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# Integrated Online Language Learning – *Achieving Communicative Competence*

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## 1. Background

In the history of language teaching, the most effective means of language learning has been a combination of learning the words, rules and patterns of the language, practicing by producing meaningful speech in authentic communicative interactions, and then receiving feedback on the accuracy and appropriateness of that speech production. These factors must be properly blended for fast, efficient language learning to take place.

The integrated relationship between the learner, the trained teacher, the learning materials and the learning environment is therefore essential for a second language to be quickly and efficiently acquired. However, for many who want to advance their proficiency in a second language, settings incorporating such a relationship are not locally available. The answer for them is the promise provided by opportunities to learn language online.

Online language learning is beyond 'emerging' – it *has* emerged. The 21st century has marked a time when people are able to communicate quickly and effortlessly wherever they are in the world, whenever they need to. This opens up new possibilities for second-language learners, along with a host of challenges for educators.

## 2. Introduction

For the many interactive and web-enabled language learning products available today, an unrealized goal is to successfully and coherently integrate the instructor-learner relationship in a way that doesn't compromise quality and effectiveness.

Idapted set out with the aim of designing an effective optimal online language learning system, globally scalable, learner-teacher centric, with no compromises to pedagogic standards.

This paper describes the features and benefits of Idapted's system, which was built from the ground-up as an intelligently-integrated solution to language learning that can be used by individual learners, or incorporated into a blended learning cycle for global institutions.

Finally, this paper presents data verifying success in enabling learners to achieve communicative competence in a second language using the Idapted solution.

## 3. Online Language Learning System Evaluation Criteria

Most existing online language systems presuppose that learners will be self-motivated, self-disciplined, and aware of the objectives that are required to be met in order to achieve their learning goals. So, most online options cater to the small percentage of learners that may succeed due to their knowledge and understanding of the objectives. This means that the majority of learners will probably fall short of reaching their goal of learning to perform in a second language.

This being said, even highly-motivated and self-directed learners with a strong awareness of their goals need a solution with a coherent learning cycle, regular checkpoints, professional spoken interaction, and corrective feedback.

Most online systems today do not provide an adequate infrastructure. Some offer courses in the form of separate lessons covering aspects of grammar, lexis, and pronunciation through interactive exercises and tutorials. Others provide a host of multi-media presentations and activities covering different notions and functions to teach learners how to deal with everyday situations in which they will need to use the new language. Many of these systems are insufficiently integrated to provide a clear path of study and a clear set of procedures for how to study a language online.

Most importantly, intelligently-integrated live instruction with targeted feedback is limited if not missing altogether from existing language learning systems.

Idapted decided to examine and subsequently address the challenges to building an online language learning solution that is manageable and creates value to both the instructor and the learner. We have identified the criteria for such a system as follows:

| Criteria       | Requirement  |
|----------------|--|
| Purpose Driven | The solution must have relevant, well-articulated goals and objectives so that developers and learners are both aware of learning targets.   |
| Effective      | With respect to those goals and objectives, the solution must achieve tangible results that are measurable with some degree of validity and reliability.   |
| Efficient      | The solution must allow rapid learning by limiting time spent on content or activities unrelated to the specified goals and objectives. Activities should be finely targeted to the acquisition of relevant language skills and knowledge. |
| Accessible     | The solution must be readily available to the user when the user wants it, without the use of specialized technology.  |
| Reliable       | The solution must perform its functions at an adequate level of consistency and reliability.   |
| Flexible       | The solution must be adaptable to the individual's needs, level, and learning style and be able to deliver a number of different types of courses and syllabi.   |
| Cost Effective | The solution must be at a price point that enables it to deliver on its promise at a competitive rate while still allowing significant revenues to the provider.   |
| Scalable       | The solution must be able to accommodate or rapidly adapt to changes in the number of distinct offerings and total global users.   |
| Supportive     | The solution must be effective for a wide range of learners rather than just those who can operate autonomously, providing appropriate scaffolding and feedback to individualize the learning experience as much as possible.              |

Each of the preceding can be seen as 'evaluation criteria', representing factors that offer unique challenges to any enterprise wishing to succeed in second-language learning.

## 4. The Idapted Online Language Learning System (OLLS)

The Idapted OLLS represents an 'ecosystem', an environment consisting of the classroom, the school, the community, the learning materials, learners, and teachers.

Optimally from the learners perspective, a learning ecosystem should encompass 1) the computer, the Web, the materials, and an intelligent user interface; 2) the interaction of the learner with materials mediated by the OLLS; 3) the learner's interaction with the instructor through voice in real time (with chat-support as needed), and 4) the time-shifted interactive feedback-review with the instructor.

In the study of any ecosystem, one should always begin by looking at the core and working outwards to understand how the distinct components fit together to form a stable, functioning whole.

