E-ACADEMY OF THE FUTURE- 3 YEARS LATER. PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

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Abstract: *This paper aims at showing the preliminary evaluation of E-Academy of the Future, a program aimed at Polish middle-school learners, from the perspective of the authors of the English e-learning units. It addresses the issues of the pedagogical model used, the adequacy of the project materials, the process of their implementation and the effectiveness of cooperation with schools. Finally, the paper gives recommendations for the future and suggestions for changes on the level of e-project design and implementation, including teacher training.*

Keywords: Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning, e-learning units, middle school learners, evaluation

For me key competencies are the basics; yet, they are too often exaggerated mainly by the teachers- a middle school user of the e-Academy of the Future project[1]

INTRODUCTION

The 1st of September 2010 marks the day when 22,376 pupils from 200 middle schools in Poland started their work in the E-Academy of the Future project, one of the most comprehensive and innovative programs of this kind in Poland if not in Europe**.** More than 2,000 teachers learned about the Project several months earlier when the principals told them that their schools had joined the program. A group of authors, though, had been working on the Project since October 2009. The team consisted of authors, experienced teachers and educators, all supervised by the

[1] All learners' quotes come from M. Kalinowska's presentation delivered during the June 2013 GPKK Authors' Conference (GPKK – *Middle School Program for the Development of Key Competences* [in Polish])

Project directors from WSiP. Some of them had done e-learning projects before; for some of them it was a new experience.

The authors' task was to create 168 English e-learning units (each meant for a 45-minute self-study practice) that were to shape the seven key competences as defined by the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.* All 168 e-learning units were to be implemented in the coming three years for the use of middle school learners and teachers in Poland.

The distribution was as follows:

- 21 e-learning units for biology, chemistry, physics, geography, English language
- 12 units for IT and WOS (Knowledge about the Society)
- 33 units for mathematics
- 6 units for learning to learn competence

The e-learning units were just a part of this very comprehensive interdisciplinary program, co-financed by the EU as a part of the European Social Fund, which used blended learning, project work methods, virtual academic circles, compensatory groups, diagnostic testing. For this purpose, there was launched an e-learning platform, hosting all project-related materials (Okońska-Walkowicz 2009). Moreover, schools received interactive whiteboards and teachers got netbooks in order to implement all materials.

This paper, written a few months after the project ended, presents the findings and thoughts resulting from the Project's evaluation, prepared by the Project evaluators Trexis-Press, under the supervision of Maria Kalinowska, the Project's Director (Ewa Grela), its Coordinator (Elżbieta Faron-Lewandowska) and the English units authors' (Gadomska, Krajka) reflection and recommendations for the future.

1. THEORISING THE LEARNING APPROACH - CONTENT VS. TECHNOLOGY IN THE COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

Before presenting the picture of the Polish education influenced by the information society of the beginning of the 21st century, it is worthwhile reflecting upon the role of technology in the foreign language curriculum. While the use of computers as a mere novelty to create the "wow factor" should no longer be the main focus of educators, the meaningful implementation of cutting-edge technologies such as Interactive Whiteboards with tablets or voting systems should not be disregarded altogether.

What is important, on the other hand, is educators' awareness of distinct models of technology use, reflecting the interrelationship between subject matter content, foreign language skills development and technology. At this point we will quote the framework of ICT use for teacher training, presented by Collis and Jung (2003) and expanded by Jung (2005), adapting it to the language learning reality.

As Jung (2005) highlights it, learners can be "trained to learn HOW to use ICT" or learners "can be trained VIA ICT" (p. 95), with the computer-assisted component used either as a core or a complementary means to the teacher training process. This crucial distinction needs to be already addressed in the lesson planning process – whether the starting point for the teaching scenario is the pedagogical purpose which finds its suitable technology, or, on the other hand, a particular website's or technology's affordance is exploited with some benefits for the language learning process.

The particular approaches presented in Jung's model are briefly described below, followed by a reflection on how the framework of E-Academy of the Future actually fits in it.

A. ICT use as part of teaching methods

This approach integrates ICT into the language learning process to facilitate some aspects of instruction. Integration in the classroom is achieved by demonstrating examples and allowing discussions among learners throughout the whole training process. Learners are asked to actually use ICT to learn about ICT skills and develop their own ICT-integrated learning habits and strategies. This particular approach is supported by some previous research that argues that learners are likely to benefit more from the instruction by actively experiencing ICT skills.

