E-LEARNING SOLUTIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE CERTIFICATION IN EU PROFESSIONS

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Abstract: Developing international standards of professional competence over the last few decades has become a key issue for countries worldwide. In this endeavour education is recognized as a crucial element towards reaching goals. Two major competencies are highlighted by today's experts for job marketability: An operational command of 1- foreign languages, and 2- new technologies. Regarding the first context, this paper addresses the question of practical needs in foreign language competency for selected working collectives, the business sectors of trade and commerce in this case, and aims to create English courses at intermediate /upper-intermediate level, namely B1 and B2, two of the competence standards (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) established in the Council of Europe to the certification of languages for professional purposes. With respect to the latter and second cornerstone on which this proposal is based, technological literacy, an interactive platform for L2 e-learning through Moodle is proposed, as is the development of tools for the teaching-learning process. The target users of this particular proposal consist of individuals with specific foreign language learning and technology-based needs at work in the service sectors of sales and accommodations.

1 INTRODUCTION

The National Catalogue for professional qualifications (updated in 2008 and available at http://www.mepsyd.es/educa/incual/pdf/CNCP_03_08_esp_ing.pdf) is an instrument of Spain's National System for Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training (VET) which classifies job expertise according to the competence considered appropriate for functional occupational performance. The National Catalogue consists of a series of requisite qualities of the work force, arranged in 26 professional families, and at 5 levels of mastery, taking into account pre-established EU criteria. These 5 levels are based on the professional abilities required for each productive activity as rated by criteria such as knowledge, initiative, autonomy, responsibility and complexity, among others, necessary for the accomplishment of tasks in the workplace.

The new European classification of occupations, established at the Lisbon Conference (2000) and available at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_es.htm, are defined as a collection of skills required to develop an active participation in the knowledge society and in today's economy, on the job market and at work, in real life as well as in virtual contexts, due to the emerging mobility of persons throughout the European Union. The lack or inadequacy of the aforementioned skills, especially ICTs and foreign languages, is considered a clear motive leading to maintaining higher levels of unemployment in disadvantaged geographical regions, particular business sectors, and underprivileged social groups.

2 LANGUAGE @T WORK

A great deal of time and effort has been spent on promoting European uniformity in terms of the rights and responsibilities of its citizens. In linguistic terms, commitments have been dedicated mainly to the realm of formal education (Phillipson, 2003), paying little or no attention to the formative capacities required of productive, professional and occupational sectors. However, this situation is rapidly changing thanks to the linguistic policies derived from the Council of Europe and the

achievements of the national and regional boards of education in member States, elaborated in the case of Spain, by the National Institute of Professional Qualifications (Instituto Nacional de las Cualificaciones Profesionales - INCUAL): http://www.mec.es/educa/incual/ice_catalogoWeb.html.

Thus, the homogeneity of linguistic competence as has become as of late a major subject addressed by governments of the 27 countries which compose the European Union. These countries 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 laid the foundations for linguistic certification and equivalency levels through the creation of language programs and syllabi, guidelines and codes, comprehensive exams, international texts, work books, learning material, realia, joint projects and mobility, just to mention a few.

Furthermore, the Council of Europe has taken initiative actions in terms of language teaching and learning by enabling the creation of a major Project aimed at establishing the basis set down in the Common European Framework of Languages through the European Language Portfolio, available at: http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/. It is in this context, and with the express purpose of creating a flexible job market all over Europe, that the elaboration of linguistic certification for occupational purposes emerges. The main objectives of languages for specific purposes are to qualify individuals to function correctly in specific communicative situations by means of adequately applying the target foreign language and to obtain internationally recognized certification in foreign languages as applied to the world of work.

Therefore, the objectives of our proposal of language teaching for professional purposes lies in equipping future professional users with specific linguistic capacity, both in terms of contents and in terms of learning methodologies. The course can be useful for beginners in order to reach required levels, or for those with some degree of acquisition to revise the contents previously learned. In addition, the course is dedicated to the concept of life-long learning. All of the cases can result in certification and recognition of the linguistic skills in terms of particular work competencies. From 2004 onwards,

several strategic plans have been designed and executed in order to give coherence to the certification and homogeneity policy of languages for professional purposes. Among the main guidelines (Council of Europe, 2001) are 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)

3 e-LEARNING: LINGUISTIC EDUCATION THROUGH ICTS

Life-long learning, the development of European mobility policies of equal opportunity, and the capacity to reach all citizens beyond national borders, finds in technology a new medium to develop the personal, cultural and professional skills of all. It is for this reason that our proposal of linguistic certification, developed in the first objective, will be carried out through multimedia tools and online learning.

3.1 Objective 1 - Linguistic Objectives

The achievement of linguistic educational needs in professional contexts is mostly harboured in the service sector, specifically in commercial, developmental and tourist management activities. In the case in point, we have designed English for occupational purposes courses based on the national guidelines of the National Institute of Qualifications (INCUAL), the technical instrument which supports the Spanish General Council of Vocational Education and Training in (for further information, click on the following site: http://www.mepsyd.es/educa/incual/ice_incual_ing.html.

Related to the National Catalogue of Professions, various levels of foreign language command, from the Basic A1 to the Advanced C2, are established. 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 table 1.

