



The ILOCALAPP Project: a Smart Approach to Language and Culture Acquisition

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the ILOCALAPP project, acronym for Incidentally Learning Other Cultures And Languages through an APP (www.ilocalapp.eu). ILOCALAPP is a three-year Erasmus+ project coordinated by the University of Bologna and carried out by a transnational consortium with the aim of producing an app for the incidental learning of four cultures and languages: Finnish, Italian, Polish and Portuguese. Based on the principles of incidental learning, the app will offer mobility students the possibility to get acquainted with local language and culture in a smart, creative way. Learners will participate in the process of knowledge creation and will be facilitated in their comprehension of (inter) cultural codes.

Building upon two previous experiences carried out by the Consortium, E-LOCAL (Electronically Learning Other Cultures And Languages) and elocALL (E-LOCAL for all), the ILOCALAPP project will result in an advanced tool for language and culture acquisition. If the E-LOCAL courses, produced and valorised with the two previous projects, – and still in use in the consortium and beyond – allow for a plunge into the language and culture of destination, ILOCALAPP will provide mobility students with a new handy tool, to be used in complementarity with the E-LOCAL courses or as a stand-alone product.

E-LOCAL, elocALL and ILOCALAPP exploit part of the huge variety of possibilities to support the acquisition of language and cultural skills that new technologies undoubtedly offer. With this paper, we investigate the approaches adopted by the three projects and the evolution in terms of both results and perspectives.

1. Methodological and political framework

Nowadays we seem to be light years away from the traditional, monolingual, language learning methodologies: plurilingualism, pluriculturalism and innovative environments are some of the current leading strands in educational linguistics.

Within this perspective, methodological and political frameworks seem to mutually support each other: incidental and implicit learning, plural and plurilingual approaches, meaningful learning are current scientific fields to explore and political issues promoted in the most recent European reports about innovation in education.

Second language acquisition research on incidental learning is still very promising and far from being covered exhaustively (Rebuschat 2015). Incidental learning, for its unintentional and unplanned nature, can happen no matter when or where. It is generally “situated, contextual, and social” [...] and it can result in improved competence, changed attitudes, and growth in interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and self-awareness” (Kerka 2000: 1). Moreover, Krashen *forgetting principle* reminds us of the importance of psychological and personal emotional factors to positively influence learning results: “the best input is so interesting and relevant that the acquirer may even forget that the message is encoded in a foreign language” (Krashen 1982: 66).

Incidental learning is *seamless* and *crossover* as it does not take place in specific settings - institutional contexts, classrooms, virtual informal environments (Sharples *et al.* 2015). The exploration of local places through interactive maps and digital devices fosters real-like, dynamic and authentic experiences around the places, which are cultural, linguistic and social at the same time. The social dimension plays a central role in unstructured explorative incidental learning. Learning by doing or experiential learning (Dewey 1938) is generally highly significant because people act and are personally involved to resolve something (problem-based activity), to reach a goal or to create an artefact. Usually rules aren't set previously, thus favouring the exploration of creative collaborative ways to get to the aim. The skills boosted in learning by doing and experiential learning are part of the general competences expected by the ‘modern’ student of foreign languages in Europe, a student who is also sensitized to be a social actor and an active citizen (Common European Framework 2001).

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Methodological and political views bring forward coherent and similar perspectives as it is shown in the report *Improving the effectiveness of language learning: CLIL and Computer assisted language learning* (CALL) published by the European Commission in June 2014. The benefits of CALL reported in this study concern *i*) motivation and confidence; *ii*) cultural awareness, and finally *iii*) “promotion of student-centred learning, allowing for self-paced learning styles, and increased risk-taking” (Scott, Beadle 2014: 24).

As we will see, all these concepts are leading for the ILOCALAPP project’s aims.

2. E-LOCAL, elocALL and ILOCALAPP

In recent years, ILOCALAPP is the third project coordinated by the University of Bologna, which is putting into effect the European policies for languages and mobility. Since 2010, with the start of E-LOCAL – and then with E-LOCAL for all and ILOCALAPP – themes such as raising language awareness, enlarging access to language resources, preserving linguistic and cultural diversity, along with the promotion of the internationalisation of education, have been actively pursued by the University of Bologna and the consortia participating in the projects.

2.1 The E-LOCAL project and the production of the E-LOCAL courses

E-LOCAL, abbreviated from Electronically Learning Other Cultures and Languages, was a two-year multilateral project funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme. It lasted from 2010 to 2012 and led to the creation of the E-LOCAL courses, uniform and innovative learning tools and materials for six cultures and languages at A1 level of the CEFR: Dutch, Finnish, Hungarian, Italian, Polish and Portuguese. The courses were explicitly designed for mobility students, i.e. for students going to experience a mobility period in one of the countries where a language of the project is spoken.

Once the project terminated, in each partner institution a customised Moodle platform hosting the E-LOCAL courses was established and it is still in use. The E-LOCAL courses are based on the adventures of two Erasmus students and have all the same structure (an introductory unit, eight core units and a final unit of self-assessment). Each core unit is built around a main theme linked to a possible real-life situation and has the same fivefold structure (a story, a grammar section, a culture and an everyday-life section and exercises). The E-LOCAL courses convey the message that integration, even in a temporary mobility experience, always involves learning local language and culture. In this perspective, they are an efficient tool to be used for linguistic and cultural preparation before and during the mobility period.

2.2 The elocALL project and the exploitation of the E-LOCAL courses

When the E-LOCAL project was achieved, the consortium decided to work on the valorisation of its results and ideated “E-LOCAL for all”, abbreviated in elocALL, a one-year LLP accompanying measures project carried out in 2013-2014. The two main objectives of elocALL were the dissemination of the six online courses among a broader public and the experimentation of an assisted modality of fruition of the courses.