In the same way, a good understanding of the Idapted *Learning Methodology* is essential in order to fully appreciate Idapted's intelligently-integrated OLLS.

### 4.1 The Idapted Learning Methodology

The Idapted OLLS learning methodology is based on the three Ps model of Communicative Language Teaching: *Presentation, Practice, and Production*. Crucially, Idapted introduces a fourth step as a major key to successful learning: *Correction Review*.

These can be understood as the four *steps* towards success in learning a second language.

- **Presentation:** Learners are *presented* with their communicative aims, examples and models of language in use, and additional linguistic elements needed to achieve those aims.

- **Practice:** Learners get the opportunity to *practice* using the presented forms and functions to learn and understand how the language works in relevant, real-life contexts.
- **Production:** The learner's *production (performance)* increases due to oral interactions where they perform communicative tasks in the new language.
- **Correction Review:** Learners are made aware of their mistakes in pronunciation, lexis, and grammar, and pragmatics by hearing and seeing corrective feedback and being encouraged to use that feedback to improve their production in subsequent spoken interactions. This additional reflective learning step draws attention to oral forms produced by the learner during the session whilst attempting to communicate his or her message. In addition to strengthening the learning potential of a given lesson over the course of several lessons, the Correction Review process builds awareness of frequent patterned errors in the learner so that they can be more readily resolved.

## 4.2 The Idapted Learning Cycle

Idapted's Learning Methodology provides the roadmap for the development of the Idapted *Learning Cycle* which consists of four learning stages:

- **Self Study:** An online lesson in which learners are presented with the key language learning aims, and language steps to achieve those aims, through step-by-step presentation and practice in the form of model dialogues, discussions in goal-specific contexts, and interactive exercises.
- **Interaction:** A VoIP-assisted synchronous session with a native-English speaking teacher wherein the learner is guided to produce and perform in the language presented and practiced in the Self Study. The instructor guides the learner through a specifically targeted one-to-one interaction based on what the learner has covered in the self study through Idapted's innovative instructor interaction screen, a 'heads up display' (HUD) that gives control of the session to the instructor.
- **Review:** A session in which learners can access and study the specific corrections and explanations of the mistakes they made during their preceding interaction. This is time-tagged to the audio and categorized into the fields of fluency, comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. This information is monitored throughout the learner's course of study and fed into Idapted's cutting edge CRM system, along with session data from the Self Study and Interaction stages.
- **Additional Activities:** A supplementary session following the review where learners are provided with tasks for additional practice.

## 4.3 The Learner Portal

The Study Center is the central hub or learning management system through which the learners can manage their lessons. Through the Study Center, learners can:

- Select the next lessons in their courses of studies.
- View reports and analytics of their progress in the 3 stages of the learning cycle for each lesson.
- Access their Correction Reviews.
- Take recommended additional activities to improve on areas of weakness identified by the analytics and the instructor's corrections.
- Meet and interact with other learners in the community.

With the intelligent integration of data collection from learner's Self Study progress, and instructor-documented corrections from the Interaction phase of the Correction Review, Idapted is able to give learners continual updates on their progress and simultaneously motivate learners through increasing awareness of goals and checkpoints in their course of study.

Learner data is collected and forms an essential element in Idapted's continual iterations and improvements to the instructional content and the OLLS.

#### 4.4 The Instructor Portal

The Instructor Portal is the central hub or instructor management system through which instructor can manage their work. Through the Instructor Portal instructors can:

- Sign-up for work shifts.
- Receive regular training up-dates.
- Take new certification training modules accordingly.
- Communicate with supervisors and instructor management
- Download the latest software for the Idapted VoIP client
- Receive monitoring and assessment feedbacks.
- Meet and interact with other instructors via forums and chat rooms.

As with learner data, instructor data is collected and forms the basis of continual improvements to the training, the interactive HUD, and Idapted policy and instructor management issues.

As of August 2010, over 100,000 live online interactions have been recorded through the OLLS to Idapted's database.

