The CMC_E Project: An e-Learning Environment to Develop Foreign Language Competence in Companies

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Abstract — The project Communicating in Multilingual Contexts meets the Enterprises aims to find out if there is shortages of foreign languages in companies in the regions where the partners of the project are located and provides a virtual learning environment offering language learning materials in six different languages thus opening up opportunities for better trained, and thus more competitive, future and in-service employees. A needs analysis survey of foreign language competences in companies was carried out in order to identify the key language competences commonly required by different sectors of the labour market and design relevant language materials. These materials are being piloted in order to assess their efficiency and reformulate minor issues. This paper presents the project, relevant data from the survey, the materials designed and the first results of the piloting phase.

Index Terms — b-Learning, e-Learning, Foreign language competences, Foreign language materials, Needs analysis survey, Piloting

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1 INTRODUCTION

The "Communicating in Multilingual Contexts meets the Enterprises: awareness and development of academic and professional language skills for mobility students" (henceforth CMC_E) project aims to find out if there are shortages of foreign languages in companies in the regions where the partners of the project are located in order to design language materials to open up opportunities for future and in-service employees. This research question was based on the results of a recently published study "Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise" commissioned by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission [1] which states that 11% of small and medium companies lose business opportunities due to lack of foreign language skills. Moreover a survey of "Europeans and their languages" [2] reports that 44% of the respondents admit that they do not know any language other than their mother tongue, while in Portugal the percentage is even higher – reaching 50%. Therefore, education and professional systems in each country need to play an important role in the promotion of multilingualism [3], [4], which is the goal of the CMC_E project.

In this paper we will describe the CMC_E project, how the survey was carried out to answer our research question and put forward the most relevant data collected. We will present the e-learning platform with the materials designed and finally, we will analyse the data which were collected when the piloting phase was carried out.

2 THE PROJECT

CMC_E is a two-year European project within Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Key Activity 2 (languages). It is a partnership made up of six higher education institutions: University of Calabria, Italy (coordinating institution); Technical University of Košice, Slovakia; University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain; The London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom; Warsaw Academy of Computer Science, Management and Administration, Poland; Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco, Portugal. These six higher education institutions partners work together with 'a best

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practice partner' enterprise located in Italy (GIAS Gruppo Industriale Alimentari Surgelati).

The CMC_E (http://www.cmceproject.it - Fig. 1) also aims to address the problem of lack of training materials, both from an academic and professional perspective, and to create a virtual learning environment (VLE) in order to enhance lifelong learning of 21st century citizens [5]. It offers language materials in six different languages – English, Italian, Slovak, Spanish, Polish and Portuguese – four of which are less used and less taught languages (i.e. Italian, Slovak, Polish and Portuguese). Thus, CMC_E also aims to promote linguistic diversity [6].

Fig.1 - Project website

3 THE SURVEY

The survey was designed in order to answer the research question that language competences in the business sector throughout Europe are low and businesses are often interrupted because of lack of meaningful communication.

The survey was the joint work of the project partners and the same in every language (http://www.cmcproject.it/questionnaire_en.aspx). The questionnaire aimed to find out how a business opportunity could be jeopardised due to weak foreign language skills and lack of knowledge of the foreign culture, what foreign language competence there is in companies and also what foreign language competence is required and should be developed. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. On the one hand, the survey collected data referring to the contextualisation of the companies in the labour market and, on the other, to the foreign language competence needed in companies. The outcomes for the six partners were similar. However, in this paper we will only refer the Portuguese results. 488 companies

were contacted in the Castelo Branco region but only 35 answered the questionnaire in spite of having been contacted by email, letter and telephone. The results on the business profile show that most companies (20) work in services, 12 exclusively in services, and 16 in commerce/sales. Ten of the respondents include themselves in production. However, many of them work in two different areas such as services and commerce or production and commerce. 29% of companies had already lost a business opportunity due to the lack of foreign language skills (and 20% in all the countries involved). This confirms our initial research question and thus the need to improve language skills in companies. Results tend to suggest that companies use English as this is now the lingua franca and therefore most commonly used in international business, followed by Spanish which is the language of our neighbour country, with whom Portugal has most business.

