

Linguistic Platforms And Business Settings

Luminita Cocarta, University, Iasi, Romania
Dragoş Cojocaru, University, Iasi, Romania
Sorin-Toma Andrei, University, Iasi, Romania

Abstract

*One of the major concerns of educators today is to make learning resources (in our case **linguistic platforms**) more accessible and flexible to a wide range of learners, keeping in mind the fact that for some students there is a certain anxiety towards computer use and that they have different preferences in what the interface design is concerned. One of the platforms piloted with our students in **Business and Administration** is the Leonardo da Vinci – Transfer of Innovation Project¹, whose products and outcomes aim to meet the linguistic and intercultural communication needs of our students, among other categories of possible beneficiaries.*

The aim of our paper is to share from our experience as beneficiaries of this linguistic platform online. The Business Culture and Personal Development courses that we have piloted with our 3-rd year students in International Relations are available online and present the integrated content in a user-friendly manner. What we are going to focus on in the following sections is the way in which our students and staff understood to use and then evaluate the ELSTI Linguistic Platform.

Key words: Business communication, learning resources, linguistic platforms, linguistic, intercultural and professional skills.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Recent research in Intercultural studies showed that the role of languages at the workplace is increasing because of the internationalization of business at the level of multinationals, but also at the level of small and medium sized enterprises. Employers all over the world became aware of the fact that intercultural communication can make one win or lose a deal. One of the studies undertaken by Europeans (among which a Romanian team² too), ELAN³-Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprises, concluded that “language competences raise the professional profile of the staff, as 73% of the participating Small and Medium Sized Enterprises have a policy of recruiting language-skilled staff and 57% keep track of their employees language skills” (This is even more obvious in large multinationals of which 94% practise selective recruitment).

Therefore, improvements can be noticed in employees’ professional profile, lately, especially in language, IT, intercultural and soft skills which would enable them to make the most of their work qualifications anywhere in the world.

It is clear that the linguistic platform we are going to discuss here is a good instrument to use for people involved in business settings as well as for students in Business and Administration.

PLATFORM DESCRIPTION

We have to mention from the very beginning that the materials presented on the platform are addressed to students and professionals who are willing to acquire or improve language skills for business settings. The language courses are available in English, French, Italian and Spanish. There are only 2 levels for each course, in conformity

¹ ELSTI Project= Eurobusiness Language Skills – Transfer of Innovation

² The Romanian team is from the EuroEd Foundation, Iasi, Romania

³ This study was commissioned by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission in December 2005.

with the 6 levels⁴ from the Common European Framework of Reference: A2⁵ and B1⁶. At the beginning of each of the four language courses presented on the platform there is a *Self-Assessment* test that will determine the user's language level. Then, the course users will receive: a progress report on condition that they complete at least 3 units of one of the language courses and a final achievement report on condition that they complete all the ten units of one of the language courses.

The progress report will be issued, on request, if the user completes 3 to 9 units of one of the language courses. This report is meant to state the scores attained in each completed unit. The final report will be issued, on request, if the user completes all 10 units⁷. This report will state the scores attained in different units as well as an average score of the overall level achieved.

Under the *Accompanying Material* heading, one can find:

1. Business culture
2. Glossary
3. Personal Development.

In the first section, 10 *Business Culture* modules offer a look into the different business environments of France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Slovakia and the UK. Each module is available in the national language of the country and in English.

The online *glossary* of business terms contained in the platform is available in 8 different languages, containing over 1000 common and practical words and phrases used in business settings. One will learn to apply new language skills at work better and will also develop his/her team building skills.

The ELS *Personal Motivational* module, on the other hand, is meant to build the necessary confidence in the user as to get the most out of the language learning courses suggested.

Consequently, the platform will be useful to those who have a job that requires foreign language skills, to the administrative staff of firms and institutions that deal with international settings, to language trainers and teachers that want to improve their teaching methodology and to students and job seekers who want to acquire and improve language skills as to increase their chances to be employed in today's global market.

One can very easily find out how to use the platform, by clicking on the *user guide* that appears on the screen and gives answers to questions such as:

- How to access the main sections of the ELS portal.
- How to register.
- How to subscribe to one of the language courses
- How to choose the language level.
- How to start the language course
- How to contact the online tutor/teacher/administrator.
- How to use the forum or the chat sections. How to access the modules.

⁴ A1, A2, (basic users) B1, B2(independent users), C1, C2 (proficient users)

⁵ A2 – Basic user that can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment); can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters; can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. (source: ELP-European Language Portfolio) <http://www.ProspereuroIntegr.ELP/>

⁶ B1- Independent user that can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters, regularly encountered in work, school, leisure etc.; can deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken; can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest; can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans (source: ELP-European Language Portfolio) <http://www.ProspereuroIntegr.ELP/materiale>

⁷ Each level contains 10 units covering business topics from conversations on the phone to organizing business trips in every language.

WORKING WITH THE PLATFORM

Our experiment used a number of 60 students and 4 teachers/administrators. The students were supposed to use the platform for a minimum of 20 hours, after which they were asked to give their feedback. Besides that, our status as platform administrators allowed us to monitor everything our students had worked on the platform. We certainly focused on the courses of English, although the platform offered 4 other languages to test one's knowledge and skills in. We found out from our own observations and from our students' feedback that the course delivery methodology in itself facilitated the development of learner's skills. This system of delivery also offered users the opportunity to learn in a flexible manner (whenever time was available) on the one hand, and to improve IT skills in addition to linguistic and intercultural skills on the other.

