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A blended practice-enterprise course for language learning in an international business community

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This paper presents the experiences and results from the LLP-project PELLIC. The aim of the project was to make full use of the learning potential of practice enterprise methodology for communicative language learning by organizing and supporting virtual international business interaction within a blended learning scenario. "Practice enterprise" is a practical-oriented teaching method with a strong focus on authenticity, which is conceptually related to task-based learning approaches (e.g. Willis & Willis, 2008). Results are based on the project's piloting phase during which learners in four European countries became "virtual entrepreneurs". The target language of the course was English, the lingua franca of international business. Learners' interactions were supported by a customized virtual learning environment (VLE), based on the open source course management system Moodle, enhanced and adapted to suit the pedagogic needs of the scenario by integrating additional collaboration tools (Google Applications, Skype, etc).

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Along with a range of openly accessible e-learning contents, focus activities and resources, e-learning tasks were developed as “blueprints” to guide educators in adapting, re-purposing and extending materials and methodology for their own teaching. The article highlights the role of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in creating opportunities for learner output, the teacher’s role as a facilitator of the learners’ project work, and the function of re-usable e-learning contents and activity formats for authentic autonomous and collaborative language learning.

1 Introduction

The PELLIC (Practice Enterprise for Language Learning and Intercultural Communication)¹ project this paper is based on was a two-year project funded by the European Union’s Lifelong Learning Programme. It started with the idea of using practice enterprise (PE) methodology – “playing company”, in short – and embedding it within a task-based blended learning scenario for business language courses. During the piloting phase, which took place from October to December 2010, learners in four European countries² became “virtual entrepreneurs”, interacting and trading with each other. The pedagogic rationale was to enable learners to develop their communicative abilities in English within real, open business communication contexts, using their own English as a lingua franca to communicate within an international business environment. Instead of asking them to produce “dry run” business correspondence for the eyes of their teacher only, they were given the chance to invest their output with communicative value. Following Swain’s “output hypothesis”, language learning is most efficient when learners produce the target language as a social activity (“languaging”, cp. Swain, 2005, p. 18 and Swain, 2006, p. 6f): PELLIC students worked in national teams in competition and partnership with national teams from the other countries, giving each other feedback on their achievements and cross-evaluating each other’s results on an international level. In order to develop the skills needed to engage in all these communications, learners were given access to a range of supporting e-learning activities and resources for autonomous and collaborative learning. The design of these materials was informed by the three basic principles of constructivist learning theory: autonomy, authenticity and collaboration (cp. Rüschoff, 1999, 2009), enabling learners to actively shape their own learning process. Learners were able to access the materials and engage in the activities on their own time and at their own discretion. The activities and resources were based on complex and authentic material (such as document samples from a mentor company) and generally involved a collaborative dimension, i.e. required learners to work together either in their local company group, communicate internationally with

¹ <http://www.pellic.eu/>

² The learner groups were based in Finland, Czech Republic, Spain and Germany, and two companies (two teams) were created in each individual country.

the other companies in the network, or both.

The PELLIC pilot course was also designed to foster intercultural awareness, and more specifically had the goal of helping learners become aware of and familiar with different ways of using English as a lingua franca, and increase their self-confidence in making use of their linguistic abilities. Lingua-franca communication, a common scenario in international business encounters, is subject to the “my English condition” formulated by Kohn: in a typical lingua-franca situation, participants «do not propose to use some native speaker standard or a particular non-native speaker ELF variety. [...] Each speaker can only use his or her own individual English, i.e., the version of English they have managed to make their own» (Kohn, 2011, p. 80f) in the creatively constructive process of language acquisition. Following Kohn’s suggestions for lingua-franca oriented language pedagogy, PELLIC learners should be supported in developing not only linguistic means of expression, but also their «communication and community-oriented requirements of performance [...]» (Kohn, 2011, p. 80), such as comprehensibility, self-expression, situational appropriateness in different contexts, or participation in a speech-fellowship. Ample room was given for individual as well as collaborative reflection on actual language use, in order to support learners’ exploration and development of such requirements.

2 Use of CMC in the PELLIC course

The requirement of employing computer-mediated communication (CMC) for tasks involving continual international exchange, linked together with e-learning activities, called for a comprehensive and robust online environment, the development and testing of which was a core outcome of the project. The learning management system Moodle³ was chosen as the backbone for the PELLIC virtual learning environment. Reasons for the choice were Moodle’s widespread use⁴, its availability free of charge, its status as an open-source project with a lively and productive community, and its adaptability. The platform was subsequently extended and enriched in its possibilities by installing several additional tools geared to the pedagogic needs in the PELLIC scenario – one of them being a seamless integration of Google Apps⁵ so that learners could make use of Google’s application suite of business collaboration tools.