B. ICT as core technology for delivering learning

In this approach, ICT is used as the major way of providing the learning experience. The content of this approach does not necessarily focus on an ICT skill itself but rather covers a variety of technology applications, and it is either the content transferred through technology or the language learning experience triggered by technology that are central to the process. While technology is essential to successful accomplishment of the learning sequence, it is subordinated to content in the sense that it does not impose the way in which content would need to be transformed.

C. ICT used to facilitate networking

Whereas the use of ICT as core technology for delivering language instruction can be found in limited contexts, there are many examples of ICT, particularly the Internet and Web-based communication technologies, being used to support learners' ongoing linguistic development and networking. Online resources for language learners facilitate their networking based on the assumption that foreign language use should be an integral part of daily practice for all language learners and the use of the Internet would enhance their continuous professional development

activities, connecting them to larger communities and allowing for interaction with expert groups (Jung 2005).

Interestingly enough, we feel the impact of E-Academy of the Future has been significant due to the fact that the project does not give priority to any of the abovementioned content-language-technology setups as specified by Collis and Jung (2003) and Jung (2005). On the other hand, all the components of the model are duly acknowledged and activated to lead towards balanced development of foreign language competence. The very approach adopted in E-Academy of the Future is, thus, multi-layered, with different models of ICT use available for use as separate layers.

To start the analysis, the very e-learning units do use ICT as a main content focus, especially those units devoted to the development of the digital competence, with such skills tapped into as selecting and verifying reliability of online resources or preventing and struggling with cybercrimes. What is important, however, is that those selected aspects of the digital competence are developed through evoking particular contexts, building narratives and bringing pieces of knowledge together. This first layer, which uses ICT as a main content focus, is relatively low-tech – apart from animations, close-ended language exercises or audio manipulation options the materials do not make sophisticated uses of technology themselves. This is the first major asset of the project – increasing impact through controlling accessibility measures, so that ICT as core delivery technology is kept to a minimum in order not to put learners from under-resourced settings at a disadvantage.

The second layer in the project is what the teacher can actually do with the ready-made materials in the classroom. While the e-learning units are not editable in themselves, they can be used in multiple modes in the classroom with the IWB tools to focus learners' attention and maximise acquisition of language input. Given flexible options of screen annotation tools (see Gadomska and Krajka 2011; Gadomska, Morusiewicz and Krajka 2012), the extent of this manipulation is extensive, and it depends on teacher's skill, learners' needs and logistical considerations. Regrettably, the use of E-Academy of the Future in the classroom, with the materials enhanced by a skilful use of the Interactive Whiteboard, was not as wide as was expected.

Finally, the third layer of use, in which content, language use and technology are interrelated, is the use of the e-learning platform to communicate with other project members, collaborate in common projects and create communities of interest. Jung's (2005) component of ICT as a facilitating or networking technology is exploited in this respect. While there was interaction among project members on the platform, it seems that once e-learning units become freely available to all students, not only from Poland, the virtual collaborative space will gain its proper scale. The teaching model of E-Academy of the Future, thus, is presented in Figure 2, where the concentric circle shape indicates this multi-layered structure.

