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### Smarttalk: Human Capital Initiative project for modern languages

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**Short Report**

## **Smarttalk: Human Capital Initiative project for modern languages**

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### **Abstract**

The future of modern languages in the Technological University sector in Ireland remains in the balance, as we enter the last year of the government's Languages Connect strategy. Given the prevailing uncertainty around language provision in the sector, this Human Capital Initiative project carves out new digital spaces for language learning, preparing learners for the challenges of the modern workplace. The project aligns the newly merged Atlantic Technological University (previously Letterkenny, Sligo and Galway Institutes of Technology) with the Languages Connect Strategy and the National Digital Strategy, by widening access to language learning and enabling the government to reach its targets regarding upskilling in foreign language competence. While this project focusses primarily on the German language, the pathway created could be replicated for other modern languages. The target users are higher level students from all disciplines that have had no prior opportunity to learn language at primary or secondary level, however, it may be useful for students who had this opportunity but, for some reason, disengaged from their learning environment. With a unique focus on building confidence in oral competencies, these virtual learning pathways include embedded mentoring channels for peer-assisted learning. These new learning spaces provide a sustainable solution to the current impasse regarding language provision at third level, creating easily accessible pathways into language learning, using interwoven synchronous and asynchronous tools.

### **Keywords:**

Digital learning spaces, language learning, online learning, higher education

## **1. Introduction**

This paper aims to provide background information to this Higher Education 4.0 project and lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive research study in the future. This project could lead to a wider investigation into technology enhanced language learning at higher level institutions in Ireland. Undoubtedly, the project addresses the ongoing challenge around modern languages in the Irish education landscape. The Smarttalk concept was initiated to create an online space for language learning that goes beyond the traditional language

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classroom, enabling learners to access learning content easily and providing opportunities for live interaction with native speakers of their target language. The collaborative project began in September 2020 and is now completed. This report will begin by outlining the background to the project, including national strategies and prior studies. It will also describe some of the existing language apps that are widely available online and highlights how Smarttalk sets itself apart. It will then go on to describe the building of the six-week learning pathway in more detail, including both formative and summative assessment. The pilot that took place in May 2023 will be briefly mentioned. Finally, the current status of the project and future potential will be outlined.

## **2. Background and prior studies**

In 2017, the Irish government launched the "Languages Connect Strategy," acknowledging the pivotal role modern languages play in Ireland's economic and social progress. However, Lanvers (2023) observed that with only two years remaining in the strategy's timeline, it was unlikely that its goals will be achieved. More recent statistics are not available at the time of writing. However, anecdotal evidence would suggest that the situation has worsened, if anything. Ireland's sociolinguistic environment is complex and at times baffling. As illustrated in prior studies, the poor performance in modern languages has long been the source of scholarly investigation (Zojer, 2010; Carthy, 2017; Berthaud et al., 2018; Bruen, 2023). The predominance of English on the Irish sociolinguistic landscape surely has a role to play in the low take-up of languages at higher level; its role as a global lingua franca has been shown to have a demotivating effect on Anglophones seeking to learn languages other than English (Dörnyei et al, 2006). Indeed, Dörnyei et al.'s (2006) study of Hungarian second level students shows significant findings to suggest that globalisation is having a negative impact on the learning of languages other than English. The study postulates that the phenomenon of 'Englishisation' could explain why foreign language learning continues to be unsuccessful in anglophone societies.

Notwithstanding these sociolinguistic considerations, there are also other psycholinguistic factors to be borne in mind. Carthy (2017) has drawn attention to empirical evidence that emerged during a nationwide investigation into language policy in the Institute of Technology sector. This research suggests that learners disengage from the language learning process, due to a lack of emphasis on oral skills. While it is impossible to control the global spread of English, it is certainly possible to prioritise speaking competence in the learning environment. It is also possible to create social presence in the digital space, an element that is considered to be essential for the success of online courses (Oztok & Brett, 2011). If learners have disengaged from the learning process in the traditional classroom, the onus is on educators to create a learning space that enables the learner to feel connected and included, with their specific learning needs being met. In short, the Smarttalk concept harnesses digital technologies to create more dynamic learning environments. These virtual learning spaces can use teaching methodologies to address the perceived shortcoming in the traditional language classroom.

