

# KEEPING FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING FRESH AND EXCITING VIA THE ISPY PROJECT PLATFORM

Irina GHEORGHIU<sup>1</sup>, Elza GHEORGHIU<sup>2</sup>, Stefan COLIBABA<sup>3</sup>

Email: [irina\\_gheorghiu16@yahoo.com](mailto:irina_gheorghiu16@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

The ISPY project is a Key Activity 2 Languages Multilateral Project, financially supported by the Lifelong Learning programme. The project aims to develop a new online networking platform which allows interaction between young adults across Europe and helps them learn a new language via problem-solving challenges and tasks. The project partners have drawn inspiration from the espionage theme in order to keep foreign language learning fresh and exciting. Learners log in and they are soon challenged, perplexed and entertained while covering a set of ten modules in the target language of their choice. Each module consists of a range of activities including photo stories, web quests, short tasks, quizzes, listening tasks and extended tasks that call for collaboration through a moderated forum. Guidelines are also developed as part of the project to support teacher training. By encouraging learners to communicate with peers across Europe through a funny virtual environment this innovative project aims to have a positive impact on developing language and intercultural skills. It focuses not only on improving intercultural dialogue in Europe but also on reinforcing language skills that are relevant to the workplace. In doing so we envisage that learners will be able to develop general and vocational language skills for use in both formal and informal situations.

**Key words:** online platform, ,interactive game, language learning

I SPY (Project number 511558—LLP-1—2010—1- UK-KA2—KA2MP ) develops an Online Networking Platform for Language Learning (English, German, Spanish, Dutch, Polish and Romanian), designed for beginners (A1-A2) involved in general and vocational training systems. The project is based on the interactive flash application environment that facilitates language acquisition, ensuring best practices in cultural contexts in both formal and informal situations.

This platform has been developed by an international partnership coordinated by the University of Wolverhampton. The other partners are other institutions from Holland, Germany, Poland, Spain and Romania. The platform promotes interaction among learners working both individually and in teams/ pairs with a view to learning a new language through problem-solving tasks.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

The project theme is unusual and challenging: the espionage theme. The partnership has decided on the espionage theme for different reasons. First of all, spy stories are accessible to every one, gaining a wide audience because they are entertaining. Secondly, people like them because spy stories are a challenge which soon gets readers/learners mentally involved in the solving of the mysteries. They give people a chance to put their mind to work in a very pleasant way. They also appeal to everybody's sense of

adventure which finds here the atmosphere needed. Thus, spy fiction becomes a refuge in the everyday life, a place full of danger but which is safe, where people are given the possibility to test their abilities of reasoning, of anticipating, interpreting, and drawing conclusions in spite of the fact that they have few clues at their disposal. Finally, learners get the satisfaction of accomplishing their missions by seeing a murderer punished. A spy story is a story about a crime, some clues, and a spy who has to solve the mystery. In most spy stories, the crime is murder and the clues lead to the solution. The pattern of most spy stories is the same: the writer introduces

<sup>1</sup> Universitatea Albert Ludwigs Freiburg, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Liceul Vasile Alecsandri Iasi/ EuroEd Iasi

<sup>3</sup> Universitatea Al I Cuza Iasi/ EuroEd Iasi

the readers to the crime, the spy and several clues and suspects. The climax of the story comes when the spy finds out the truth and solves the mystery. The spy in our case is the learner who is in the pursuit of the murderer through the skilful presentation of clues. The mystery is very important and the writer must be fair and follow strict rules in the telling of the murder, the presentation of the clues and the withholding of the identity of the murderer until the end. The reader/learner's pursuit in finding out the truth becomes an adventure of the mind. The project spy story engages the learners by gradually revealing clues which will eventually lead them to the solution. In the end the learners are reassured of the validity of human logic in the face of strange mysteries. The text is also rewarding, catching the reader/learner's attention by making them curious and inviting them to participate in the adventures. The project writers have noticed and analysed the engagement of the readers of the spy stories. Thus, in designing the story of the game the project writers started from the idea that what readers most like about spy stories is the capacity of reasoning and solving puzzles, by putting clues together in a logical manner. They know that what keeps readers glued to this literature lies not in the punishment of the guilty person, the characters or the setting of the story but in the way in which the writer arranges the events and builds the narrative structure.

