

Learning English through Practice Enterprise Methodology, Samples of Best Practice from PELLIC Practice Enterprise for Language Learning & Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

Today's work force needs practical language and intercultural communication skills relevant to the workplace in order to enhance competitiveness within Europe.

The Practice Enterprise Methodology used in the PELLIC project provides a virtual learning space where students can practice business communication skills in English within a Practice Enterprise environment. A pilot training has been successfully carried out on a on a virtual learning environment.

The Practice Enterprise pedagogy promoted by PELLIC [1] gives learners the opportunity to develop their business language skills by setting up and running virtual companies, interacting and trading with other practice enterprise companies in different countries. Learners can access language lessons within the VLE whenever they need them to support a number of business activities.

- *Writing a business plan and starting up a company*
- *Planning a company website*
- *Developing a marketing plan*
- *Advertising and marketing products*
- *Making arrangements for meetings, sales visits and exhibitions*
- *Sales presentations and negotiations*
- *Sending business letters and e-mails*
- *Making business phone calls*
- *Running of and participating in meetings*
- *Writing reports, minutes of meetings and other business documents.*

Project materials are designed for blended learning but allow for different combinations of online and face-to-face learning. As one of the latest developments SecondLife® was integrated as a platform for exhibitions and marketing goods. [2]

1. Introduction

Practice Enterprise for Language Learning and Intercultural Communication is one of the multilateral transversal projects under Key Activity 2 of the Lifelong Learning Programme for the promotion of Languages 'in a Europe where linguistic diversity is a fact of life, learning to speak other languages can open many doors. For individuals, it can pave the path to a better career and help them to live, study or work abroad.' [3]

This project brings together the expertise of six partner organisations from Finland, Great Britain, Czech Republic, Germany and Spain who, at the time of application, were either already aware of or had direct experience with teaching Practice Enterprise (PE) Pedagogy in face-to-face learning environments and were firmly convinced of its potential of using a virtual learning environment to develop authentic scenarios for Practice Enterprise education.

As far as language education is concerned, many of us continue to be acutely aware of the fact that it is still very difficult to provide learners with language practice in authentic and meaningful contexts. Therefore Practice Enterprise pedagogy offers great opportunities to provide such contexts through vocational language training simulations in authentic learning environments.

1.1 The Aims of the PELLIC Project

The project aims to promote language learning practices by developing Practice Enterprise environments within an easily accessible virtual learning environment for tertiary level education, advanced vocational education and training, and adult continuing education. The pedagogical approach is based on PE pedagogy and the aim is to develop a business English course which can be integrated into Practice Enterprise business studies as well as be used independently in language studies where the students are provided with a simulated environment of a company's international operations.

The idea is to exploit daily corporate level work life related communication practices inside the interactive, simulated business life environment of PE pedagogy.

Activities and interaction between student groups in different European countries offer opportunities for reflection on different aspects of intercultural communication.

Students participating in PELLIC language courses will gain knowledge and insight into European working life processes.

1.2 The Practice Enterprise (PE) Approach

Practice Enterprise is defined by EUROPEAN – PEN INTERNATIONAL, which is a non-profit organisation [4]

'A practice firm is a virtual company and a centre of vocational learning that runs like a "real" business silhouetting a "real" firm's business procedures, products and services. Each practice firm trades with other practice firms.' [5]

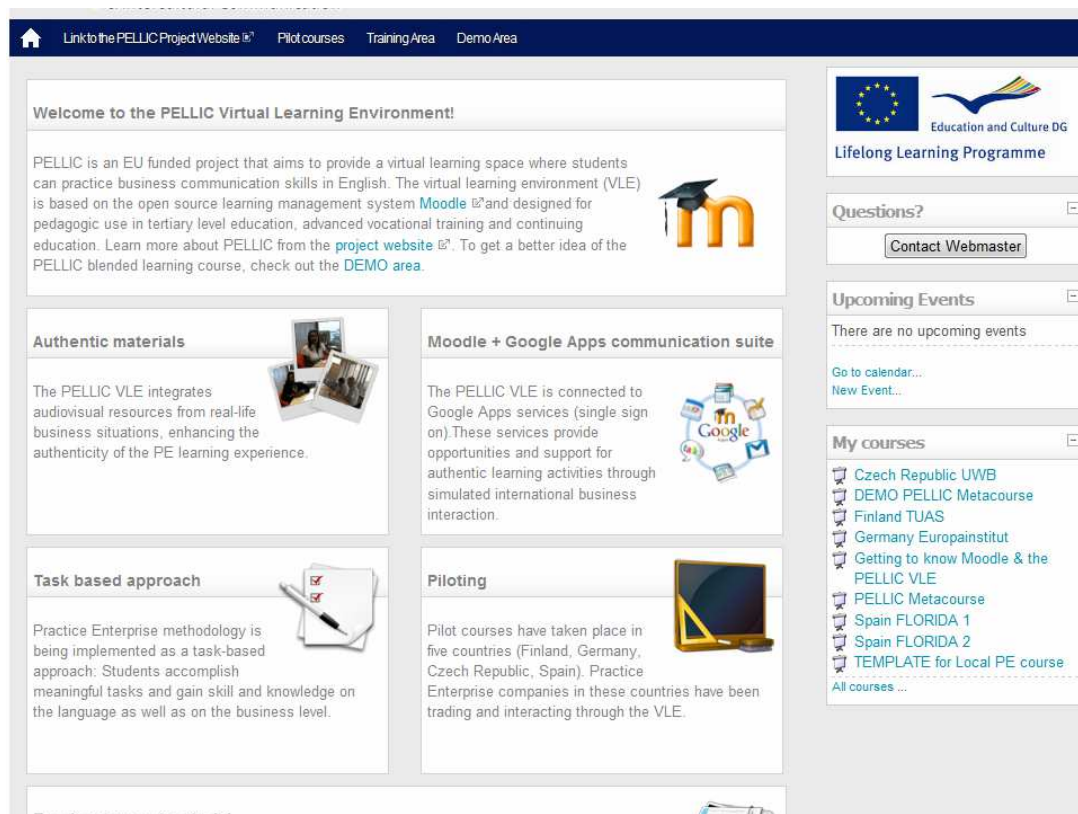
PELLIC applies the context related PE method into language learning. The project has created a virtual learning environment (VLE) (www.pellic.com) in order to provide students with a business environment for practising intercultural business skills. [6]