More than that, the platform offered a dynamic and comprehensive alternative in the field of language acquisition, a package that being both flexible and informative, helped our students improve their language skills in a challenging, yet consistent manner. In a more concrete way, we can say that on the one hand the *business culture* course really exposed the users to the business culture of ten European countries so as to develop their cultural awareness, and on the other hand, the *personal development* course helped to enhance learners' motivation to acquire new linguistic, intercultural and professional skills. All these were available at a simple click on www.eurobusinesslanguageskills.net, a learning environment translated into nine languages and free of charge.

Different students used different levels of the course, taking into account their real needs and thus avoiding the exposure to the colleagues and teachers observations in class. Many of our students considered this an advantage for individual learning and the shier ones preferred the use of the linguistic platform to the traditional course. They enjoyed the topics suggested by the platform: *In the office, On the telephone, Correspondence, Internet, Grammar, Culture*, as well as the four types of follow-up activities; *Dialogue, Practice, Game and Simulation*. We appreciated the fact that each unit aimed at developing the four skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking and included vocabulary, grammar practice and cultural information sections, that which was certainly useful for our students. Emphasizing the cultural differences and suggesting pragmatic norms for business settings, the modules of business culture, with their ten units: *Making appointments, Telephone Etiquette, Receiving clients, Business dress code, Addressing others, Negotiating, Entertaining, Public behavior, Regional differences and How to start a business* were available in English, Italian, Lithuanian and Romanian (and also in the national language of the suggested culture), allowing users to be exposed to a large range of cultural and linguistic aspects. One more module, entitled *No limits to success: create your own personal future* was designed to help learners use their creativity, addressing challenging topics such as personal responsibility, self belief, continuous learning, managing stress and others, and was very well received by students.

EVALUATION OF THE ELSTI PLATFORM

After using and discussing the ELSTI modules with our students, we (the team of teachers involved as administrators and the external evaluator) tried to evaluate the platform, by finding answers to the following issues listed in the table below.

Platform evaluation

| Questions | Answers from users of ELSTI -Platform |
|---|--|
| 1. How relevant do you think the platform is for the students in Business and Administration? a. As an instrument for a foreign language learning. b. From the point of view of the specific content (the module of professional training and the one of intercultural practice). | 1. We think in positive terms about this platform. a. It is a useful source, especially for individual study. b. The topics are appropriate and their content updated. The course is interactive, the students being stimulated to approach the activities and even to try them again if their first results are not satisfactory. |

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| <p>2. Do you intend to use the platform further on?</p> | <p>2. Yes, the preliminary results are encouraging, the students seem to enjoy the interactive types of courses used and their results are satisfactory.</p> |
| <p>3. How did the initiators of the platform help you in what the possibilities of the platform are concerned?</p> | <p>3. We have already organized two meetings with the initiators of the platform and the administrators and a focus group discussion: students were satisfied with the results, especially because the communication with the initiators was encouraged for the future.</p> |
| <p>4. How do you appreciate the platform from the didactic point of view?</p> | <p>4. We think it responds to most of our students' needs.</p> |
| <p>a. As a primary resource?</p> | <p>a. Improbable as a primary resource, since very many of our students have already covered the linguistic levels suggested by the platform. But for the distance students (5-10% of our total number of students) the platform is a good instrument, although it would mean we should have some negotiations with the Faculty management, since our evaluation system uses a unitary form of multiple choice test.</p> |
| <p>b. As a complementary resource?</p> | <p>b. It would be a better choice, because this means the administrators will have to permanently monitor the students' activity and could include these results into the final evaluation (10-20% of the final mark).</p> |
| <p>c. As a recovery resource?</p> | <p>c. Quite possible. The students that are supposed to retrieve the seminar activities might be assessed in this interactive way (thus getting 25-35% of the final mark). A problem that may arise here is the fraud, in the sense that the students may be helped by someone else when completing their tasks online. In this case the result would not be relevant any more.</p> |
| <p>d. As a formal/informal resource</p> | <p>d. We used it rather as an informal source, functioning as an alternative to other types of activities and giving the course administrator the possibility to decide how much, when and where to use the platform with the students. It is obvious that the modules were preferred especially for the seminar work.</p> |
| <p>e. As a permanent resource.</p> | <p>e. The platform can be used as a permanent resource only for the students' individual work. Their results may be used by the administrator, in some cases, as a bonus for their final work.</p> |
| <p>f. As a punctual, temporary resource.</p> | <p>f. It is possible, but at this moment it is hard to predict in what way exactly this would be useful.</p> |
| <p>g. As a resource for the official evaluation.</p> | <p>g. This is improbable, at least for the moment,</p> |

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| | because of the generalized evaluation system from the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. Nevertheless, the platform can be adapted to the needs of our students, meaning that in time it may become an alternative way of evaluation. |
| h. Besides the student's assessment. | h. For some students, namely the ones interested in the learning of another foreign language besides the ones they are already familiar with, the platform is really useful. As for the ones that want to improve their knowledge in the language they are studying as their major, the activity may be considered as a bonus for the final mark. |
| i. Used with all the students in Business and Administration. | i. Improbable but not impossible. |
| j. Used with small groups of students with a certain profile. | j. We prefer to use it with smaller groups of students with a certain language level and profile, at least for the moment. |

CONCLUSIONS

Using the ELSTI Platform with our students was a useful and interesting experience because it helped us teach foreign languages online, by finding a new and fun way to learn practical language skills for the office, by training them on the different world business cultures, by encouraging them to effectively speak a foreign language in real business settings. Using the online ELSTI linguistic platform with certain groups of students and with moderation will certainly help both students and teachers in the teaching learning process, helping especially on the side of individual study and encouraging the less communicative ones to improve their linguistic and business skills. That is why we warmly recommend the use of this online platform as an alternative material in the area of learning/teaching and assessing foreign languages for special purposes.

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