The PELLIC course was divided into four sequential modules of activities,

³ «Moodle is [...] a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It is a Free web application that educators can use to create effective online learning sites.» (cp. Moodle Trust 2012a)

⁴ Moodle.org statistics webpage counts almost 65,000 registered installations in 218 countries worldwide, amounting to over 50 million users (cp. Moodle Trust 2012b).

⁵ Moodle-Google (<http://code.google.com/p/moodle-google/downloads/list>)

modelled on phases and focal areas in the life of a company:

- A. Starting up the company
- B. Advertising the company
- C. Buying and selling
- D. Exhibitions and trade fairs

Module A bundled tasks through which the learner groups built up the basic framework of company life: the virtual companies in the network, their names and business plans were established, and first contacts among them were made. For writing their business plans, learners were taught how to use the Google Docs service for efficient online collaboration, namely distributing responsibilities for the different sections within their team, and setting up internal deadlines. They were required to submit the finished document to the company repository on the VLE. Module B focused on advertisement, and included tasks such as researching advertisement strategies, designing and broadcasting ads, and putting together a company website for the international counterparts to see. Gmail⁶ accounts were set up to allow members of the virtual companies to communicate so that, as part of module C, they could send each other formal offers, schedule Skype meetings and engage in sales negotiations with the goal of closing virtual deals (see Figure 1). Recordings of the oral Skype interactions were made available to the company group to allow for detailed peer analysis and feedback. Module D focused on tasks related to trade fairs, such as design of a trade fair stand or holding a VIP reception. The tasks in module D also allowed participants to use a space in Second Life⁷ to create a “virtual face-to-face situation”.

Each module was planned to take approximately two weeks of course time (covered by two face-to-face sessions each in the author's piloting course), so that the parallel pilot courses stretched roughly over two months. The choice of business field for the companies in the network was made on the basis of learners' local curricula – so that the author's piloting students, who were training to become “multilingual management assistants”, formed two language service companies, offering interpreting and translation services as their virtual products.

⁶ Gmail and Google Docs are available for free after registration at <https://accounts.google.com>

⁷ <http://secondlife.com/>



Fig. 1 - An oral interaction task from module C on the VLE

A questionnaire on self-assessment concluded each module, asking learners to reflect on their learning progress, problems and personal goals for the next module. Furthermore, learners evaluated their own proficiency by considering “can-do” statements inspired by those developed by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE)⁸ as an appendix to the CEFR (cp. Council of Europe 2001). Learners were also asked to reflect on the group dynamics of the company team, and to estimate the value of their own contribution.

3 Combining tasks and e-learning activities

In selecting and specifying the business tasks in each module, the main goal was to develop tasks that required international communication and interaction; the higher the level of communicative interaction, the more suitable a given task was regarded for PELLIC. Other factors were the relative importance of potential tasks within different focal areas of company life, as well as practicality and feasibility in the teaching context. Given these criteria, the PELLIC approach to practice enterprise (PE) departs to some extent from more traditional practice enterprise approaches, in which financial accounting procedures and exchanges of relatively formulaic correspondence are often in the foreground. The reason for the much narrower focus found in many traditional approaches to PE methodology is that there is relatively little purposeful integration of language learning into practice enterprise courses (cp. PELLIC consortium 2010, p. 10), so making a connection between language learning and PE pedagogy was one of the key innovations of the PELLIC project. The term “task” as it was used in PELLIC is based on the following definition by Skehan (1996):

[...] A task is taken to be an activity in which meaning is primary, there is some sort of relationship to the real world, task completion has some priority, and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome. (p. 38)

⁸ Association of Language Testers in Europe website: www.alte.org

The tasks selected for the course were generally meant to be completed autonomously by either individual students or teams of students, autonomously on their own time and without the explicit need for teacher intervention. Individual students were expected to make use of the resources and materials provided in connection with the communicative tasks they had to carry out. They were meant to exploit situations in which learners «[...] notice that they do not know how to say (or write) precisely the meaning they wish to convey» (Swain, 2005, p. 8) before, while or after engaging in a communicative task. This “noticing” potential is amplified to the extent that students need to take some measure of (joint) responsibility for the outcomes of their work. A necessary corollary is that the teacher’s role in this scenario is one of manager, coach and facilitator, rather than distributor of content – guiding the student groups in developing and negotiating their internal company workflows and procedures, as well as assisting them “just-in-time” on language and business related requirements. This is in line with a social constructivist (Vygotskyan) approach to learning, which suggests that «higher mental processes find their source in interaction between an individual, others, and the artifacts they create» (Swain, 2006, p. 17), and with the idea that such interactions play an important role in “pushing” learners forward in constructing and revising their individual version of the target language, i.e. English.

