

## 7. A view of some practical, down-to-earth ways of using IT in the language classroom and beyond

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### **Abstract**

The world of EFL teaching is changing rapidly through new technologies. This article explains those changes providing advice for teachers and easily applicable activities for students. The basic element of the first activity is a working knowledge of Microsoft Word. The second part describes the website and platform developed by Université Pierre Mendès France in Grenoble giving two concrete examples of how it has been used to improve teaching practice. The last part of this article proposes a web site for teachers, which will help everyone to avoid the traps and pitfalls of using Internet with students.

### **Preliminary remarks**

**W**ithin a fairly short time, things have changed drastically in the teacher population in France. Three years ago, 50 percent of young teachers starting their training after passing their exams had their own PCs at home. Now it is 95 percent. Three years ago, 5 to 10 percent had home Internet access. Now, 50 percent have an ISP subscription. 95 percent have web based mail boxes, i.e. Internet access one way or another. Definitely the technology has entered teachers' homes. And yet on the teaching side, at class level, the picture is not that rosy. It has been estimated that today, only 0.2% of the language teachers are using ICT. There has been virtually no ICT-based pedagogy so far. Connections are mostly used to retrieve web resources and word processors are used to prepare nicely-finalized, paper-based teaching material.

Now if we have a look at our customers — students of all kinds that our community will have to cater for in the next few years — we find things are changing rapidly. We have the *B2I — Brevet Informatique et Internet* — a national, junior high school-based diploma certifying that the 15-year-old holder is able to handle Excel, Word as well as Internet browsing. This will be implemented this year, heralding new generations of really competent ICC users. Can we still hold on to our paperwork? No way.

The paradox is that today, the 40-50 year old teachers are the most advanced community in pedagogical terms, but the most backward in ICT terms. So you have two groups facing each other with very little exchange taking place — the graying pedagogues whose didactic knowledge the young desperately need, and the younger teachers whose ICT competence is indispensable to face the challenges of the future. In the middle, ICT has stalled. At university level the situation is even worse, because professors teaching non-specialists receive absolutely no funding for their personal training, whether ICT or otherwise.

Granted, there are young teachers who are superb ICT-enhanced pedagogues. Granted, there are graying teachers who know how to use ICT in their classes. But they are very few, and we are not dealing here with minorities.

The teacher-trainer generation must take up the gauntlet and apply their pedagogical knowledge to the new tools, which, thanks to a natural-selection process, have got increasingly easier to use over the years. Now anybody teaching languages can access a word processor, web browsers and web platforms and project into these simple instruments their already well-proven didactics. It is high time the elders looked at ICT to see what good it can bring to their teaching, if only to transfer both worlds, the old with the new, to their backup, to those who will replace them. Their knowledge is too valuable to be lost in the past; ICT is too convenient a teaching tool to be misused. They have a fundamental role to play.

The problem is that most language teachers hate technology because, they feel it runs counter to everything they have based their knowledge on — a literary, nonrational approach to the world. They also regard teaching as related to soft science, not hard science. The teacher-learner relationship, they feel, has nothing to do with hardware. And yet there are prestigious examples of literary-oriented, famous personalities who have opted for IC as a tool capable of enhancing their creativity. One is Salman Rushdie. The fatwah on his head forced him into exile and a nomadic life, but he had to have an office to continue writing. He bought a laptop, and it changed his way of writing, for the better. The *Last Sigh of the Moor* largely benefited, he says, from the relentless polishing made possible by the word processor. Umberto Ecco states that writing with a computer enables him to explore either end of the writing spectrum. Note taking can be so fast and effective, while the polishing no longer generates a pile-up of draft paper, but

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clean, clear-cut versions of a sentence re-examined over and over again.

The idea is that ICT is nothing but a tool. It's a piece of chalk, only, perhaps, more versatile. This, hopefully, we will now demonstrate, on the basis of our experience at the CLV, Center for Modern Languages, Université Pierre Mendès France in Grenoble.

### *Collective Viewing in class*

One very little implemented use of IT in Language Learning is collective viewing, i.e. the setup which consists in having a workstation, with a video projector, a PC and Internet access, all available for the teacher at any given moment of the lesson.

