

Interactive Classrooms 2.0: An E-Learning Platform for Teaching Languages for Occupational Purposes

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Abstract

Recognition of professional competence over the last few decades has become a key issue for member governments of the European Union. As a result of this demand, the purpose of the project herein presented is two-fold. On the one hand, official recognition and certification of foreign language levels, for both general and specific purposes, as based on national and European guidelines, frames the content and development of the first of the main objectives we pursue. On a professional level, the users of this proposal consist of individuals with specific language learning needs, be those beginner levels established in the project, be those refresher levels of previously learned content, or simply those pertaining to life long learning.

On the other hand, the second cornerstone on which this project is based is that of utilizing information technology as the means of support through which the education for linguistic certification takes place. In this sense, technology becomes the second major focus of the project herein, specifically with the creation of courses in CD multimedia and the Moodle platform. Nonetheless, and although Moodle offers the adequate environment for language-learning programme development on the Web, the features of the courses and the levels covered in the project call for the compulsory design and integration of new tools that allow for acquiring communicative skills (oral and written expression), in addition to course management on behalf of the teachers and administrators.

This paper describes the online/multimedia courses designed, contextualizes the specialized content developed, and specifies the technological teaching tools implemented as conducive to professional foreign language competence for EU certification. It will also explore the role that Web 2.0 technologies can play in enhancing language learning development by facilitating social interaction, exposure, authenticity, feedback, and learner autonomy.

1. Theoretical Framework

The new European classification of occupations was clearly established at the Lisbon Conference (2000). Such classification is currently available at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_es.htm, where it is defined as a collection of skills required to develop an active participation in the knowledge society and in today's economy and the job market.

Linguistically speaking, commitments have been dedicated mainly to the realm of formal education (Phillipson, 2003)[1], paying little attention to the formative capacities required to productive, professional and occupational sectors.

Thus, the countries members of the European Union have been diligently working to establish common guidelines devoted to the learning and teaching of foreign languages within European contexts. The results of their efforts have been compiled in the Common European Framework of



Languages. This document, presented in 2001, has meant the foundations for linguistic certification and equivalency levels through the design of language programs and syllabi, guidelines and codes, comprehensive exams, international texts, work books, learning material, realia, joint projects and mobility, among others.

The establishment of six competency levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) and the definition of the abilities which should be developed in each of them (<http://www.linguanet-europa.org/pdfs/global-scale-grid-en.pdf>)[2] have been two major achievements reached by the Council of Europe in 2001. These goals have turned into clear references and guideline to follow a global guideline in the learning and teaching of foreign languages.

1.1. Towards Innovation: tutoring Moodle for online language teaching

Nowadays, the process of teaching and learning a foreign language has found technological allies which can be used as additional tools to complement the traditional tools such as books, workbooks, tapes, CD-ROMs, etc. Hypermedia systems, Internet, the great variety of on-line contents and the interaction among Web users have originated the use of on-line language learning systems (Agudo et al, 2007)[3]. Nevertheless, acquiring an effective learning requires order and organization. Therefore a user needs to learn how to choose the best tailored resources and contents. For this reason, we consider that a special effort should be placed on the development of platforms and tools capable of practising the four main language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), not only the typical reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar components on which the majority of teaching/learning on-line systems have been based so far. Though on-line learning sites contain a great variety of tools for language teaching, it cannot be forgotten that assessment, interaction and constructivism are also essential premises to acquire a language properly.

For on-line learning, CMS (Content Managing Systems), are being used, as they not only allow us to create and administer contents with an interface which controls one or several data bases, but also allow users to manage its design and content independently. Moodle is one of those CMS and, due to its pedagogical nature and to the fact of being an open-source platform, it has turned out to be an outstanding on-line course managing system with a great number of possibilities.

Graf & List (2005)[4] state that Moodle is the best platform among other nine tested, basing this selection on the incorporation of the following components and features: communication tools, learning objects, management of user data, usability, adaptation, technical aspects, administration, and course management. Moodle offers standard tools (activities, sections and resources) with each of its distributions which allow adding functionalities for language learning; nevertheless it is essential to have other additional tools available to achieve a complete and effective learning.