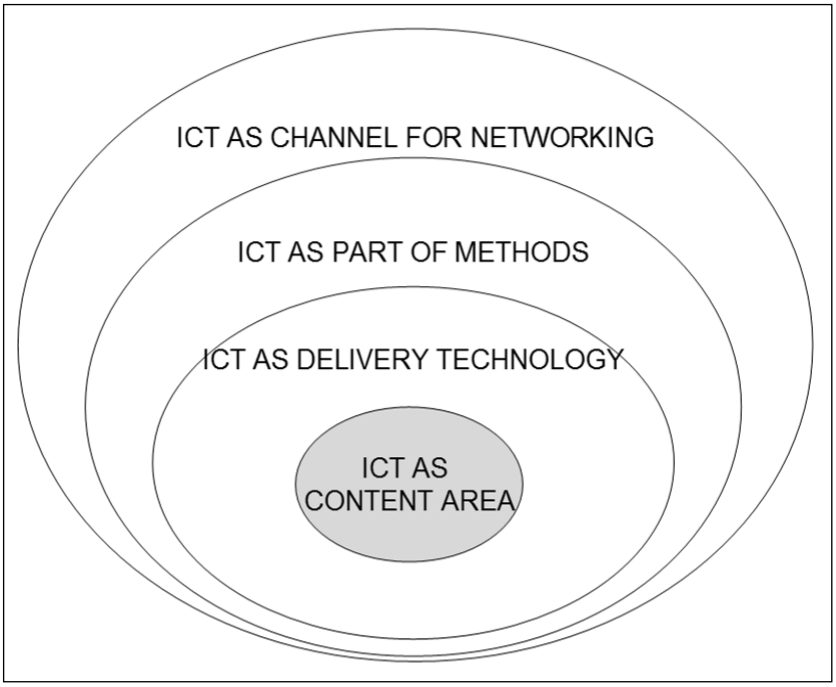

Figure 1. Revised Model of ICT-Content Interrelationship Implemented in E-Academy of the Future

Source: authors' original idea

2. PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF THE E-LEARNING UNITS

For me [key competencies] are the knowledge covered by the e-learning units. The transfer the knowledge in an easy and a pleasant way. Sometimes they are too long and the avatars appearing in the short films talk too slow- a middle school user of the e-Academy of the Future project.

2.1. Method and Procedure

Trexeris-Press evaluated the Project ex-post by means of a quantity research method, supported by the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (Kalinowska 2013). They interviewed 160 school headmasters, 1,017 teachers and 13,500 pupils. The findings refer to a variety of aspects, materials and activities of the e- Academy of the Future project. However, the authors would like to focus on these results that concern only the e-learning units.

2.2. Results and Findings – Overall Evaluation

85.3% of teachers claim that the e-learning units were most useful (among all project related materials) in shaping key competencies (Table 1).

Table 1.

Usefulness of Project's Materials in Shaping Key Competencies – According to Teachers.

Educational materials	Teachers
Knowledge base	47.3%
E-learning units	**85.3%**
Out-of-class materials for special educational needs pupils	21.2%
Out-of-class materials for skilled pupils	24.0%
Handbooks	15%
Diagnostic tests	44%

Source: Kalinowska 2013

Moreover, 43.3% of pupils found e-learning units most useful in the learning process (Table 2).

One out of four respondents found e-learning units as very good and 45.2 % of teachers as good. Moreover, although they were most consistent with the expectations and most recognizable project materials, diagnostic tests turned out to be equally important and valuable for pupils (Kalinowska 2013). In addition, the evaluation proved that the project contributed to the process of shaping key competencies, but mainly the following ones: learning to learn competence, digital competence, mathematical and basic competences in science and technology. From the pupils' perspective, digital competencies are mainly shaped outside the classroom. The Project's e-learning platform and its tools lost to popular social forums, communicators (Kalinowska 2013).

Table 2.

Usefulness of Project's Materials in the Learning Process – According to Pupils

Educational materials	Pupils
E-learning units	**43.3%**
Outside classroom materials for skilled pupils	11.3%
Diagnostic tests	42.0%

Source: Kalinowska 2013

During the June 2013 GPKK Authors Conference, the Project's Coordinator (on behalf of WSiP) Elżbieta Faron-Lewandowska presented the results of the survey on

the e-learning units conducted among the teachers during summer training sessions (organised after the first, second and third year of project) (see Table 3).

Table 3.

Teachers' Opinions on the E-learning Units in the E-Academy of the Future Project

Content-related and didactic merits	Content-related and didactic drawbacks
– attractive, dynamic, innovative, learner-friendly, cross-curricular – building learner's autonomy, self-study, time-management skills – helping to individualize the learning process – developing pupils' interests – providing control tools for teachers and review/ repetition options – transferring knowledge into practice – shaping key competences – " building IT competence so important in the future career" – "boosting the feeling of being up-to-date with modern technologies" – "prestigious for the school" – " boosting teachers' skills" – " material suits the interests of parents" – "in accordance with the current strategies for education development"	– difficulties with logging to the platform, access to computers and the Internet – " a pupil is more IT advanced, which causes discomfort of teachers" – " the learning process depends on the web options" – "problems with deadlines for e-learning units, computer lab sharing" – "stress because of extra work" – "extra burden for pupils" – "too long/ difficult/time- consuming units" – "imposing the e-learning method" – "automatic way of doing the activities" – "no division into levels of difficulty of the e-learning materials- problems with choosing adequate materials" – "pupils cheating" – "no correspondence between the e-learning materials and the classroom course book"

Source: Faron-Lewandowska, 2013

2.3. Results and Findings - Methodology

As regards the evaluation of the Project's methodology, teachers reported using:

- mostly fragments, particular exercises, activities, experiments by teachers during lessons
- the section of Knowledge/Lesson during a classroom lesson and assigning the sections of Practice and Test as homework
- the section of Knowledge during a lesson, assigning Practice as homework and the corresponding Test part in the paper based version in the class

- the section of Knowledge as self-study material before the lesson, while implementing Practice and Test in class with the teacher's supervision
- all three sections (Knowledge, Practice and Test) as self-study material with set deadlines
- the e-learning units as revision material before a classroom based test.

