

Applying Lessons Learnt from the L₂O Project in the creation of an institutional repository of LOs and pedagogic assets

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Background

*L₂O: Sharing Language Learning Objects*¹ is a JISC-funded Distributed e-learning Pilot Project. Led by the University of Southampton, a consortium involving 4 regional partner hubs, including the University of Portsmouth, have generated online re-usable learning objects (RLOs) from existing learning materials. These have then been tagged, stored and can be retrieved from the Project's customised learning object repository, CLARe², (Contextualised Learning Activity Repository) by learners and teachers for independent learning, classroom-based learning or blended learning according to particular need. In broad terms, L₂O has aimed to evaluate the feasibility of re-using learning resources across the regional community and in different educational and teaching contexts, and for different purposes.

This case study will describe how involvement with the processes and concepts explored by the L₂O Project has influenced practice and philosophy in the School of Languages and Area Studies at the University of Portsmouth.

Institutional Context

The School of Languages and Area Studies (SLAS) at the University of Portsmouth³ is one of the largest departments of its kind in the country. It offers some 20 degree programmes to more than 900 undergraduate students. These include French, German, Italian, Spanish, EFL and associated area studies units. In addition, it has a strong IWLP programme, which provides MFL tuition in the all major European languages, Arabic, Japanese, Mandarin and British Sign Language to over 1,000 specialist and non-specialist students across the University.

Over the last three years, the School has invested in excess of £300,000 in state-of-the art multimedia digital classrooms and software. It has also upgraded its Learning Resources Centre, computer suites, teaching classrooms and resources development workshop. WebCT-delivered online resources support most MFL courses within SLAS.

Intended Outcomes from participation in L₂O

These were some of the intended outcomes of Portsmouth's involvement in the project:

¹ <http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/researchcommunity/projects/l2o.html>

² CLARe Contextualised Learning Activity Repository: <http://clare.eprints.org/information.html>

³ <http://www.port.ac.uk/departments/academic/slas/>

- To absorb lessons learnt in the creation and testing of the L₂O repository and then explore ways in which this experience could inform the design and piloting of a LOs and assets repository for SLAS.
- To adapt existing in-house materials to the Pedagogic Asset and Learning Object formats developed by the L₂O project team.
- To disseminate the development within the Faculty of Humanities in order to foster departmental participation across different languages, levels and disciplines.
- To explore initial student attitudes towards the pilot repository with an eye towards future development.

Challenges within Established Practice

1. WebCT-delivered online materials were an integral part of the Spanish *ab initio* course, and included a range of self-correcting and open-ended tasks to reinforce content covered in class. Available resources, for example videos, were aimed to cover a specific skill or areas of knowledge invariably attached to a particular level. The way in which students are centrally attached to resources on WebCT implied that only those registered for the *ab initio* Spanish course had access to the materials related to the course, adding accessibility constraints and preventing students doing Spanish at other levels from using the materials for revision purposes (for example, higher level students).

2. Online resources for Spanish are usually designed having in mind a particular level and they are, in most cases, an integral part of the course closely linked to the content covered in formal teaching sessions. Little attention had been paid to exploring ways in which existing resources could be repurposed and reused for different levels of instruction within the Spanish programme or across other Modern Foreign Languages and/or related disciplines.

3. The restrictive way in which materials were designed and made available to students left very little room for the sharing, repurposing or re-using of otherwise copyright free, high quality, and labour intensive, in-house produced resources. For example, a video filmed in a hotel in Santiago de Chile, including an interview with a receptionist describing her duties, booking a room by telephone and a tour of the hotel facilities could be exploited, as it originally was, for listening comprehension, vocabulary expansion and cultural awareness for *ab initio* students. However, by adopting a learning object approach to materials design, the same asset (i.e. resource) could also be used for transcription at advanced level, subtitling at postgraduate level, some areas of linguistics such as discourse analysis, regional and national varieties of Spanish, conversational rules and politeness or intercultural awareness in the case of, for example, hospitality management students. In the same way, more generic, less culturally-bound resources originally developed for Spanish could, in some cases, be re-used by other MFL language teams within the School and/or by other institutions across the different educational sectors.

Applying lessons learnt

The L₂0 Project team defines a learning object as ‘a stand-alone, interactive resource which allows a learner to learn and/or practice a learning point connected with a skill, or a subject area.’⁴ Although some of the existing resources on WebCT could easily be adapted to the learning object format, thus allowing them to become self-standing units of learning, some others had to be re-designed according to the L₂0 model. This implied a) avoiding the inclusion of open-ended tasks in those LOs included in the pilot repository, and b) exploring the LO’s potential for reusability, for example, with a variety of students at different levels and within different subject areas. It also involved the distinction of ‘pedagogical assets’ from the LO itself. The Project team’s definition of an asset is ‘a resource that has its own value for pedagogic purposes. An item which will have an implicit value for learning (already recognised), for example, an audio extract, or a downloadable Word document containing grammar reference information.’⁵ These examples may form part of activities within an LO, but could also stand alone and be used for a variety of pedagogic purposes.

