

Development and implementation of online Dutch courses in adult education: critical success factors

Liesbeth DePaepe
VUB
Belgium
liesbeth.depaepe@gmail.com

Abstract: Online course offerings have continued to expand worldwide at an exponential rate, since they were first introduced in centers for adult education. Fully online language courses, however, are still relatively new in the field of adult education, and applying a sound pedagogical online curriculum is still far from common practice. Developing and implementing a less commonly taught distance language course is relatively new. This paper aims at providing stakeholders interested in designing and implementing online language courses with necessary e-learning quality benchmarks, as derived from this current and former research, and with a sound pedagogical foundation for online language course development and implementation. The paper, based on qualitative research, identifies and critically discusses 10 factors for successful development and implementation of online language courses for adult education.

Methodology of the research

A qualitative approach was chosen to understand the critical success factors (CSF) of online Dutch course development and implementation as perceived by 12 stakeholders in the field of acquisition of Dutch as a second language amongst adult learners in Belgium and The Netherlands. Critical success factors are those actions or states that must be addressed in order to ensure successful online development and delivery. In order to examine the CSFs, 12 key stakeholders were interviewed: 3 providers of Dutch language courses, 2 educational supervisors, 2 employees in Houses of Dutch, 1 teacher trainer/ teacher of Dutch in F2F groups, 1 online instructor / instructional designer, 1 editor, 1 social intranet consultant and 1 policy maker.

The interviews are intended to specify the critical success factors for the development and the implementation of online Dutch courses, as perceived by key stakeholders in the field of L2 learning of Dutch.

The information gained from the interviews was then compared with former research in the field, after an extensive literature review.

Literature review

Papp (2000) grouped the e-learning critical success factors with regard to university courses into 7 categories: Intellectual property, Suitability of a course for an e-learning environment, E-learning course content, Building the e-learning course, E-learning course maintenance, E-learning platform and Measuring the success of the e-learning course.

Benigno and Trentin (2000) suggested a framework for the evaluation of e-learning based courses, which they categorised into two topics: evaluating the learning and evaluating students' performance. These two topics were then subdivided into several more specific critical success factors: student characteristics, student-student interaction, learning materials, learning environment, effective support and IT.

Volery and Lord (2000) held a survey amongst 47 students enrolled in a distance management course at an Australian university. They described three main CSFs, each of which further pointed out in subdivisions: *Technology* (Ease of access and navigation, Level of interaction, Interface design); *Instructor* (Technical competence, Attitude towards students, Classroom interaction) and *Previous use of technology by the students*.

Govindasamy (2001) was the first to add course structure and evaluation/assessment to the list of critical success factors. He distinguished between 7 e-learning quality benchmarks: Institutional support, Course development, Teaching and learning, Course structure, Student support, Faculty support and Evaluation and assessment.

Selim (2007) states that – for institutional support in higher education institutions – the availability of technical assistance or a help desk was the most critical success factor. Selim’s research pointed out that ensuring that the institution’s IT infrastructure is rich, reliable and capable of providing the courses with the necessary tools to make the delivery process as smooth as possible, is of critical importance when implementing e-courses.

Debevc and Bele (2008) also concluded that LMS usability can significantly affect learning.

Puri (2012) did a research on e-learning critical success factors as perceived by 214 students in professional courses at Amity University. Respondents perceived the *pedagogical factor* to be the most important one. The pedagogical factor is broad and is subdivided into the following topics: prompt feedback, alternative submission of assignments, interactive course, learning styles, teacher as facilitator, student commitment, multimedia tools/technologies. The second most important factor turned out to be that of *institutional-administrative affairs*, with the following subdivisions: staff willingness to learn new system, online payment system, qualified e-learning course designer, cost and benefit, training for students/staff. The third factor is *technology* (download speed of audio/video, system reliability and availability, system backup procedures, high broadband internet connection, system error tracking). The other factors include *evaluation* (assessment of learners and evaluation of the learning and teaching environment), *resource support* (language and IT support) and *interface design*.