Each task was headed by a brief instruction, phrased consistently with the term “you will”. The first item below the task header was a detailed, chaptered and printer-friendly instruction on how best to accomplish the task. Detailed instructions were emphasized in the pilot courses as a response to replies to a survey, administered soon after the project had started, which indicated that «“poor organization and description of the Practice Enterprise activities» were mentioned as a key factor leading to lack of motivation in learners (cp. PELLIC consortium 2010, p. 11). Technically, the Moodle “Book” activity proved well suited for this purpose, as it provided a simple means for creating multi-page, structured resources within a Moodle course. The instructions included suggestions for distributing the workload within the company team, and breaking down tasks into smaller steps or phases. They also provided best practice suggestions for making use of focus activities and the resources available. Tutors were able to extend, modify, replace or augment the individual tasks, including «[...] the interesting possibility that students could be involved in the negotiation of which tasks are used, and how they are used» (Skehan, 1996, p. 38).

All the tasks included a range of activities and resources that supported learners in autonomously developing the specific skills needed for working in an international business environment. The activities were meant to focus

on the particular learning aspects connected to each task (hence “focus activities”), and deal with language, business and intercultural aspects. They were designed to anticipate the learning needs of students working in the PELLIC environment, at an assumed CEFR level of B1-B2, and offered in conjunction with situations where learners were faced with a complex task. While learners in the pilot courses were actively encouraged to make best use of them, these activities were not intended to be part of the course assessment, but to be used as opportunities for autonomous and collaborative training. In authoring the activities, Moodle’s activity tools were used, as well as the additional possibilities offered by the various extensions available on the PELLIC VLE (cp. Glombitzka, 2011, p. 19-45).

The screenshot shows a Moodle task instruction page. At the top, there is a small icon of two people and the text "TEAM TASK". Below that is the title "Developing a business plan" and the level "A2". The main text area contains the following description:

Before your company meets officially for the first time, its members will draft ideas for the parameters of your business and the details of your company's business plan. Members of the group will have to write drafts of different sections of the business plan before the meeting. These drafts and ideas will be the agenda items that you need to discuss in your first meeting.

Below the text, there is a call-to-action: "Submit your meeting invitations, meeting agenda, meeting minutes, and the business plan to the repository." To the right of this text are three buttons: "A2 Task Details: Meeting in order to develop a business plan" (with a "DETAILS" link), "A2 Business focus: Matching task - business plan" (with a "BUSINESS FOCUS" link), and "Website: 8 steps to creating a simple business plan" (with a "RESOURCE" link). At the bottom of the page, there are two more buttons: "The language of meetings" (with a "LANGUAGE FOCUS" link) and "A2 Language focus: Meetings - Getting started".

Fig. 2 - Task instruction for “Module A, Task 2: Developing a business plan” on the VLE

In the centre of most focus activities was an authentic example of the communication learners were expected to engage in as part of the task at hand.

Depending on the task, this example was either in the form of a text (e.g. business plan, meeting agenda, meeting minutes, etc.) or an audiovisual recording (e.g. personal introductions in a business setting, presentations, etc.). These materials required learners to focus on the relevant aspects of the communication involved in the task, e.g. special formal requirements, order of structural elements, or specific phraseology and vocabulary. During the course of the project, a total number of 81 focus activities were designed, 48 of which were “language focus activities”. There were 19 “business focus activities”, which focused on business-related competences or skills (e.g. producing a

well-formatted meeting agenda) and 14 activities focusing on learning aims that emphasize intercultural competence development.