2. Practical Proposal

The main aim of our proposal regarding language teaching for professional purposes lies in providing future professional users with specific linguistic capacity, both in terms of contents and in terms of learning methodologies.

2.1. Linguistic contents

Our study is focused on some of the occupations which, within the general area of Trade & Marketing and according to the Certification Standards, demand a linguistic competence level of the independent user (levels B1 and B2, intermediate and upper-intermediate respectively) and whose main features are summarized in the following table 1:

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Course Title: Customer Service and Attention</i> (http://www.mepsyd.es/educa/incual/pdf/BDC/COM087_3.pdf) | |
| Linguistic Level: | B2 (Upper Intermediate) |
| General Area: | Trade and Marketing |
| Numbers of Formative Modules: | Client attention and support (150 h) Consumer complaints management (150 h) Consume information system organization (180 h) Professional English for commercial activities (90 h) |
| General Description of Linguistic content: | Can communicate in commercial activities by using English in an independent user level. Can communicate with clients by using English. Is able to make sales of goods and services. Can analyze basic commercial documents in English. Can fill in complaint forms in English. Is able to solve English-speaking customers' complaints. Can establish sociolinguistic relevant interaction with customers/consumers. |

Table 1: Customer Service and Attention Course.

| | |
|---|---|
| <i>Course Title: Commercial Agent</i> (http://www.mepsyd.es/educa/incual/pdf/BDC/COM314_3.pdf) | |
| Linguistic Level: | B2 (Upper Intermediate) |
| General Area: | <i>Trade & Marketing</i> |
| Numbers of Formative Modules: | Commercial organization (90 h) Sales and commercial teams management (120 h) Sales operations (180 h) Commercial promotions (90 h) Professional English for commercial activities (90 h) |
| General Description of Linguistic content: | Can communicate in English as an independent level user in commercial activities. I sable to communicate in English with clients. Can sell goods and services. Can analyse and interpret Basic commercial documents in English. Is able to fill in complaint forms by using English. Can solve English-speaking customers complaints. I sable to establish sociolinguistic relevant interaction with customers/consumers. |

Table 2: Description of Trade & Marketing courses

2.2. Technological Development

The purposes pursued in terms of technology are to develop tools and learning objects to ensure linguistic acquisition, and consequently, certification for specific professional sectors.

According to our formative needs in foreign language competency (independent user – B1 &B2) identified for the selected working fields, research is currently in progress on tailoring the development of specific learning objects and tools.

Apart from the tools which can be included in the platform (assignments, questionnaires, choices, etc.), the importance of Moodle is also due to the different formats it supports. There are standard modules which offer resources to publish on the web by including text, images, links, tables, sounds, videos, flash, as well as conducting questionnaires and evaluation exercises. There are also additional modules that can be installed such as:

- Proofreaders and dictionaries (a spelling corrector, dictionary) offering grammar help (individualized learning of linguistic components). The spelling corrector must be installed in Moodle HTML editor, and the dictionary is installed as an individual block. These tools will allow automatic correction of some spelling and format mistakes, making the job of the teacher a lot easier and helping the students to improve their writing skills;
- Webquests, which can be defined as structured and guided activities that provide students with well-defined tasks, as well as resources and guidelines that allow them to correctly perform them;
- Games to practice previous learning (games, JClick, Hot Potatoes, SCORMS). These software packages include groups of activities carried out through questions, associations, fill-in-the-gaps, sorting phrases, etc., that can help students understand vocabulary, grammar, and even reading and oral comprehension exercises, etc.;
- Presentations to outline and summarize concepts, which can be complemented (and assessed) by reading comprehension quizzes and questionnaires, as well as by written assignments (Moodle assignment, blog, etc.) where students will have to develop their synthesis and critical thinking skills; (Skills: Reading and writing).
- Sound recording module for oral assessment (Nanogong). This tool is intended for learning speaking skills by practising the target language as well as assessing students' oral performance when confronted with a specific communicative context and situation.

