

The E-LOCAL Project: a virtual travel across cultures and languages

Elisabetta Magni

Università di Bologna (Italy)

elisabetta.magni@unibo.it

Abstract

This paper illustrates the E-LOCAL project, abbreviated from Electronically Learning Other Cultures and Languages, a multilateral, two-year project funded by the European Union that belongs to the Lifelong Learning programme, and precisely to the sub-programme Key Activity 2 for Languages (www.e-localproject.eu). The main goal of E-LOCAL is to promote multilingualism and LWULT languages, which is short for 'less widely used and less taught languages', by creating original and uniform learning tools and materials for six languages and cultures: Dutch (Belgium), Finnish (Finland), Hungarian (Hungary), Italian (Italy), Polish (Poland), and Portuguese (Portugal). The partnership includes six universities and three secondary schools. The target group consists of school pupils and university students of the nine partner institutions, that is young people that are likely to experience mobility abroad.

While the Bologna process has positively contributed to student mobility, which is presently part of the mission of Europe's higher education institutions, there is consent that much remains to be done in this respect. Undoubtedly, language learning and culture appreciation are crucial factors in order to foster both mobility and integration. In this perspective, the E-LOCAL project, which focuses on building the student's competence in intercultural communication, promotes successful mobility experiences by also offering a precious support to Comenius participants and a valid alternative to EILC for Erasmus students. In the E-LOCAL platform, cultural patterns are presented alongside with linguistic components, and each target language and culture is intended as an individual, virtual experience of discovery for the student. Also, a great attempt has been made to create the methodology in a way that it would entail a sense of innovativeness. The paper will discuss in detail the key values of the project, and the culture-specific approach to building competence of cultures that are not in the mainstream of general awareness.

1. Introduction

The E-LOCAL project, acronym for Electronically Learning Other Cultures and Languages, is a multilateral, two-year project funded by the European Union and coordinated by the University of Bologna (www.e-localproject.eu). The project belongs to the Lifelong Learning Programme, and specifically to the sub-programme Key Activity 2 for Languages. The aim of the project is to promote multilingualism and LWULT languages, which is short for 'less widely used and less taught languages'.

The aim of the project is to create original and uniform learning tools for six languages and cultures at A1 level: Dutch (Belgium), Finnish (Finland), Hungarian (Hungary), Italian (Italy), Polish (Poland), and Portuguese (Portugal). There are six universities and three secondary schools in the partnership. The target group consists of school pupils at the ultimate and penultimate level and first-year university students.

The key concepts of the E-LOCAL online courses are English-speaking travellers, who arrive in one of the virtual E-LOCAL countries. Initially, the travellers do not speak the local language at all, but gradually learn it through various experiences in the virtual scenario. The E-LOCAL partners have agreed to use English as the vehicular language in the learning environment since students are likely to have a sufficient command of it, and this choice also ensures that the cultural information or linguistic specific features can be successfully conveyed.

In the following pages, the details of the project will be illustrated, with a focus on the envisaged effects with respect to supporting mobility and integration. The paper is organized as follows: the first section will describe some central aspects such as the issue of LWULT languages, the choice of the target group, the results of the E-LOCAL survey. In section 2, a thorough discussion of the contents and the key values of the project, along with methodological issues will be proposed. The paper concludes with some observations concerning short and long-term perspectives of the project, and the envisaged results from the exploitation of the E-LOCAL courses.

1.1 LWULT Languages

The EU's language policy encourages the promotion of less widely used European languages as a key contribution to multilingualism and invites the Member States to broaden the selection of languages taught at different levels of education (e.g. Council Resolution of 21/11/2008 on a European strategy for multilingualism). When it comes to 'less spoken' languages, however, the education systems of the Member States offer the opportunity to learn them as foreign languages only at tertiary level. Moreover, having schoolteachers for LWULT languages seems anyway a hardly realizable goal in most EU countries, hence the necessity to bypass traditional learning. Developing alternative educational tools, such as online courses, would contribute to implementing the objectives set by the Barcelona European Council (2002), also in view of the envisaged further cycles of the European Indicator of Language Competence, which are designed to involve a wider range of languages.