## **3. Language Apps**

There is an abundance of popular language apps on the internet, with millions of users worldwide. Duolingo, Babbel, Lingoda and Busuu (to name but a few) are used by learners of all ages, offering copious amounts of learning material. The content is presented in a user-

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friendly interface with inbuilt multiple-choice exercises and instant feedback. While there is substantial evidence to suggest that users find these apps engaging and fun, there is little evidence as to whether they are effective (Tommerdahl et al, 2022.) In most cases, the user engages in an asynchronous way with the learning content and there is little scope for synchronous interaction that might occur in an immersive real-world environment. Duolingo, offered on a freemium model to users, gamifies language learning by offering bitesize lessons. Lingoda and Busuu incorporate sessions with online instructors and users are subject to subscriptions. While Babbel contains practice conversations with AI partners, both Lingoda and Busuu are learning platforms providing interaction with native speakers of the learner's target language.

## 4. Smarttalk Learning Pathway

While the Smarttalk learning pathway has elements which are similar to some of the apps mentioned above, it is designed to fit into the ATU curriculum, as a stepping stone for learners who might never have considered a language at primary or secondary level. The pathway is available on Blackboard, the learning management system for ATU Donegal and was entirely built by the ATU Higher Education 4.0 design team. Firstly, it has a ring-fenced timespan and requires the learner to commit to a certain number of hours over that period. It is aligned with the Common European Framework (CEF), which is a globally recognised benchmarking system for learning languages. The level offered in this six-week pathway is A1 i.e. no prior knowledge of the German language is required. The main objective is to build confidence and competence in oral skills, and this is reflected in the assessment format. The Smarttalk virtual environment provides live interaction to stimulate learning and challenge the learner to prepare for real world communication. There are weekly synchronous sessions with online mentors, in addition to the asynchronous content, incorporating videos, interactive exercises and quizzes. These sessions are agreed between mentor and learner on a weekly basis and can take the form of one hour-long session or two half-hour sessions. Learners need to commit to a minimum of three hours engagement weekly, including their live mentoring session. It is recommended that they familiarise themselves with the asynchronous content before meeting their mentor, on order to get the optimum value out of the session. During the mentoring sessions, learners have the opportunity to interact with native speakers and engage in conversations to practice the content for each of the six topics to which they have been exposed.

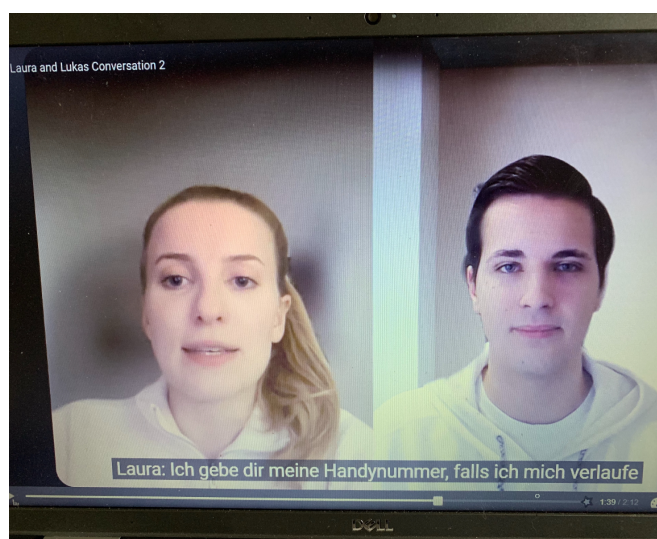
### Asynchronous content

The asynchronous content is closely aligned with the key competencies outlined in the CEF at A1. The pathway includes cultural knowledge about Germany that would be of interest to adult learner. It is divided into six topics as follows:

