Semi-autonomous learning in language education: a testimonial case
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SEMI-AUTONOMOUS LEARNING (SAL)
IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS:
A BELGIAN EXPERIENCE

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SEMI-AUTONOMOUS LEARNING (SAL)

In Foreign Language Education For Business Students:

A Belgian Experience

Abstract:

Situated at the cross-roads of three important linguistic and cultural communities, the business faculty at Hasselt University (Belgium) has always seen foreign languages as having a high priority within its curricula.

In 2002, a new and overall strategic plan for teaching and learning has been implemented with the explicit intention of orienting students towards a future of lifelong learning. The basic principle: to give students full responsibility for their own learning process by granting them a maximum of autonomy. This objective has contributed to a profound questioning of customary practices in foreign language courses and has led to SAL, a system of semi-autonomous (foreign language) learning.

The present contribution will develop a three-stage description of SAL as it functions for French Foreign Language, including its key-principles as well as the prerequisites for its implementation and an evaluation after two years functioning. As a conclusion it will be argued that, although asking for a considerable financial and human investment at the beginning, a great challenge for all partners involved is being offered here. In the meanwhile, the initial scepticism from students as well as from teachers has been replaced by a reasonable level of enthusiasm.

Key words:

ICT, interaction, multimedia, coaching, guided autonomy, self-consciousness, contextualisation, foreign languages, intrinsic motivation, diversification

1. Introduction

It is the intention of this paper to comment on the authors' experiences with the implementation of 'semi-autonomous learning' (SAL) in foreign language education. The concept of SAL has been widely discussed and has a longstanding tradition within the literature (Armanet and Obese-Jecty 1981). A closer inspection of studies focussing on SAL reveals that most often, the accent is on efficiency evaluation (Zandvliet 2004). It is typical for this type of research to empirically test the value of SAL within a range of experimental settings and to report under the form of quantitative data (Mustajarvi 2000). Although we fully recognize the relevance of such endeavours, we think it may be useful to provide qualitative case-based material where the focus is rather on practical guidelines related to the needs and requirements for the implementation of SAL. In our opinion, such practically-oriented issues have not been sufficiently addressed before and deserve further attention. In fact, many teachers show interest in SAL but are reluctant to apply it in their daily practice simply because they have not found any helpful advice about how to proceed. Thus, it is our belief that such a case-based approach offers a valuable contribution both from an academic and from a practical point of view. In particular, this paper will comment on how and why we introduced SAL into the programme of French Business Communication (for Dutch speaking students) at the Business Faculty of Hasselt University (Belgium). In addition, we shall consider students' as well as teachers' views of SAL after an initial period of 4 years (SAL was introduced in 2002).

2. Structure of the paper

First, we will contextualise this paper. More specifically, the section on the macro-context sketches the geographical and socio-cultural background while that on the micro-context concentrates on some organisational aspects of the Business Communication programme as it is operational at Hasselt University. This will help the

reader to contextualise the content of our paper. We shall then focus on some of the main drivers behind the evolution of our thinking about (foreign language) learning. As a next step, the core concept of this paper, that is SAL, will be discussed. After having explained its basic principles, we will turn to the identification of what might be referred to as a series of basic requirements for its implementation. In particular, we will see that these imply a reshaping of the classic learning environment as well as a redesigning of the course material and an adaptation of the work formats. Finally, we will comment on teachers' as well as students' evaluation of SAL.

