



A Multilingual Language Platform that Redefines the Boundary between Learners and Teachers

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Abstract

This paper introduces a project for an innovative online system of language learning that seeks to improve motivation through narrowly targeting a multilingual or otherwise language-loving audience that is to either benefit from a significantly reduced cost of lessons or generate actual profit. A subscription-based online platform is to enable learners to form pairs and conduct classes in accordance with both the desired language at hand and the two users' proficiency levels as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) or a relevant equivalent. The learner whose level is lower in the selected language is to only pay for the "gap" between their and the other learner's proficiency. In other words, let us assume that A and B have decided to study Italian together. A's level is A2, whilst B's level is C1. Therefore, as the difference in proficiency between the learners is three levels, A will be asked to pay three times the price per level as defined in the platform. In contrast, A may choose to study with C, whose level is also A2, in which case there will be no monetary exchange (similarly to a "language exchange" situation). In order for proficiency levels to be evaluated as accurately as possible, all users are to be considered as having a 0 (pre-A1) level unless they can demonstrate language ability via a recognized language certificate. Additionally, users that prove especially high multilingual ability (e.g. owning two C2-level certificates in different languages) are to benefit from a special "mentor" status that comes together with a higher rate of profit when attending classes in any language (encouraging their desire to learn multiple languages and resting on the principle that "language" can be taken as a common concept, its acquisition being continuously enhanced through the study of any specific language).

Keywords: *multilingualism, student-teacher relationship, online language learning, language certificates*

1. Introduction

The current paper presents an innovative system that seeks to significantly improve motivation for learners who view the study of languages as a pastime and would normally be constrained by time and finances to spend sufficient time engaging in the activity. By removing the strict distinction between "students" and "teachers", the system is to define a plurality of learner types, whose interaction can be selected in a way to meet academic needs as well as to optimally minimize lesson costs or allow monetary profit.

Firstly, the benefits of such a system will be outlined, focusing on its impact on learner motivation and teaching quality. Then, the platform's proposed implementation will be presented. Finally, plans and suggestions regarding future work on the project will be taken note of.

2. Benefits

The system's key sought benefits will be examined via two positive characteristics, pertaining to, respectively, the "learner" and the "teacher" roles: motivation and teaching quality.

2.1 Motivation

The concept of motivation is underlined for two main reasons: firstly, since the system is already aimed at a motivated niche audience and secondly, due to an engagement to actively work towards sustaining and increasing learners' motivation.

Let us note that "motivation" can be broken down into several definitions as well as types. Notably, it may be intrinsic or extrinsic, the former denoting a feeling of enjoyment and a perception of the activity in question itself as a "reward", and the latter implying an involvement of external, instrumental goals. For the purpose of this study, we are mainly referring to intrinsic motivation, as the assumed target audience enjoys the process and results of learning a language.



Alizadeh is firm in stating that motivation, which “arouses, incites, or stimulates action”, is key for success in general and in foreign language studies in particular [1, p.11]. He goes on to note that motivation tends to be “infectious” within a group of learners [1], a rather desirable effect in the case of a community of passionate participants. To go further, an important element that adds to the level of motivation is the maximal reduction of common restrictions that the audience is likely to have experienced. Namely, the price of lessons is reduced and, by extension, time is optimized as language lessons are turned into a source of income.

2.2 Teaching Quality

Two distinctive characteristics of the teacher that stem from the project’s concept are their general non-nativeness and their multilingualism.

The non-native teacher has been viewed as “deficient or less-than-native speaker” [11, p.187] and has subsequently developed an inferiority complex in regard to their work [3]. However, as Baskota points out, the ideal teacher as described by students is not necessarily native [3]. Some of the non-native teacher’s key strengths include their empathy with and closeness to the student [3]. Medgyes, in turn, specifically points out that non-native teachers have an edge in that they are teachers and learners at the same time [9, p.434].

Garcia notes that up until recently, even the very fact that a teacher or learner speaks an additional language from the one being studied (notably, English), has been viewed as a hindrance [6]. Offering a deep discussion of what he defines as a monolingual bias, Dufva criticizes the very concept of “foreign language” or “a language” as contrasted with a view on language as a Bakhtinian “plurality of usages and perspectives” [4, p.110] and “an essentially ‘multi-lingual’ phenomenon” [p.115].

