A LANGUAGE COURSE FOR IMMIGRANT STUDENTS
A Proposal to Break Cultural and Literacy Barriers through ICTs and Design

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Abstract: Despite of the economic crisis Europe and Spain are facing, foreign-born workers are still increasingly becoming a crucial part of the European community and an important component of the local workforce. Taking the necessity of training newly arrived population into account, this paper aims to share with the scientific community an A1/A2 blended course of Spanish as a foreign language for immigrant workers following the policies of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment. It differs from other language course since it is based in three focal and innovative cornerstones: specific cultural training for immigrant workers, preparation for fast cultural assimilation, overcoming illiteracy before arriving into the country. All that by means of the ubiquity provided by the ICTs and a great component of visual material which will help to overcome illiteracy and cultural problems originated in multiple ethnicities, bridging the gap between formal teaching practices and the experience of using language and culture knowledge by living in a target language country.

1 INTRODUCTION

As more foreign-born workers stream into the workforce and believing that it is in the best interest of immigrants to better understand the cultural and language barriers, we present an A1/A2 blended course of Spanish as a foreign language for immigrant workers that have been supported by the Estremaduran local government. This project aims to challenge prospect workers to overcome cultural and language barriers while learning a foreign language before arriving into the host country. It diverges from other language course since it is based in three central and original sections: specific cultural training for immigrant workers, preparation for fast cultural adaptation, overcoming illiteracy. Language teachers are particularly aware of the need for students to transfer learning to real life settings. In this sense the Ubiquity of learning technologies provide the opportunity for students of foreign languages to bridge the gap between formal teaching practices and the experience of using language and applying cultural knowledge in a target language

country. The Internet is constructing this global link for students to communicate and learn languages. In addition, the ubiquity provided by the ICTs and the great amount of visual material included in multimedia applications will help to overcome illiteracy and the cultural problems originated in multiple ethnicities. Being practical in helping break down these cultural barriers can: train this population on-line to make them aware of the cultural differences beforehand, can make them assimilate faster to the new context; Improve employers' ability to recruit, hire and retain workers; In a long term, increase workers' productivity.

2 SPECIFIC ISSUES IMMIGRANT FACE WHEN THEY FIRST ARRIVE

Thinking in Spain as a recent melting pot, the writers did research to trace the most common issues immigrants face when they first arrive in the

country. By means of detailed questionnaires passed a long a number of newly arrived immigrants located at different nongovernmental associations[i] that take care of this population, the course editors established the main and common facts this newly arrive residents had to go through. They designed explicit exercises addressing themes such as specific work-related language functions and structures, culture and cultural differences, stereotypes, and politics all within the target language on a technological format to train students before landing in Spain.

3 SUPPORTING LITERACY THROUGH ICTs VISUAL COMPONENT

In many developing world countries, there are no or very few social welfare systems to provide population with formal education, so in some occasions they receive a few years of schooling. In that sense, immigrants coming from these countries have a triple barrier: illiteracy, cultural shock and difficulty finding a job. Recently, educational technology is nudging literacy instruction beyond its oral and print-based tradition to embrace online and electronic texts as well as multimedia. The ubiquitous connectivity is already having an impact on us and will have a greater impact in the near future in illiterate people. Within a multimedia support, the visual component becomes a powerful instructional tool and a lingua franca that can be understood by a great number of nationalities and backgrounds, a population that in too many occasions a lack of basic formal education. The goal is the acquisition of meaning using multimedia devices, visual imagery, and virtual environments, as well as a low amount of written text.

Figure 1: *¿Cómo solicitar el NIE?[ii].*

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[i] Among these institutions, CEAR, Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado and the Red Cross.
[ii] The images are illustrated by Carmen Sanz Rubio.

4 OVERCOMING LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES THOUGH ICTS

Language goes hand-in hand with cultural differences. Linguists and anthropologists have long recognized that linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). In that sense, language and cultural barriers and misunderstandings can get in the way of successful communication and generate complications in the workplace. To this light, the course studied the most striking cultural difference between Spain and the rest of the countries and designed exercises with an important cultural component. This training will facilitate multiple ethnic groups with very different cultures a successful entrance and also will accelerate their process of personal and professional adaptation to the new context. This course differs from other language course since it is able to train the students before landing in Spain with a great variety of cultural exercises that will teach them about the Spanish culture at the same time they learn the Spanish language. These differences can cause problems interpreting what the other person means. Some simple examples: Institutions and Roles and status of people; Body language and personal appearance; Religion.

4.1 Language and Cultural Content

By means of a multiplicity of cultural activities the course intends to become a comprehensive customized resource that instructs students about the Spanish language and culture to make them adapt faster to the new circumstance. Each level is divided into 5 units.

Within level **A1 students are expected to:** Understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic sentences to respond to very specific needs; Introduce themselves, ask and respond to questions regarding personal information such as where he/she lives, the people he/she knows and the things he/she owns. Interact in simple circumstances when the interlocutor speaks slowly, clearly and can assist him/her in the communicative act.

Within the **A2 students are expected to:** Understand commonly used and very basic phrases and expressions (e.g. basic familiar personal data, shopping, geographical environment, job-related language); Can communicate regarding simple routine tasks requiring the exchange of simple and

direct information on familiar topics and daily routines; Can describe features of his/her surroundings and topics related to his/her general interest. Students will be evaluated of each level by means of 5 exams that will cover the most relevant communicative and cultural goals presented along the units. Using authentic situations will help to engage students in authentic cultural experiences, so the units address first steps such as learning about the most important Spanish institutions. In addition, students face issues such as applying for the universal health care card, to register at the local town hall, to send money home, to enroll children at school, to understand the job sections of local newspapers, to be able to post an add on a newspaper, to do a first interview etc.

4.2 Modes of ICT Delivery

Computer technology, used to try to overcome the challenges of distance learning, provides learners with new and varied options for language learning through interactive tasks delivered through CD-ROMs, Web pages, online platforms, virtual environments and communications software on the Internet. However, as the widespread and underlying access to information and computational resources becomes more pervasive, the existing ICT teaching models need to be thoughtfully reconsidered to decide in which ICT, the degree of ubiquity, application and tools can define the types of learning activities and resources available. In this sense, the course presents a wide variety of technological tools adapted to specific and explicit learning purposes. The course is offered on a CD format with offline Access to language and cultural content. This system leads students to using different tools depending on the didactic goal. When it comes the time to work together with other students, collaborate and interact with them and the teacher, the course introduces not only Moodle, but Tools for Student-Student and Student-Teacher Communication, Tools for Collaborative Work and LMS. To carry out and enhance theoretical leaning the course also provides with an authoring tools called FMI. *Second Life* also helps students and teachers simulate real language situation. In that sense, the course breaks geographical and schedule limitations of conventional courses.

5 CONCLUSIONS

We present a multimedia level A1 and A2 language

training program specifically customized to cover formative needs in foreign language for selected working collectives. This course is delivered through the ICTs and designed using a huge visual component. It aims to facilitate adult students with limited literacy skills to overcome literacy challenges and improve literacy skills. By using CD, Moodle and Second Life, together with authoring tools such as FMI (which includes hotpot helps create Activity and Task Types, Individual study etc.), Tools for Student-Student and Student-Teacher Communication, Tools for Collaborative Work and LMS, we aim to overcome illiteracy and on the other hand, to be able to target a wide audience with different cultural background and languages.

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