

Hook up! To Languages – Enhancing the Mobility of Young Europeans through ICT and Language Competence

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Abstract

Language continues to be a critical issue in the internationalisation of European Higher Education, functioning too often as a barrier rather than as a bridge to intercultural relations in general and increased academic mobility in particular.

In response to this, the European University Foundation – Campus Europae (<http://www.campuseuropae.org/en/>), an enhanced mobility network for students and staff made up of 20 universities across 16 European countries, set up Hook Up!, a two-year Project, co-funded through the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme, dedicated to the building of a virtual language learning platform. This language learning platform supports the goals of Campus Europae itself, providing the support needed to sustain mobility, to achieve academic success, and to ensure the acquisition of B1 level competence in at least two European languages.

The Hook Up! platform uses an integrated, blended language learning approach developed collaboratively by language teachers from the participating universities, and offers tuition at A1 to B2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), through a virtual campus available on Moodle, complemented with interactive online activities using Skype and Wiziq, for example, as well as face to face tuition.

In order to facilitate the development of Campus Europae and of a community of Campus Europeans who are prepared for study and work in diverse language and cultural environments, Hook Up! provides preparation in the language of the host country before the mobility period, on-going tuition during the study period abroad and opportunities to continue using and developing language competence after the period of study abroad.

Besides Portugal, 15 countries participate in this project, developing language learning modules online in twelve languages. Amongst these languages are some of the lesser taught and less widely known languages of Europe, constituting an added value to this project. The modules are available online on the Moodle platform (<http://languagelearning.campuseuropae.org/>) permitting the complementary learning of any of the languages available. The teaching and learning is supported by technologies, such as: Skype, Wiziq, DimDim, Survey Monkeys, Hot Potatoes, among others.

This paper will focus on the case of Portuguese and the development of online modules and blended tuition within Hook Up! since 2009. We will look at the challenges faced in the setting up of this collaborative international initiative, the products developed and the impact of this innovative approach on the learners themselves and their learning.

1. Background

Although not a new priority, internationalisation has recently become a central factor in a higher education institution's claim to success and excellence. Defined as "the process of integrating an



international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003: 21), internationalisation relies on cooperation between national institutions in various fields of action: teaching and learning, research and development, cooperation with society, in order to meet the challenges of globalisation. Through processes of internationalisation, an institution strives to become more competitive, more able to engage in top-class research, more attractive to a wider range of students, more able to produce highly qualified graduates for a global or internationalised workplace. In this sense, as Vogel puts it: “A consensus exists among politicians, industry, universities, and students that a global economy depends on the internationally minded, interculturally trained, multilingual graduate” (Vogel, 20012).

Against this background, student mobility and international exchange, still marginal to academic life in Europe, become a central concern, the path par excellence to achieve the international mind, intercultural training and language skills required. Thus a renewed challenge emerges: to transform learning mobility within the European Higher Education Area from the exception, involving between 2% and 4% of students, into the norm, becoming a regular part of university education for all (CEC, 20093). In the context of the Bologna reforms, the value of student mobility, as an essential component of the new degree programmes, can be summarised in terms of its contribution of European added-value to academic studies, the opportunity it provides to experience other languages and cultures at a time when language and intercultural competences are recognised as essential competences for all, the preparation for labour-market mobility it provides and the participation in European citizenship it enables. Unfortunately, the emergence of mobility as an essential and integral component of academic life continues to be hampered by linguistic and cultural barriers, lack of financial support and problems with recognition of studies undertaken in other institutions.

2. The European University Foundation - Campus Europae (EUF-CE)

Campus Europae (CE) is an enhanced mobility network set up in 2002 with the aim of “actively using Europe’s cultural diversity as a way to prepare students to work in a global market and within multicultural teams” (Campus Europae, 20034). Simply put, CE has set itself to promote deeper and more sustainable student mobility in the interests of achieving the wider educational goal of European citizenship, building a learning mobility based on agreed and stable interchangeability of curricular units and supported by a robust commitment to language and cultural learning.