3. Situating the context

3.1. Macro-context

Traditionally, vital importance is attributed to the teaching of foreign languages within the Belgian (Higher) Educational System. In order to understand why this is the case, we will briefly discuss the geo-political context to this paper. Since 1970, the Belgian government has been based on a federal structure that distinguishes between three regions (based on territorial identity) on the one hand and three so-called 'communities' (based on cultural identity) on the other (see http://www.belgium.be/eportal/). More specifically, an individual's community membership is determined by his/her mother-tongue. This means that Belgium unites three linguistic communities with the Dutch speaking community being the largest (5.7 million speakers, followed by the French speaking community (4.3 million speakers) and the German speaking community (80 thousand speakers). Since these three communities are in close and continuous interaction with each other, the knowledge of foreign languages is extremely important. This is all the more important because of Belgium's economic dependency upon other (surrounding) nations like France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. In fact, these are its biggest import and export partners (see http://www.abh-ace.org and http://www.export.vlaanderen.be). So, in

order to maintain its competitiveness and its reputation as an attractive business partner, the mastering of intercultural communicative skills and foreign languages is an absolute necessity. Hasselt University is situated in the Eastern part of Flanders, that is, the Dutch speaking community. It is some 20 km from Maastricht (Netherlands), 70 km from Aachen (Germany), 45 km from Liège (French community), 100 km from Brussels (bilingual statute) and 85 km from Antwerp (Dutch community).

3.2. Micro-context

Hasselt University was founded in 1972. The university is affiliated to two technical institutions (i.e., Expertisecentrum voor Industrie Onderwijs en Samenleving (XIOS) and Provinciale Hogeschool Limburg (PHL)) and together with the University of Maastricht it is part of a larger association called Transnational University of Limburg. This is outlined in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Altogether there are approximately 11000 students and staff working within this associative network. Hasselt University includes three faculties. These are business, sciences and medicine. Contrary to those of the other two faculties, foreign language courses are compulsory for business students. More specifically, we have about 1300 students choosing three out of five languages being offered. These are French, German, English, Italian and Spanish. The majority opt for a French course. This is due to the fact that French is one of the official languages of Belgium. In addition, France is the country's biggest export partner. Incoming students have already reached a good competence level (i.e., A2 or 'Waystage' and partially B1 or 'Threshold' of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). This can be explained by the fact that they have had lessons in French from the last two years of primary school. This

amounts to a total of approximately 500 to 600 hours of French. It is important to realise that our objective is not to prepare students for a career as translators or specialists in languages. Rather, we train them in business communication with special attention being given to oral communicative competences since it is these that have been found to be most in demand within the business sector (Clijsters and Verjans 1994). In order to achieve our learning outcomes we have three full time teachers and ten time credits, that is, about 270 hours in a four or five year programme. The understaffing can be seen as one of the main reasons why we decided to rethink the traditional educational strategy for teaching languages. However, quite apart from the constraints imposed by our current working context, we also thought it was important to take account of some of the more recent theories of learning.

4. Rethinking the concept of (language) learning

Inevitably, the concept of learning is constantly evolving. Throughout the last thirty years or so, our thinking on learning and educational strategies has been profoundly influenced by a technological (r)evolution on the one hand and by a series of evolutions within society and (working) life on the other. Where the technological sector is concerned, it is no exaggeration to say that it has been developing at an incredible pace. It is often hard to keep up with the creation of new ICT applications and the rate of growth is exponential. Practical possibilities for users are enormous and constantly expanding. Increasingly, the use of technological devices for the execution of basic as well as complex and time-consuming (communicative) functions has often become standard practice. The advantages of such technological tools are many: they mean that all kinds of physical, geographical and time barriers become almost irrelevant. Also, they have a massive capacity for stocking data, execute the most complicated commands in a minimum of time, allow for the integration of different kinds of media (audio, video), are very mobile and often quite easy to use. The wide variety of

potential applications has made ICT particularly appealing for education in general and for language teaching in particular (Corbitt, Wright and Martz 1999; Fischer and Musacchio 2006; Naidu, Ip and Linser 2000). Nowadays, the explicit encouragement of the integration of high-tech features into language education has become widespread (Irvine and Brna 2003; Šikolová and Složilová 2006). This developing trend is reflected in the academic literature where scholars have systematically replaced the classic notion of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) by more sophisticated concepts such as WebCT-based learning (Mzoughi et al. 2005; Naqvi 2006). Podcasting, Webblogs, use of Wikipedia and Video conferencing are just a few of the tools and techniques that are currently being explored by (foreign) language teachers and trainers in intercultural business communication (Ferry, Kervin and Rudd 2006; Guth and Grigio 2006; Hanekova and Rostekova 2006).

