

Review of language learning needs for Romanian and Estonian immigrants in two professional sectors: agriculture and ICT

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Abstract

This paper presents findings conducted through LaProf project¹ with the purpose of extracting language learning needs of two specific target groups: Romanian agriculturalists learning Greek and Estonian ICT professionals or teachers learning Finnish. The findings specifically outline the "language and IT literacy profile" of targeted learners, determine the expected level of current knowledge/understanding of the target languages in the user communities, and identify user preferences for which types of language learning exercises would be most appropriate for the learners. Generally, there is a low knowledge of the target languages among the user groups and a high level of IT knowledge.

The research was conducted through information-gathering workshops held with participants in the originating counties (Romania and ICT) and further supplemented with additional workshops and the distribution of additional questionnaires in the target countries (Greece and Finland).

Introduction

The Needs Analysis for LaProf extracted from participants in the user countries (Romania and Estonia) the relevant information related to language learning needs of the target groups (professionals in agriculture and ICT). The results of the needs analysis workshops informed the development of the language e-learning exercises and activities. More specifically, these workshops and the questionnaire will enable user organizations to:

- outline the "language and IT literacy profile" of targeted learners to understand the expected level of current knowledge/understanding of the user communities that will later be involved in the pilot training trials;
- identify user preferences for which types of language learning exercises would be most appropriate for the learners;
- identify relevant user groups and a small number of motivated people that could be candidate learners for our pilot training trials.

Section 2 describes the methodology used for this Needs Analysis, which was carried out in two stages: development and execution. The development stage involved several organizations, allowed for testing of the questionnaire to be used in the formal needs analysis, and offered insight into the language learning situation in the user countries. Since the target countries (Greece and Finland) had

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access to individuals that had successfully immigrated to their countries in the sectors of interest (agriculture and ICT) there was a unique opportunity to gain insight into their language challenges in immigrating. The draft questionnaires were developed by the Poznan University of Technology and tested with these successful immigrants. Informal discussions with these individuals took place during or after the questionnaire testing that provided a real life example of the target audience. These discussions shaped the development of the workshop activities by providing retrospective insight into what language learning opportunities would have been valuable to them as professionals in the target fields (agriculture and ICT).

Section 3 (Results and Discussion) explains the results of the Needs Analysis Workshops executed at the three user organizations and provides a detailed presentation of the target group's competency in English and the target language, preferences for the formulation of exercises and, in the case of the agriculture sector, the target group's computer skills.

Section 4 (Conclusions) includes some recommendations and a description of the requirements for the language learning framework and exercises to be developed.

Methodology

The Needs Analysis was conducted in two parts: a questionnaire and a workshop. The questionnaires were in some cases completed within the context of a workshop and sometimes mailed to individuals for them to complete and return to the user organizations. The workshops were organized into two sections: in the first section, time was given to complete the questionnaire and the second section was a guided open discussion. The questionnaire covered a basic inquiry into the current capacities of the learners, what they think is important in order to build their capacity in the language, and preferred methodologies for language learning. The guided open discussion allowed workshop organizers to gain a more specific understanding into the necessary terminology within the two target sectors.

The Needs Analysis was broken into sections (the questionnaire and a workshop) was that it was decided that giving individuals the opportunity to contribute to a participatory discussion would result in a higher quality of information in regards to the terminologies that we wanted to gather, but other specific information and a wider audience could be reached with the completion of questionnaires.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections.

1. Demographics
2. English Competency
3. Finnish or Greek Competency
4. Expectations and Preferences for Language Learning
5. ICT Needs or Requirements (Agriculture Sector Only)

The last section (ICT Needs or Requirements) was excluded from the Needs Analysis for the ICT target sector, since the assumption was made that ICT professionals had a high level of computer skills proficiency. Also, it was noted early in the development phase that the Romanian user organizations thought there would be few individuals who had any knowledge of the Greek language. Therefore, it was decided that information would be included about the English Competency, in order to extract useful information about language learning techniques and preferences. Additionally, English will be used as the base language from which the target language exercises will be developed, and as an option for the working language for learning the target language so it was helpful to collect this information about the target users.



Results and Discussion

The sections below provide a compiled analysis and overview of the results of each workshop held in the two user countries. The results of the workshops and questionnaires were compiled and analyzed to inform the development the Language Learning Framework and exercises for LaProf project.

Compiled Questionnaire Results and Analysis

There were a total of 106 completed questionnaires; 86 were completed by the two Romanian user organizations and 20 by the Estonian partners. Questionnaires were either completed by the attendees at the Needs Analysis Workshops or were sent to interested parties (via mail/email), completed and returned to the administering user organization. The questionnaires were organized into five sections and the results will be reported in the same divisions:

- 3.1.1 Personal Information (Demographics)
- 3.1.2 English Competency
- 3.1.3 Finnish or Greek Competency
- 3.1.4 Expectations and Preferences for Language Learning
- 3.1.5 ICT Needs or Requirements (Agriculture Sector Only)

Personal Information/Demographics

The total sample size was 106 and individuals completing the questionnaire were of an average age of 26.2 years. 52 men and 54 women completed the questionnaires.