The learners log in and undertake a set of approximately ten modules, which are described as 'spy training missions' and which they have to attend and complete in order to become qualified spies. The first mission introduces them to the crime: "Someone hacked into a special government research laboratory and copied secret files". Learners are asked to participate in the investigation, identify the criminal and return the files. Their itinerary in search for clues which will bring them nearer and nearer the hacker takes them to the airport, a hotel room, a restaurant, a chemist's, the Star City Shopping Mall and Leisure Centre and finally to the ESB Headquarters to assist with the interrogation of the arrested suspects.

The course/ game follows the pattern of the traditional spy story: learners/spies to be have to find important information on the suspects which can help them to identify the hacker.

The challenging story is in fact a pretext to go through main topics which people usually study when learning a foreign language: Checking in at the hotel/ Asking for and following directions/ Ordering a meal in a restaurant/ Watching news bulletins to find specific information/ Buying a train ticket/ Using a map: identifying the correct routes to reach a number of destinations/ Buying items in a shop/ Describing and identifying people/ Describing and identifying places. In order to proceed further into the story the learner has to complete 10 missions which will enable him to find

more clues about the criminals/ hackers. Each mission is accomplished by doing several tasks: listening, matching, true or false, fill-in the-gap tasks, and an extended task that may call for collaboration among learners, "spies" through a forum. During the missions the users will need to learn key language skills such as booking hotel rooms, dealing with purchasing, arranging and presenting at meetings, ordering a meal in a restaurant, purchasing travel tickets and reading documents in order to complete the missions. As the main tasks sit on a virtual learning environment, facilities for storing files and personalising individual pages are already build into it. This also applies to teachers/trainers as they are able to add additional facilities although outside of the project responsibility. Users will also need an area in which to save notes and work.

The approaches used to develop the materials are innovative as the learning situation created encourages use of problem-solving skills combined with language learning and cultural understanding.

In essence, the project and its methodology aim to provide innovative tools to tackle issues of engagement and motivation in language learning in upper secondary as well as pre-vocational and vocational education and training. Learning a language turns into a challenging experience which will engage learners into a spy story that will enable them to make decisions based on their learning the language.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The ISPY project aims to develop a new online platform to help young adults across Europe learn a new language. The platform aims to develop learning situations which will enable learners to learn a new language via problem-solving challenges and tasks within an interactive environment. By fulfilling the tasks learners will be able to develop general and vocational language skills for use in both formal and informal situations.

The project promotes language learning and encourages both teachers and learners to participate more actively in developing their language and cultural competencies. The espionage theme acts as an incentive in this endeavour by engaging its participants (learners/ teachers) emotionally and mentally. What is also innovative is that it gives opportunities to teachers/trainers to develop new tasks at a higher level, hence becoming a progressive learning and teaching tool. Learners/trainees and teacher/trainees can generate their own new learning situations. This would be achieved by the development of guidance tools for creating new content using the existing mission templates.

The main objectives of the project are:

1. Develop an online networking platform for learning languages (general language and vocational language skills) (formal and informal learning context) available in English, Dutch, Spanish, German, Romanian and Polish.

2. Develop learning situations which will allow interaction between learners from different countries who will work together to learn a new language, via problem-solving challenges and tasks.

3. Develop a training manual for teachers and educators, supporting professional development (including pedagogical guidelines and reference to the Common European Framework of Reference)

In order to achieve the main project objectives and start the development of the platform, the consortium carried out research on each partner's national context, language provision, ethnic distribution and representation, general educational systems, teacher training provision, languages taught, methodologies and pedagogies, materials used and techniques and use of ICT in language teaching. The executive summary can be downloaded on the ISPY website: [www.ispy-project.com](http://www.ispy-project.com).