The capacity of communicating in languages other than individual's mother tongue has in fact become a fundamental requirement for all EU citizens, and a more widespread knowledge of local languages would surely increase the freedom to study and/or work in another EU State. In this sense, student mobility has a high value for the European society of knowledge and is also one of the main action lines of the Bologna process, which greatly contributed to develop new forms and possibilities of 'going abroad' (vertical/horizontal mobility, joint international programmes, etc.). Mobility has thus presently grown to a complex phenomenon, where also issues concerning intercultural communication and integration have to be considered (Chen & Starosta 1998 [3]). In this perspective, national governments and institutions have to develop new strategies to take part in the network and to implement new tools to satisfy the various needs related to student mobility.

When it comes to language learning, for instance, students participating in the Erasmus programme are already given the opportunity to attend EILC courses abroad. The E-LOCAL courses specifically meet the needs of students going to countries where LWULT languages are spoken, with the advantage over EILC courses that the learning process precedes their departure. Moreover, these courses can be also proposed by secondary schools to younger students, which may thus appreciate the value of multilingualism and the advantages of knowing local cultures for real mutual understanding and integration. School and universities are in fact natural targets for long-term exploitation of the E-LOCAL project.

1.2 Target Groups

The E-LOCAL courses address young people at two educational levels: 1) Secondary Education: i.e. students from both vocational and general secondary schools; 2) Higher Education: i.e. students attending university, independently of their field of study.

While the dissemination strategy will predictably increase the number of E-LOCAL users in the years to come, especially by addressing the Erasmus students as long-term targets, in the development phase the target group reached by the survey and in the pilot phase has been intentionally restricted to pupils attending the penultimate and the last year and students attending the first year of undergraduate academic study. This is because the homogeneity of the short-term target was indeed a crucial factor when defining the methodology and the content of the learning objects.

This is a wide and relatively homogeneous target group of individuals that are likely to be involved in various mobility experiences. School pupils, for instance, may take part in Comenius projects and prepare for their active European citizenship by visiting schools across Europe, while first-year university students may start to plan their participation in Erasmus programme and acquire competences for their personal development and future employment.

As a matter of fact, teenagers attending the final school levels or beginning the university must make important decisions for their further education and professional future and become aware that the mastering of local languages multiplies opportunities to study and work in EU.

The survey

Both methodology and contents have been discussed not only on the basis of the pedagogical expertise amidst the partners, but also by taking into account what has been found out by means of a survey addressed to students in the nine partner institutions. The E-LOCAL questionnaire was online from Feb 22nd to March 21st, 2011, and it was submitted to 1124 students, in total. Among these, a smaller group of pilot users (from 60 to 120 people) will be selected for the second phase of the project, in order to test the E-LOCAL learning environment.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions: four open questions and six selections; two of the selections included an open field for further elaboration. The questions focused on students' attitudes towards learning languages and cultures, and the motivations for learning them, as well as themes and technological solutions in language learning. Special attention was paid to previous linguistic knowledge, interest in languages and cultures, motivations for studying online, and interest in taking part in the pilot phase. The overall aim was to find out the needs and expectations of end-users in order to pinpoint the learning methodology and the framework of contents for the E-LOCAL courses.

The "Analysis on the Survey for End-Users", which has been carried out on the results and uploaded as a document in the Deliverables section of the E-LOCAL website [5], effectively helped to define some central items and to identify some interesting desiderata. According to what the submitted answers reveal, it seems that students are mainly motivated by high-quality learning materials, efficient and functional learning environments, and clear guidelines. Also, the findings in the E-LOCAL Survey Analysis provide further information about relevant topics, as it turns out from the following discussion.

Leaving aside introductory questions, Question 4, which focused on the motivations for studying languages, carried along useful indications relevant to mobility, because the students consider as main reasons: *to find a job* (70,5 %), *just to travel* (63,5 %), and *to study abroad* (61,4 %). A less significant reason is *for networking* (28,9 %).

Question 5, asking whether students regard learning about cultures as important as learning about

languages, confirms that the majority of respondents (84,7 %) are aware of the fundamental link between culture and language.

Question 6 provided crucial information for building the general framework of contents. Here, the students have chosen whether they are *not so interested*, *interested*, or *very interested* in seven themes to be possibly implemented in the learning materials. The most popular themes are: *habits and lifestyle* (52,4 % very interested), *history and traditions* (47,1 % very interested), *music* (45,5 % very interested), and *art and literature* (43,6 % very interested). These results definitely support the cultural approach that has been planned for the framework of contents, which also includes themes like *movies* (46,8 % interested) and *cuisine* (48 % interested), whereas *sports* have been excluded, since 54,2 % of the answers was *not so interested*. The relevance of the proposed themes is confirmed by the open Question 7, about other interesting things in foreign cultures, to which the answer *Mentality and lifestyle* was given by 83 respondents.