Indeed, recent experimental research supports the claim that multilingualism or prior experience with language learning is highly beneficial for the acquisition of new languages. According to Anamaria-Mirabela, “academic and cognitive skills transfer readily between languages” [2, p.168-9]. In his study, Medgyes discovers “knowledge of other foreign languages” to be a primary criterion of what makes one a good language learner [9]. To go further, Hirosh and Degani present a detailed literature review of past research on the topic, distinguishing between a number of unanimous direct and indirect benefits that multilingualism has on the study of languages [7]. Whilst the former range from an ease in acquisition of vocabulary to high learning skills and are best applicable to related languages, the latter involve abstract qualities like general phonological flexibility [7, p.900] and an improvement of literacy that is valid “even across different alphabetic orthographies” [7, p.909].

3. Implementation

3.1 Platform Layout

In terms of visual representation, the platform is to be simple to use as well as intuitive and, as such, it is likely to resemble related websites that involve visible user profiles as well as a scheduling facility. The majority of information is to be accessible solely upon secure login, and profiles are to be generated for each learner and filled in to their personal preference, naturally specifically including information about their language skills and goals. Lessons are to be scheduled internally (such as through the opening and reservation of user time slots) and possibly carried out with the help of an external application, such as Skype or Zoom. The content of individual lessons is to be generally defined by the learners themselves, whilst the creation of learning materials in offered languages may be a future option to consider.

3.2 Monetary Exchange

As mentioned, the system is to replace the traditional price unit “per lesson” by a set price per proven level of language proficiency. Thus, two enthusiasts with no certified language skills can choose to “learn together” without monetary exchange. The closer the process is to “learning together” rather than one user teaching another, the lower the price is going to be. When users’ levels diverge, the learner with the lower level (as defined by CEFR or an established equivalent) is to pay the defined price per level multiplied by the difference in levels. Let us assume that the price per level is set at 3.00 euros. If an A1 learner and an A2 learner are having a class together, then the former is to be asked to pay 3.00 euros to the latter. If the A1 learner decides to have a class with a C1 learner, then they would need to pay four times the price (i.e. 12.00 euros).



In order for community and loyalty to be encouraged, the learner receiving money from the exchange is to be granted the whole payment, whilst the platform's profit is to be based on subscription fees alone. It would be relevant for the fee to be lower for learners who are willing to demonstrate higher involvement, such as through studying multiple languages.

3.3 “Mentor” Status

The concept of special statuses for experienced learners is not novel to online language exchange environments [8]. In the case of the described system, certain users are to be rewarded for their learning effort and for their close inscription within the system's “philosophy”. The status “mentor” is to be granted to users who have satisfied a defined condition of proficiency, such as through presenting two C2 level certificates in different languages. One may regard this competence as equivalent to twelve learning levels as per CEFR; therefore, alternatively, different combinations of certificates can also be presented (e.g. two C1 certificates and one A2 certificate).

In practice, a “mentor” is to benefit from a higher price per lesson than their non-badged counterparts. Moreover, this distinction is to apply to all languages on offer (even ones that they have no prior experience with), thus underlining the presented assumption that proficiency in languages can be taken as proficiency in “language” as a general concept.

Although standardized language exams may have drawbacks, such as the reliance on a student's single performance and difficulty in reaching agreement between national institutions and testing bodies [5], language certificates are used globally to this date and viewed as beneficial by students [2]. For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that the CEFR framework is engaged in seeking internal coherence between languages and bases much of its research on plurilingual rating and cross-language comparison of test items [10, pp.16-18]. This being said, it would be optimal if specially prepared level-determination exams are organized and conducted within the platform, especially in view of promising recent trends, such as the introduction of the IELTS Indicator online exam.

4. Conclusion and Future Work

This paper has presented the theoretical framework behind a conceived system that involves the learning of multiple languages as combined with an opportunity to reduce costs or make a financial profit. As explained, the project's main goal is to both seek and enhance learners' motivation. However, the described system has not been tested through practical experimentation. In order for the platform to be launched as a trial, a number of language enthusiasts would need to be involved. Consequently, their experience may be analyzed with the help of a questionnaire that addresses the system's performance in relation to key concepts like quality, satisfaction, and problems encountered. The focus should be on qualitative rather than quantitative evaluation; both because of the noted focus on intrinsic appreciation and due to the time restriction that is unlikely to allow for learners' progress to be evaluated objectively solely based on experimental use.

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