4 Results

The findings reported here are based on teacher observation, systematically elicited learner feedback, and assessment material collected from learners during the two-months piloting phase. One of the main benefits of the blended learning scenario used in PELLIC, as perceived by the author while teaching one of the pilot courses, was the possibility to take class time for briefing on upcoming tasks, reporting on task progress, and de-briefing. The key factors that made it possible to use class time in such a way were: (1) the availability of a virtual space for students to work autonomously yet in a collaborative manner, and (2) the embedding of the learning scenario in a joint, task-based project that the students owned – it was authentic to them in the sense that the business they had developed and were using to interact with their international partners had been created by them and was theirs. Reporting and de-briefing episodes in particular gave rise to informed discussion and reflection on communication that had really taken place; this was often lively and sometimes controversial. This concerned, for example, language appropriateness when dealing with critical situations, e.g. an offer that had to be declined, or a business partner who had not answered an email for several days and perhaps needed to be reminded tactfully. In-class discussion of appropriate formulation, choice of words and pragmatic rules of the target language – “*languaging about language*” (Swain, 2006, p. 4) – naturally ensued. It is doubtful that this type of discussion would have unfolded, or been as authentic for learners, had it been prompted by the teacher instead of by an actual need arising from learners’ own interactions. According to Swain, such languaging activities can be an efficient mediator of second language learning via the metalinguistic (reflective) function of output (cp. Swain, 2005, p. 15), alongside the functions of noticing and hypothesis testing.

The outcomes of most tasks – the “artifacts” of learners’ communications, such as their business plans, advertisements, and company websites, but also trade fair stand designs or company logos – generally displayed a surprising amount of creativity. Learners seemed to identify with their respective virtual companies in the process of creating it, which is supported by some of the self-assessment comments (e.g. comment 1 below). This stronger – and, importantly, joint – identification with artifacts during the course and the life of the PE companies certainly enhanced the probabilities for output-related learning processes to occur.

A questionnaire administered at the end of the course indicated that 80% of respondents in the author's piloting group agreed or strongly agreed that the course had «helped them in becoming aware of differences in the way people use their English internationally (e.g. between the different countries)». 67% agreed or strongly agreed that their «confidence in using [their own] English has increased as a result of the course». Below are examples of feedback from students' self-assessment questionnaires:

While I was working on the business plan I noticed that there a quite a lot words I still have to learn because I just did not have to use them before. [...] I hope to get in contact with some students from Finland, Spain or Czech Republic [...] and I am very excited about how we will manage to present our company ILS.

I learned and fostered a lot of things. It will make me feel more confident in using my English skills. [...] We have to learn to be reliable because this will cause much work for the rest of the group if someone forgets his part. [...] I could learn that it is very important to be dependable and to finish my task within a given time.

I learned to write offers and enquiries and despite my bad English I have the feeling of an progress. My personal goal [for the rest of the course] are for example that I can learn more to speak and communicate in English, and especially to resolve my fear to speak in English.

It must be noted that the opportunities offered by the PE approach do not come entirely without challenges. It has been argued that the role of the teacher requires a reconceptualization –ideally, learners are provided with what they need, exactly when they need it. Inevitably, teachers in a PE context give up a measure of control over how a course develops, and it clearly becomes more difficult to predict – or decree – what individual students will learn at a given point, even while engaging in identical tasks. It is clear that institutional assessment practices and syllabus designs must keep in step with such changes, and reflect the outcome-oriented and collaborative nature of the PE learning experience by integrating assessment methods appropriate to a PE-based language course. Techniques based on self-assessment, peer-assessment, group-assessment and expert-assessment were used at various stages in the pilot courses. But the issue of assessment in PE-based language courses is clearly a complex one, and certainly warrants further consideration (see, for example, Pittaway *et al.*, 2009 for a discussion of assessing practice enterprise activities).

Conclusions

Practice enterprise methodology, as it was used in the PELLIC course, proved to be an efficient way of integrating language learning with vocational education and training, creating conditions that promote second language learning for learners on an intermediate or advanced level of proficiency. In particular, the use of CMC for promoting open international communication has prepared the ground for a scenario in which learners focused on their linguistic output as part of authentic interaction, and this gave rise to episodes of languaging as described by Swain (2005; 2006). The blended learning modality characterized by both face-to-face sessions and the systematic integration of VLE-based tools for feedback and reflection contributed to achieving the desired level of awareness about different situational requirements of language use in lingua-franca situations – giving learners ample opportunity for making English “their own” in communicative interaction with other non-native users of English. An area which certainly requires more research is assessment in these contexts. Hopefully the findings of the pilot course will lead to promoting this format for language learning to different curricular contexts (e.g. engineering, tourism, health care).

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