

Promoting Matching Competences in Language Training

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Abstract

In the running of language training courses, a mismatch has been observed in different real cases between the formal degree or certified qualifications obtained by the language learners and the real need of the organisation funding the language course.

This paper summarises the preliminary results of the project PrMaCLT, funded by the Programme Lifelong Learning of the European Commission and conducted in cooperation by training providers from Spain, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Latvia and Poland with the aim to distil good practices to enable an optimal match-making of the competences sought by funding organisations of language courses and gained by the target group of language learners.

The approach followed in the project is the detailed analysis and comparison of twelve real cases (two per country involved) based on the evaluation received by the language training providers involved in them, which have led to the hypothesis that there are factors external to the method applied (whether e-learning, distance learning, blended learning or classroom learning), to the contents provided (whether general purpose or specific purpose for an individualised target group), to the language concerned (regardless of the origin), and to the type of education (public and private), which are crucial for the competence oriented match-making process.

These external factors to the language training course that have a direct impact on the success of the language training course have been classified focusing on:

- *The specifications provided by the organisation funding the training course, and*
- *The cultural and linguistic background of the learners.*

Preliminary conclusions relate to aspects to bear in mind in the definition of the goals of the language course by the funding organisation, in the management of cultural aspects of the target group by the teachers and course providers, and in the adaptation of the components of the method chosen by the language course designer, in order to keep the interest of the target group of learners.

Extensive testing of the preliminary conclusions will be carried out in the six countries involved in the project during the next months, and they will be gathered in a handbook of useful practices for funding organisations, teachers and managers of language training courses.

Progress of the project will be available at www.promacolt.eu

1. Introduction

The rationale behind this paper focuses on describing the method of the PrMaCLT (Promoting Matching Competences in Language Training) project. The project has allowed so far to draw up conclusions of already applied training courses who have proved to be useful to detect flaws in the chosen methods, to be inspiring to bring up ideas for the design of new courses, and to be successful



in overcoming mismatches between the expected outcome of language learning courses and the actual results of language proficiency obtained by the learners.

The PrMaCLT project has been running for almost one year now, during which 12 cases of actual language courses in six different European countries have been thoroughly analysed following three focal points:

- Course typology.
- Learner's profile
- Teacher's profile.

The conclusions of the analysis presented in this paper relate specifically to the relevant learner's characteristics to take into account when designing the method of the language course in order to achieve the targeted results defined by the organisation funding the course. These conclusions are being used to launch a theory which shall be tested in the coming months with different stakeholders involved in the organisation, running and evaluation of language courses, with the purpose to minimise the mismatch between the results expected and those actually obtained.

2. Description of the analysis

The basis of the analysis was the selection by each of the six organisations involved in the ProMaCLT project of two real cases of language courses already run in their countries of origin. All the partners were involved in the designing and/ or running of these courses or they have direct access to the relevant information.

The titles of the courses analysed are:

1. General English for Civil Servants
2. Chinese Mandarin Level II (Basic) for companies.
3. Company in-house training: Business English for Refreshers
4. Integration course for migrants in Germany
5. English and German Language Course for Au Pairs
6. English for Career Counsellors
7. PERSPECTIVE WAY - to favour active entrance to labour market for long term unemployed.
8. ELANCOM
9. French on Campus
10. EuroCatering Language Training
11. General English for Elementary level (public courses)
12. Integrated Course for Teachers of English

The learner's profile in each of these courses was analysed based on internal and external indicators, assessed with the contribution of the learners themselves. The indicators chosen were:

- Educational background.
- Multiple intelligences.
- Target language level.

- Motivation to take the course.
- Learner autonomy to learn a language.

Since all of the courses had already taken place, the source of information for the different indicators was always related to the situation of the learners after having taken the course. It consisted of the evaluation records of the courses, the direct contact with the learners via interview or questionnaire and/ or the direct contact with the coordinators/ teachers of the courses. In few cases no information was obtained, in particular for the indicator of multiple intelligences and the learner's personality.