Many actions were carried out at consortium level which ensured a larger user-base and a more stable usability. Among these actions, it is worth recalling that the E-LOCAL courses are the first resource that the University of Bologna shared in the IDEM and eduGAIN networks, thus allowing all the users of institutions belonging to the networks to enter the E-LOCAL platform and freely take the courses.

The assisted exploitation was meant as a tutor-based fruition of the E-LOCAL courses according to which users could interact with a tutor during their learning process to be helped in solving problems and completing tasks. With elocALL different forms of tutor-based assistance were tested and evaluated and this mode of learning (combination of online activities with tutors’ assistance) was highly valued by the pilot users. The tutoring actions carried out supported the users in particular as far as the understanding of topics is concerned. But they also impacted on motivation as the human interaction with peers and tutors contributed to keep the level of users’ commitment high.

At the end of elocALL it was decided to move forward and create a new support to foster language and culture acquisition in mobility students. The E-LOCAL learning materials could be re-adapted and contextualised for an application to be exploited on a mobile device. This was the origin of the ILOCALAPP idea.



3. Focus on the ILOCALAPP project

The ILOCALAPP project, acronym for Incidentally Learning Other Cultures and Languages through an APP, is a three-year Erasmus+ KA2 project. ILOCALAPP is carried out by a transnational consortium composed of 4 partners: the University of Bologna (Bologna, Italy), the Adam Mickiewicz University (Poznań, Poland), the University of Lapland (Rovaniemi, Finland) and the Centre for Social Studies (Coimbra, Portugal).

The project is aimed at developing an APP for the incidental learning of 4 cultures and languages: Finnish, Italian, Polish and Portuguese. Following the principles of incidental learning, with ILOCALAPP the acquisition of language and culture intends to rely on the learners' participation and happens in an informal setting. Learners will be able to stroll around the town using the APP to access language and culture geolocalized relevant contents. In this way, ILOCALAPP is offering to mobility students the possibility to get acquainted with local language and culture in a smart way, thus enabling them to integrate in and interact with the country hosting them.

ILOCALAPP is meant to be attractive, going beyond the conventional ideas of language and culture teaching and learning. With ILOCALAPP, the "formal aspects of learning are interlinked with the informal learning experiences" (Sharples *et al.* 2015: 11) that may occur wherever and whenever. ILOCALAPP is contextualized in the University city where the students arrive and it is embedded within their daily activities on the basis of their position or of Google research. ILOCALAPP is intended to improve the quality of language proficiency, intercultural comprehension, integration, interaction. In this regard, it addresses three important EU priorities.

First of all, it fosters mobility providing more opportunities for students to gain additional skills through studying or training abroad. As it is known, learning mobility helps individuals increase their professional, social and intercultural skills and employability. Those issues are crucial and are to be addressed with the right tools to make learning mobility a concrete and exploitable opportunity for a growing number of students. Secondly, as it promotes innovative methods for the acquisition of language and digital competences and for the acquisition of intercultural skills, ILOCALAPP develops three out of the eight EU key competences for lifelong learning, namely communication in foreign languages, digital competence and cultural awareness. Finally, ILOCALAPP enhance digital integration by promoting access to and learning through Open Educational Resources.

As a first output, ILOCALAPP is delineating a framework which includes the outline of a methodological document, a survey on users' needs and a map of contents. In its initial phase, the project is carrying out a research based on stakeholders' consultations. The dialogue with potential users is crucial in order to design a functional tool in line with their needs. The methodological specifications deriving from the results of the survey on users' needs and expectations as well as from discussions among partners intend to produce an innovative framework, potentially exploitable also for other languages and cultures. The second output of the project consists in the effective production of the materials, i.e. the adaptation of the E-LOCAL learning materials to the new device and the production of new and ad hoc resources. Then, the effective development of an app suitable for the incidental learning of languages and cultures will be the third output. This will also include a testing and revision phase during which the tool will be finalised before the ultimate release.

4. Tuning on the future of education

The overall evolution of our project, starting from the E-LOCAL courses, their subsequent valorization through the elocALL experience, and the present promising revamp within the ILOCALAPP framework, has been constantly tuned on the future of education.

Since its first steps devoted to the elaboration and the dissemination of learning materials focused on less used languages and conceived for Erasmus students, the project has not only contributed to the EU policies for multilingualism and mobility, but it has also met the desiderata about fostering of linguistic diversity and intercultural awareness in EU.

Now, the ILOCALAPP project renovates this idea by exploring the advantages of incidental learning as experienced by learners who are not only immersed in authentic foreign language environments, but also constantly connected to the digital world. As a matter of fact, in the last years, teaching and learning models have been continuously transforming in response to the advances in digital technology and culture. Now, the leading trends in education are the experimentation of alternative learning tools and spaces, as well as the exploration of personalized learning.

In this stimulating framework, the emerging buzzwords, which also inform the ILOCALAPP project, are connectivity, learning on-the-go, experiential, social, and contextual learning. In particular, context-based, crossover, motivating learning is often easily perceived as meaningful by students, as it relates to their previous knowledge, and it is also 'meaning-based'. Moreover, ILOCALAPP incidental learning



environments will enable students to explore real social and geo-localized contexts, promoting interactional and situational authenticity principles. Geo-localization will probably also have a strong positive impact on meaningfulness, socio-cultural authenticity and motivation, fostering incidental rich linguistic inputs, and on the other side, proposing a sort of guided 'scaffolding' to mobility students visiting a new town and a new country.

Eventually, through the ILOCALAPP learning experience the native language speakers of the Internet will have the opportunity to develop the multiple dimensions of their digital literacy (e.g. cultural and social understanding, effective communication, creative thinking) while becoming smart learners of foreign languages.

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