#### 5. Idapted's Criteria Fulfillment

Previously in this paper we presented a set of criteria for OLLS and suggested that this list could serve as evaluation criteria for such systems. The intelligently-integrated Idapted OLLS fully meets all these criteria:

| Criteria       | Idapted's Solution  |
|----------------|---|
| Purpose Driven | The primary offering of Idapted to date is the EQEnglish service. The central goal of this service is to increase learner speaking performance. However, as the service has evolved it has become a coherent system in which reading and listening skills feature highly in courses delivered through the Idapted system.   |
| Effective      | Results from learners who have taken the EQEnglish IELTS Speaking preparation course have been used as verification of the efficacy of the system to raise learners speaking abilities by a significant margin. Data from a number of learners who have previously taken IELTS, completed the course, and subsequently retaken the test show a typical gain of one full point (e.g., from a 5 to a 6 on a 9-point scale). |
| Efficient      | Due to the highly focused nature of study possible with such a coherent system, courses of any length can be built and delivered through the system. Typically learners find that viewing their progress and the progress of peers in the Study Center, along with study guidelines and real-time customer service, results in greater comprehension, faster.   |
| Accessible     | The system, including online access to a live instructor is available to learners on demand.  |
| Reliable       | From a technical standpoint, a learning standpoint, and a teaching standpoint, reliability is a key factor in Idapted's drive to continuously develop and maintain a platform, service, and range of products that is consistent, coherent, and stable.   |
| Flexible       | The learner has control of the pace and intensity of preparation and review. The instructor adapts to the learner's apparent proficiency during the interaction.  |
| Cost Effective | Providing rich materials and exercises for the preparation and review phases, utilizing well-trained online paraprofessionals rather than more expensive classroom teachers, and limiting instructor interaction time to around 20 minutes per lesson, Idapted has made language learning significantly more cost effective for the learner.  |

| Criteria   | Idapted's Solution  |
|------------|---|
| Scalable   | The technical infrastructure is designed to be fully scalable. As with any scalable platform lead time is required in preparing materials and interactions for new courses, however this time-to-market figure is shrinking as the development teams increase in number, proficiency, and efficiency. Instructors are continually screened, recruited, and trained, to ensure that there is always a sufficient pool of instructors to accommodate the rising number of learners. |
| Supportive | The importance of expert support is most obvious in the review sessions where learners reflect on the spots marked by the instructors and the accompanying instructional commentary. Additional assistance is available through the report system and online customer support. These features combine to provide a highly motivating experience.  |

As customer satisfaction is built largely on these criteria, the foundation of the success of Idapted is the continual iterative development of all aspects of its OLLS: the technical platform and infrastructure, learning- and training-materials and corresponding user interface features, instructor training, data collection systems, and customer service.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 EQEnglish IELTS Speaking Course Results

The IELTS (International English Language Testing system) is an internationally certified Cambridge ESOL language proficiency test, recognized as an objective standard by which to judge a learner's communicative competence. In 2009 187,000 Speaking tests were delivered to candidates in China.

Before taking the EQEnglish IELTS courses, repeat test-takers were required to hand in their previous speaking test results. Then, after completing courses, learners were requested to report back with their new IELTS Speaking Test results. In this way the IELTS Speaking Tests function as an objective external verification of EQEnglish's IELTS course results.

In the IELTS Speaking Test learners are graded on a band scale of 0 - 9, and most testers must achieve a band score of 6 or 6.5 to be accepted on the overseas study programs for which they have signed up. The average band increase most learners require is a band increase of 0.5 to 1.0 on their previous score.

The data from the repeat test-takers between January 01 and July 31st 2010 shows that:

- 88.5% of learners taking the Idapted 30-lesson package raised their score by 0.5 bands.
- 88.8% of learners taking the Idapted 60-lesson package raised their score by 1.0 bands.
- 89.0% of learners taking the Idapted 120-lesson package raised their score by 1.5 bands.

This data indicates that learners who studied Idapted courses and completed the Self Study, Interaction, and Review sessions significantly raised their scores.

### 6.2 British Council Global VoIP Learning Pilot Results

The Idapted OLLS was used by the British Council in a pilot delivering Business English courses to Chinese professionals working mainly in multinational finance companies. The pilot was conducted with approximately 3,000 learners in February and March of 2009.

After the pilot was completed, a voluntary survey of the learners was conducted to evaluate their experience and potential interest in future products. Results of the survey indicated:

- 88% of learners gave the pilot an overall rating of "good" or above.
- 90% of learners were satisfied with the design and structure of the experience.
- 87% of learners indicated they would enroll in a similar product if offered through their company.
- 80% of learners indicated they would buy a similar product even if not offered through their company.

On the basis of this data, the independent market research company that conducted the survey recommended a full-scale product be developed for this market.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the current state of online language systems in the increasingly critical realm of online English language learning. We identified a set of challenges to online language learning systems in the form of evaluative criteria and demonstrated how the Idapted OLLS and the Idapted *Learning Cycle* meet the requirements of these criteria.

We asserted that cost-effectiveness, learning-effectiveness, and scalability must be given the highest priority and must be verifiable if an online language learning system is to be considered successful.

Most importantly we have seen how the unique integration of the live instructor is what makes the Idapted OLLS an efficient and effective language learning solution.

Through a continual process of needs analysis, development, data collection and analysis, and reflection, Idapted is rapidly growing its expertise and offerings in online language learning.