

## Using Lyceum, an audio-graphic conferencing system, to talk at a distance

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### Pedagogical context

<b>ICT is used</b> in a tutorial
The <b>target group</b> comprises Open University students in a level 2 (post A level) course.
The <b>aims of the tutorial</b> were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ language learning, especially the possibility of developing speaking skills</li><li>○ giving learners the opportunity for relatively authentic interaction</li><li>○ bridging the gap between distance students</li><li>○ giving learners the opportunity to 'meet' more often than with face-to-face arrangements and to interact with their tutors and peers (including outside scheduled sessions at times convenient to them as the conferencing system is accessible on a 24 hour, seven days a week basis).</li></ul>
The <b>target language</b> was: German The purpose of the language was: Language as communication; language as culture
<b>Further remarks</b> Open University courses are designed for students studying in their homes or at their work-place, in their own time, anywhere in the UK, Ireland, throughout Europe and often further afield. Courses use a range of teaching media – specially-produced textbooks, TV and radio programmes, audio and video tapes, computer software and home experiment kits. Personal contact and support comes through locally-based tutors, a network of 330 regional study centres in the UK and overseas and annual residential schools in the target language country. Undergraduate courses are open to all, regardless of educational qualifications.

### Organisational context

<b>Size of target group:</b> over 30 (of whom 12 students were involved in a study evaluating online tuition via Lyceum)		
Apart from the target group - were <b>other people</b> involved? If yes, who?	How many?	To what purpose?
- fellow teachers	23	3 fellow academics on the L231 course team 20 tutors (who ran the tutorials and had the responsibility for correspondence teaching); 6 of them were involved in the study

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- technicians	3	1 software coordinator, 2 software developers, plus: helpdesk support staff
- evaluators	1	External examiner who was interested in the project
- others (please specify):	3	1 course manager, 2 research assistants (involved in the study)
<b>Teaching period:</b> Approx. twelve 75-minute sessions per year (February – September)		
The whole project was done as distance learning		

### **Motivation for the use of ICT**

In line with the Open University's learning and teaching strategy we decided to use ICT in general (course website, virtual tutorials) and audio-graphic conferencing in particular to overcome the challenge of getting students who are geographically dispersed across the UK and continental Western Europe to interact with each other. It was also one way of responding to students' need for more flexible speaking opportunities. In addition, the Open University is attempting to improve its graduates' ICT literacy.

### **Description of the project**

The aim of the project was to introduce Internet-based, real-time audio conferencing into an Open University language course, a German level 2 course (post A level) in 2002. This was the first time that online tutorials had been used in a mainstream language course. After several pilot projects (in which different media were tried out and evaluated), the medium chosen was Lyceum, a conferencing tool developed in-house, which combines audio, several graphics tools (for writing, drawing and importing and manipulating web images) and text chat. Lyceum offers virtual space for plenary sessions as well as breakout 'rooms'.

The **teaching methodology** used involved interactive, collaborative, task-based, student-centred learning based on socio-cultural and constructivist theories as well as principles of second language acquisition (SLA).

#### **The teaching materials**

The course team developed a bank of activities for the online tutorials that reflected the above teaching methodology. The content of the activities related closely to the content of the self-study course materials. Topics such as adoption, Internet companies, environment, the press, and literature provided a framework for the activities. The tasks called for a mixture of online plenary sessions, group/pair work and preparation in-between sessions (in groups), and students were encouraged to use authentic Web material in order to collate information.

#### **Other information**

We also organized **technical induction sessions** for tutors and students as well as helpdesk support. On top of this, we trained tutors to use the virtual learning environment in a series of sessions concentrating both on the use of the different tools and their pedagogical implications.

The **project was accompanied by a study to evaluate** the use of audio-graphic conferencing in practice, a study which identified a range of challenges and benefits of audio-

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graphic conferencing. This in turn has instigated improvements both in the software used and in the quality of student support; additionally, it has led to some changes to task design.

**The technologies used:**

- Hardware: PCs
- Special workspaces: Lyceum, developed in-house by the Knowledge Media Institute (KMI) at the Open University.
- e-mail for tutors to correspond with their students and students with their peers
- other: Lyceum (audio conferencing system); course website

● What was successful

Both students and tutors identified important benefits, some of which can be described as added-value effects of Lyceum as they refer to advantages that are difficult to achieve in a face-to-face classroom situation or in a written CMC context. Generally, most students and tutors agreed that using Lyceum had improved the students' oral communication skills.

More specifically, those involved in Lyceum welcomed the opportunity to practise and improve the language. Both students and tutors pointed to the usefulness of online tuition for oral interaction and for authentic communication with other learners over a distance. Some noted the advantage of being able to share texts. The fact that Lyceum is very useful for work in small groups was also mentioned by several students and tutors. Tutors observed that users found Lyceum exciting and stimulating, thus increasing motivation. The result was that the students had more control over their learning situation and that the tutor's approach had generally been "more hands-off", as one tutor noted.

