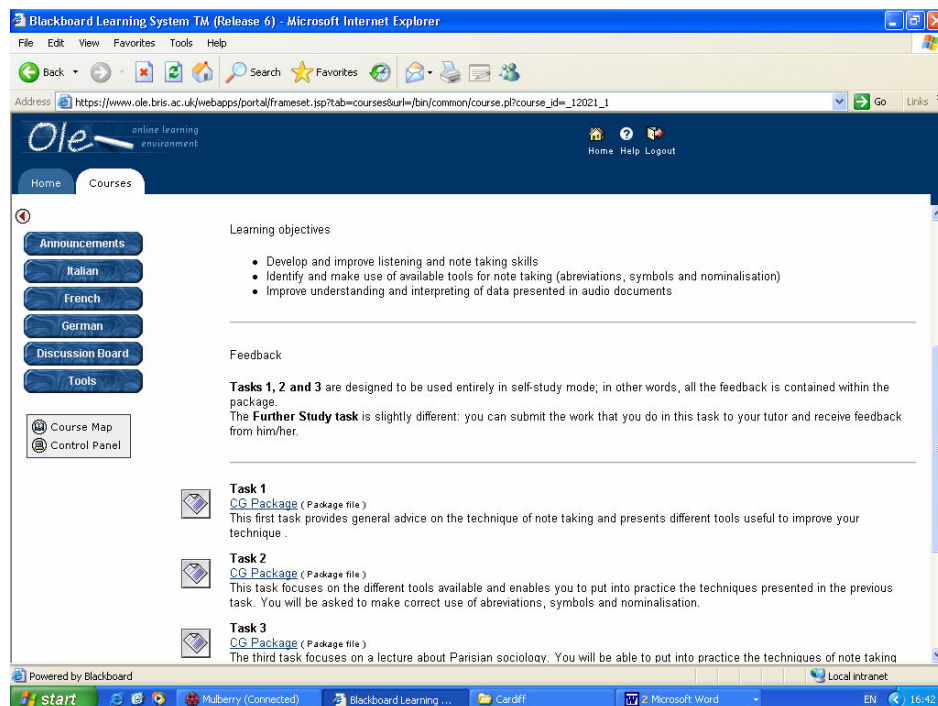


Fig 4. Screenshot of a self-study package on Blackboard

As stated, packages were developed for students in the second year of the Study in Continental Europe Programme, and who it was felt, would benefit from additional opportunities to develop and practice the essential linguistic skills needed to prepare for the year spent abroad. Packages were developed with the following criteria in mind:

- They should tie into the already established schemes of work for the unit
- The topics and language skills chosen should be common to each of the four languages
- Packages should enable students to revise for exams and/or reinforce the work done in class
- Packages should concentrate on skills essential for students to function effectively whilst in an academic environment abroad
- The emphasis should be on language skills rather than topics to avoid packages becoming dated
- Texts types and other media should be reasonably generic in order to facilitate replication in each language

Having taken the above points into account, four topic areas were agreed upon as follows:

1. Presentation skills (Package 1)
2. Processing information from texts and graphs (Package 2)
3. Processing information from listening and note taking (Package 3)
4. Study abroad (Package 4)

The Software

Each package was developed using CourseGenie, a piece of software licensed to the university that enables documents created in Word to be turned into html pages. This particular software was selected for several reasons. Although basic training is

required, CourseGenie is very user-friendly as it uses Word documents. This allowed developers to work in a Word format and concentrate on the pedagogical aspects of the packages without being distracted by unfamiliar technologies. Furthermore, it provides a wide selection of exercise types (multiple choice, multiple selection, true/false, text entry, matching and gap-filling) and supports an eclectic range of media (audio, video, images, texts etc.). The exercise types enabled developers to create tasks such as comprehension questions, summary completion, language noticing, vocabulary and grammar practice and extension. Finally, CourseGenie provides a choice of either summative or formative feedback.

How are the packages used?

In order to accommodate a range of users and uses, the content of the four packages is flexible, with components that can be used independently of each other. At the same time, each package constitutes a coherent set of materials with clear aims related to language skills and topics covered in the schemes of work. There are three clear scenarios where packages are best used:

- Scenario 1: To prepare for a lesson
- Scenario 2: To reinforce and extend what has been learnt in class
- Scenario 3: to prepare for exams

The computer-based self-study materials fully complement and extend the content of the units. The materials developed are bespoke and fulfil a need for more interactive exercises for the development of specific language and skills at advanced level. The materials can be used and accessed by students at any time during the academic year, they are fully integrated into the schemes of work and cater for the specific needs of our students.