The following resources are all active at the same time: Word, an electronic encyclopaedia, an Internet browser, e.g. IE5, and language aids, for all students to tap from at any time. Depending on the needs of the students, the teacher displays wide and large—in a normal classroom the screen may be as big as 10ft x 7ft—whatever is required.

Writing exercises may be conducted collectively using the extraordinary facilities offered by Word. Web-based articles can be read and analyzed together, language aids provided at a click of the mouse. Basically this turns the PC into an electronic whiteboard, with all the power of a variety of databases, just a click away for the teacher.

In this traditional—but tremendously IT enhanced—environment, the teacher creates the bases for student autonomy.

Let us focus for a moment on the little-known resources of Word. Start with pedagogical color possibilities: in red, the teacher using the software, in blue, a student taking over. When the group enters class, the teacher opens the file saved at the end of the previous session under the name of the group. The history of what has happened with this group from the beginning of the year until now simply unfolds for everyone to see.

Suppose there is a CNN report input on schedule. The teacher proposes some **lexis**

that may be of help to understand certain parts of the document. Then he or she may retain a few sentences typed under dictation by some students, introducing the theme of the document. In the next phase, as the footage is being run, the teacher will type in key points, demonstrating **note taking** speed, showing how this can be done. Then a student will sit at the keyboard and try out the technique.

The next session —date 2— will be devoted to bringing order to the note taking, using Word's **outline mode** facility. First the teacher will operate, again to show how it works, then a student, instructed by the group as to what to put where and why. This outlining operation is certainly one of the least taught in language learning, and yet it is a crucial skill.

The final session —date 3— will allow for composition from the outline previously obtained. This time the student invited to take the keyboard will be shown how to use the **grammar**, **thesaurus** and **spell check** help in Word. We keep requiring our students to try and increase their lexical competence. Is there any better tool than the thesaurus facility, just a click away, to become aware of the versatility of the English language?



At any level, the time machine facility is of great didactic help as well, allowing the group to go back upstream through all the writing process, and resume it downstream in accelerated mode.

After each operation the file is saved, ensuring that in case of absence, any student will be able to retrieve at least the framework of the lesson they have missed.

As you have realized, we have moved here from teacher-based to learner-centered activities.

### **Website & Platform: what's the difference anyway?**

The website we designed at Université Pierre Mendès France in Grenoble is not an advertising gimmick or a course description brochure. It is meant to be both content rich and a portal to resources that already existing educational language sites provide. In other words, our website, as we see it, should offer *finalized* material for our students to trust and use at will.

These resources are made available to our students on the Language Learning

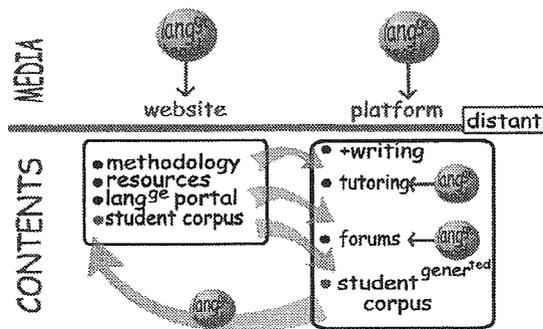
Center website, accessed from any place on campus or outside. We have methodology regarding how to read the press, handle film analysis, write professional CVs, compose essays, etc. But *Write Essays* also contains proofread student material, used here as samples of good —and sometimes bad— practice.

*Web Literacy* allows students to work better with web resources. It links to a site we have built for the Council of Europe. *Civilisation* accompanies a lecture on US society. *Grammar sites* is obviously a gateway to grammar for our student visitors.

*Language db*, as the title suggests, is a fairly exhaustive language database of the notional-functional kind offered to students for constructing their exposés or essays, while *Links* connects with such resources as the Bible online, or Au pair sites, etc., maintained under constant surveillance for dead links or inappropriate contents. *Dictionaries* opens onto, among other things, a user-friendly —and free— Concordancer. Because the teacher, in the collective viewing context, constantly calls in these resources, the students see 1) that they exist; 2) how to access them; 3) how to use them.

The *Intranet Area* leads to a QuickPlace Collaborative Platform implanted on the University server, and open to whichever teacher is interested.

For us, the platform is an environment where student language is being produced or is *in progress*. Learning is visible here everywhere in writing. Traces of learning processes abound, and the teacher sort of eavesdrops on them, and learns what to teach, the better to assist with the learning.