Table 1: Description of Customer Service and Attention course.

Course Title: Customer Service and Attention	
(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.

3.2 Objective 2 - Technological Objectives

One of the principal agents of the entire online formative process is the implementation of technology. Technological skill functions as a medium for information transmission (content) and for communication between participants. Moodle (Modular Object Oriented Distance Learning Environment), a platform combining an array of management tools, enables pedagogical communication between the participants of the teaching/learning process in an e-learning or b-learning format (Adell et al., 2004) (Cole & Foster, 2007) (Rice, 2006)(Rice, 2007) (Gómez et al., 2009). The purposes pursued in terms of technology are: (1) to create a platform for e-learning centred management, i.e. language learning through Moodle, and; (2) to develop tools and learning objects to ensure linguistic acquisition, and consequently, certification for specific professional sectors.

3.2.1 Objective 2.1 - Creation of a Platform for e-Learning Centered Management

Although Moodle offers a complete Web learning environment, a tool will be needed to manage simultaneously Moodle installations which share content and courses. Traditionally, sharing courses involved creating course backups and running a downloading and restoration process onto the new website, a complicated procedure which may pose obstacles in terms of efficiency when managing several educational sites and course scores at the same time.

Thus, in our system, www.aulasinteractivas.es (a website to provide on-line learning platforms), we require independent platforms to cope with the teaching/learning needs of educational institutions (e.g. vocational training centers, academies, schools, business, etc...). The common core of some of the courses and the simultaneous teaching-learning demands on teachers and participants calls for the need to share content between them efficiently. Consequently, our objective is focused on developing all the necessary tools to handle backups, sharing courses and content, and carrying out updates when running different platforms simultaneously. Our system, built in PHP, will provide a set of tools to create, delete and update any Moodle platform installed in our server, making it possible to change general aspects such as name, owner data, themes, modules, etc., and to create personalized learning platforms adapted to the needs of different educational centers.

Thus, the design of the multi-purpose platform will facilitate the distribution of material between different Moodle installations with ease by enabling the selection of the available courses and transferring them to other platforms.

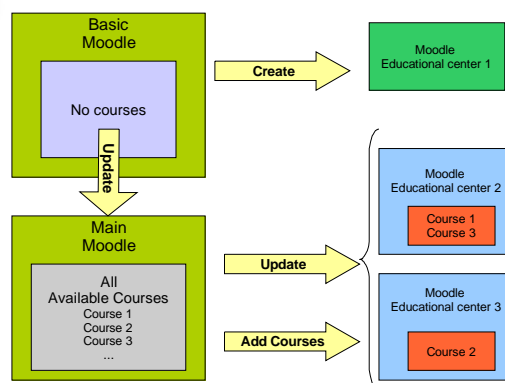The various components of our multi-platform system are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Learning platforms management system.

As observed, there are two main Moodle installations: the Basic Moodle platform, a non-course installation which is used to create new courses and update the Main Moodle, and the Main Moodle, a system used to store all the available courses in order to update the platform in other

specific installations and to add courses to each additional system.

On the same token, visual information is one of the most important aspects in the design of our multi-platform system. Thus, building an effective e-learning space means that every piece (bars, graphics, colours, hyperlinks, pictures, icons, resources, etc.) looks like a sign or symbol integrated within a global piece of communication.

3.2.2 Objective 2.2 - Development of Tools for the Acquisition of Communicative L2 Skills

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 installation, enhancement and development of specific learning objects and tools. Due to the singular characteristics inherent in language acquisition, our platform must contain customized features indicative of an adequate e-learning environment.
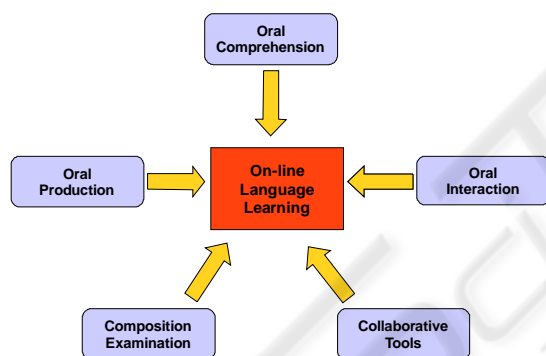

Figure 2: Main tools for on-line language learning.

In the pursuit of effective on-line language learning, we need oral and collaborative tools that facilitate communication between our platform users (Curado & Agudo, 2009). In this sense, specific modules have been installed in our courses to practice and improve productive and collaborative abilities, being purposely divided, as seen in figure 2), into oral comprehension, oral production, oral interaction, composition examination and collaborative tools.

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

E-learning solutions for the professional sectors in need of a certain degree of foreign language competence and technological know-how can be provided with the proper content and applied methodology. It seems logical to assume that the proposal herein presented is a viable alternative to reaching literacy goals regarding both of the required skills, objectives in which the development and implementation of technology play a major role. The increasing need for e-learning solutions has made it advisable to develop management tools which enable us to run different platforms simultaneously. Also, we need special tools to achieve effective on-line language learning, mainly communication, multimedia and collaborative tools on which we are currently working to improve our system. In this sense, we are developing a complete platform with all the tools that any teacher / student can use in the e-learning process, to design a medium for information transmission and communication between participants.

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