The next stage undertaken was the outlining of the learning situations of each mission within the platform. They are now the basis of the flash content which sits within a virtual learning environment and is accessible by all types of learners and educators involved. Each mission implies learning tasks displayed in very attractive technical interactive environments. These missions do not only introduce the learners to the foreign language but also provide them with a lot of practice in the fascinating online space. The learners gradually discover and complete activities which are also rooted in the cultural context of each language. Learners' progress is ensured by authentic audio files and catchy visual images. The online space is friendly and definitely makes learners feel at home, creating a comfortable atmosphere.

Language learning is structured on topics and achieved through a wide range of challenging tasks (exercises) which guide the learner through the ten missions.

The platform provides interactive, diverse and attractive teaching materials and it enhances the participants' motivation to learn and tests their competences in learning and practicing formal and informal language structures.

Alongside the platform the partners also developed a pedagogical guide, which includes sections on the use of ICT in language learning, a

'How to Teach' section and recommendations for implementation and future improvements. The How to Teach section gives teachers/trainers valuable tips on how to manage the missions in an interactive manner and even create additional missions using the templates of the missions and environments available.

## CONCLUSIONS

The project course provides a flexible learning format: learners work at their own pace and work through the activities and quizzes on their own schedule. Learners have an easy access to all materials. They also have access to authentic materials in six European languages (English, German, Spanish, Romanian, Polish and Dutch); all materials are designed with audio files that are embedded into each module (which definitely will help learners improve their pronunciation: from a single word to complete conversations). Learners will have an enjoyable experience while learning by being exposed to a story (on the topic of espionage) that enables them to make decisions based on their knowledge of a situation together with their learned understanding of a language and culture. In addition to basic vocabulary building and grammar activities, the language online course programme includes reading comprehension activities that allow learners to understand new meanings, expressions and words in different contexts. The vocabulary dealt with in the modules belongs to basic categories such as nationalities, food, jobs, house, sports or places in cities.

The project provides innovative tools to sustain and enhance learners' engagement and motivation in language learning in upper secondary and pre-vocational and vocational education and training. The theme chosen appeals to people's appetite for problem solving, which makes learning a language memorable and pleasant. The learner is provided with clues from which the identity of the criminal may be deduced but the solution to the crime is revealed at the end of the course/game. The learner cannot find the solution unless s/he achieves the tasks in the target language. Thus, finding a solution to the crime becomes similar to learning a foreign language.

Language learning is interactive, challenging and takes place through a virtual environment which encourages learners to communicate with peers across Europe. The platform benefits from using excellent creative graphics, which suits the learners' expectations. Its graphics systems stem from advances in image technology, which enables the new story to be told. Its graphics elucidates a

decision, dispels a doubt, or adds dynamism to all the project stages.

We all know the role virtual graphics plays nowadays. Virtual graphics helps people learn because it addresses all kinds of people who come with different learning styles and abilities. It is based on a universal language understood by everybody no matter the mother tongue they speak; we are all familiar with a picture which is used instead of a story because it can give the necessary information. Visual graphics means less time and less effort. Visual graphics supports all types of learning, enhances goal achievement and motivation. Virtual graphics appeals to people because it is creative, introducing, informative and innovative. Visual graphics is appreciated for its benefits and applicability to every aspect of learning making it unique. The project visual graphics has a great impact on its learners and

teachers rendering everybody's learning/teaching experience memorable and engaging.

We are confident that the insights generated by this project will have enduring relevance to people in other contexts. The consortium expects to achieve the aims by "collaboratively working together in developing learning situations which are appropriate for the target users identified. In addition the consortium aims to actively involve learners and other potential end users in order to do this and promote a better understanding between countries and culture"(www.ispy-project.eu).

## REFERENCES

**Blake Robert J., 2008, *Brave New Digital Classroom: Technology and Foreign Language Learning*, Georgetown University Press, p.1-25**

**Osborn Terry A., 2000, *Critical Reflection and the Foreign Language Classroom*, Bergin & Garvey, p.1-50**

\*\*\*[www.ispy-project.eu](http://www.ispy-project.eu)