

The ILOCALAPP project: a smart approach to language and culture acquisition

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Introduction

ILOCALAPP (Incidentally Learning Other Cultures And Languages through an APP), is a three-year Erasmus+ project coordinated by the University of Bologna.

It is 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.**

About the app

The app based on the principles of incidental learning and it 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.

Perspectives

- The ILOCALAPP project builds upon two previous experiences carried out by the Consortium, **E-LOCAL (Electronically Learning Other Cultures And Languages)** and **elocALL (E-LOCAL for all)**.
- 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.
- We investigate the approaches adopted by the three projects and the evolution in terms of both results and perspectives.

Methodological and political framework (1/3)

- Methodological and political views bring forward coherent and similar perspectives.
- **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).
- Krashen *forgetting principle* reminds us of the importance of psychological and personal emotional factors to positively influence learning results.

Methodological and political framework (2/3)

- 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.**

Methodological and political framework (3/3)

- 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).
- The benefits of CALL are: *i)* motivation and confidence; *ii)* cultural awareness; *iii)* “promotion of student-centred learning, allowing for self-paced learning styles, and increased risk-taking” (Scott, Beadle 2014: 24).

E-LOCAL, elocALL and ILOCALAPP

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.

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. 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

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.

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

- In order to valorise the E-LOCAL courses, the consortium 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**.
- 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 tutoring of the E-LOCAL courses

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.

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 started in October 2015.

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).

More about ILOCALAPP

- The project is aimed at developing an APP for the **incidental learning of 4 cultures and languages: Finnish, Italian, Polish and Portuguese.**
- 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.

The geolocalisation of contents

- 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.**

The EU priorities

ILOCALAPP is intended to improve the quality of language proficiency, intercultural comprehension, integration, interaction. In this regard, it addresses three important EU priorities.

1. It **fosters mobility** providing more opportunities for students to gain additional skills through studying or training abroad.
2. It **promotes innovative methods for the acquisition of language and digital competences and for the acquisition of intercultural skills.**
3. ILOCALAPP **enhances digital integration** by promoting access to and learning through Open Educational Resources.

The project outputs

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 production of the app

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.

Tuning on the future of education

The overall evolution of our projects 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.

Leading trend in education

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.

Conclusive remarks

- 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’.
- 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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