

LIFELONG LEARNING FOR VET: PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNING IN EUROPEAN PROJECTS (LAPROF AND ELSTI CASE STUDIES)

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This article aims to present the efforts and means of putting into practice and of promoting trans-national mobility for vocational training and education, especially in connection to language learning, in the context of the present European economic shifting background. We will concentrate on two European projects: LaProf (Key Activity 2: Languages) and ELSTI (Leonardo da Vinci – Transfer of Innovation), both focused on foreign language learning meant to improve professional development and support company progress.

Key words: administrative staff, students, languages at the workplace, agriculture, business and administration, on-line language learning resources

This article is intended to share valuable information on the development of two European Union co-financed projects: Leonardo da Vinci – Transfer of Innovation and Key Activity 2 (Languages) project, both coordinated by the EuroEd Foundation, Iasi.

The first one, entitled **ELSTI: Eurobusiness Language Skills – Transfer of Innovation** (or, as called in the official documents, *European Languages for Secretaries*, ref. no. LLP-LDV/Tol/2007/RO/008), aims at enabling office staff working in SMEs and students or pupils studying economics, business administration or accounting to improve their linguistic and intercultural communication needs so as to enhance personal professional evolution and successful integration into the office working environment. On the other hand, the project is also aimed at raising the small and medium companies' rates of success in the light of a smoother channel of business communication. In this respect, the ELSTI project offers to its targeted public modules of *business culture*, which were

built to reflect the national business environments of ten European countries and a module of *personal development*, which works on building confidence and motivation of students for reaching higher levels of proficiency in terms of both job and linguistic performance.

The second project presented here is ***LaProf: Language Learning for Professionals in ICT and Agriculture*** (ref. no. 143436-LLP-1-2008-FI-KA2-KA2MP). The main objective of ***LaProf*** is to equip its target public with a series of tools for learning general and specific vocabulary and for acquiring cultural and social information much needed when going to work abroad. The intended users are ICT teachers living in Estonia (and the Baltic region in general) who want to relocate and work in Finland, and agricultural professionals living in Romania who want to move and work in Greece. At the same time, the project addresses the training institutions and decision makers in this field, providing them with working tools, such as online learning platforms that include language courses and language learning exercises; the main idea is how to tie up language learning and cultural acclimatization into the training and immigration processes.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The two projects are the effect of the analysis of the findings of a study commissioned by the European Commission related to the consequences of language skills command on the business development. It has been proven that small and middle enterprises from newly joining countries into the European Union experience difficulties with business interaction worldwide due to the lack of language, cultural interaction and IT skills. This was the starting point of the above mentioned study called ELAN - Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise-which gathered information from 100 Romanian SMEs working in exporting goods or services, related to the importance of language and intercultural skills of the staff.

EuroEd Foundation is familiar with the results of this study, as it was directly involved in the gathering of information and data processing; results indicate the importance of acquiring the skills mentioned above, not only from the personal development point of view, but also from the business success perspective. The respondents said that they could clearly identify moments of business loss (such as failing to close contracts) because of language related difficulties and that they considered language skills as an important criterion when hiring new staff. It is all the more so with the multinational companies which practice "selective recruitment" in a percent of 94%. Aside from being a selection criterion, language skills are also monitored during employment, as participant companies in the study declared.

On the other hand, these two projects are concerned with work mobility within the EU, as many professionals from countries like Romania or Estonia find it difficult to fit into the new working and social environment, because they were not previously exposed to the language and culture of the destination country. Moreover, office staff from Baltic countries cannot meet their full potential and are also not sufficiently qualified in the European working context when it comes to language, IT and intercultural communication skills.

For ***LaProf***, the basic idea was to help specific categories of professionals to qualify for, find and adapt to new jobs in their field of activity across the borders. To start with, as partner in the project, EuroEd strongly supported the choice of the two target groups from Romania and Estonia: ICT teachers and young agriculture

professionals, both categories wanting to find work in EU countries. The basic pattern is that young agriculture professionals from Romania seek relocation in EU countries more concerned and for a longer time so with an approach to agriculture connected to ecology (for example Greece) and ICT Estonian teachers seek relocation in Finland or other Nordic countries.

The main objective of the **ELSTI** project on the other hand is finding a way to transfer innovation from more experienced countries in the EU towards the less experienced ones and also to add new practical value to previous project findings and results, namely to apply them to real situations the project has identified.

LaProf project is oriented towards two professional areas – ICT education and agriculture – and its final product is planned to be an online environment called the *LaProf Web portal*, where professionals from the two fields of activity can find language learning exercises and much needed info on cultural matters in the countries where they wish to immigrate.

As mentioned above, the project is focused on two specific types of professionals: ICT teachers (or students/unemployed graduates with this specialisation) from the Baltic region, who wish to find work in Finland and agriculture professionals (either unemployed, or freshly graduated in this field of activity) from Romania who wish to find work in Greece.

The motivation behind this initiative was based on the fact that people working as ICT teachers or in agriculture and residing in Eastern European countries have little access to foreign language learning, especially if we should take into consideration the following aspects: a) these professionals are located in rural areas (which might be the case for agriculture professionals); b) the foreign language they need to learn is not one of large circulation (such as Greek, Finnish, Hungarian, Romanian, and Russian); c) they need to use a specific portion of vocabulary, namely the professional terminology. Therefore, it seems as absolutely necessary to create language learning and teaching tools for the particular sectors of teacher and vocational education.