Ethnicity/Citizenship and Native Language

The sample ethnicities were representative of where the questionnaires were distributed: 81% of the questionnaires were completed in Romania, so individuals identified themselves as having Romanian nationality. In the case of those questionnaires completed in Miercurea Ciuc and Targu Mures, the respondents noted their Hungarian ethnicities and Romanian citizenship. The questionnaires conducted by the Estonian partners Miksike included some Lithuanian individuals. Pursuant to the ethnic breakdown, the participants noted the native languages in identical proportions to their ethnicities: 48% spoke Romanian, 33% Hungarian, 16% Estonian and 3% Lithuanian.

Highest Degree of Education and Occupation

As expected, because of the target groups for this needs analysis, the majority of participants were graduates with a baccalaureate degree or higher. However, many participants listed 2-3 years of university study as their highest obtained level of education; these were students still in pursuit of the baccalaureate degree. 79% of the total number of respondents listed their occupation as 'student'. In Estonia teachers were the primary participants; 13% of the total respondents listed 'teacher' as their occupation and 5% 'ICT specialist'. Less than 3% of the total respondents were not students, teachers or ICT specialists (1 professor, 1 unemployed individual, 1 unanswered).

English Competency

Of the 97% of participants who noted English as a second or third language, over 75% of these individuals learned the language in a classroom setting. Approximately 12% learned the language through self-study and the remaining 12-13% learned through other methods.



Of those individuals who listed either school or university level English classes, the majority were general English (89 respondents) and a few individuals had taken English for specific purposes in the areas of agriculture, business and engineering. Only 8 respondents listed having taken any standardized test in the language (such as BEC preliminary, TOEFL, etc) but 21 individuals had been tested in their courses on the language ability.

English Language Level

The level of knowledge of the participants in English was a self-identified level and was not tested through the questionnaire (although in some cases the questionnaire was administered in English). According to the aggregate responses, approximately 30% of the respondents noted an average B1 level of knowledge in all areas and 64% of respondents noted a B1 or lower level of knowledge of the language.

English Usage

Two-thirds of respondents said they use English to speak with family and friends or with other students. However, the high prevalence of 'students' as a response is likely due to the high number of students in the sample. Some of the responses listed in the 'other' category included internet, professors and teachers, and collaborators or partnerships. Additionally, the participants commented on if they most often speak English with native or non-native speakers. 86% of respondents noted that they usually speak English with non-native speakers and approximately 15% said they speak with native speakers. One individual noted that he spent equal time communicating with both non-native and native English speakers.

Participants were asked questions about "Situations Where English is Used" and "Situations Where English will be Used in the Future" to gather an idea of the areas where English knowledge seems to be the most practical. The top ranked responses (watching movies, listening to music, socializing) suggest that English is not the most commonly used form of communication for work or school related activities. However, the respondents certainly foresee English as playing a big role in these areas as over 50% of respondents noted that in the future they felt it was likely that English would be used in both social and professional situations.

Additionally, approximately two-thirds of respondents noted that they use English "sometimes" or "often", reflecting the importance of the language in normal activities.

Another indicator of the methods of study utilized by participants that was explored was the time spent on activities to learn English. Terminology is an important aspect of language learning, since two of the top three activities noted in response to questions about "Time Spent on Language Learning Activities" were about learning terminology.

Specialized Fields of Use

The highest ranked activities in agriculture where English was noted as important were: Food processing, Marketing, Agribusiness management, Biotechnology, Agritourism, and General horticulture. In ICT, the top activities were: Installation of different kinds of software and hardware, Statistics programs, presentation programs, web page editors.

These rankings are generally in line with the results of the topical breakdown of the terminology extraction exercises conducted in the discussion sessions.

Finnish or Greek Competency

In addition to the competencies of the respondents in the English language, identical questions in regards to their competencies in the target languages were addressed. In the case of the Romanian

users, two different needs analysis were conducted: Romanian agronomists who had moved to Greece and Romanians (some of them of Greek nationality) in Romania involved in agriculture in some fashion and with some tie to the Greek community (such as heritage, through marriage or simply interest in the culture). The most notable difference between the two user groups is the level of knowledge of Greek. Those in the first user group (Romanian immigrants in Greece) are mostly in the process of learning the language, but have some knowledge, with the majority of individuals reporting a A1/A2 knowledge of the language while those Romanians in Romania had a higher level of Greek knowledge (B1/B2 level). However, they are likely not as well versed in the agricultural terminology, so would still benefit from studying professional terminology at a lower level of competency.

Of the Estonian users, just under half of the respondents noted some level of knowledge in Finnish. These individuals have been learning the language for an average of 9 months, with two-thirds of the individuals taking some form of instruction (either classroom or private lessons) with the other one-third of individuals learning the language through self study. The great majority of individuals noted an A1 level of knowledge of the language in all areas, with no one stating higher than a B2 level in any area. Additionally, 75% of respondents noted using Finnish "sometimes".

The top results of areas where the respondents through they should improve their Finnish were in grammar, listening and comprehension, and terminology, which is to be expected considering the low level of language knowledge.

