



## *Global perspectives on Computer-Assisted Language Learning*

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### **YELLing for peer-learning in teacher training: A social platform for sharing practice and reflection in pre-service and in-service teacher training**

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#### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on an ongoing project in which a professional community of teachers, trainees and trainers use a social platform to promote life-long learning and reflexive collaborative practices within a socio-constructivism framework of teaching and learning. The social platform YELL/TELL (Young English Language Learners / Teen English Language Learners) offers support and tools to improve pre-service and in-service teacher training on the basis of sharing resources, commenting and reflecting on them in the spirit of Open Educational Resources and in a peer-learning/peer-teaching perspective. Thanks to the collaboration with the L3S Research Center in Hanover, the YELL/TELL community can use the social platform LearnWeb2.0 adapted to the needs of the users. The paper discussed a case study in which the platform is used by student teachers of a pre-service course for nursery and primary teachers in an Italian University (Udine). The research questions aim at investigating how the student teachers perceive themselves as participant users in a professional social community. Whereas the students show a positive and encouraging attitude towards the participation in such a community for training purposes, they also reveal difficulties in adapting to such an environment. The research is ongoing and will need wider samples and a variety of analytical tools in order to investigate further the use of social platforms and communities for teacher education.

**Keywords:** online collaboration; peer-training, teacher-training; OER; co-constructed knowledge, LearnWeb2.0

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#### **1. Introduction**

This paper outlines the aims and scope of the YELL/TELL project for life-long teacher education and focuses on one case-study involving the YELL community. The overall aim of the project is to promote collaborative professional improvement for teachers of English as a foreign language and contribute to teacher training courses for primary and nursery school teachers (YELL: Young English Language Learners) and secondary school teachers (TELL: Teen English Language Learners). YELL/TELL consists of an open and sustainable community that includes trainees, teachers, trainers and experts from different schools and backgrounds (nursery, primary, lower-secondary and higher secondary teachers,

teacher trainers, university lecturers and computer developers). The key-principle is sharing one's knowledge, practice and experience within a life-long peer-teaching and peer-learning perspective for teacher education. The theoretical framework is grounded in reflexive teacher education (Edge, 2011), critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001) within a socio-constructivist view of learning and teaching (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Feuerstein *et al.*, 1991, Goodfellow and Lamy, 2009) to promote multiliteracy (Kalantzis and Cope, 2008) and digital literacies (Jones and Hafner, 2012). Using the affordances of digital technology and the flexibility of the LearnWeb2.0 platform developed at the Leibniz University of Hanover, the project uses a virtual environment to support and promote pre-service and in-service teacher training. The LearnWeb2.0 platform (2013), customised specifically for the YELL/TELL community, can be accessed freely and it can be used for:

- A. searching and exploring open educational resources for teaching and learning;
- B. annotating and discussing among trainees and experts resources for teaching and learning (tagging, commenting, annotating collaboratively);
- C. uploading and re-organising resources in a multimodal and multimedia repository (sharing materials with peers and commenting on resources) (Marenzi and Zerr, 2012).

More specifically, the teaching community (trainees, teachers and trainers) can share and negotiate ideas and collaborate creatively, improve on language skills, reflect on learning and teaching planning and practices, gain confidence as teachers, develop and share quality and innovative materials and web resources (see Bailly, Ciekanski and Guély-Costa, 2013).

The aim of the case-study presented here is to investigate the perception of trainee teachers about using the YELL platform for the 2012-13 English language course for primary and nursery teacher training. More specifically, the research questions are:

1. How do student trainees react to the use of this platform and being part of a wider e-community of teachers and trainees?
2. To what extent do they find useful and interesting the idea of using a social platform for professional purposes?
3. How easy do they find the use of the platform to become part of the community?

The starting hypotheses are:

1. The trainees would be highly interested in using the YELL platform since one recurrent complaint for the whole degree was the limited use of digital technologies for training.
2. They would be highly interested in being part of the wider professional community of teachers beyond the university course.
3. They would find easy using the social platform given their age group and their familiarity with social platforms for personal, non-professional purposes.

## 2. Method

The case-study consisted in using the platform with a small but linguistically fairly homogeneous group of postgraduate students (25 female and 1 male) attending 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year at Udine University (from September 2012 to February 2013) to become primary and/or nursery school teachers. They are all Italian native speakers and foreign users of English (advanced users).

They were asked to access the platform during the English language course (50 contact hours with two trainers) and to carry out specific tasks to train themselves to use the platform. The relevance of the YELL platform as a means for creating a professional community that could last beyond their English course was discussed during the lessons and the platform was used at times in class. The final project that contributed to coursework assessment was posted onto the platform and shared with fellow trainees and future colleagues. At the end of the course a questionnaire about the YELL platform and community was administered and filled in by 26 out of 32 students, that is all the students regularly attending classes.

## 3. Discussion

A detailed discussion of the data results and the qualitative and quantitative analysis can be found in Bortoluzzi and Marenzi (forthcoming). The data was manually cross-analysed and 4 categories were identified to answer research questions 1 and 2: the trainee-user perceived s/he was

1. Learning from other teachers (57% of trainee users);
2. Using the platform to find resources posted by the community (100%);

3. Using the platform as a professional teacher (100%);
4. Sharing materials and collaborating actively with the others (96%).

The four categories show a progressive shift from a role as student/trainee towards a perception of her/himself as teacher experienced and confident enough to share resources and materials with the community. The results confirm hypotheses 1 and 2: there is clear appreciation in their belonging to the YELL professional community and the student teachers tend to perceive themselves as professionals that can actively contribute to the community with their own resources, comments and support for the other participants.

Hypothesis 3 was investigated by looking at the two complementary categories of Problem and Suggestions. In this case 53 % of the trainee-users mentioned the need for improving the platform to make it more user-friendly for the community. The developers launched a new version of LearnWeb2.0 in May 2013 and thus solved many of the issues raised by the participants. However, the general digital skills of the trainees (they are all users of social media such as Facebook) did not seem to transfer easily to a platform for professional purpose like YELL; 73% of them declared that had never used a social platform for learning or for professional purposes before.

#### 4. Conclusions

The first two hypotheses were confirmed: the trainee teachers demonstrated a positive attitude towards using the platform as part of their training and confirmed they were professionally involved with the community. However, their general digital competence was not easily transferrable in this context: the majority mentioned they would have needed more time and help to become expert members of the virtual community. The case-study was limited in its scope. More research is needed with a wider population and greater variation of tools for analysis (focus groups, personal interviews, analysis of logs). The project is ongoing: the next steps will investigate further the YELL/TELL teaching community and will promote the participations of schools in the project and in the research programme.

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