A secondary issue was that of promoting under-represented languages (mentioned at b), along with the specific language skills in wide circulated European languages. In this respect, the users of the *LaProf Web portal* will find exercises for learning terminology of their sectors in both the languages of the destination countries (i.e. Finland and Greece), as well as in two widely spoken EU languages (i.e. English and French).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In order to accomplish the set targets, the partners involved in LaProf project needed to identify first the learning needs of the selected groups and the connection between these needs and the requirements of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFL) of the Council of Europe, so as to equip learners with skills and knowledge relevant for the European frame. In the same time, the proceedings of the project are planned to meet the trainers' need for particular VET tools, applicable to this situation. The resulted methods and learning/teaching materials will be evaluated by means of having actual sample users experience the developed platform.

After the trials and the confirmation of the model, the goal is to embed the methods into the educational system, so that people who wish to relocate in other countries may have a background of cultural knowledge about those countries, and

into the immigration process, so that along with the generic conversational language skills, professionals who want to find jobs elsewhere in the EU may acquire specific terminology in the language of the destination country. Last but not least, it is important to forward a set of policy recommendations to language teachers, professional associations and decision makers that deal with both language learning, teachers' education, as well as vocational education and training around Europe.

As a continuation of a previous project, *ELS: European Languages for Secretaries*, ELSTI aims at taking a step further the findings of ELS, which means developing new content based on the existing patterns and making available for the public (and especially for the target public, administrative office staff) the final results materialized in modules on **business culture** and on personal development of **office staff**, contents that can be accessed on <http://www.eurobusinesslanguageskills.net/>.

For the ELSTI project, the targeted users are intended to be employees of SMEs all around the European Union who deal with secretarial/administrative tasks on a daily basis, but also student and pupils in the process of training/education enrolled in technical, economic and professional educational institutions.

Another way of helping through the profesional achievement of office staff regarding language, intercultural and IT skills and the development of SMEs in view of smoother international business communication is intergrating all the resources mentioned above into the teaching systems of the newly added countries of the EU. This goal is especially important for the fesability of the project and it addresses the students and pupils from technical, professional and economic educational institutions.

The platform of the project is meant as a valid and challenging alternative for the already set institutionalised means of teaching/learning languages and IT skills and as an interesting path to getting acquainted with the **business culture** of 10 European countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and UK. Both projects also address the trainers and educational institutions as far as teaching tools and methods are concerned.

The most important products of *ELSTI* are business language courses, business culture modules (presenting the business environments of ten European countries) and a module on personal development (aimed at enhancing learners' motivation to acquire new linguistic, intercultural and professional skills). The business language courses are available in four languages, but the platform which is designed as a challenging learning enironment is translated into nine languages: English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Norwegian, Romanian, Slovak and Spanish (www.eurobusinesslanguageskills.net).

The business language courses are organised into ten units on the following topics: In the Office, On the telephone, Correspondence, Internet, Grammar, Culture, and also include four types of follow-up activities: Dialogue, Practice, Game, Simulation. Aside from developing the language skills (reading, writing,

listening), these units are designed to familiarise the user with cultural issues in connection with each topic and to encourage language practice by means of vocabulary and grammar exercises. All ten units are available in English, French, Italian and Spanish and for two levels: basic users and independent users (A2 and B1 respectively, according to the Common European Framework of Reference).

The business culture modules reflect the specificity of the business environment in ten European countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and UK. The organisation of these modules is given by business activities related topics, such as Making Appointments, Telephone Etiquette, Receiving Clients, Business Dress Code, Addressing Others, Negotiating, Entertaining, Public Behaviour, Regional Differences and How to Start a Business in ... and the users may evaluate their intake after getting through the modules by doing the Final Test (each module ends with such a test).

The module on personal development entitled ***No Limits To Success: Create Your Own Personal Future*** is available online and it helps users to develop their own personal vision on success and on means and ways of becoming successful. The hypertextual presentation consists of references to bibliographical resources on various subjects and active links, so that each individual should find his/her own way to achieving professional success by taking the right chances and overcoming barriers like the lack of confidence and stress.

All these elements combined with the interactive method offered by the use of an internet platform as support for the structured modules build on the users' confidence not only in gaining language and office behavior proficiency, but also in making use of the Internet and in acquiring ICT skills, on top of becoming familiar with the cultural issues of the countries mentioned.

The modern approach of creating learning materials directly linked to the learners' personal needs is being found at the basis of the development of the contents of these two interactive e-learning environments: the ***LaProf*** project starts with a thorough investigation and workshops meant to spotlight areas of professional content relevant for the target audience alongside previous successful learning experiences useful at the moment when decisions regarding the development of the new materials are being made.

CONCLUSIONS

For European Member States, promoting lifelong learning is a way to move forward towards the so-called "Lisbon objective", that is to make the EU become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.

In this light, both projects presented in this paper work on the "Lisbon objective" and the way to get there is by empowering individuals to better fit in new surroundings: social, political, economical, cultural. The two-way directioning of effects and results of ***LaProf*** and ***ELSTI*** address the targeted public (professional

individuals from the fields of activity presented above) and the relevant decision-making bodies, educational institutions and interested companies (stakeholders), which is why the activities and the results of the projects will be - after the initiation phase – self-sustaining, as they will trigger a set of measures in the line of officially filling in the gaps identified at the initial stages of the projects.

An interesting way of identifying these gaps and of also finding solutions is the concept of “user generated content”, as stakeholders will be enabled to further develop and maintain existing content. Based on this approach, a refined sustainability model will be worked out during the project, as **LaProf** is designed the way it does not need many resources and the emphasis is on networking and target groups learning and working together.

For the ELSTI project, the means to the same end is including the language courses and accompanying learning resources currently available on the project portal (www.eurobusinesslanguageskills.net) in the professional training public system of at least one country represented in the project partnership. The Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, The Faculty of Economics in Iasi, The Economic High School in Iasi are all engaged in piloting these courses and finding ways of harmonising their implementation within the national or institutional curriculum for language learning.

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