In addition to these technological trends, the traditional (language) learner profile has been substantially affected by a series of fundamental changes in society as a whole and the professional work-related environment in particular (Karjalainen and Lehtonen 2006a). Without going into too much detail, three specific trends should be mentioned here. First of all, there is today's popular notion of *life long learning* (Uden and Dix 2004). As discussed above, we are living in a society where knowledge is continuously expanding and rapidly changing. Moreover, it is frequently of vital importance to respond quickly to newly emerging opportunities. Thus, if we are to remain competent, this automatically implies that we have to continue learning throughout our professional careers (Rainbird 2000). However, in order for such life long learning to take place, the necessary means and tools have to be developed (Bork 2004). In addition, the educational system cannot afford to lag behind. The point has frequently been made that if account is to be taken of these trends, students have to be made aware of the need for ongoing learning and provided with the competences necessary for successful learning throughout their lives

A second noticeable evolution is the move towards *distance learning*. One of the central underlying ideas here is that the activity of learning should be 'detached' from the traditional classroom format with its 'physical' face-to-face contact between learner and teacher (Ferry, Kervin and Rudd 2006). Besides improving the individual's flexibility, this facilitates the complex task of having to combine work with additional learning and private life. Another advantage of distance learning lies in the fact that people gain more control over their own learning process. The internet literally puts the world at our fingertips thereby making it possible to attend courses all over the world and to study anytime, anywhere and anyhow (Dillinger 2000; Petropoulakis, McArthur and McDonald 2002).

A third interesting trend is that nowadays it is more explicitly expected that, as well as acquiring domain-specific knowledge, students need to master a wide range of cognitive, affective and practical *competences* (Caproni and Areas 1997). This is clearly reflected in the way in which job profiles are being defined with frequent use of terms such as innovativeness, creativity and assertiveness. Also, it is advisable to be a collaborative team worker, a talented organiser and a skilled communicator. Within an increasingly globalised working environment, professionals are specifically urged to be capable of interacting and communicating efficiently with partners speaking other languages and coming from different cultural backgrounds (Friedova and Vetrakova 2006; Hofstede 1980; Karjalainen and Lehtonen 2006b). Yet, such competences and skills are not learned in a traditional way. Rather they require specialised training (Koblizkova 2006; Leplat 1990). As a consequence, the traditional educational approaches where the accent was long placed on cognitive learning should be re-oriented to meet these particular needs.

These multiple challenges have preoccupied scholars in recent years and are still generating a considerable number of academic publications. Several strategic approaches have been proposed in the literature in order to improve the quality and

thereby increase the effectiveness of (language) teaching. One of these is known as the Semi-Autonomous Learning paradigm.

5. Semi-autonomous learning (SAL)

In order to meet the new challenges and to prepare students to deal more effectively with the recently emerging trends discussed above, we decided to replace the traditional programme for Foreign Language and Business Communication by a more dynamic and modernised approach. After a substantial period of theoretical exploration and practical preparation, SAL was successfully implemented in 2002. However, before looking in more detail at the technical facilities necessary to make SAL operational, we will briefly discuss the key principles behind it

To start with, it is important to give a clear definition of the core idea behind SAL, which is to increase students' *autonomy* throughout the learning process. Essentially, SAL is aimed at stimulating a person's self-perceived autonomy indirectly by increasing his/her task-related responsibility, self-consciousness and motivation. Augmenting a student's task-related *responsibility* should be understood here as an attempt to give him/her more control over basic learning-related activities such as planning, organisation, timing, preparation and follow-up. In addition to delegation, another important aspect of the transfer of responsibility is to leave the initiative (as much as possible) with students instead of teachers in cases where they are faced with problems (for instance, when they need theoretical feedback or practical information).