The project team decided early on in the Project that CLARe should contain only LOs and assets (as opposed to other kinds of online material), in order to enable reusability and sharing; and it was observations and analysis of the testing of CLARe that informed the development of a prototype SLAS repository which also focuses on the inclusion of LOs and pedagogic assets. Students are currently participating in the piloting of the SLAS prototype are following a range of degree programmes which involve the study of one or two MFLs, one of them being Spanish at *ab initio* level. The prototype repository has also been piloted, to a lesser extent, with non-specialist students following IWLP courses in Spanish.

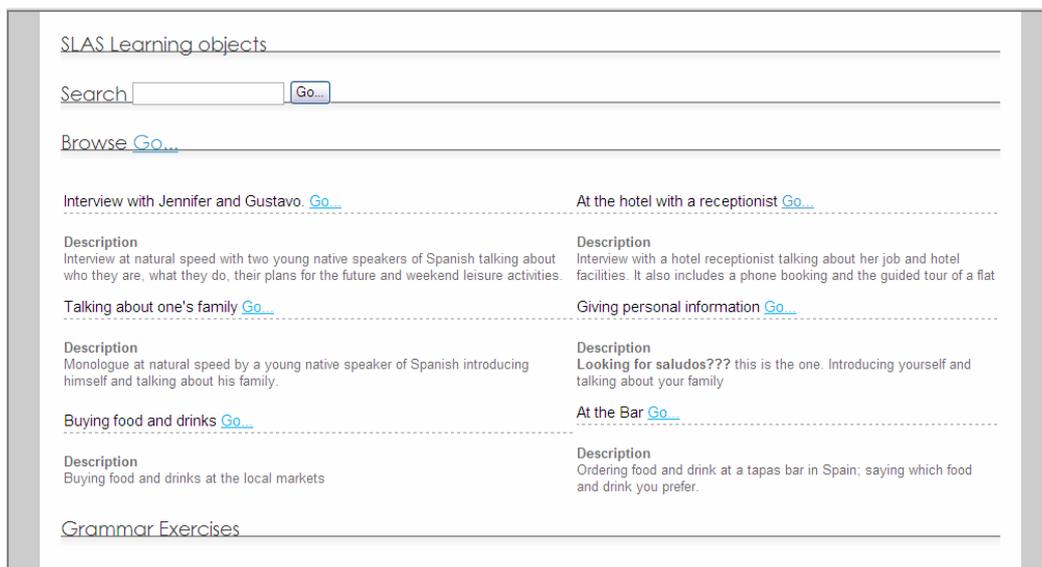


Fig 1. LOs on the SLAS repository

⁴ <http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/researchcommunity/projects/l2o/terminology.html>

⁵ <http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/researchcommunity/projects/l2o/terminology.html>