As is shown in the diagram here [see above], activities on the collaborative platform are linked to resources offered on the website. The students create corpora which are either corrected in a tutoring type setup —where the teacher may link directly to the website resource relevant to the problem— or simply posted for all to see and react on in the forums. Finally, some of the output —for example on a film-related project— after processing by the teacher or another high-level student, is floated online on the official website, for all to see and emulate.

There is no question that language teachers are indispensable at all stages of this process. They still provide input, whether visual, textual or web based. But They are now more of a *quiet* (now this is culture shock...) Zen master, who point at resources but let the disciple discover, explore and create their own paths to learning, only stepping in discreetly when the situation requires.

#### **How platforms can change teaching: a case in point**

A lot of universities today across Europe are developing curriculums that include in-company training for their students, especially in vocational areas. In Grenoble, we have the *Institut Universitaire Aménagement du Territoire et Urbanisme*, a school that produces young professionals in the areas of Development Management and Town Planning.

Now obviously a *normal* teacher of English is not necessarily well versed in such specific areas of the English language —or **his** or **her** native language, for that matter. How do you bring your students the lexis appropriate to their future field of activity? The traditional solution is to list the words they need and try to find out for yourself their equivalents in the target language. Then you produce this catalog in class and force them to learn it by heart for the next session. How brilliant. Within two weeks, they will have forgotten everything. But another solution comes to mind. You go to the computer lab with your students and instruct them as below.

- Work in pairs.
- Run *Word*.
- Save file as your combined names, i.e. : Vion-Charles.doc.
- Start browser.
- Go to *Google* or *Yahoo*, depending on which you feel more familiar with. Type in “town planning”.
- Explore one site in depth, and take notes in your word file as stated below:

<p><a href="http://www.blahblahblah.com">http://www.blahblahblah.com</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organisation (university/ company, etc.)</li> <li>• aspects: easy navigation, good graphics</li> <li>• contents: description</li> <li>• personal view, esp. why you retained this particular site</li> <li>• vocabulary: explain one or two technical phrases encountered while reading the site, which you did not understand at first.</li> </ul>
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- Feel free to access the *American Heritage Dictionary* site if necessary, but don't get trapped.
- *Compose* your report from your notes, save it and print it.

Exploration along with the note taking takes at least an hour, and another hour is required for drawing up the reports. During the next session each group shows their findings by taking the whole class to 'their' site, commenting on it very informally as they go along. Then others may field questions if they so wish, etc.

Before the next face-to-face session they must finalize and upload their reports onto the collaborative platform for the teacher to read, correct and grade at leisure. Then these are turned into one html page that is fed into the official website of the Center for Modern Languages. In other words, the private work of those groups, once validated by the teacher, has become official website material, and a very useful tool for other students of the same school, as can be seen at:

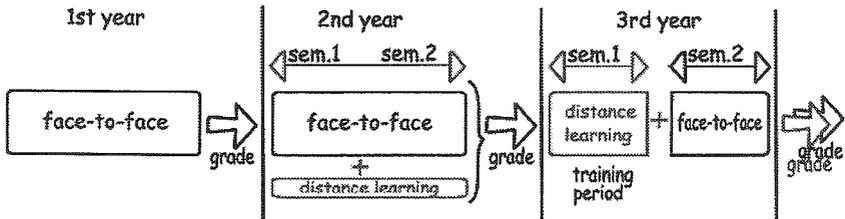
[http://languagelearningresourcecenter.org/anglais/links//townplanning\\_sites.htm](http://languagelearningresourcecenter.org/anglais/links//townplanning_sites.htm)

In terms of language learning, these students have practiced Written Comprehension, Note taking, Composition and Oral Skills. Without being fully aware of it, they have learned the lexis of their trade, used it immediately when taking notes and making their oral exposés, and because their partners have explored the same areas of activity and now share this knowledge, they understand even the technicalities of their discourse. Beyond this immediate satisfaction is of course the long-term pride to have contributed to an official university site with their names appearing in print.

