

# VIRTUAL SUPPORT FOR REAL LIFE LET'S GO, APLANET, ISPY PROJECTS

## SUPPORT VIRTUAL PENTRU VIAȚA REALĂ PROIECTELE LET'S GO, APLANET, ISPY

*COLIBABA Anca*<sup>1,2</sup>, *VRÎNCEANU C.*<sup>3</sup>, *COLIBABA S.*<sup>2,4</sup>,  
*COLIBABA Cintia*<sup>3</sup>, *DINU E.C.*<sup>1</sup>

e-mail: acolib@euroed.ro

**Abstract.** *The three projects presented within this article develop on the idea of user virtual support. It is highly recommended that both students and teachers are presented with such resources which enhance efficiency, relevance and achievement. However, despite the vast quantity of online materials, users often find themselves at a loss: there are too many, too varied materials and too little time for selection. Directly addressing this situation, the three projects focus on online material selection, development of tutor guidance, online courses for direct beneficiaries with user support and international collaboration opportunities. Before actually being supportive, virtual support needs to be clearly structured and labeled so that target beneficiaries can easily access relevant material directly. Although direct transfer to real life use necessarily includes adaptation of the material, the products of the above mentioned projects will facilitate selection of online material and will thus support use of relevant material appropriate the context of implementation.*

**Key words:** online resources, training, skill development

**Rezumat.** *Proiectele prezentate în articolul de față sunt centrate pe ideea de dezvoltare a suportului virtual. Bazele de date online dezvoltate de aceste proiecte oferă atât profesorilor cât și elevilor un suport de lucru relevant cu scopul de a le eficientiza activitatea. În fața mării varietăți de materiale online utilizatorii se află în situația dificilă de a le selecta pe cele potrivite activității lor. Proiectele mai sus amintite se adresează direct acestei situații și urmează să implementeze activități de selectare a materialelor online, dezvoltare de ghiduri pentru utilizatori (profesori și elevi), și deschidere de oportunități de colaborare internațională. Pentru a facilita accesul beneficiarilor la aceste materiale bazele de date trebuie să fie clar structurate și catalogate oferind în același timp posibilitatea de adaptare a resurselor la contextele specifice ale beneficiarilor.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** resurse online, sesiuni de formare, dezvoltare de abilitati

## INTRODUCTION

With all the latest development in relation to online teaching and learning materials few of us teachers can undertake the position of a well

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<sup>1</sup> University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iași, Romania

<sup>2</sup> EuroEd Foundation

<sup>3</sup> University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iași, Romania

<sup>4</sup> "Al. I. Cuza" University Iași, Romania

informed, competent user of online resources and educational technologies. Even though materials exist in an overwhelming amount we find ourselves in the position of not being able to decide whether or not we need online resources, which ones we need and best suit our needs and how to smoothly integrate them in our classes. When it comes to the learner, the situation tends to be even more dramatic: to be able to select a proper set of online materials they need to have a very well structured approach to discriminate among the immense variety of online offers.

We all know that online materials are meant to make our work easier, both for educators and learners. But does it always turn out to be just as easy as that?

When we discuss the facility with which we approach online resources and their selection we need to bear in mind at least a few more other aspects such as: appropriateness, efficiency and accessibility. When we consider all these aspects and try to assess a large amount of material the task turns out not to be as easy as it seemed in the beginning.

It is within this context that the three projects, funded by the European Commission, are set. LET'S GO (LLP-LdV-TOI-2009-IT-0912), APLANET (511460-LLP-1-2010-1-TR-KA2-KA2MP) and ISPY (511558-LLP-1-2010-1-UK-KA2-KA2MP) all deal with online materials user support in more or less complementary manners.

Let's Go underpins the necessity of educators being trained to select online materials for their classes and develops online courses in this direction.