Using a VLE to support collaborative work

As demonstrated, the collaborative nature of the project and its success was wholly dependent on good communication channels, as all project members needed to be in regular contact with each other from the planning stages through to the development of the end product and the evaluation process. Due to the different status of staff working on the project (full-time and part-time), the need for tangible channels of communication was paramount. At a very early stage of the project it was, therefore, decided that an online platform would be appropriate to best facilitate communication and collaborative work.

A project support site was set up on Blackboard and maintained by the Project Manager. Creating a virtual presence provided a focal point for the project, a place where members could share information and ideas and get help with any issues or difficulties that arose over the course of the year. It was vital, therefore, that the online support available to all team members was meaningful and user friendly. Using a VLE enabled all members to be present, regardless of distance, availability and other professional commitments. The site provided a two-way support and communication network: on the one hand, the content developers were made to feel part of the project at each stage of its development; while, on the other hand, project managers and editors were easily able to monitor their own language area as well as have an overview of the project development. The significant benefits of the virtual support site were as follows:

Creating support mechanisms

The project manager was responsible for setting up and maintaining the site and developing support mechanisms to underpin the project by regularly uploading documents and instructions in the “project information” section. An “Essential Reference” folder (see fig.5) was created containing information about exercises, packages and formatting materials which proved essential literature to consult before producing the learning materials. As developers and editors often communicated in their mother tongue, in short, Blackboard was the platform, where participants accessed and shared generic information in English.

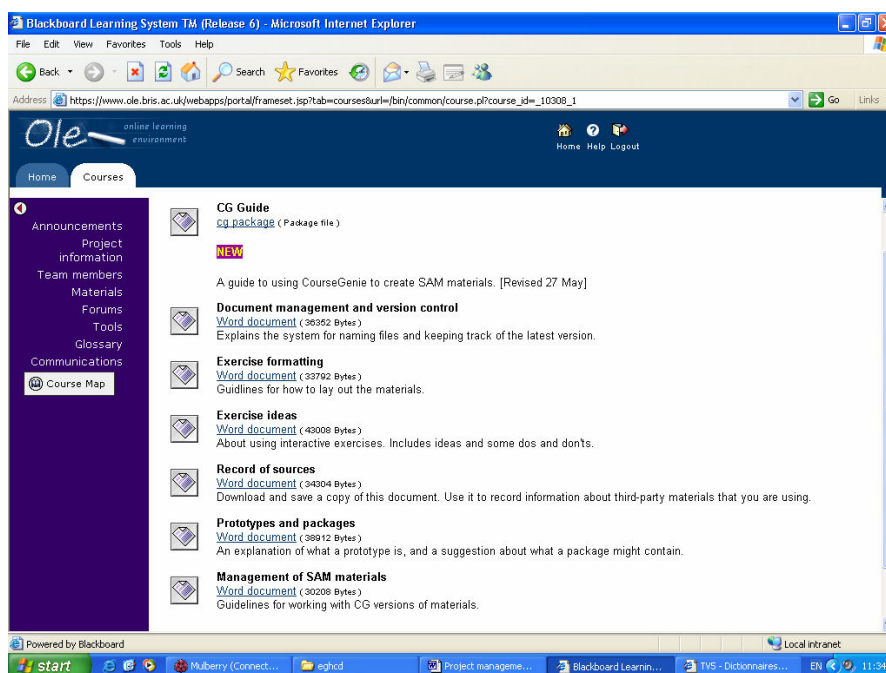


Fig 5. Screenshot of the Essential Reference folder on Blackboard

Enhancing communication between participants

One of the main benefits of using a VLE for collaborative work is the variety of tools available to users to maintain communication links. For example, the message tool was used for sending group messages, members' contact details were published on the site, and discussion boards were set up so that participants could discuss ideas and problems, as well as share material that could be beneficial to other team members. Using Blackboard meant that (1) communication between members was facilitated by user-friendly tools, (2) all messages were compiled in a single place, (3) information did not need to be repeated to each team member.

This proved to be an efficient way of working as staff workloads were reduced by sharing outlines and ideas. At the prototype development stage, discussion was essential and Blackboard proved an invaluable tool for asynchronous discussion. The outlines of the four prototypes were kept online for reference and staff posted examples of work in progress so that developers, editors and project managers were able to discuss the content and the format of prototypes via the discussion board (see Fig 6.). In short, the Blackboard support site enabled developers to work in isolation and/or in different location, with the security of support mechanisms, communications tools and easy-to-access resources.