Ten critical success factors (CSF) from this research

1. Instructional designer / instructor: characteristics and support

A third of the respondents expressed the importance of a motivated and skilled core team of instructional designers who get enough time to develop the online Dutch course, to spread the knowledge and to motivate colleagues so as to achieve a gradual implementation. For an editor, it is equally important that the instructional designers understand what the market demands. A positive involvement of instructional designers and online tutors is believed to be an indispensable ingredient of successful implementation of online language learning in an institution. The engagement and the belief in e-learning for languages should gradually be embedded in all levels of the institution to be successful. Ware & Hellmich (2014) came to the same conclusion: “Studies have tracked the importance of coupling training with a positive school culture (Hawkes, 2011) and a supportive department culture (Fisher, 2011) in order to generate enthusiasm for change, willingness to attempt new pedagogical approaches, and maintenance of technology integration over time.”.

A motivated team is not enough to guarantee a successful implementation. There needs to be adequate support in the form of advancement of expertise. The promotion of digital learning technologies can lead to a different kind of language education.

2. Student: characteristics and support

The stakeholders in the field of Dutch as a second language strongly believe that distance learning courses should be accessible to a broad public of foreign speakers, from low-skilled to high-skilled language learners. They assume, however, that those who want to take part in an online language course, should have certain learning strategies and be able to reflect on their learning process. Screening beforehand is assumed necessary. The institutions providing online Dutch courses, should have personnel to assist the online students technically. A gradual implementation of online learning with opportunities to practice in open learning centers, is regarded the best option.

3. Course development / instructional design

Hampel & Pleines (2013) investigated a four-year cycle of the design and implementation of language learning activities in an online distance education course. From their comprehensive case study, they conclude that more

instructor involvement and a simpler structure with fewer tasks and tools had a positive impact on learner engagement. The stakeholders in my research also uttered a strong belief in the positive impact of sufficient instructor involvement so as to be able to keep track of the students' progress in the online Dutch course. They additionally believe that the online students should get regular deadlines and that the tutor's feedback on regular assignments is indispensable for the success of the online courses. Also, they agreed that a straightforward course design with a simple structure is beneficial.

The design of the online course should be based on a profound pedagogy. The great danger is in offering old-school exercises in a brand new medium, without any new underlying didactic approach. A successful online Dutch course depends as well on the actual content and the approach used to train the four skills. A prerequisite is making the learning fit the purposes. Students must learn functionally: the e-course should provide them with the necessary skills and linguistic elements to solve real problems in everyday life. A communicative approach underpins this functionality of the e-course: distance courses should by no means be a hindrance for the use of interactive learning methods, perhaps even on the contrary. One of the roles of the online tutor is to make students communicate with each other in the target language.

4. Perceptions of learning

The success of the development and implementation of online Dutch courses largely depends on the perceptions of learning. Educational supervisors advocate a combination of functional goals and an understanding of the success factors of natural language acquisition. We must move away from an element-oriented approach and pursue an educational belief in a task-based approach. The belief exists that distance learning is also a possibility for low-skilled adults, as long as the pedagogical choice underlying the design is well-founded. Some stakeholders emphasize that we also need to move away from the belief in the necessity of a group in which to learn a language. In face-to-face as well as in online education, the basic assumption should be that people learn best at their own pace; sometimes this will happen in a group, and sometimes individually. The current face-to-face education for Dutch as a second language strongly focuses on groups, whereas a more individualized approach provides more opportunities for growth. In the Flemish area, a committee of educators has been composed which acts as a think tank to make the Dutch courses more flexible, but some stakeholders don't believe that much will change on a short term. The underlying assumption is that a gigantic switch in mentality is necessary for Dutch tutors in order to achieve this flexibility: it would mean more individual learning trajectories, a different kind of student follow-up system, a larger share of counseling, a smaller proportion of frontal teaching, more creativity in composing groups and managing groups. A shared, long-term vision is indispensable to make this work.