None of the groups involved in the pilot courses were native speakers of English and hence were provided with an authentic learning environment for practising business English and intercultural skills using English as a lingua franca. The materials developed and supplied by project partners were tested in the Practice Enterprise piloting groups.

The task-based learning approach in the PE pedagogy enables students to manage their virtual business, improving their English communication skills at the same time.

2. Course Design and Structure

The courses followed a blended learning approach. Face-to-face elements were accompanied by online learning modules, which were represented in the open source platform Moodle.



[screenshot from www.pellic.com]

The courses consist of four modules:

Unit A: Starting up

Unit B: Presenting your company

Unit C: Buying and selling

Unit D: Exhibition

Each module is following the same pattern:

- The unit outline and expected outcomes
- Task instructions, resources and focus activities (language, business, intercultural)
- Support material for autonomous learning

Sample of module 1, unit outline; further information can be obtained from the demo session on the PELLIC Moodle website [7]

The course delivery mode is a blended approach which includes face-to-face sessions with online (local and international) interaction in asynchronous and synchronous written and oral form.

The learners are provided with a number of audiovisual language support material for self study to focus on language, grammar and vocabulary needed for engaging in the communicative tasks.



The activities also include questionnaires for self or peer assessment and detailed feedback. The VLE is connected to Google Apps services which provide opportunities for authentic learning activities through simulated international business interaction.

2.2 The Pilot Courses

Eight pilot courses were carried out in Finland, Germany, Czech Republic and Spain in 2010; two 8 week parallel business English courses were run by each country. The group sizes varied from 7 to 26 students. The students' age groups were homogenous, between 18-25 years. The required language level for participation was B1-B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEF).

Successful participants received a Certificate at the end of the course which stated the course contents. The course covered 2 ECTS.

The two Finnish pilot course groups had already been involved in the Practice Enterprise study method within their business studies at Turku University of Applied Linguistics and used PELLIC as part of their Practice Enterprise studies.

The other pilot groups, however, Florida University in Valencia, Spain, EKUT/ Europainstitut Reutlingen, Germany and the University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic created their own companies specifically for the piloting phase as there were no Practice Enterprises available.

In order to provide the learners with authentic English business related materials, a set of models from different kinds of business activities with native speakers of English were collected from the West London Chamber of Commerce. The Google Apps that were provided in connection with the Moodle course as for example Gmail was used for business correspondence (i.e. offers, enquiries etc.), the Google docs were useful for collaborative writing (documents, spreadsheets, presentations) and the Google Sites were used to set up a company's website.

The pilot courses demonstrated that the Practice Enterprise scenario can unleash a great amount of creativity and motivation in students. They very quickly got the hang of running a company in a playful way. The motivation curve at the beginning of the courses was fairly high. The learners adapted very quickly to the new learning environment and were enthusiastic about getting in touch with international contacts.

However, there were also a number of issues addressed in students' feedback during the course:

- Time constraints, (some groups and individuals were very ambitious)
- Technical issues (in one case the University server was down for a week which kept students from logging in)
- Lack of international interaction (because of the time difference between countries and different 'study' hours and misunderstandings, interaction only took place between specific international groups).
- A lack of background knowledge regarding a business context was addressed.

All in all students enjoyed the experience and benefited from the courses as the following quotes demonstrate:

'It's a whole different experience sending an email in English to a business partner abroad – from just writing a letter at home that only the teacher will ever see.' (Peter Hiller, Germany)



'The project helped me in several ways: working in a team over a longer period, distributing tasks just like in a "real" company, taking responsibility -and also the consequences, if team members haven't done their "homework" (Sonja Kemmler, Germany)

3. Summary

The courses described above are based on the first phase of the project's trialling process. Final versions of the course and learning scenarios will be made publicly available upon completion of the project. As a result, the course and learning scenarios described in this presentation are to be considered "work in progress".

Consequently the experiences gained during the piloting phase, the PELLIC VLE materials will undergo modification during reiteration. The teaching and learning experiences will be collected in the teacher's guide with support material, which will be available in electronic form on the PELLIC website (www.pellic.eu) by the end of the project (October 2011) and will also be available as a printable teacher's guide booklet.

References

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This publication/communication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

[2] See <http://secondlife.com/>

Of the several existing virtual worlds, Second Life® is the most recent. It is a publicly available 3D multi-user virtual world and has been available for public access since 2003 for users over the legal age of 18. Developed by Linden Lab in the US, SecondLife® has established itself as an attractive social, entertainment and transaction space, ideal for business transactions, exhibitions and marketing products.

[3] EACEA European Commission: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/ka2/languages_en.php; Languages (Key Activity 2, (29/04/2011)

[4] EUROPEN – PEN INTERNATIONAL: <http://cms.europen.info/> (29/04/2011)

[5] Ibid.

[6] The VLE was set up on the open source platform Moodle by Andreas Glombitza, University of Tübingen, Germany, 2010: www.pellic.com (29/04/2011)

[7] see www.pellic.com Demo Area (29/04/2011)