1. Introductions
2. Numbers and the alphabet
3. Family relationships and birthdays
4. Hobbies, dates and timetables
5. Travel arrangements

## 5. Getting to know Berlin.

Each section contains videos, exercises and quizzes, with the main emphasis on oral competence. The videos were created using native speakers acting out scenarios related to each topic. The actors were recruited from Hochschule Bremerhaven, with the assistance of Professor Gerhard Feldmeier, one of the partners in the project. There are two pairs of actors; firstly, Laura (played by Malin Bock) and Lukas (played by Ben Wagner) who meet for the first time in Bremerhaven university and get to know one another over a number of encounters, culminating finally in their trip to Berlin; the second pair are Siobhán (played by Helen Deepe) and Ella (played by Aliah Bahmann). Siobhán is an Irish student learning German and Ella is her online mentor. There are two videos in Unit One- Introductions; the first video captures the first encounter between Laura and Lukas on the university campus; the second video illustrates Siobhán's first meeting with her online mentor, asking her to practice basic introductions with her. Each video has three options for the learner: 1. No captions; 2. German captions; 3. English captions. In the earlier stages, learners will need the English captions to facilitate understanding, gradually, as confidence builds, they can progress to the German captions and, ultimately, to understanding the dialogue without any captions at all. The learning pathway follows a storyline, involving these fictive characters, thereby engaging the learner, while providing copious amounts of listening practice to build aural skills.



**Figure 1: Snapshot of video clip from Unit One.**

## 6. Building of the pathway

The pathway for learners to access Smarttalk was created using Articulate Rise, with embedded H5P and unlisted YouTube video content by instructional designers within the Higher Education project. The pathway is located on Blackboard which has an integrated live interaction space called Blackboard Collaborate. All videos have bilingual captions and learners are encouraged to start with the original German and only resort to the English translation as a last resort. H5P has an in-built voice recognition facility which was incorporated into the asynchronous material, allowing the learner to practice without their mentor, prior to the live sessions. The pathway was piloted in May 2023; both students and lecturers were invited to participate. Due to the poor timing of the pilot, only five volunteers

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took part: three students and two lecturers. Some of the feedback gathered from volunteers during the pilot would suggest that the voice recognition facility was far from ideal and sometimes gave negative feedback to the learner when in fact their pronunciation was correct. More refined voice recognition technology should address this shortcoming in the future. Other feedback suggested that two half hourly sessions per week would be more effective than one hourly session. The timing of synchronous sessions also proved to be challenging for both participants and mentors. There is clearly a need to conduct another pilot with a larger number of participants to gather more meaningful feedback as to the effectiveness of this learning pathway. Mentors for the larger pilot could be recruited from teacher training colleges in Germany, where students are required to gain 30 hours of teaching experience (including online), as part of their training requirements.

## 7. Current status and future potential

The project has the potential to transform teaching and learning spaces for languages and, in doing so, motivate more students to take on the challenge of learning a second language. It lays the groundwork for a wider research study that would enable more students to engage with the pathway and provide valuable feedback to educators. With its emphasis on oral skills, the project creates a unique learning environment, tailored to individual learning needs. While German is the main focus of this initial phase, the project lends itself to the learning of any target language. Currently, there are no access mechanisms in place for ATU students to use the learning pathway. In theory, this learning pathway could be accessed by students across all disciplines, regardless of programme or level. However, in the absence of appropriate scaffolding, it remains to be seen whether the full potential of this project will be exploited. The next step will be to set up an ATU-wide framework that will enable this learning pathway to be accessed by all students. When this happens, the university will be seen to address the government's nationwide strategic goal to increase the numbers of students learning modern languages. Undoubtedly, this project could widen access to language learning in a way which would never have been possible in a traditional learning environment. The potential of digital technologies to transform our teaching spaces for languages will only be truly realised when it is fully supported at policy level.

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