This transformation of traditional schooling has also been described by Ware & Hellmich (2014): "Educational reformers have captured these shifts by documenting how technology has the potential to transform traditional schooling. Collins and Halverson (2009), for example, argue that conventional models of education will, in the digital age, ultimately transition from a focus on uniform learning to a focus on customized learning, from standardized high-stakes assessments to demonstrations of specialized expertise, from learning by assimilation to learning-by-doing, and from owning knowledge to mobilizing outside resources."

5. Course structure

The online course should be structured in such a way that it allows for differentiation, meaning that we need to move away from a linear concept. It needs to allow for individual learning trajectories and the ultimate selector of the course topics should be the student. One of the most important benefits of an online Dutch course could be that it promotes learner autonomy and can meet the students' personal linguistic needs. Suzuki (2013) analyzed the off-screen behavior of a student while participating in a synchronous Japanese class. Suzuki argues that her data show that this student gained important affordances through the online course format and concludes that CALL can promote learner agency and autonomy.

When designing an online language course, we need to start from the existential competences and build a matrix-like course design on top of it. A qualitative online Dutch course should allow for flexibility, differentiation and individual learning trajectories.

6. IT

30% of the interviewed stakeholders indicated the importance of a user-friendly electronic learning platform, both for the students as for the tutors. The LMS should be above all social and allow for interaction, which is said not yet to happen enough. Stakeholders point to the current internet applications, evolving from Web 2.0 towards Web 3.0, while many learning management systems still work top-down and merely provide the possibility to upload and download information. A good LMS, on the other hand, should bring all content together and allow for discussions, comments and questions with the ultimate goal of constructing a social knowledge network. Wang and Vasquez (2012) agree on the positive effects of Web 2.0 technologies: “Web 2.0 technologies have become a ubiquitous component of our daily lives (McBride, 2009). As Warschauer and Grimes (2007) point out, millions of people now use Web 2.0 technology to interact, collaborate, network and entertain through blogs, wikis, social networking tools, and multiplayer games; many of these individuals enjoy the thrill of instant self-publishing and feel stimulated by their dynamic interactions online. During the past decade, the shift from Web 1.0 to 2.0 has been remarkable. People do not merely read and retrieve information, but also create and share information (Lomicka & Lord, 2009). Indeed, Web 2.0 technologies exploit the participatory potential of the Web. As a consequence of this, Web 2.0 communications have become an indispensable component of many students’ daily and academic lives (McBride, 2009).” Though empirical research on Web 2.0 learning environments is currently in its infancy (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Lomicka & Lord, 2009), results of existing studies have pointed out that Web 2.0 technologies offer language learners several benefits: the potential for a collaboration-oriented and community-based learning environment (Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Dippold, 2009; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Kessler, 2009; Tu, Blocher & Roberts, 2008). Guth and Thomas (2010) view the Web 2.0 as a context that provides “a more organic experience” for users.

Not only the LMS is important. The design of the interface should be kept simple, so as not to exclude (technically) low-skilled students. In the implementation phase of the online Dutch courses, the pragmatic preconditions are essential for the success of distance learning: qualitative computers and other technical appliances, user-friendly and reliable tools and software, and a stable broadband internet connection. Educational supervisors point out that there is a need to further explore and optimize technological developments in the light of interactive teaching methods.

7. Evaluation and assessment

Regular assessment in the form of staggered evaluation, followed by prompt feedback by the online tutor, is believed to affect the online Dutch students’ learning process positively.

8. Start-up phase

Several stakeholders point out the importance of a clear positioning of the digital learning materials as well as of the offer of distance learning within an individual institution. The possibility of learning Dutch online should be known to the general public of foreign speakers. Institutions should communicate well if the online course is part of the general (and face-to-face) curriculum, or a separate trajectory (i.e. a fully online Dutch course).

For a successful delivery of online Dutch courses, institutions need to be confident that there is a target group that will explicitly choose the online Dutch offer. This partially depends on the success in communicating the added value of an online course.