Designated in 2007 an Erasmus Plus by European Commissioner Ján Figel’, the network has the potential, as a relatively small and intimate group of institutions, to fully enact the goals of learning mobility. Its targets for students encompass more extended periods of mobility, the completion of two years of study abroad in two different universities/countries, the possibility of combining study with work, and the necessity, built into CE’s concept and organisational structure, to enable academic success as well as life experience. Of particular relevance to this paper, CE requires its students to reach at least the B1 level of competence, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFLR), in each of the languages of the countries in which they study, thus aiming to transform the ideal of multilingualism into a reality.

Currently comprising 20 European Universities spread across 16 European countries (including three recently joined members), CE has exchanged upwards of 500 students since 2004. But the network is particularly notable for the range of countries and languages it includes, well-illustrated in the map presented in Figure 1, and for the insightful desire to empower future Europeans with skills in languages which are not regularly taught and learnt in our schools but which are nevertheless essential components of Europe’s linguistic and cultural diversity.

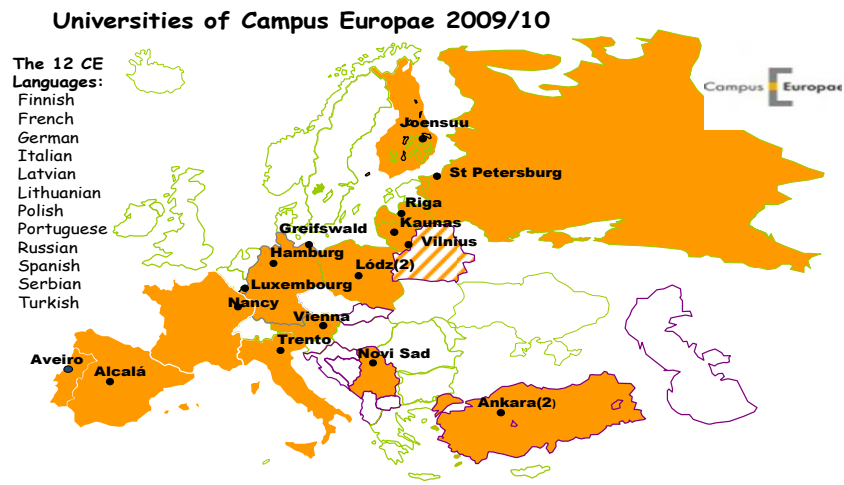


Figure 1. Map of CE universities (source: <http://www.campuseuropae.org/en/>)

3. The Hook Up! project

It was to meet the challenges posed by this commitment to language learning in general, and to the learning of lesser taught and lesser known languages in particular, that Hook Up! was launched in 2008 with joint financing from the EUF - CE and the European Commission, through its LLL Programme. Hook Up! describes itself as an innovative language learning gateway, which uses an integrated blended approach developed collaboratively by language teachers from 16 participating universities. It offers tuition at A1 to B2 levels of the CEFRL in 12 languages, through a virtual campus available on Moodle, complemented with interactive online activities, using Skype and Wiziq, for example, and face to face courses.

Its goal is to motivate students to language learning in a fun and meaningful way, while at the same time contributing to their mobility experience and academic success. Ideally, CE students begin their contact with the language of the host university 6 months before the study period starts, reaching A1 level and being ready to take on A2 level on arrival at the host institution. Combined with face-to-face tuition, the Hook Up! platform acts as a constant support to learning as students progress through their mobility year. On return home, students continue to have access to materials for continuing their contact with the language they have just learnt, with other learners and speakers of that language, and are thus enabled to maintain and extend their competence after their study visit.