### How platforms can change the engineering curriculum: a case in point

The school of Town Planning in our university has had to face a problem with the curriculum. During their first and second years, the students attend 40 hours a year of language courses. In their third and last year, because they are on full-time placement from September through to February, either some place in France or abroad, they cannot attend any course, let alone language courses, until they return to university. Traditionally they were offered only some 20 hours of language lessons on an optional basis, which obviously they did not attend, first because they were overloaded with work in preparation for the exam and second, because the college, historically uninterested in languages anyway, did not require them to take a language exam. "We can't ask them to do this when they haven't spoken or written a word of English for 6 months", the rationale went. The resulting paradox was that the final phase of their training, when they most needed to demonstrate valid language skills as they were starting job seeking, was the time they were least capable of doing it.

We therefore came up with the idea of using a collaborative platform to solve this engineering curriculum problem. We will now comment on the diagram below, which sums up the project we submitted:



In the first year nothing is changed, the traditional face-to-face format prevails and students are given an overall grade in English. Throughout their second year, they are granted access to the platform, getting used to using the tool. Most writing practice takes place out there, in the form of free forums, tutored writing, projects, etc. At the end of the 40 hours of English, they get an overall mark.

In their third year they have the same tutor as in the second year. While in training placement during the first semester, they are required to access the platform on a regular basis, attend the forum in English and post at least one contribution a week.

Students are offered a private exchange area—a virtual office as it were—where they can communicate with their distant teacher who gives, corrects, discusses and grades written assignments. This for the tutor is the equivalent of 20 face-to-face teaching hours. In other words, the platform serves two purposes; one being to keep contact—albeit in non-native language—with their fellow students; another to tremendously improve their English through writing. These students will get to produce more writing than they would in any other type of setup. And because we are dealing here mostly with asynchronous communication, both the tutor and the tutored are free to work day or night, morning or evening.

Once the placement is over and they get back to university for the second semester, students revert to the face-to-face setup, still with the same teacher who has known them from the beginning of their second year. Obviously during the 20 hours left, without discarding writing altogether, oral competence will hold center stage. Now the grading at the end of this third year does make sense, and those freshly-knighted professionals should now be able to handle a job interview in the target language, which is what language teaching at university boils down to.

In other words, thanks to this platform tool, we are in a position to:

- provide a language learning environment that transcends distance and a variety of training situations;
- allow students to keep in touch and possibly exchange on the problems—technical or other—that they encounter during their hands-on training;
- re-establish language as a key competence in a vocational curriculum.

Incidentally, but that is not directly our aim as language teachers, we also prepare those students to use an instrument that is increasingly popular in the business environment. Needless to say, the project has been sold to the school management.

### **Internet Surfing for teachers**

It is my belief that in the long term, what happened with VCR technology in the teaching industry will also take place with IT. Despite massive training efforts

from educational institutions, it took some 20 years for VCRs to be used in the language class. And it really took off only when teachers had their own devices at home and felt comfortable enough to use them in a classroom context.

Over the last fifteen years I have been involved in teacher training for IT and Language Learning, I have found that using the Internet is certainly our Trojan Horse for getting language teachers to use IT at last. Because despite their solidly ingrained literary orientations, they are aware of the tremendous resources lying in store out there just a few mouse clicks away, and eager to get their hands on the keyboard without wasting too much time searching and trying to understand the technicalities.

However, the teacher has to master the use of these resources. This was why we designed and built the *Web Literacy* website. In the preliminary stages, we met Josef Huber, Assistant director of the Graz-based European Center for Modern Languages, who decided to sponsor the project as an example of good practice. The web site is already available in English at [www.ecml.at/projects/voll/literacy/](http://www.ecml.at/projects/voll/literacy/) but will be available in French as well, both in web based and CD-rom forms. I will now describe this website.

### *The navigator's environment*

We felt our colleagues should become familiar with all the basics of using Internet Explorer's environment when browsing. There is first a kind of static knowledge of the interface essential to using it in all of its power: what does what and how. We therefore set out to present the standard Windows Internet interface, IE5x, as a dashboard where users are invited to click on all the details, menus, buttons and icons and see for themselves what they do, but in explanatory, protected mode.

A typical Internet surfer has two goals. One is to go places, a process that seems easy, but the variety of ways to do it is vast enough to require some sort of clarification. Another is to retain data for further use. This is not a complicated operation if you know (1) what type of information you wish to keep: addresses, links, lists of contents or contents themselves; textual or visual; (2) how long you want to keep it; (3) whether you want to use it offline or online; (4) whether you have the right to use it with your learners.