The main target group of the Aplanet project (Autonomous "Personal Learning Networks" for language teachers) is made of language teachers that want to improve their professional development and hence the performances of their pupils by accessing a wide range of resources, teaching techniques and advice available from other colleagues on the World Wide Web. There is a technique that can be used by any individual that wants to engage in learning online and this is called a Personal Learning Network (or PLN in short). The Aplanet project aims at enabling a high number of teachers in using PLNs effectively by designing a set of instructions for developing a PLN, by familiarizing potential beneficiaries with current concepts for using a PLN and by giving examples of resources that can be used for the creation of a PLN. In this article, we wish to explore how support is being offered for teachers that want to create and maintain a PLN, how effective can support be when it is ensured only online and sometimes by experts the trained teachers have never met. We will analyse the main tools and strategies designed within the Aplanet project for recruiting and retaining teachers and in the conclusion we will present the tools and strategies that have proven to be most effective in attracting teachers and the ones to which the target group has responded well.

Within the context of developing mother tongue and two other languages alongside other goals set out under the E & T work programme 2010, language and intercultural competencies are key skills for personal, social and economic effectiveness and fulfillment within the European context

and citizenship. Improving education and training, the quality of the workforce and promoting language learning are key areas addressed by ISPY project.

## **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

In order to respond to the needs outlined above, the Let's Go project developed four online training courses on the following topics:

1. Introduction to e-learning
2. Research and evaluation of e-learning based language training products
3. Development of e-learning based language learning sources
4. Effective use of e-learning based language learning sources

The project partnership also developed a database of e-learning based products for language teaching and learning, a database of e-learning experiences carried out by language teachers and a collection of tools and sources related to e-learning

The first steps taken by the Aplanet project partnership are in the direction of bringing together a high number of teachers interested in piloting the Aplanet methodology. This is a very essential stage as, once the Aplanet methodology for creating PLNs will be finalized, it will need to be validated by those who will have to use it – the foreign language teachers. The project partnership, through promotion in social networking sites, has managed to find 140 foreign language teachers willing to volunteer as participants. All these teachers were recruited online which proves that, even if a high number of teachers are present in social networks and on websites for professional development, they still feel the need that they would benefit from training in the area of designing a PLN. The social networks most frequently used for recruiting teachers were Twitter and Facebook. The institutions managing the Aplanet project are educational institutions with a wide range of contacts among foreign language teachers. The 140 teachers initially recruited have been directed to a Facebook group that was created when the project received the EU-funding for development. On this initial group news were posted regarding the project goals and initial steps. This was a challenging time in the life of the project as the project partnership could not offer much to the teachers interested since the project products have not been developed yet. The next step to involve the teachers was to let them know that the first project of the meeting is being organized and to give them the opportunity to attend an online seminar (webinar) within this meeting. The webinar was organized as follows: every teacher had a webcam and a chat window opened in which they could type-in questions for the project partners. The project partners were all in one room, using one computer and one web camera for introducing themselves to the teachers. After a member of the partnership introduced herself or himself, they moved on to their own computers where they answered, in the chat window, questions coming from the teachers. In this webinar the teachers that decided to participate (around 30 teachers, on a weekend day) were presented the project goals by the project coordinator and explained what their main role will be.

The second interaction with the teachers was to announce them that a Facebook page was created for replacing the Facebook group - as it allows posting more information. The Facebook page has now gathered more than 200 supporters. The Aplanet project has a Ning as well. The Ning is – to some extent – the equivalent of a project website – that in addition to the traditional content of a

website – allows collaboration between registered users of the website. The Aplanet partnership advertised the Ning to the teachers recruited via Facebook and on the project Ning: <http://aplanet-project.org/> there is now a lively community of teachers already sharing a lot of information and starting discussions even if the resources from the Aplanet project and the methodology will be finalized at a later stage. The number of the Ning users is greater than the number of the Facebook page and of the Facebook group initially used. Most of the users interested in the project have continued to participate in all the subsequent channels of communication used.