However, in the pursuit of effective on-line language learning, we need a special emphasis on oral and collaborative tools that facilitate communication among our platform users (Curado & Agudo, 2009)[5]. In this sense, specific modules have been installed in our courses to practise and improve productive and collaborative abilities, being purposely divided into oral comprehension, oral production, oral interaction, composition examination and collaborative tools.

2.2.1. Oral comprehension Tools

- Multimedia filter. This filter can embed links to enable audio files, video and Flash-based animations within the default player so that course participants can listen to and/or view multimedia without having to download the files or install a given type of player.
- Multimovie filter and block. This feature enables the insertion of videos from an assortment of web providers (including YouTube, Google Video and Metacafe) within any web page in a user-friendly fashion.

2.2.2. Oral production

- Gong project. The aim of this project is to enable Moodle users to record and listen to audio files by means of a Java applet in a forum-like format. Herein, existing conversations can be shown as they unfold, with the option of adding on further messages in the conversation.

2.2.3. Oral Interaction

- Audio/Video Conferencing and Recording of Audio for Evaluation modules. The Covcell Project (see <http://covcell.org>) is developing additional tools for online FL teaching and learning via Moodle, allowing for, among other activities, oral communication among users through videochat conversations. A tool named Recording of Audio for Evaluation deals with the recording of learner audio for evaluation by the teacher at a later time.

3. Collaborative tools

The collaborative approach is a teaching method in which students work together to explore significant questions, create a meaningful project, share strengths and develop their skills, and the teacher acts

as a facilitator. Communicative competence in a foreign language is achieved through successful interaction among learners and tutors, an approach through which participants can actively develop their skills (Agudo, 2007) by means of interactive and dynamic activities.

To develop and implement collaboration (Rice, William 2006)[6] there are modules and platforms that interact with Moodle for communicative, cooperative and constructivist purposes:

- Forum where students can exchange information asynchronously via text and where they can also publish files or comment on others' contributions;
- Chat (oral and written) where students exchange information simultaneously through text and/or speaking, and where they can interact with one another and with the teacher;
- Wiki by which content can be collectively constructed through writing, and in which students create content and teachers are able to correct and modify contributions.
- Whiteboard, a tool which provides synchronous collaboration between students and the teacher, developing an active construction of knowledge;
- Videoconferencing, with which students can synchronously present their work, share it with their colleagues (and get feedback from them), and discuss it with the teacher, who will moderate the overall process.

Apart from all the tools mentioned before, there are some others which can be installed or linked to Moodle, such as:

- Oublog by which a student can state his/her opinion, and others can discuss and comment on what is written.
- Audio and video chat (COVCELL and Skype), which is a much more complete chat where you can take advantage of voice and gesture for information exchange.
- Collaborative Boards (COVCELL and Skype), which enable information exchange synchronously through text, symbols, diagrams, also enable the teacher to perform interactive support exchanges;
- Sloodle that allows us to connect Moodle with the Second Life metaverse, in which we can perform roles as if we were in the real world and can be used to exchange information based on role-playing.

Moreover, we are currently developing new modules and services to improve our platform potential for L2 learning, namely, with the incorporation of a voice recognition module, writing online assessment and an online presentation system.

4. Final Discussion

As it can be deduced from this paper, e-learning may be really useful to help foreign language learners to acquire the required level of knowledge and to get a certificate according to the European guidelines depicted in the official documents .

It seems logical to assume that the proposal herein presented is a viable alternative to reach literacy goals regarding all the required skills, objectives in which the development and implementation of technology play a major role. We also foresee the need of special tools to achieve effective on-line language learning, mainly communication, multimedia and collaborative tools. For this reason, we are currently working to improve our system in this direction. In this sense, we are developing a complete platform with all the tools that any teacher / student might use in the e-learning process, to design a



medium for information transmission and communication between participants. Although we know that we still have a long path to walk, we also believe in the future of e-learning as the key to achieve independent and individual learning and progression.

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