



e-CLIENT Simulation facilitating language learning.

María J. Mariñoso

FASE.NET
Zaragoza, Spain.
fase@fase.net

Abstract

e-CLIENT is a Simulator for learning languages in the sector of hospitality. The project has been a challenge in search of the innovation in the field of language learning for low skilled professionals. We wanted to create something new and effective. Have we succeeded in our search for innovation? Have we finally found the tool "facilitating" language learning? To which extent is it possible to be innovative and creative in language learning? These questions are high priority in 2009 as the European year of innovation and creativity.

I am always ready to learn although I do not always like being taught.

Winston Churchill

1. First-order headings

e-CLIENT project was selected with best marks for the first round LLP under the Leonardo da Vinci framework of development of innovation. The evaluator's comments praised the fact that the project aims and objectives as well as the final result were clear and concise.

We wanted to facilitate language learning to people working in the sector of hospitality and tourism specially those with no training and in direct contact with the public.

Our proposal to help these people learning a language easily was the creation of a virtual simulator, according with the idea we "sold" in the in the proposal the simulator was to have the following characteristics:

LOW-SKILLED FOCUSED: the target group is characterized by its low level of training, their reluctance to attend training activities mostly due to the long working hours which characterise the sector and also by the proliferation of immigrants.

BASIC LEVEL: The tool will be strictly focussed in providing basic level contents just being realistic and knowing the failure of previous experiences in the field which were good for proficiency but neglect Basic level as being less interesting or rewarding. LEVELS A1, A2 and B1

LANGUAGES: four of the most spoken languages in tourist sector are taught (EN, ES, FR and DE) whereas two less spoken languages are promoted (GR and BG) .

USER- FRIENDLY: a person with no knowledge of the ICTs could use it.

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING: The tool could be used for self-learning, given the tight timetables of the target group and the difficulties to attend group sessions.

HELP IN DEALING WITH DAILY SITUATIONS: the contents will be based upon the TPR (Total Physical Response), a language learning method based on the coordination of speech and action. The learners will face work situations very similar to those they will have to face later in their work.

2. How to facilitate learning?

I have now for some years participated in European language projects of different qualities and distinct results. Something common to all was the long-lasting debates carried out during the design period of the tool on how a learner learns and how we as developers could facilitate this learning.

What makes a hospitality worker wanting to learn a language? So far I have only have one response, a very simple (even stupid) conclusion and extended to any kind of learner and learning, and that is: motivation.

Only motivation makes a person learn and motivation is in itself a multi-factorial element there are as many motivation ways as different people. We can not pretend that any tool can "motivate" in itself but we also find out that very close to motivation lies the "identification with what is being learnt"

In order to produce the identification of the learner-learning in the e-CLIENT project was an easy decision just to adjust the contents of the situation simulated to real situations happening in any bar, restaurant or hotels in the participant countries. In order to reproduce the sense of reality in the learner each one of the selected scenes was recorded in any of the 6 languages by native speakers instead of being in one language and later translated.

The next to be sorted out was how to get the learner involved and how to facilitate learning through a simulation. For this purpose the methodology suggested for the simulator as a language learning tool was the Total Physical Response; this methodology was developed by Dr. James J. Asher [1] in the 70's and we can say it hasn't received much support from mainstream educators.

Summarising, TPR proposes learning language in the same way as a child does where language is internalized through a long period of listening and developing comprehension prior to production and where language learning is associated to action. There are also some studies on brain lateralization supporting this theory.

TPR analyses the way that children learn their native language (also the migrant which are part of e-client's target group) and proposes a series of exercises to be carried out in the classes to practise the methodology.

According to Asher [1] there are three critical elements in the way children learn their first language:

- 1) Listening skill precedes speaking, with children often able to comprehend many complex utterances before they produce any intelligible speech.
- 2) Many of the utterances that are directed at an infant relate to actions, and more than 50% are in the form of commands such as: "Come here!" "Hold onto my finger!" "Look at Daddy!"
- 3) Listening seems to produce a "readiness" for speaking, but it appears that the process cannot be rushed. When the child has internalized an adequate cognitive map of the language through listening, s/he will spontaneously begin to produce utterances.

In a face-to-face environment students must respond physically to the words of the teacher in a simulated environment the learner must respond by selecting one response to the order given by the character in the simulation.

3. TPR and Simulation.

We tried to transfer the child learning principles according to Asher into the e-CLIENT simulation tool in the following way:

- Before having to make any exercise of decision with the tool the learner is presented with a film depicting a situation which could take place in a real life in its working environment. The learners can repeat the same situation as many times as they like they can take the necessary time to comprehend before they have to produce any result. During this process the simulator menu offers the learner some supporting information in order to understand to what's happening in the scene (description of the action in the learner's native language, some grammar hints, etc).
- When the students feel like playing the simulation the film starts in the same way as they have seen before but stops at a point where the learner must interfere with the situation and produce a "movement". The image freezes and a prompt pops out of the window suggesting or ordering the learners to act.
- The learners then have to create their own speech by recording their voice and then selecting in a menu which option do they think is the right one. Depending on the selection made the situation will follow the path as shown in the pre-view or will turn into another pathway showing the learner that wasn't right in the choice.

The results of implementing this theory for many years showed how the TPR reduced learners stress, accelerated the acquisition of the target language and improved long-term retention.

Conclusions

Have we succeeded? Have we been able to develop our envisaged simulator? Is it possible to really facilitate language learning with a tool? Does any tool facilitate any language?

If we succeeded is a question that still remains. At present the tool is being finalized and will be tested in the following days. During the process of implementation the project faced serious delays in delivery which burdened the technical implementation on time.

In this conference I wanted to present the final results of our testing in order to see the final result of our dealings and if we finally succeed in our aims but for those participating in projects must be aware that there is always one Murphy's law lurking: "No project was ever completed on time and within budget." . But in few days those willing to participate in the testing could be registered in www.e-client.org

At the beginning of this abstract one issue was raised which hasn't been answered yet: To which extent is it possible to be innovative and creative in language learning materials? At present I'm working in the development of three projects promoting the use of the ICT in language learning, the three of them focussed in the sector of hospitality. The question is always raised in the three of them especially when one has to be different from the rest.

If we measure our results against the following definition:

- Creativity is the way an individual succeeds in changing his or her perception.
- To innovate is to make something new in the system; whereas to be creative means
- thinking up a new system. Innovation is linked to action, creativity to thinking.

(de Brabandere 2005: 10)

Then we could say that we did contribute to creativity in the sense that we envisaged a new language learning tool whose innovation was not as much in the contents but in the methodology and the tool design but if we ever achieved innovation has to be proved yet.

References

- [1] Asher James J. "The Total Physical Response Approach to Second Language Learning" The Modern Language Journal, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Jan., 1969), pp. 3-17
- [2] Richards, Jack C.; Rodgers, Theodore S.(2001). Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching. Cambridge University Press; 2 edition. pp. 72-72. ISBN 978-0521008433.
- [3] Sivert, S., & Egbert, J. (1995). Using a language learning environment framework to build a computer-enhanced classroom. College ESL,5, 53-66. [EJ519984]
- [4] de Brabandere, L.: 2005, The Forgotten Half of Change: Achieving Greater Creativity through Changes in Perception. Dearborn: Chicago
- [5] [Arial, 10-point, normal, alignment justify, upper and lower case]