The notion of *self-consciousness* should be interpreted here as the degree to which students come to see the underlying relevance of a certain programme. Put differently, besides knowing what it is they have to learn, students should be made more aware of why it is important for them to learn it. Students normally are more convinced of a course's usefulness if its objectives and content are sufficiently contextualised. We, for instance, provide such broader context by referring to SWOT-

analyses and language audit reports undertaken by the Centre for Applied Linguistics (to which both authors are affiliated) on behalf of the Belgian government and companies within the private sector. The results obtained by these studies indicate clearly that the knowledge of foreign languages and intercultural communicative competences is of crucial importance for the successful completion of regional and international business transactions (Verjans 1999a, b). It is our experience that this background information definitely encourages students to take the business communication programme more seriously and to be less inclined to question its relevance.

This brings us to the third central aspect of SAL, that is, stimulating students' *motivation* during the learning process. Of course, the latter is closely related to the previous two aspects. Students who have been given more responsibility over a well contextualised study programme will probably feel more motivated throughout the learning process. From this it may be argued that SAL tries to motivate students intrinsically. In other words, motivation is based on students' personal conviction that what they are doing is interesting, challenging and relevant. Our basic philosophy was that these three pillars on which the concept of SAL rests could be realised most effectively by means of an educational approach that combines (1) guided autonomy with (2) study formats based on two-way interaction and (3) the integration of ICT as a means for educators to customise their teaching.

Where the first element is concerned, it is important to take account of the fact that students leaving Secondary School are usually conditioned to expect a teacher-controlled learning environment. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to promote student autonomy without providing the necessary assistance. As will be discussed later on, students are given a course textbook that can be consulted online containing a clearly structured organisational programme together with all sorts of practical guidelines, helpful tips, information related to examinations, etc.

Secondly, the development and promotion of work settings based on two-way interaction (see section 6.3.) was deemed to be more appropriate for SAL than the more traditional teaching format based on lecturing ex cathedra. Unlike a single directional teacher-to-student classroom model where the role of students is often limited to that of passive recipients of incoming information, a classroom activity which corresponds to a two directional pattern will increase (inter-)active participation and will make students feel more involved.

Thirdly, in redesigning our programme according to the basic principles of SAL, we gave a more important role to ICT. As discussed above, it is widely accepted that ICT serves as a useful approach to make the learning experience become more flexible by detaching it from the traditional and rather stiff classroom setting. To start with, ICT-applications can take over several teacher-related tasks (such as the provision of feedback, assessment, administration and so on). Also, they make the course content more mobile which allows teachers to customise the learning process. Customisation is a term borrowed from marketing theory and is used to suggest that ICT makes it possible for marketeers to offer highly individualised products which are completely adapted to the customer's personal wants and needs. A parallel may be drawn between the added value of Webmarketing for marketing practitioners on the one hand and the advantages of online courses for teachers on the other. This means that teachers are now able to develop course activities which may be controlled and organised to fit each student's personal levels of competence and needs. As such, it is the student who determines when, where and how to engage in learning activities. Moreover, ICT permits teachers to make use of several multimedia, thereby improving the attractiveness of the material offered and increasing interaction (Gunawardena 1995; Poole 2000; Swan 2002; Walther 1994). Finally, multimedia online courses are ideally suited for collaborative learning (Alvarez and Castor 2001; Fisher, Phelps and Ellis 2000; Lam, Kong and Kwok 2006), training of intercultural communicative

competences (Champion 2006; Kahkonen, Silander and Gerdt 2004) and all sorts of critical thinking skills (Gottesfeld 2000).

In sum, the implementation of SAL required a substantial modification of the existing programme format which had to be transformed from a single directional transfer (teacher → student) model where students are task performers under the control of the teacher, into a two directional (teacher ↔ student) exchange model with students as more autonomous task managers. In what follows, we shall elaborate further on the basic requirements for the implementation of SAL. More specifically, it will emerge that these are related to three different aspects of the educational environment, namely, the learning environment, the course material and the work formats.