Portuguese companies identified several linguistic competences in order better to deal with foreign markets. Their priorities were:

- telephone skills (32);
- listening and speaking skills (29);
- writing skills (e.g. e-mails, faxes) (28);
- knowledge of specific/technical lexicon (24); and
- presenting products at international exhibitions (19).

These were also priorities of the companies in the regions where the CMC_E partners were located. Therefore these five skills are all addressed in the materials that were developed. There are five units: training in the workplace; administration; business and finance; marketing; and technology and environment (Fig.2). Each unit has five activities with three different types of exercises. These exercises include video, audio, and a variety of written exercises. All the units have a self-evaluation test and we have later included suggestions for face-to-face activities as a result of the Portuguese piloting phase of the Spanish materials that will be described below.

Exercises vary from listening comprehension, such as true/false and multiple choice, to writing, such as e-mail writing and leaflets, covering all the skills needed to acquire linguistic competences.

Users of these materials can have online evaluation and some feedback to explain why some of their answers may be incorrect (e.g. multiple choice exercises).

Fig. 2 - Units

All the materials were designed to be used online at one's own pace, rhythm and availability. They can be used either alone or in blended sessions, as we decided to do in the piloting phase.

4 THE PILOTING PHASE

Materials were designed to be available on the web and used by companies/employees, university leavers and mobility students. However, we decided to pilot materials with a tutor in a blended course in order to get a deeper learning experience in which students could have oral feedback of their work and we could obtain more detailed evaluation data of the materials so that they could be improved in the near future.

The first language to be piloted was Spanish, and the data we are going to present refers to the group of students that attended the Spanish course in Castelo Branco. A native teacher was invited to deliver the materials in a 22-hour intensive evening course. All the students (n=20) that attended the course were already working in companies and the majority were engineers, global account managers, secretaries and clerks.

None of the students had attended an online or blended course before.

When asked to assess the units one by one (end of unit questionnaire) they referred that all the units were interesting, well-structured, balanced and very useful, providing technical vocabulary.

Most liked reordering texts, filling in spaces, drag and drop activities, true/false and multiple choice exercises.

They all mentioned they had learned a lot with this b-learning course, improved reading skills, writing, listening/understanding, oral interaction and oral production.

However, they also made some suggestions for improvement, more hours of contact with the teacher in order to develop both writing and speaking.

The teacher wrote a report with useful comments after each class with the students. She gave a short interview that can be seen in the Portuguese website of the project (http://cmce.ipcb.pt/nosmedia.html). Those comments were used to improve the materials not only in Spanish but in the other languages as well. For example she underlined the need of developing oral skills that online materials do not offer easily and suggestions for face-to-face activities were at a later stage included in all the units.

5 CONCLUSION

Nowadays students and potential employers are not satisfied sitting through a course with only a textbook and a lecturer, demanding a more hands-on and integrative approach to learning [7]. Similarly, while many adults realise the importance of lifelong learning in order to improve their chances of promotion or to enable them to make a career change, they are often too busy, too distant, or feel intimidated to attend traditional face-to-face courses. Online courses have proven to be a convenient, time-efficient, and cost-effective alternative [8]. However, students seem to prefer blended courses which offer a unique learning experience combining face-to-face instruction with computer mediated instruction [9], [10], [11], [12] which may increase their motivation and confidence.

The guidelines drawn up for the five units of CMC_E attempted to address most of the needs identified by the respondents of the questionnaire as far as unit topics, communicative skills and types of activity are concerned. English is going to be piloted from the middle of September.

Although the project first aim was to develop online materials to be used freely by companies in order to improve the foreign language competences of their workers, the piloting proved that the materials were more successful used in a blended course because the teacher could help students with grammar explanations, written feedback and exercise speaking skills both face-to-face or online. In addition the presence of a teacher helped to enhance intercultural knowledge while developing communication skills and language competences.

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