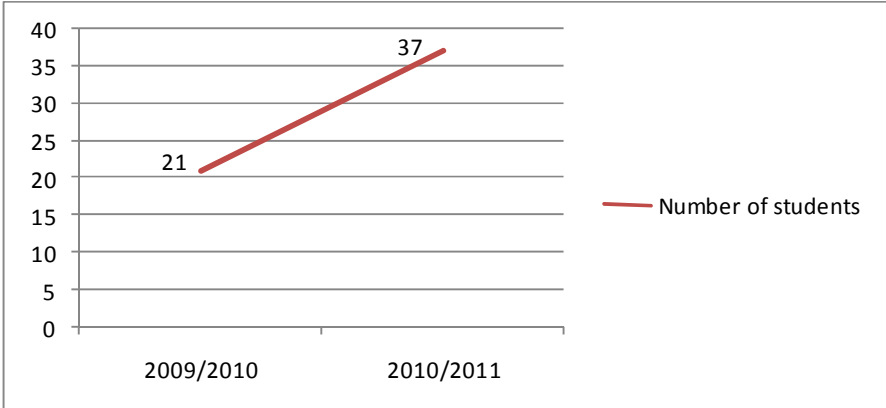
3.1 The case of Portuguese

Although Portuguese is a widely spoken world language, it is not widely taught or spoken in Europe, and it is fair to say that there is also not a strong tradition of teaching Portuguese as a Foreign Language, nor a plethora of materials available on line for the learning of this language. Thus it is an interesting and challenging case to look at within Hook Up!

The Hook Up! Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) course has so far been made up of 4 levels – A1, A2, B1 and B2 – corresponding to Basic and Independent users, in accordance with the CEFRL (Council of Europe, 2001). In addition, the online course includes a “taster course” which aims to introduce the learner to the language, providing an initial contact and the motivation to take up the

course. In the future, the course should also entail the proficiency levels – C1 and C2. In 2009/2010, our course had 21 students; and this year, we have 37 students enrolled so far (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Numbers of students participating in Hook Up!



In comparison with the other participants in the Hook Up! Project, Portugal is the country which has registered the largest number of students, as the University of Aveiro has also been one of the most popular destinations for students within the network. The figures presented in Figure 2 include only students formally participating in the Hook Up! Project, not counting other students, who, for a variety of reasons, were integrated in the group of CE students at the University of Aveiro.

Each language level has been built in accordance with the parameters established by the CEFRL and is made up of 8 units, through which the students develop their linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences (Council of Europe, 2001). At the same time, complementary components are included which help consolidate the learning of the language and the culture of the host country – online exercises, links to sites of cultural and linguistic interest, pictures, videos.

Graphically, the materials at each level are represented by a different colour, which corresponds to a particular cultural theme and aims to deepen the learning experience for the student. For example, the A1 level is represented by the colour green since this is the colour of the University of Aveiro. Combined with links, images and materials related to the University of Aveiro, this provides an initial and, hopefully positive, contact with the host institution.

Throughout the 8 units, the student encounters texts and recordings, videos, worksheets, a bank of internet sites where particular information can be found related to each unit. Having been in use longer (2009 and 2010), the A1 level has an additional section given to activities for consolidating the language competences acquired and developed during the online teaching of this level.

Methodologically, the organisation of the learning throughout the levels is designed to respond to the specific needs of the learners. “It is they who have to develop the competences and strategies (...) and carry out the tasks, activities and processes needed to participate effectively in communicative events (Council of Europe, 2001: 141). In accordance with constructivist theories of knowledge, the learning methods used in our units contribute to the development of a learner with an active role to play in looking for and constructing knowledge and participating in his / her own learning. In parallel, the role fulfilled by the teacher is that of facilitator and mediator of knowledge (Almeida, 2006(5); Amorim, 2010(6); Heidrich & Santarosa 2003(7); Ribeiro, et al., 2009(8)).

All the materials available on line have been produced with a view to presenting the learning path for each level clearly, efficiently and effectively. Portuguese is used to present the contents of the units

although, in the earliest stages, English is used as a bridge language in order to maximise autonomous comprehension and engagement with the new language. This is gradually phased out and Portuguese takes over as the language used for all purposes in the materials. On the Moodle site of the PFL Hook Up! course, there is available a large amount of interrelated materials designed to guide the learner in his/her learning. For example, each unit begins with a visual image. This is followed by a PowerPoint presentation which orients the ‘class’, guides the learning, introducing the topics of each unit, step by step. Texts to read and listen to, work sheets, exercises using Hot Potatoes, internet links, are provided to help consolidate the learning, deepening and widening the learners range of competences (Figure 3). Cultural aspects are also included in each unit.