6. Basic requirements

6.1. Learning environment

As already mentioned, the implementation of SAL engendered a large scale integration of ICT into the foreign language and business communication programme. First of all, this resulted in a radical digitalisation of the learning environment. More particularly, the traditional paper and pencil supported environment was replaced by an electronic *virtual learning environment* (VLE). After careful consideration of the various alternatives (Munoz and Van Duzer 2005) and a considerable pre-test period, we decided to implement Blackboard. Students at the beginning of the course receive a login code and a password by means of which they can easily access this multifunctional platform. Here they can participate in an online discussion forum, retrieve messages, do multimedia exercises, find announcements, consult the course guidelines, produce documents, send e-mails, download software and so on. In addition to the implementation of Blackboard as an overall learning environment, a great deal of time and research went into the development and testing of *author*

systems and software packages appropriate for the production of exercises that can be digitally consulted. With the support of funds from a European research programme (MENTOR 1998-2000), the Centre for Applied Linguistics created Lingu@tor (see http://www.linguator.com) which is an author system roughly comparable to Hot Potatoes, Hologram and Ace. To enable the digitalised course material to become operational, we also had to update the (hardware) infrastructure. With financial support from the university, we were able to modernise the computer room and to equip it with all the latest technological devices (internet, audio, video, DVD, CD-rom, etc.). Finally, personnel had to be trained in order to maintain the infrastructure and to guarantee that the necessary technical support could be provided whenever needed.

6.2. Course material

The main problem with regard to the course material is twofold. On the one hand, the production of digitalised multimedia exercises requires substantial expertise in programming and information management and presupposes some very specific procedures (Alvarez and Castor 2001; Morgan and Skinner 2000; Stoyanov and Kommers 2000; Sullivan 2000). Therefore, we first had to ensure ourselves of full co-operation from specialists in information science and technology. On the other hand, commercial editors are usually not really interested in the development of course material aimed at a very specific public (for instance, technical engineers or purchase managers in sectors such as automobile construction, pharmaceuticals, high tech, non-ferrous industry and so on). Since students of our faculty are often employed in businesses such as these, there was simply no appropriate course material at our disposition. Consequently, we had to start from scratch. Overall, the process of development and production can be subdivided into three stages.

Firstly, we had to identify the (latent) communicative needs experienced within the business sectors of interest to our students. This would maximise the relevance of

our course material. More precisely, we based ourselves on the outcome of a European project called Linguaplan Limburg (Clijsters and Verjans 1994) that was undertaken and co-ordinated by the Centre for Applied Linguistics from 1993 to 1995. One of its primary objectives was to analyse the communicative needs of small and medium sized companies within the geographical region surrounding Hasselt University. Based on a large scale quantitative survey and a qualitative follow-up study using semi-structured interviews, we were able to extract detailed sector-specific communicative profiles from the data. These were double-checked as an additional safeguard by representatives of the population under study. Next, these sector-oriented communicative profiles were used as a blueprint for the development of interactive and multimedia exercises. The didactic concepts were developed under the co-ordination of several specialists in foreign language education while the programming was outsourced and executed by one of the university's spin-off companies specialised in informatics and digital media. The Lingu@tor platform was used as a production facility and once the exercise batteries were completed, they were extensively checked for potential bugs and errors. Throughout three subsequent European projects (i.e., Leomep 1998-2000, Leomep-Multi 2000-2003 and Com-I-N-Europe 2003-2005), this procedure was further refined and trialled in more than 10 European countries. Finally, these exercises were put onto Blackboard making them freely accessible to our students (for more information, see http://www.plurilingua.com). Besides the possibility of practising foreign language skills, these packages allow students to train themselves in intercultural (non-verbal) business communication.