Another advantage of Lyceum that was identified was the multimodal nature of audio-graphic conferencing reflected in its range of tools. Several tutors mentioned that they were impressed by the way students made use of the multimodal environment by employing a range of different tools, in order to make presentations, for example. When asked which tool in Lyceum they found most useful, there was great diversity in both the students' and the tutors' answers. Different users found different tools useful as they suited their different learning and teaching styles. One tutor, for example, commented that she found different things useful at different times.

One tutor pointed to the fact that because there is no need to travel, Lyceum enables fairly regular attendance at tutorials, and another mentioned that students can meet independently at any time they wish.

Finally, there were also a couple of comments relating to improved electronic literacy. One student commented that she now uses the Internet more to search for information when preparing assignments and another noted that the course had improved his computer literacy.

● Was anything less successful

Technical difficulties were a major issue, particularly at the beginning of the course, and it was the issue about which both students and tutors complained most. Yet at the same time it was found that students can be very reluctant to seek help when problems occur. Things improved over the course of the year as some of the problems connected with the technology were resolved by several major improvements to the system. The result was an overall

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improvement in audio quality and participants were also disconnected less often. Yet despite the improvements to the system, two thirds of students and tutors believed that technical issues had had a negative effect on the learning/teaching experience. This can at least partly be explained by persisting problems with ISPs and bandwidth, user hardware and user errors.

Another area both students and tutors commented on was the lack of body language in the virtual medium and its consequences. Although a button for raising one's hand makes turn-taking in Lyceum relatively easy, online discussions can still seem less spontaneous as no visual signals are available which could help when more than one person wishes to speak. If students forget to use the hands-up button, this can result in several users starting to speak simultaneously and then stopping altogether as soon as they realize this. The result can be awkward silences. The lack of body language can also make it more difficult for shy people to participate, as one student noted; another mentioned that someone with problems may be less likely to be identified.

Several students complained about the complexity not of the system but of having to do too many things at once (using the mouse, speaking, typing on the keyboard), and some of the tools were seen as laborious and time-consuming (especially for those students whose typing skills are not very good). As one tutor noted, the technical challenge adds to the difficulties encountered in speaking a foreign language. Some students and tutors noted the need for more practice with Lyceum – a comment which may have more to do with lack of time than lack of opportunity. The opportunity for practice is there as the system can be used any time and users can try out the tools both offline and online, on their own or with others.

Some of the other problems encountered have to do with the fact that tutorials for Open University language courses are not compulsory. This explains – at least partly – why some groups were relatively small, with sometimes as few as 2 or 3 students. Another reason for small group size was the fact that telephone tutorials were offered as a fall-back to students who did not have the technology to run Lyceum or encountered problems with the software initially. This meant that although those students who participated in tutorials had the opportunity to practise their communicative skills extensively, some activities had to be adapted to work well with a smaller number of students. In addition, because tutorials are not assessed and students can be very busy with the course work they do in self-study, those who did attend tutorials were not always well prepared for the sessions. Yet as the activities build on work done in-between sessions, this meant that tutors sometimes ended up having to adapt them.

● Feedback

See above.

● What we change next time

Some of the problems mentioned have already been resolved in the course of 2002. The audio quality has been improved with several updates to the system, and participants get disconnected less often. The new version of Lyceum, which was introduced at the beginning of 2003, has refined the hands-up button, making turn-taking easier. When several students raise their hands, the system now shows a record of the order in which participants wish to speak, thereby making a discussion flow more easily without the tutor having to come in constantly.

The new version also provides a direct link from each Lyceum conference to a technical support room, which is staffed by the helpdesk during tutorial times. This makes it easier for both students and tutors to seek help when there are problems. Besides receiving Lyceum training in the induction, students have also been provided with a teach-yourself tutorial for Lyceum on CD-ROM.

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Alternative activities are being offered now which do not cover two sessions but are free-standing in order to cater for groups which are less willing to put in extra time for preparing tutorials. We are thereby building up a larger resource bank, which eventually will also include images (with copyright clearance) for use by tutors and students.

Other plans for the future include a shared web browser in Lyceum and a different approach to organizing tutorial groups in order to guarantee larger and more viable groups. Finally, the perceived lack of body language has led discussions about the introduction of emoticons into the system.

- What we would recommend to other professionals in the field
  - That online tuition needs to build on a sound pedagogic rationale, learn from research done in the past and take into account the potential challenges and benefits of the medium.
  - That student and tutor support (including technical training for students and tutors as well as pedagogical training for tutors) is of paramount importance.
  - That institutional support also has a bearing on the success of the project.

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### **Professional background**

Profession Lecturers in German
Our current occupation is: Designing, implementing and maintaining distance language courses (German undergraduate) in the Department of Languages at the Open University.