With a view to fulfilling the objectives planned for each level, we were concerned with the extension of our materials, so as not to allow them to become an obstacle to learning, and with their diversity. It was also important to us to present multiple learning contexts, in order to respond to the needs of a wide range of students, and to take care with the organisation of the learning process (timetabling, number of students per session). Moreover, the teacher who accompanies the students during their on-line learning (with the help of sessions on Skype and Wiziq, taking advantage of synchronous on-line learning opportunities) also accompanies their learning during the face-to-face course at the host university.



Figure 3. Hook Up!, the online structure (source: Hook Up! Moodle server. In, <http://languagelearning.campuseuropae.org/>)

From our observations of the use made of these materials by students, we find that the online page corresponding to the A1 level has been accessed a total of 10,000 times over the period it has been available (<http://languagelearning.campuseuropae.org/course/category.php?id=10>).

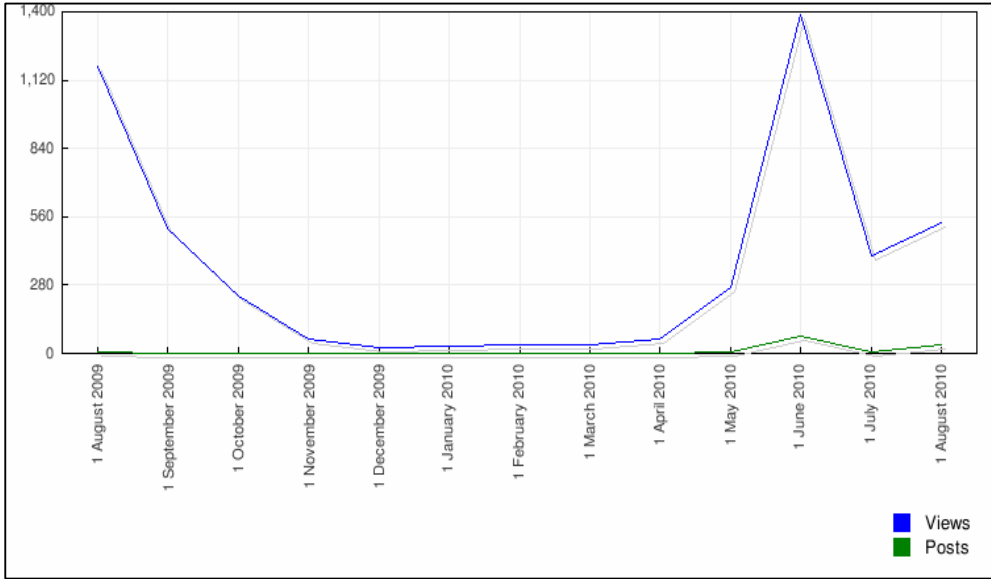


Figure 4. Access to Hook Up! Online, level A1 (source: <http://languagelearning.campuseuropae.org/>)

From Figure 4, we can clearly see the intervals of time when the PFL course, A1 level, ran, both from the number of visits and from the number of posts.

As for the number of visits at other levels, A2 level registered a total of 3945 visits, level B1 2530 visits, both of these levels having been taught only once. Level B2, which is currently being implemented, has registered 139 visits (Figure 5).