The following Questions 8 and 9 aimed to find out support for the creation of the learning environment. *Efficiency* is the only feature considered *very motivating* by most (49,7 %). The majority considered as motivating: *simple enough to use* (51,8 %), *fun* (50,8 %), *technically well made* (52,2 %), *visually attractive* (54,7 %), *interactive* (50,5 %). In the open Question 9, 136 respondents mentioned *flexibility and convenience* as the most significant motivator in online learning.

To sum up, it seems that the questionnaire included enough and probably just the right questions, since it resulted in a rather impressive package of information. Also, it can be stated that the survey offered a valuable resource for defining the framework of contents as well as the shared learning methodology. These aspects of the E-LOCAL project will be discussed in the next chapter.

2. Framework of Contents and Methodology

The main goal of the project is to create language-learning resources embedded in an overall pedagogical strategy that incorporates learning on cultural issues (Kramersch 1993 [6]). Starting from the recognition of the advantages of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) dual-focused approach, which is strongly encouraged by EU, the E-LOCAL project will tackle the difficulties that such a methodology presents when a language is taught from zero. In fact, the expected final level of language proficiency corresponds to the A1 level in the CEFR, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

To this purpose, the learning material is going to contain simple everyday language and stimulating cultural *realia*. Also, to ensure homogeneity of the products, the E-LOCAL partners have agreed to develop a common framework of topics for the languages involved in the project. As mentioned in the introduction, the leitmotiv of the E-LOCAL courses is a couple of English-speaking travellers, future Erasmus students, who arrive in one of the virtual E-LOCAL countries: their one-week's adventures develop a story line, which is the backbone of the courses.

2.1 The E-Local travellers

In the E-LOCAL courses there is a special focus on 'mobility', in the sense that the student is a self-guiding individual, who gradually discovers the target language and culture by identifying him/herself with a young man/woman travelling to a foreign country. Identification with the characters should be made easier by the fact that they are intentionally left 'unspecified' with respect to their nationality. Initially, the travellers do not speak the local language at all, but gradually learn it by meeting people, going shopping, and even solving problems in the virtual environment.

The E-LOCAL partners have also decided to use English as a vehicular language in the courses, since its widespread knowledge is likely to facilitate communication and mobility, in both virtual and

real life. E-LOCAL end-users are actually supposed to have sufficient command of English, which will make possible to bypass the limits due to the A1 level in the target language, and introduce even complex cultural notions in the course scheme, i.e. the Storyboard.

2.2 The Storyboard

The adventures of the two E-LOCAL travellers are programmatically entitled "Explore X-Language", since the E-LOCAL Storyboard portrays typical situations related to student mobility.

The storyboard has enough flexibility to include the specific grammar contents and communicative functions of each language in the suitable units. In addition to the planned 9 units, the partners have agreed on the creation of an introductory unit – called unit 0 – where users will be introduced to the basic structure of the course. This encompasses the following kind of Learning Objects:

- 1) The story (with a final multiple-choice question to check comprehension skills);
- 2) The Glossary (including all the new words and expressions found in the story);
- 3) Grammar notes (where the "rules of the game" are explained, also according to previous analyses of A1 level textbooks for each language);
- 4) Culture (where the vehicular language conveys information on art and literature, but also on music, movies, cuisine, etc);
- 5) Everyday life in X-Country (which brings the intercultural experience closer to E-LOCAL travellers by presenting curious and useful things about the people and the country);
- 6) Exercises (to check and increase proficiency in X-language).

Each of the following units presents linguistically and culturally anchored scenarios portrayed in seven pictures. The study units are relatively small and concise, and they will consist of several coherent Learning Objects, which are to going to be short and attractive (as requested by e-learning) but also efficient (i.e. implementing real competence). In this way the learner is supposed to find a balance between obtaining the relevant textual information and experiencing the (inter)cultural situation itself.