The most valuable price of information regarding the Finnish language is relative to the fields in which Finnish has shown to be necessary. 45% or more of respondents noted that Webmail applications, Presentation programs, Installation of different kinds of software, Installation of different kinds of hardware were important areas where the knowledge of Finnish is useful.

Expectations and Preferences for Language Learning

In the fourth section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked about their experiences and preferences with language learning activities. Generally, it seems that participants greatly preferred learning a language in ways that enabled communication with other individuals – either a teacher or other students. Over 80% of respondents noted that they preferred methods of language learning that allowed communication with another individual, while only 20% said they preferred to methods where they could study alone. Respondents were also asked particularity about the types of exercises thy preferred, when involved in language learning activities; popular exercises are multiple choice, gap-filling, and matching, while written assignments were the least likeable.

Only about a third of the respondents were aware of any self-learning, computer assisted, or online (e-learning) programs available for any language. Of those individuals that were aware of the self-learning language opportunities, about 44% have used one or more of these methods and 71% of them were satisfied with it. The respondents identified looking up words in the dictionary, reading, speaking; quick English study course; translation; learning without a teacher; reading magazines; CDs, cassettes; tests; interactive exercises; vocabulary exercises, grammar exercises; websites; e-learning; and "Essential" (the title of a language learning program) as available methods or types of self-learning language study.

When asked about computer-assisted language learning programs, again only 30% of respondents were aware of any program and of those that were aware, only 30% had used these programs. Half of the individuals who used these programs were satisfied, and there was not reason given why they were not satisfied. The computer assisted learning programs that were identified are: www.5percangol.hu; CDs; and reading/listening exercises.



When asked about internet delivered (e-learning) language programs, approximately 46% of respondents were aware of these, while only 20% of those aware actually used any of them. Of those that used an e-learning program, 44% were satisfied. One individual reported the reason for his dissatisfaction was that it was “not so wide and didn't take into account [the users'] needs”. The following e-learning activities were listed: www.5percangol.hu; automatic translator; online dictionary (x2); tests; exercises; listening; reading; texts for learning words.

The last question in this section asked about the characteristics that the respondents thought would be useful in an e-learning program. The top ranked categories (over 60% of respondents choose that they were important) were: an electronic dictionary, and automatic translator, exercises with knowledge control, knowledge assessment to adapt steps to level, and conversation partners.

ICT Needs or Requirements (Agriculture Sector Only)

The last section, which was included only with those questionnaires administered to the target group in the agricultural sector, was included to assess these individuals' competency and comfort with computers and the internet. Overall, the target users are very competent computer users.

Compiled Discussion Section Results and Analysis

In addition to distributing the questionnaire, each of the user organizations held a workshop with approximately 20 people. During these workshops additional inquiries were made in regards to the individuals' language learning experiences and knowledge. Most importantly, these individuals were organized so that they could provide insight into the actual terminology that would be relevant to users in their fields (agriculture and ICT) so that the exercises could be developed using relevant terminology.

For the agricultural sector, three workshops were conducted where a total of 39 individuals participated and individuals were able to comment on currently available language learning opportunities and their perceptions were:

- That competition is a motivating factor in the context of language learning, and therefore the participants' preferred delivery method of language learning was through courses where social interaction is supported. They believed also that these courses could be complimented with online resources and materials. Speaking activities and interactive methods were preferred. Classroom teaching was generally referred to as ineffective.
- Generally, (English) language learning has taken place at school or the university and it has not been studied on their own.
- The participants heard about online resources (such as those available at www.5percangol.hu), but generally have not yet used it. They also expressed some knowledge about the availability of translation software on the internet, but they did not know where exactly it could be found.

The third user organization, representing the ICT sector, conducted three separate workshops which resulted in the following conclusions about available language learning opportunities and the workshop participants' experiences with them.

The participants identified the following preferred methods of learning/exercises types:

- exercises with choices
 - filling gaps
 - finding mistakes

- written tasks
- It was pointed out that learning needs to involve corrective feedback and has to be motivating, especially in the case of self study.
- Half of the participants preferred to study alone
- Importance was placed on learning vocabulary/terminology which is connected with their work.
- Participants have heard of non-traditional language resources, but they cannot provide the names. As a description, the participants have offered that they have used some resources for learning vocabulary or making language tests.

General Summary of User-oriented Requirements for the Language Learning

Framework

While English is not necessarily the focus of this project, it was important to explore the user needs in this language to get an idea of what their needs could be related to their learning the target languages, since the use and learning methodologies for English would likely be similar to the use and methodologies for the target language. Therefore, the above results can directly be applied to the development of the framework and exercises in order to make them most applicable to the target audience when applied to the target languages (Greek, Finnish). The preference for language learning methodologies in one language could be assumed to be the same for all languages studied. Also, the areas in which English is used most often (concerning the specific topics for each specialization) can also be assumed to be the same for any language learning in this specialty, since it qualifies the vocational vocabulary. Therefore, according to the results of the Needs Analysis, the language learning framework and exercises should be able to be adjusted to the level of knowledge of the user, should utilize the terms identified in the extraction exercises, and should incorporate some opportunity for interaction and feedback, either with a teacher or other students.