### *Search tools and strategies*

Search technology has evolved tremendously over the last few years. Having a precise idea of what instrument you are using when searching the web is crucial if you are to understand how to make the best use of it. Keeping up to date with the changes is also a must, if only to know which engine is best at one given moment in time.

Intelligent search agents have made searching strategies much easier than they used to be for the novice user. But again, knowing, if only basically, how to compose requests for best results, does help. Being aware as well that some engines cheat you by offering sites they have been *paid* to put on display may be inductive to paranoia—or mere lucidity.

# ENGINES LIE TO YOU!!

### *Validating sites*

Once we decide to take learners out on a web sortie, we tutors feel more or less responsible for whatever may happen out there. So when we have found a site capable of catering for the specific needs of our students, we must decide fast whether the trove we have come across is worth their visit. A complex mixture of hints or criteria will help. None of them in itself is sufficient to guarantee success, but combined, they do make sense.

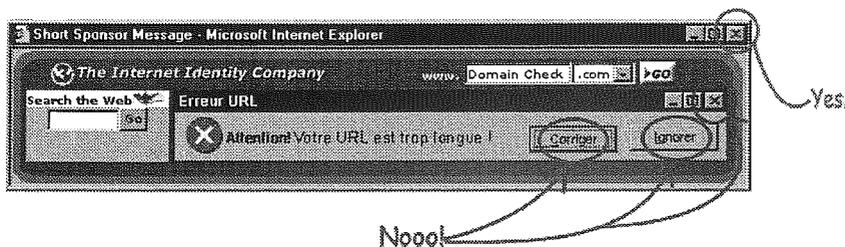
The URL—the web address—sometimes tells you a lot, while colors—say red, pink or black—are far from neutral, signalling something about the site that chooses

them. Also, the visual to textual information ratio is essential — the more visual the web page, the least trustworthy its content, exactly as in the written press. In our application the beginner is led through an interesting case in point that compounds all the faults of the site you want to avoid at all costs.

### *Web traps*

One problem encountered by web users is the three-dimensional aspect of the Internet. The web has geographic depth, a website has structural depth as well, and all levels are affected by time, sometimes on an hourly basis. This in itself is a trap, but there are many others of a worse kind.

Advertising is a major threat for those who want to get fast from A to B on the net. There is nothing more tempting to divert them towards destinations they had never thought of before setting out. And the techniques, fueled by commercial logic and funding, are extremely versatile and marked by an evolutionary process of natural selection — those that are inefficient simply disappear, while those that are effective grow even more complex and more effective.



### *A typical popup window... where's the catch?*

There are so many that keeping track is quite impossible. But this section of the Web Literacy site lists those best known to date, in an interactive way, with authentic material serving as examples, from banners to right-hand placards and pop-up windows to the very sophisticated traffic viruses.

meta crawler Search Query = charon

What are you looking for?  
  [Search Help](#)

any  all  phrase

Are you looking for:  
 Pluto Charon      Charon Kransen      Charon SWX      Charon Boatman  
 Sabor Charon      Jean F. Charon

**NEC SuperScript 870 Laser Printer** [CLICK HERE](#) **NETGEAR \$1499** [solution@netgear.com](#)

Find books on charon at bn.com

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Results for "Charon" 1 to 20 of 74 results [page 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 next](#)

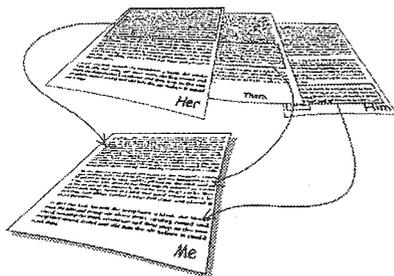
[View by: Relevance](#) | [Site](#) | [Source](#) [Email results to a friend](#)

**Charon Information Services**  
*Excite:* Internet Service Provider to Melbourne, Australia Congratulations on visiting the web site of one of Melbourne's cheapest and friendliest Internet Service Providers.  
*LookSmart:* Melbourne ISP provides Internet access for companies and individuals. Check out the monthly rate plans.  
*Direct Hit:* Congratulations on visiting the web site of one of Melbourne's cheapest and friendliest Internet Service Providers. I am around, compare our prices to those of the competition, and  
[www.http://www.charon.net.au/](http://www.charon.net.au/) ([Search](#), [LookSmart](#), [WebCrawler](#), [Direct Hit](#))