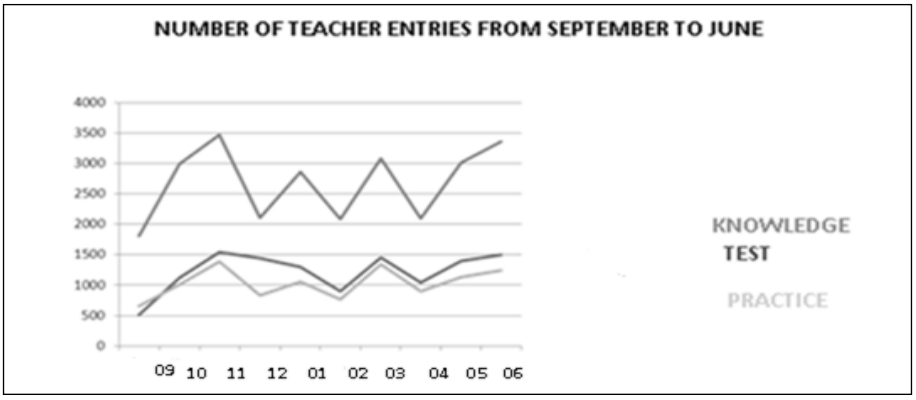

Figure 2. Average Number of Teacher Entries in the School Year – from September (09) to June (06)

Source: Faron-Lewandowska 2013

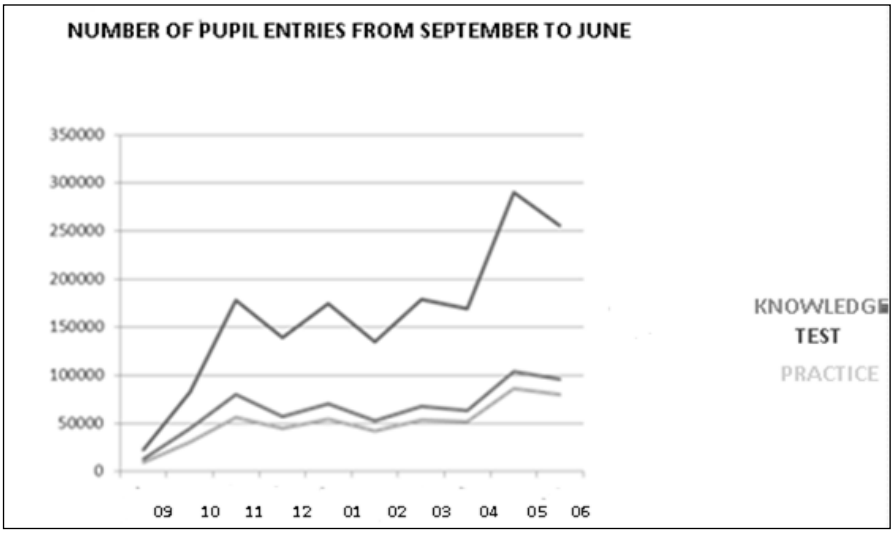

Figure 3. Average Number of Pupil Entries in the School Year – from September (09) to June (06)

Source: Faron-Lewandowska 2013

It can be concluded that teachers mainly used the Lesson/Knowledge section of the e-learning unit through the school year (Fig. 3), which was substantially ineffective

as from the authors' perspective the two sections of the unit (Knowledge and Practice) were integral. It can be also seen (Fig. 4) that pupils mostly used the testing section, which may mean that they were obliged to take the test and were rather reluctant to consult Practice and Knowledge. It may be suggested at this point that perhaps the names of sections assigned at the beginning of the project were misleading for both authors and teachers and should have been changed into Knowledge and Practice 1 and 2 plus Test. In effect, at least teachers could have been encouraged to use the Practice section more. In case of the English units this decision could have been especially beneficial as our Practice section was a continuation and development of the language material introduced in the Knowledge of the unit and not of a "practice" character exclusively. However, it can be also concluded from the graphs above that the motivation of pupils to use the two first sections of the unit was rather low and unsatisfactory.