2.3 Intercultural competence

As discussed in the project deliverable called "Methodology Specifications", there are three different approaches with respect to building intercultural competence: the culture-specific, the context-specific, and the culture-general approach (Bennett 1998: 9 [2], Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2010 [7]). The latter approach focuses on skills and knowledge that can be relevant to various situations within different (national) cultures, which are thus assumed to share similar features. Conversely, and under the assumption that every single culture has its own peculiarities reflected in individual ways of behaviour and communication, the culture-specific approach provides materials dealing with one particular, i.e. national culture. Rather than learning general mechanisms of intercultural communication, students are thus expected to become culturally competent (i.e. aware of values, habits, behavioural patterns, and communicative strategies) of the target culture. Eventually, the context-specific approach, applies the same principles to a more detailed level of contexts, or even individual situations.

In the E-LOCAL courses the learning material is created by using the culture-specific approach and concentrating on each culture separately. This choice is also consistent with the end-users' needs and suggestions, such as indicated by the survey results. Nonetheless, since the E-LOCAL project deals with languages and cultures that are not in the mainstream of general awareness, it could be that students' expectations can be partially based on stereotypes rather than actual knowledge. In this sense, the E-LOCAL partners agreed that attention should be paid to avoid negative stereotypes, as

well as to defuse some general beliefs linked to each of the national cultures represented. After all, stereotypes can also have a negative effect on both motivation of students and the process of learning about intercultural communication (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2010: 170–173 [7]).

2.4 Key values for the E-Local methodology

During the various meetings and discussions, the E-LOCAL partners have identified some salient aspects of the project. This section briefly illustrates how these will be reflected in the methodological planning and in the implementation phase.

The first key value in the online learning environment is **authenticity**. In the Storyboard linguistic, cultural and situational authenticity is obtained by using native speakers in audio materials and by including realistic contexts and circumstances in which young people travelling to a foreign country could be involved in everyday life (Jonassen 1995 [5], Kramsch 1993 [6]).

The second key value is **motivational learning**. Motivation starts obviously from within the student that, according to the E-LOCAL Survey Analysis appreciates high-quality learning materials, efficient and functional learning environments, and clear guidelines. In addition to offering technical solutions that are *prima facie* appealing and stimulating for the users, the E-LOCAL courses foster motivation by also presenting well-selected themes. As a matter of fact, the motivation of the users to acquire a new language is higher if learning activities are targeted within the relevant interests of the users, and therefore could be applicable to advancement in their preparation for active European citizenship and/or future profession.

The third key value emerging from the survey answers was **communicativeness**. Since the E-LOCAL courses will be fully online courses, the learning process is going to be distance learning (Bates 2005 [1]), where the student is working autonomously without any teacher support. If, on the one hand, the missing human contact was deemed to be de-motivating by some respondents, on the other hand, several others signalled that interactiveness and learning about communication is clearly hoped for. Assuming that the project addresses expert-users, i.e. people already acquainted with new technologies and with means of exposure to digital resources, the articulation of social networks with the project has been discussed as one of the solutions in the implementation phase.

Eventually, another key value is **replicability**. Considering that the aim of the project is to offer the E-LOCAL courses for new target groups coming in every year, replicability will be taken into account in creating the contents and the technical implementation as well.

3. Conclusions

Supporting student mobility is one of the key challenges in a united Europe. This support incorporates different aspects, such as fostering language learning, acquiring cultural competencies, but also mastering intercultural communication skills. When it comes to ICT and foreign language learning as enablers of mobility and integration, many solutions are indeed already available and working. Those designed to expose the learner, albeit virtually, to real-life situations and contents seem to be much appreciated. In this paper, we discussed the concept, the key values, the envisaged methodology and implementation of the E-LOCAL project. The years to come will reveal the extent to which the objective of promoting multilingualism and competence in less widely known languages and cultures will have been fulfilled, and how the metaphor of the virtual travellers will have helped to win the challenges of real-life mobility.

References

- [1] Bates, A. 2005. *Technology, e-learning and distance education*. London: Routledge.
- [2] Bennett, M.J. 1998. Intercultural communication. A current perspective. In: M.J. Bennett (eds.) *Basic concepts of intercultural communication*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- [3] Chen, G.M. & Starosta W.J. 1998. *Foundations of intercultural communication*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- [4] E-LOCAL team University of Lapland. 2011. *Analysis on the Survey for End-Users*. <https://www.academic-projects.eu/elocal>
- [5] Jonassen, D.H. 1995. Supporting Communities of Learners with Technology: A vision for Integrating Technology with Learning in Schools. *Educational Technology* 35 (4).
- [6] Kramsch, C. 1993. *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Samovar, L.A., Porter, R.E. & McDaniel E.R. 2010. *Communication between cultures*. 7th ed. Belmont: Wadsworth.