In addition to Plurilingua, three other products deserve to be mentioned. Gr@num and Gr@mvoc are two software packages containing exercises on grammar and vocabulary, specifically oriented to business students (for more information, see http://www.uhasselt.be/ctl/). These have been provided with linguistic feedback and were recently put on Blackboard. The packages permit students to test and evaluate

themselves. Also, students can save their scores and personally follow up their progress. Finally, there is the freely accessible site http://www.olyfran.org, with more than 4500 multiple questions about French grammar, vocabulary and communication in general. The site also contains a menu with closed questions about French culture using different formats ranging from puzzles and gap-filling exercises to combining, dragging and dropping of text, pictures, photos, videos and audio files. The site is also provided with a worldwide discussion forum and chat boxes. The latter make it possible for students to interact directly with people from different cultural backgrounds.

6.3. Work formats

As indicated above, the implementation of SAL inevitably meant that the practical work formats had to be rethought. Our intention was to increase two-way interaction and to allow students to play a more active role in the management of their learning experience. Taken together, this resulted in a teaching programme combining three different work formats, each characterised by a different set of properties.

In the first instance, we have the classic *plenary session*. Within the modernised course approach, the importance of this particular type of setting was seriously reduced. For the course of foreign language and business communication, there are no more than two plenary sessions with one being programmed at the beginning and another at the end of the course schedule. They serve only to provide students with additional background related to the course. It is during these sessions that we contextualise the course content, demonstrate the functioning of software programmes, comment on the course handbook, discuss evaluation and examination, and so forth. Plenary sessions are organised for groups of about 250 students, generally last two hours and can be classified as monologue teacher-to-student work formats with a minimum of interaction.

In the second instance, there is a new format referred to as *question and answer sessions.* These are programmed at the beginning of each week and organised for groups no larger than 90 persons. Students can signal problems and obtain feedback related to the theory and exercises which they are preparing on a weekly basis. This automatically favours a dialogue between student and teacher. Additionally, question and answer sessions allow teachers to further elaborate on certain items and to emphasise what is important and what is not.

Thirdly, we have *work sessions* as another classroom format. Here, teachers focus exclusively on practice. Students are further subdivided into groups of 30 and by means of role play they are encouraged to interact more intensively with each other. Such sessions are systematically programmed at the end of the week (this allows students to have enough time to prepare the theory and exercises) and last no longer than one hour. The furnishing of the rooms where such sessions take place has been adapted to the specific requirements for this type of conversational format to obtain optimal results. This means, for instance, that students are working at round tables all provided with a loudspeaker system, allowing the teacher to listen, record and intervene if necessary. Also, students can communicate with each other at a distance, which is interesting for training in basic communicative skills like a telephone conversation. Items of technical equipments such as overhead projectors, television screens, DVD-players allow us to simulate real-life situations where students are, for example, asked to chair a meeting, give a press conference, deliver a company presentation, and so on.

These three work formats are combined with a substantial amount of weekly scheduled *self-study activities.* In order for their preparation to be effective, students can always consult the online *course book.* This set of guidelines contains all the students need to know about why, how or when to do things. However, it is important to note that these guidelines are not in any sense compulsory. Thus, students decide to

what extent they will follow our advice. In the next section, we will focus on the pros and cons of our reformed SAL-programme.

7. Evaluation

At the end of each term, a group of ten student representatives meets the teaching staff in order to evaluate the functioning of the course. These group delegates gather all the pros and cons their fellow students would like to see discussed with the teachers. Thus, on the one hand, these encounters give students the opportunity to openly express their worries and concerns. On the other hand, they can signal positive aspects and formulate suggestions that might help to improve the quality of the programme. In this way, students participate more actively than before in the process of designing the course. Teachers see these meetings as an important opportunity to receive more detailed feedback on the students' learning experience. In addition, the teachers can express their point of view on certain specific issues and, if needed, they can take preventive action to deal with the way in which students are coping with the SAL-based system.