Figure 5, however, illustrates the usual day time when the users were working on the platform. They used the platform mainly after the lessons as usually the lessons in a Polish middle school end about 2 p.m. in the afternoon. The biggest number of hits was observed in the late afternoon or even in the evening, which proves that the units (and here again mostly the tests) were used as self-study/ homework material for pupils and reference material for teachers. The question arises here to what extent it is effective to take the test without sufficient usage of the corresponding knowledge and practice.

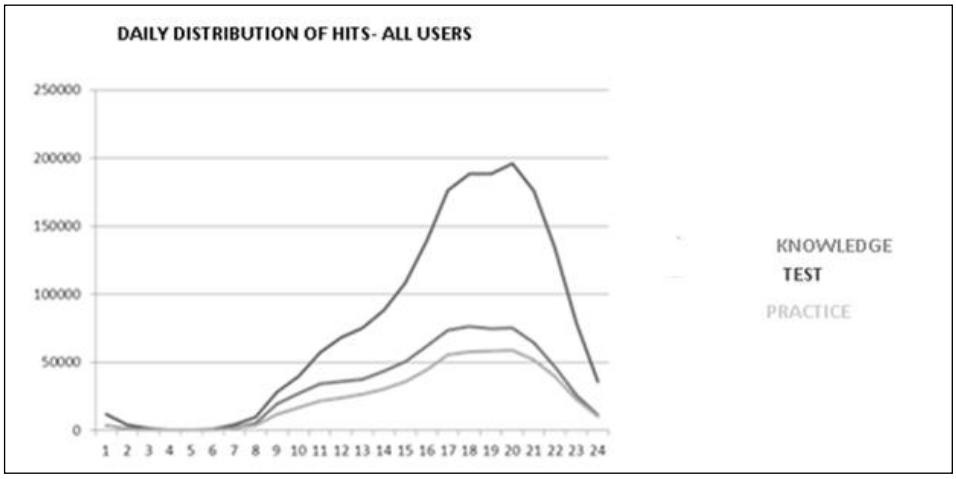

Figure 4. Daily Distribution of Hits - All Users

Source: Faron-Lewandowska 2013

It has to be noted, however, that the above presented data on the distribution of entries into all parts of the e-learning units by teachers and pupils (Fig. 5-7) refers to all units in the Project and not to the English units exclusively.

According to Ewa Grela, the Project's Director, pupils spent on the platform approximately 8.4 hours during classroom activities and 8.2 hours during self-study

time per month (Grela 2013). That is not much comparing to the time spent by the same pupils using social networks, communicators or just surfing the net. "*The Youth of 2011* report, prepared by the team of experts under the supervision of the Polish minister Michał Boni, shows that the young Poles spend from 17 to 20 hours weekly online" (Szafraniec qtd in Gadomska, Krajka 2012: 105)

3. FINAL CONCLUSIONS

For me key competencies are the following: family, love, friendship, work, social life, sex, a car, a bike and sport- a middle school user of the e-Academy of the Future project

The contribution of the E-Academy of the Future Project in the process of shaping key competencies as the element of the life-long learning process among middle school learners in Poland is undeniable. The evaluation has proved that pupils found the e-learning materials interesting; yet, they preferred when the units were connected with the topics discusses in the classroom (Kalinowska 2013). This shows that they associated the online materials with their obligatory school work or even workload. Perhaps, it was the teachers' role to encourage young learners to use the e-learning units not only as self-study material but also as a motivating tool in their pursuit of knowledge, entertainment and fun. Unfortunately, the Project's prerequisites did not allow external linking, which would definitely change the users' attitude and, in effect, expand the influence of the Project.

Although the pupils might not be able to use the EU terminology in naming the key competencies (comp. the quote above), thanks to the choice of topics and content related material, they obviously recognize and share the most important knowledge, values and skills and, moreover, thanks to this project, they associate these ideas with the modern technology usage in education. One other young user of our program said, "[For me key competencies mean] extra ambitions, knowledge that I got from the platform" (Kalinowska 2013).There can be no better gratification for the authors, whose main aim was to inspire young learners, to give them the skills and knowledge that they can later appreciate and use in their careers. In the near future, the authors plan a more detailed analysis of the Project's outcomes and a deeper and more thorough evaluation of the role of e-learning in shaping the key competencies by teachers among Polish middle school learners of English.

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