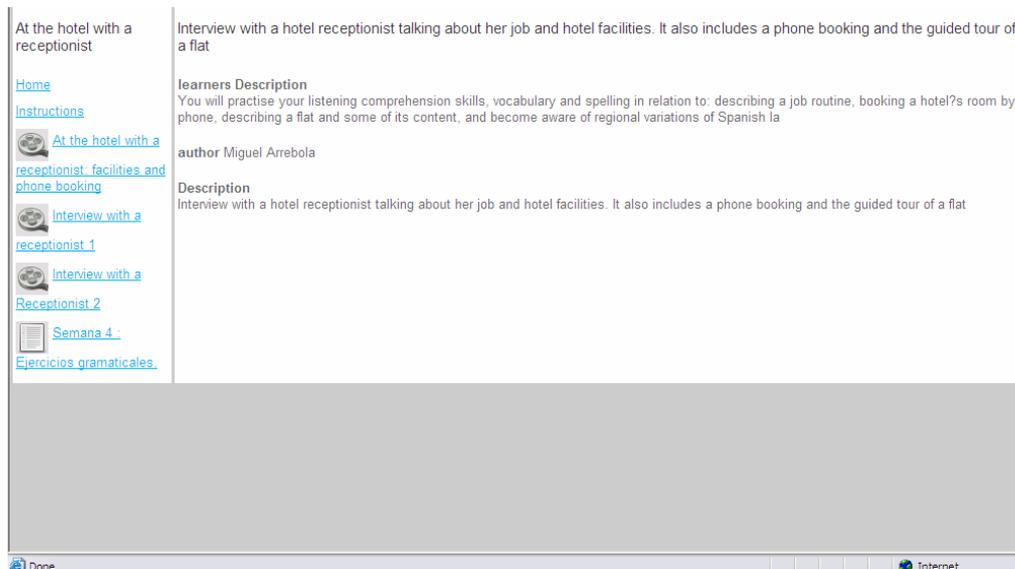


Fig 2. example LO page

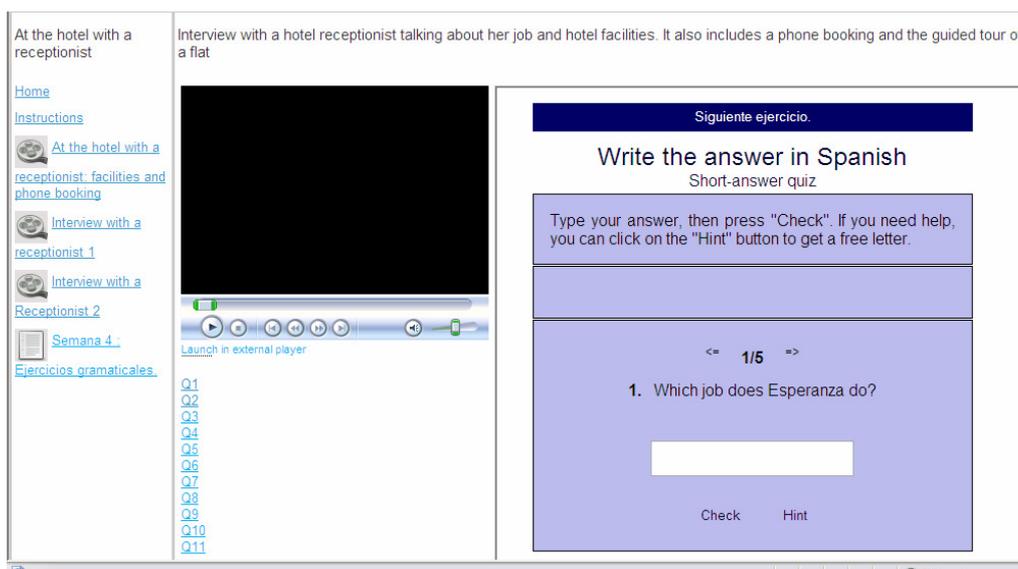


Fig. 3 An LO 'in action'

The integration of WebCT-delivered online materials into the *ab initio* Spanish course and the piloting of the prototype repository ran in parallel throughout the course. Further research into users' attitudes, preferences, patterns and purposes of use in what is primarily a face-to-face teaching environment will be conducted as the prototype is refined and becomes more populated.

Key lessons learnt for effective practice

- The nature of this type of project requires close collaboration among specialists in different fields (i.e. academic staff, web-developers, learning technologists, film makers, etc.). Lack of awareness of each other's fields of expertise might cause

- initial friction among team members. A strong collaborative approach to the task, based on a willingness to understand and assess the different constraints associated with the various specialist fields can minimise friction.
- Secure departmental support in order to embed new concepts and trial ideas
 - Explore the copyright status of the resources you are planning to use. If they do not comply with institutional policy, they cannot be used.
 - Clarify the ownership status of the materials you intend to develop, as educational institutions tend to have different policies in this respect: do materials belong to the authors who developed them or to the educational institution they work for? This may have implications if you are planning to share your resources across institutions.
 - Set up realistic targets and inform your design. Is the approach appropriate to your teaching and learning context? Does it provide solutions to specific problems?
 - Involve potential customers in your design: if students do not like it or find it useful, they will not use it.

Conclusions and recommendations

In the case of Spanish, participation in the L₂O project has made us rethink the potential that existing resources may have for reusability, and to adapt some of them to the LO format, as defined by the L₂O Project. The process models and metadata templates designed by the L₂O project team have provided clear guidance for achieving this task.

A future in-house repository based on the initial SLAS prototype will increase the potential for sharing resources across different languages, levels and disciplines, helping us overcome some accessibility constraints associated with WebCT. It will also increase the number of potential users of both LOs and assets. This early prototype was presented internally at last years' UoP, Faculty of Humanities Teaching and Learning Conference, and the development was welcomed by the MFL team. Inevitably, as the repository becomes more refined and populated institutional support beyond the departmental/faculty levels will have to be secured to ensure the project's further development.

Without any doubt, the reusing, repurposing, remodeling and sharing of resources offer potential advantages to language teachers, particularly so in the case of high quality audiovisual materials (scarce online and/or copyright protected). Sharing these types of copyright free resources within and across institutions would seem the obvious way forward in the current context. However, careful attention should be paid to the extent to which resources should be reused internally to prevent a practice which might cause student fatigue due to over exposure to the same resource.

Additional information

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