Overall, it appears that students do appreciate the autonomy that is granted to them. Notwithstanding, the first few weeks of the course are always quite demanding with students having a great deal of information to process and dealing with the challenge of finding their way through the Blackboard platform and the various software packages. As signalled previously, incoming students are not really used to a digitalised learning environment. Rather, they are used to working with traditional handbooks or manuals. Yet, these days, adolescents have become much more comfortable with ICT, simply because they are confronted with its applications on a regular basis. On several occasions already, it has been shown that our daily consumption of high tech multimedia is still increasing (see for instance the Pew Internet & American Life Project 2006: http://www.pewinternet.org). Each day, a

substantial amount of time is spent on activities such as surfing the internet, chatting, wapping, downloading music, playing video games and so forth (Rainee 2006). It goes without saying that this makes today's students much less reluctant to operate within a virtual learning environment. Yet another issue is that students need to get used to the self-discipline that is required by a more autonomous learning system. Finally, students seem to be particularly enthusiastic about the multimedia course activities, the higher rate of interaction, the use of real-life settings, the mobility and flexibility of course contents and the fact that they can be confident that what they are doing is relevant due to additional background contextualisation material with which they are supplied..

Clearly, for the teaching staff, the greatest challenge lies in the preparation and implementation of SAL. As discussed above, transforming the traditional learning environment, course material and work formats requires an intensive, interdisciplinary, time-consuming and financially expensive effort. This must not be underestimated and has to be part of a long term strategy for the organisation of education. In addition, it should not be forgotten that the traditional teacher profile has undergone a fundamental change. Teachers, in addition to lecturing are expected to coach, organise and interact more intensively with students. This is not always self-evident and requires some 'experimentation'. Also, a digitalised learning environment needs continuous updating in order to remain accurate and attractive. Nevertheless, once these adaptations have been made, a SAL-based learning environment can lead to very satisfactory results. Students develop more empathy towards the course which improves the quality of the classroom activities. This, in turn, keeps the teaching staff well motivated. Moreover, the time spent with students can be much more effectively used. One of the biggest advantages of SAL is that teachers, in addition to helping students to develop further their cognitive competences, now have the possibility of working more intensively on the training of practical and communicative skills as well.

In sum, a learning strategy based on the principles of SAL does present a number of challenges to students as well as to teachers. Both parties have to be sufficiently open-minded and willing to develop the appropriate mentality if r SAL is to become effective. Yet, herein lies the system's core value. It is the individual's capacity to adapt to a rapidly changing and continuously evolving environment that will determine to a large extent how 'successful' s/he will be in meeting the professional and social responsibilities of adult lives and careers.

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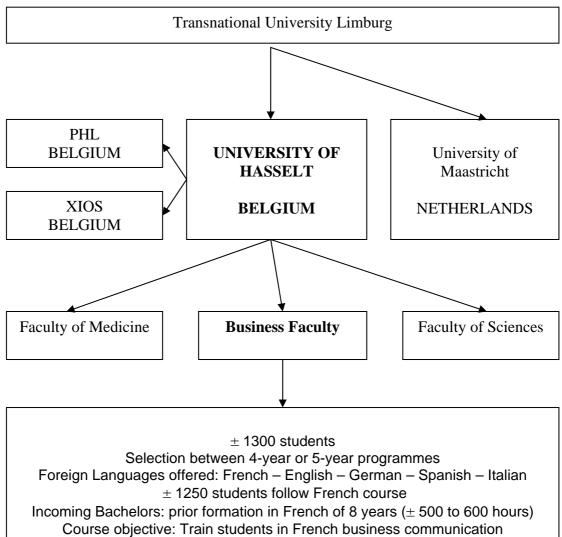
Figure 1: Transnational University of Limburg

Transnational University Limburg

PHL BELGIUM		**UNIVERSITY OF HASSELT** **BELGIUM**		University of Maastricht NETHERLANDS
XIOS BELGIUM				

Faculty of Medicine	**Business Faculty**	Faculty of Sciences

± 1300 students
Selection between 4-year or 5-year programmes
Foreign Languages offered: French – English – German – Spanish – Italian
± 1250 students follow French course
Incoming Bachelors: prior formation in French of 8 years (± 500 to 600 hours)
Course objective: Train students in French business communication
Staff: 3 full time teachers
Time credits: 10 (= 270 hours)