**ClassMates**  
 For Your High School  
 Class Reunion on the  
 Web  
[Click Here!](#)

### *A search engine results listing page... where are the catches?*

Another source of anxiety for us teachers is how unscrupulous students preempt material picked up on the web... Plagiarism is a tendency that has always existed,



but has recently developed into a nightmare for anybody correcting essays on a variety of subjects for which ready-made responses can easily be found on Internet sites. The teaching community must be aware of the problem and address it with utmost severity. We propose a few solutions, but applying them rests in the hands of those concerned.

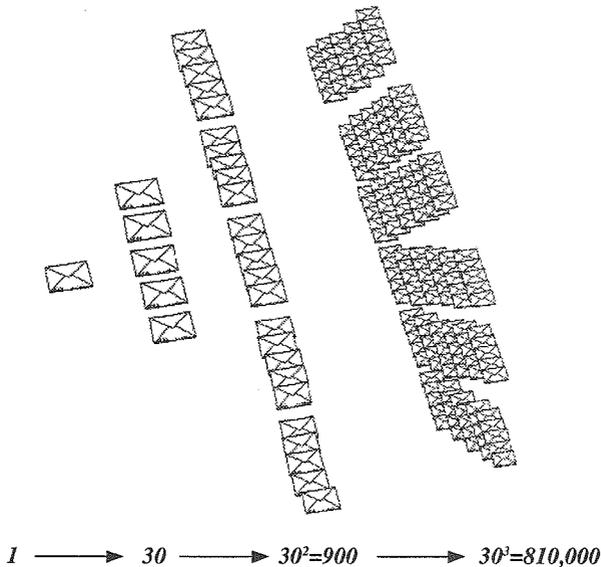
### *E-mail etiquette*

The prophets of doom complain about the deterioration of language exemplified by e-mail contacts and exchanges. Wrong. Through e-mail, language learners who would never have written before are now writing, to people they would never have dreamed of ever establishing contact with, in target languages they would have felt uncomfortable using.

True, as teachers, we must set standards and clearly define the do's and don't's of Internet mail exchanges. Contrary to what is generally admitted, there are rules, and they should be observed.

One lies in how correspondents encode our own names when choosing an e-mail address. We could easily take our straight names, i.e. john.doe@mailserver.com, but some decide, for the sake of secrecy, or other mysterious motivations, to mask their e-persona with some sort of gimmicky alias such as lost.buzzard@hotmail.com, a far more telling title than any real name. Your e-mail is like a first handshake: you want it firm and straightforward, not soft and sweaty.

Another is never ever to forward chain mail, because this is an exponential process that inevitably ends up slowing down the net.



There are actually many traps in which beginners may fall. common sense does help. But a few, crystal-clear examples do help as well. This is what we set out to propose to our colleagues, because honestly it's a jungle out there.

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As hopefully we have shown in the pages above, teachers, because of their training and the amount of reading they have accomplished in their professional life, are natural interfaces between students and the resources of the Internet world. Until recently, learning has, most of the time, been contained within the geographic limits of the school. Learners have always been working *in vitro* as it were, to be exposed to the real world only when they left school or university. This was all very theoretical, and many outside instances, especially the enterprise, justifiably blamed the system for being introverted and having too little contact with reality. Access to the Internet can—and will—change that. Web browsers bring the world into the classroom, or allow the class to travel around the world.

**Bernard Moro** A former graphic artist became a 'Professeur Agrégé' at the age of 30. He has used his former competence in his didactic approach to teaching English as exemplified in the fairly successful and very visual course book *Flying Colours*. He very early set his sights on computer-enhanced pedagogy and has explored this area of language teaching since 1988, keeping abreast of the many changes in the field ever since. Now a Chargé de Mission for ICT and language teaching with the Université Pierre Mendès France in Grenoble and a consultant with the Council of Europe, he teaches English to non-specialists (Law, Economy, Philosophy and Geography students) and trains teachers both locally and internationally.