3. Results of the analysis.

- The great majority of the courses have been developed for learners with different educational backgrounds, encompassing from primary school to university and post-graduate studies. This indicator does not seem to have been sensitive for the language course design.
- The most common intelligences developed in the courses are verbal-linguistic and interpersonal. They appear indicated in 7 out of the 10 cases. Two of the cases studied did not provide data regarding this indicator. None of the cases indicated intrapersonal abilities gained, which is also considered as a relevant detail. It would seem that the set of language courses studied contribute mostly to promote the communication skills of the learners and the capacity to interact with others.
- The sample includes different language levels ranging from A2 to C2 of the "Common European Framework of Reference of Languages". Little correlation is found between this indicator and the rest. In particular, conclusions driven from other indicators seem to be transversal to the target language level of the course.
- The motivation indicated in most of the cases is professional. Much less representative are other motivations like: private interest, entertainment and travelling. The professional character is presented under different angles: improving career possibilities, accessing a (better) job, maximising existing business opportunities in the company. The professional character appears not only in professionally oriented language courses, but also in general purpose ones.
- In 60% of the cases providing data related to the learners' autonomy to learn a language, the learners indicated to have never learnt a language on their own. Most of the learners indicate that they need support and guidance when learning. Only learners with high educational level background indicate to feel independent enough to study on their own and even to develop their own ways to enrich their language skills. The most frequent personality traits of the learners indicated by learners themselves, teachers and coordinators as those facilitating autonomous learning are being: determined, hard-working and intelligent, in this sequence and leaving aside others like being curious or observant.

4. Interpretation of the preliminary results.

The results obtained in the interpretation of the twelve study cases have led to reinforce the analysis focusing on the needs side. It would seem that the organisations demanding language courses (whether by public mandate or with a private purpose) may not be selective enough regarding the target public receiving the course and precise enough in adapting the goals of the course to the characteristics of the target public receiving it, when facilitating the specification of the course to language training providers.

In particular, the correlation of the indicators "educational background" and "learner autonomy to learn a language", described above in this paper, would indicate that courses designed with a method giving

the learners great autonomy may fail when the educational background of the target group is very heterogeneous in terms of general education background, since the progress risks not to be uniform.

Similar arguments may be found when the motivation of the target group to take the course (another of the indicators) is also different, or when this being similar in general (professional purposes for instance), they require different intelligences or refer to different starting point with regard to the professional target (unemployed vs. improving the actual working position). In all this cases, we may find the same risk of unequal progress and, if demotivation increases, even cases of drop-outs.

Last but not least, great importance has been given to the personal traits perceived by the own stakeholders as more relevant to learn a language autonomously. The fact that being determined and a hard worker is perceived as a key to success would indicate that correlation with other indicators like the motivation or the availability of the learner in terms of time may play a more important role than initially thought, in the success of a language course with an autonomous method.

5. Conclusions

In order to minimise the mismatch between the results obtained (or failed to be obtained) by language learners and the real needs in terms of use of language of the organisations (public or private) funding those courses, it is essential to start by taking two initial steps in direct work with the funding organisation of the language course:

- To provide a detailed description of the relevant learner characteristics in terms of at least the following parameters: educational background, target language level, mother tongue language level, motivation to take the course, availability during the time of the course.
- To describe the targeted language use in terms of abilities to be gained by the learner and intended to be applied in real life situations.

These are the two primary building blocks to enable later on the design of the most appropriate method, encompassing: contents, pedagogical model and interface.

6. Next steps

The conclusions of this paper will be applied to test real designs of language training courses in direct contact with the relevant stakeholders in the six countries concerned, detecting the key elements in terms of relevant learner characteristics and targeted language use, and discussing the better fitting elements in terms of contents, pedagogical model and interface.

New conclusions on the features of best adapting methods for language training courses in different contexts will be drawn up in the coming months in the context of the PrMaCLT project.

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