ISPY – GAMES FOR LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

ISPY - JOCURI PENTRU ÎNVĂȚARE DE LIMBI STRĂINE

PETRESCU Elena Lucia[1], COLIBABA Anca Cristina[2], DINU Claudia[2]
e-mail: lucia.petrescu@euroed.ro

Abstract. *ISPY is a Partnership Project which aims to develop an Online Networking Platform for Language Learning. Apart from teachers and lecturers who can access the database, the Platform is also designed for beginners (A1-A2), learners involved in general, and vocational training programs. The project takes into account not only the interactive flash application environment that assists the language acquisition, but it has also in view the educational aspects to ensure full integration of best practices.*
Key words: online games, language learning, Moodle platform

Rezumat. *Proiectul ISPY are ca obiectiv major dezvoltarea unei platforme online pentru studiul limbilor străine. Platforma prezintă activități în format Flash dezvoltate de către echipa internațională. Profesorii au posibilitatea de a completa baza de date cu activitățile proprii, desfășurate la clasă.Acest lucru permite prezentarea la nivel internațional a unor modele de bună practică din cadrul țărilor participante în proiect și precum și a altor viitori beneficiari.*
Cuvinte cheie: jocuri online, invatare de limbi straine, platforma Moodle

INTRODUCTION

I SPY (Project number 511558—LLP-1– 2010—1- UK-KA2—KA2MP) develops an Online Networking Platform for Language Learning (www.ispy-project.eu). Apart from teachers and lecturers who can access the database, the Platform is also designed for beginners (A1-A2) involved in general and vocational training programs. The project takes into account not only the interactive flash application environment (Osborn, 2000) that assists the language acquisition, but it also has in view the educational aspects to ensure full integration of best practices.

This platform has been developed by an international partnership including the University of Wolverhampton (the project coordinator) and five other institutions from Holland, Germany, Poland, Spain and Romania. The platform encourages interaction between learners from different countries who can work both individually and in teams/ pairs to learn a new language via problem-solving challenges and tasks. In doing so, learners will be able to develop general and vocational language skills for use in both formal and informal situations (Blake, 2008).

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[1] EuroEd Foundation Iași, Romania
[2] "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Iasi, Romania

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The course the international partnership has developed is structured in ten missions which focus on various language aspects. These missions are meant not only to introduce the learner to the foreign language and provide practice opportunities. They also present cultural aspects related to the foreign language studied. Thus, the activities developed are contextualised and completed with both visual and audio images to better accommodate the learner in the virtual, online space.

Language learning is structured on topics and is added a rather large variety of exercises which guide the learner through the ten missions.

The real-time platform is aimed at upper secondary school learners and those in both general and pre-vocational education and training, who will trial the new platform alongside teachers and trainers. Guidelines will also be developed as part of the project to support teacher training. Language learning is interactive, fun and happens through a virtual environment which encourages learners to communicate with peers across Europe. This innovative project aims to have a positive impact on developing language and intercultural skills and it is focused on improving intercultural dialogue in Europe and on reinforcing language skills that are relevant to the workplace

The project has a theme of espionage and learners who log in on the platform undertake a set of ten modules. The modules are developed in each of the project languages and learners can select 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. Once learners have completed all of the modules they "graduate" as a qualified spy! Each country will also have the option to add additional activities to keep the content fresh thus add to the ten missions already developed by the international partnership.

The partners have tested the first missions in English version set up in the Moodle platform. The first missions were assessed in connection to proposed environments, general story and scripts. Each mission begins with a scene/context setting exercise which has a strong cultural focus. For example, in Mission 1 it consists of identification of landmarks from the relevant location e.g. London and the task of finding out more about them. Within each mission section in Moodle extra games, activities and additional documents can be added in Moodle. The overall story of each mission is consistent across all target languages: English, German, Romanian, Spanish, Polish and Dutch.

Teachers of foreign languages can be part of the project both as facilitators, presenting and using the platform with their students, and as direct beneficiaries themselves, using the methodological guide which is to be added to the platform.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the early stages of the ISPY Project a research and contextualization stage was carried out by all the partners. The aim of this was to contextualize language learning within the wider educational, political, economic, social and cultural dimensions of each partner country.

The reports subsequently produced are based on the information provided by partners in relation to their country specific situation and associated data. These reports are being used (by the project team) to inform the development of the platform and mission content.

An Executive Summary has also been produced and it presents an overview of the specific findings. This concise document provides an overview of the key themes in relation to the current state of languages education and national policies supporting language learning and current implementation models in the countries of the project partners. It also identifies current training and professional development of teachers and trainers, use of technology and cultural influences. The Executive Summary can be accessed at www.ispy-project.eu

The Platform provides interactive methods, 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. The basic topic of the project is "spying": the learners will log in and have to work on about 10 Modules, described as "Training for Spies".

Each module will be available in the six target languages and it will contain a background story, a photo-story, web links, short assignments, a quiz, listening tasks, gap texts and an extensive assignment that will be moderated on the forum. Once a learner has completed all 10 modules s/he will be recognized as "trained spy" in every country and the creators of the game, teachers and trainers will have the chance to add new activities to the content of the current assignments. On the one hand, this aims to foster competition between participants by increasing the learners' interest and motivation for taking responsibility for the dissemination of effective learning materials.

The ISPY Project has an Advisory Steering Board (ASB) to strategically steer the project's development and ensure relevance at local and transnational levels. The board gathers experts professionals in their field and includes representation from all the partner countries. The key objectives of the ASB include:

· providing quality assurance for the project plans and outcomes;
· offering expert advice and guidance, and act as a 'critical friend';
· assisting with dissemination of the project within their networks and contacts;
· facilitating cross-country collaboration and the sharing of good practice.

The first of two virtual meetings took place in November 2011 and allowed the board to comment on the project progress to date and make specific suggestions for the future direction. The board is informed of the project progress on a regular basis and will feedback on an ad hoc and informal basis whenever relevant.

CONCLUSIONS

Developing the materials for an online, multilingual platform has of course been accompanied by challenges in setting the right balance between content and language level so as to produce a final material appropriate for the end beneficiary.

The members of the international partnership have commonly develope the developmental frame for the ten missions and then each of the national teams have adapted the missions to their national language.

Material production in ISPY has been a complex process which included research, material development, testing and piloting, feedback collecting and material improvement according to the feedback received.

ISPY team continues to work on the platform further developing and improving materials. The platform can also be customised by teachers interested to personalise the ISPY ten missions to the specific learning needs of their students.

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