Once an institution has clearly positioned its online Dutch courses and an interested target audience has been detected, this target audience needs to be screened. Stakeholders state that the intake procedure should – depending on the type of course – filter those students who have good learning strategies, and who can reflect on those learning strategies.

At the same time, there should be online Dutch courses available for low-skilled and high-skilled students alike. Accessibility to online courses should not be a privilege for highly educated students.

The online Dutch courses should be implemented stepwise and well-prepared, in the interests of students and tutors.

9. Financial support

As far as the development of online Dutch courses is concerned, stakeholders point out the importance of sufficient financial support from the government, because otherwise, it means quite a slice out of the budget of an individual institution. They describe the current financial support as inadequate and the topping of the growth at 0.8% as an impediment to innovation. Proposed suggestions include that the government organizes calls for projects to develop digital learning materials collaboratively, or to lower the focus on waiting lists for Dutch as a second language, so as to open more possibilities for individual institutions to work on a future linguistic program. Several providers of Dutch language courses state that they want to avoid declining student numbers and therefore strive to elaborate the program, but are financially restricted in this plan due to the current governmental regulations.

10. Collaboration

This research shows a need for collaboration in three areas. The first is a need for a clear and common framework within which Dutch learning materials can be developed and shared. The second type of collaboration is an extensive exchange of know-how. Ware and Hellmich (2014) see the same need for collaboration in US K-12 education: "In looking toward future research, we anticipate that K-12 educators and researchers, from both the learning outcomes and opportunities frames, will increasingly seek opportunities to collaborate, particularly in two key areas: assessment and professional development. The first of these, assessment, offers a key lever of change in elementary and secondary contexts. Assessment data that provide information on large numbers of students help persuade stakeholders to support the kinds of financial, infrastructural, and pedagogical changes needed when institutionalizing the integration of language learning technologies at a large scale. We are therefore likely to see increasing use of technologies that promote specific learning outcomes, such as standalone modules that allow learners to practice integrated language skills, particularly for the growing population of English language learners in US schools." The third need for collaboration is about setting up a task force of stakeholders challenged with the assignment of developing online Dutch courses for all kinds of target groups within adult education. Smaller institutions have neither the know-how, neither the appropriate personnel, neither large target groups to realize this as stand-alone projects.

Comparison between this study and literature review

The qualitative research shows six critical success factors in the light of development and implementation of online language courses, which are in line with previous research. The factor "instructor/instructional designer" has also been described by Volery & Lord (2000), Govindasamy (2001) and Puri (2012). The CSF "student" has previously been determined by Benigno & Trentin (2000), Volery & Lord (2000), Govindasamy (2001) and Puri (2001). The third critical success factor, "course development/instructional design", had also been determined a CSF in the research of Papp (2000), Benigno & Trentin (2000), Volery & Lord (2000), Govindasamy (2001) and Puri (2001). The CSF "course structure" was also mentioned in the research by Benigno & Trentin (2000), Volery & Lord (2000), Govindasamy (2001) and Puri (2001). The fifth CSF from this research that was in common with previous literature findings, was "IT". This factor has already been described by Papp (2000), Benigno & Trentin (2000), Volery & Lord (2000), Selim (2007), Debecv & Bele (2008) and Puri (2012). The sixth CSF which is in line with previous research, is "evaluation & assessment". It has been mentioned by Papp (2000), Govindasamy (2001) and Puri (2012).

The other four critical success factors as regarded by the twelve stakeholders in this qualitative research, cannot be traced back in previous research. These comprise "perceptions of learning", "the start-up phase", "financial support" and "collaboration".

Conclusion

The twelve stakeholders interviewed within the context of the research on development and implementation of online Dutch courses, confirmed previously determined critical success factors. This qualitative research sheds a light on four other critical success factors, which have not been mentioned in previous data. These four CSF's,

namely perceptions of learning, the start-up phase, financial support and collaboration, were described by several of my respondents. I argue that giving the ten critical success factors described in this paper serious consideration when designing and implementing online language courses, could ameliorate the students' learning experience and increase the scope of efficient online language learning.

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