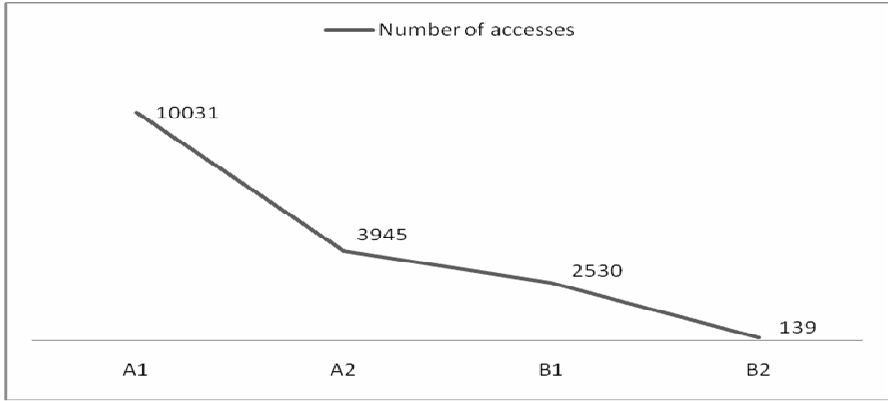


Figure 5. Access to Hook Up! online (source: <http://languagelearning.campuseuropae.org/>)

At the end of the learning path, students undergo a test of their knowledge in the form of an exam, made up of 4 parts – reading comprehension, structural competence, oral and written expression. On the basis of these four components, students are attributed a final grade which appears on the final certificate of course completion. The implementation of the courses of PFL online have had a visible success, observable through the attainment of positive results (Figure 6).

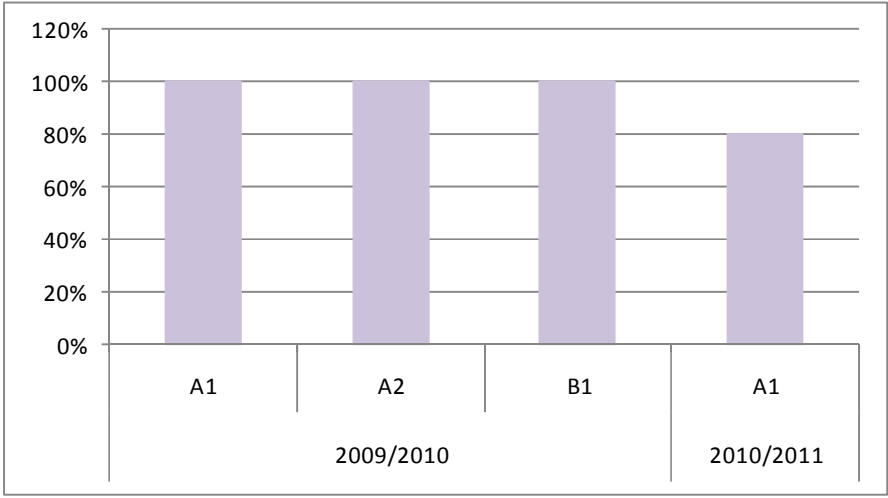


Figure 6. Success rates of CE students (source: <http://languagelearning.campuseuropae.org/>)

In effect, the only case of non-attainment was due to technological reasons, when one of the students (A1 level, 2010/2011) was unable to do one of the components of the exam. In this particular case, the total obtained on the assessment of the four components was not sufficient for the student to pass.

There are clearly aspects which need to be refined in such a project in order for barriers, such as this one, not to impede the success of the learning process. Other barriers have been encountered over these 15 months, such as: the lack of technological know-how, the absence of access to technological equipment, lack of access to the internet, financial difficulties to buy technological equipment, time constraints, other activities. With regard to financial constraints, however, we should mention that for Campus Europae students, the online courses are totally free.

In conclusion, we can say that language learning, supported by information and communication technologies, by resources adapted to the learners, by teachers who closely accompany the learning paths of the students and pay particular attention to their needs, can achieve excellent results. We imagine that, in the near future, this type of product can support the increasing needs of institutions in the field of internationalisation and learning mobility. While our modules are still in a construction and evaluation stage, it will soon be possible to trace the path of learners of Portuguese, from their initial contact with the language, through their period of study in the University of Aveiro, into a post-study stage of language maintenance and consolidation. This will allow us to build a clearer picture of the impact of this project on those who participate in it, and ultimately to the development of language competences of European citizen.

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