ISPY project focuses on the following aspects:

- Reinforcing the acquisition of competence in languages to improve intercultural dialogue in Europe
- Reinforcing language competencies relevant to the workplace in order to improve the integration of individuals in enterprise and enhance European competitiveness
- Developing and promoting methodologies to motivate language learners and to enhance their capacity for language learning, in particular, through information and communication technologies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Work on Let's Go project started from the presumption that there are three core competencies necessary for language teachers / trainers who are willing to exploit the e-learning potentials :

- Knowing how to choose products within the available identifying those that best meet their educational needs.
- Knowing how to use and enhance the products available either as an alternative or as integration of traditional methodologies.
- Knowing how to create educational and training products that exploit the potential of new technologies.

To further develop on these ideas the partnership prepared an action plan focusing on development of online user support, assessment and improvement of materials. Activities included:

- Involvement of 5 school and 20 teachers per partner
- Involvement of 3 training institutions and 10 trainers per partner
- Collection of 5 school letters of intent per partner
- Collection of 3 training institution letters of intent per partner
- Sending of the School Presentation Forms and of the Training Institutions Presentation Forms
- Creation of the project web site
- Technical check and debug of the LeTS On Line courses.
- Check of the contents of the LeTS On Line courses
- Pilot course to prepare the partners for the delivery of the course for trainers
- Project web site
- Technical Improvement of the Lets On Line courses

- Improvement of the contents and of the translations of the Lets On Line courses
- Preparation of partners for the delivery of courses and for distance tutoring

The main objectives of the LeTS GO project is to enable language trainers and teachers to: choose quality language teaching products identifying those that best meet specific educational needs, use the products available either as an alternative or as integration of traditional methodologies, create educational and training products that exploit the potential of new technologies.

The project partners in APLANET found out that the online recruiting channels (Twitter and Facebook) can be very efficient if those who launch an invitation are credible and well-known in the online environment. A crucial step in recruiting online and in maintaining the teachers interest in the project is to give regular updates regarding the project development and to send the clear message that the volunteers are not forgotten. The webinar was the most effective tool in retaining the attention of the participants as they met the project team more closely and reviewed the project goals and their roles as volunteers. A very effective tool in retaining the attention of the participants is the creation of the project Ning. The project's Ning was initially advertised on the Facebook page and then teachers were invited to register on the Ning and share discussions, questions and expectations related to PLNs. In the true spirit of collaborative learning encouraged by PLNs, the teacher enrolled on the Ning already started sharing resources and interesting links. This is the first step in creating a PLN and the partnership has noted as very important the fact that the teachers involved are doing this naturally.

The ISPY platform makes use of a real context for developing a European dimension to learning, multilingualism, interaction, cooperation and collaborative working, learning language strategies, and experiencing different cultures via interactive social facilities. The platform is aimed at upper secondary learners and learners in vocational education and training who are also the primary test users alongside teachers and trainers. It makes use of a new methodology for teaching and learning languages and, therefore, pedagogical guidelines are included to support initial and teacher training (staff and educators).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Knowledge of the foreign languages is a key element for a good employability. New Technologies can make the language learning process more user friendly and enjoyable. At the same time New Technologies have changed training methodologies, introducing elements of innovation that have redrawn the role of teachers and trainers.

In recruiting and retaining participants in a project online, the main risk is that the participants lose interest, and, not being compelled by an extrinsic

obligation to continue, they are very likely to give up. The partnerships in the three projects managed to keep the teachers' interest through several communication channels. The main feature of these communication channels was the fact that they are open. Every participant has the opportunity to contribute and to say something, with discrete moderation from the entire partnership. It is very likely that many of the teachers would have given up if they had not been allowed to communicate but only receive information and instructions. Collaboration is thus one of the key features one must take into consideration when designing a recruiting process online. Another key element that has resulted is maintaining interest through online presence of the project partnership and presentation of updates. The permanent presence of the project members and their contributions to the discussions has assured teachers that the project is not inactive and that their contributions are being taken into consideration by the project partnership.

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