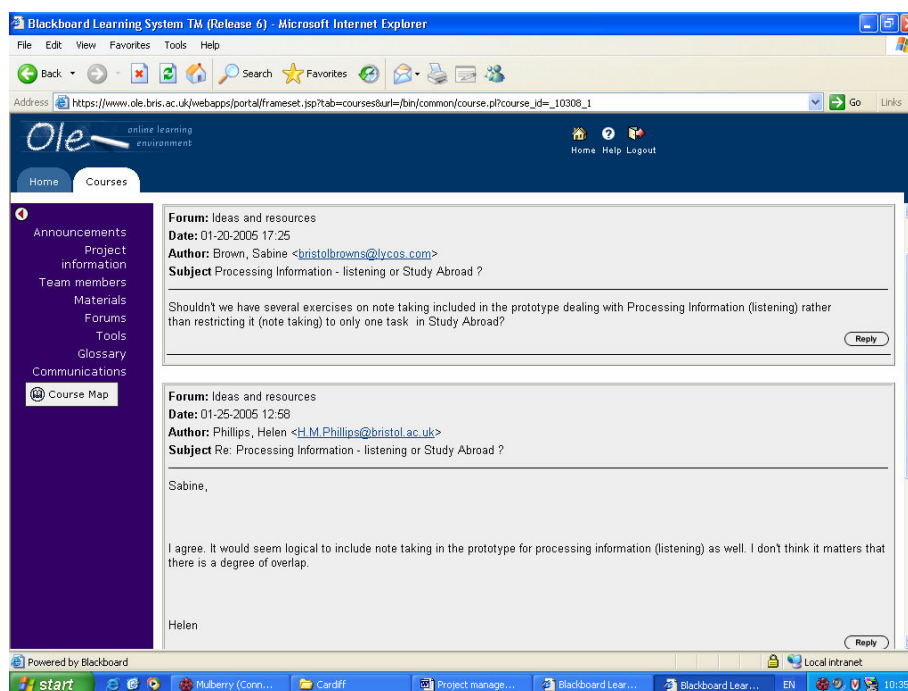


Fig 6. Screenshot of a discussion on a prototype on Blackboard

File sharing

Collaboration and group work was greatly facilitated by the file sharing facilities available on Blackboard as it offered user-friendly options for sharing resources and disseminating information e.g. uploading a wide range of file formats and media, attaching files to e-mails, to messages or to the discussion board. This enabled the team to easily deliver their work and access shared resources. Importantly, however, developers and editors were not permitted to upload materials onto the main content site. The project manager retained overall “instructor rights”, so that the core information for the project was not altered and the focus not lost. Managing the project in this way meant that the efficiency and timing of file sharing was at times slowed down but in terms of resource management, it was controlled and information was prioritised and streamlined.

Primary Evaluation

As part of the evaluation process, students were asked to complete an online survey and the initial results make for interesting reading. To summarise:

- Students claimed to have accessed each package at least 2 or 3 times and spent on average between 20 to 40 minutes logged onto the site each time
- They usually attempted all the exercises in each task and were able to navigate the packages easily
- Students were highly satisfied with the quality of the audio and video excerpts, rating it no lower than “very good”.
- The content of each package and the feedback for each exercise was consistently described as “highly relevant” or “relevant”
- 70% thought their language skills had improved, and that the tasks were pitched at the right level for them

- 71% thought the tasks were sufficiently varied and stimulating
- 73% thought that this type of autonomous self-study helped them better prepare for exams and equally 73% felt that this type of exercise served to consolidate work covered in class
- 100% would have liked to see this type of work integrated into the first year language units.

Analysis of the survey, suggests that the majority of the project's aims seemed to have been met. Nevertheless, there are some aspects that will need reviewing, many of which highlight technical difficulties and the limitation of the software. Feedback showed that one of the main aims of the project was not met, namely to encourage students to make more use of the in-house multi-media facilities. Nearly all students claimed to have accessed the materials off site, at home. This in itself is not deemed to be a failure for the project, however, it simply illustrates the evolving nature of student learning landscapes. The survey showed that students appreciated the relevance of the online materials when teachers used the packages in conjunction with the work done in class, and directed them to complete the work.

Finally, to the question "do you think you benefit from autonomous self-study", 11.8% disagreed thus questioning the actual benefit of autonomous learning. Admittedly this is a small proportion compared to those who found they benefited from this type of learning, however, it is, worthy of note. At this early stage we can see that at an advanced level, students appear to appreciate self-study better when it is fully blended into the curriculum, with clear instructions and directives from teachers. In essence, full autonomy does not seem to be what is required.

Conclusion

The principal aim of the project was to dress already well established and proven language units with additional e-learning materials, adding a fresh dimension to applied foreign learning at advanced level. As demonstrated, this initiative had wide implications for all involved. Admittedly it was an ambitious undertaking and at times extremely challenging in terms of workload. Nevertheless it has undoubtedly provided staff with invaluable opportunities in terms of using new technologies, working collaboratively and experimenting with an alternative approach to project management. The use of a VLE as a project support site served as a focal point for accessing essential information, and as a repository for resources and documents that could be accessed by team members at any time and from any location. Most importantly though, the project has provided the department with a blue print for the development of on-line resources that can be re-used across any of the areas of activity at the Language Centre.