

'ELENA Goes Mobile': a Mobile Assisted Early Language Learning Pilot for Familiarizing Children with Neighboring Languages

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Abstract

How do you involve (grand) parents in early language learning of their (grand) children outside school? How can young children become familiar with languages that are used in neighboring countries that are geographically proximate to where they live, in an entertaining and explorative way? These questions are addressed in a pilot with a mobile learning game that is part of the ELENA project (Early e-learning of neighboring languages). Within the Euregio, in the border region between the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, several languages are spoken within a geographically small region. However, when children start to learn a foreign language, still in the majority of cases English is chosen. Opportunities for early language learning of e.g. German, French and Dutch, within children's neighborhood are left unexploited. Within the ELENA project seven European partners collaborate to develop digital learning material to improve the learning and teaching of neighboring languages from an early age on. ELENA is not only the name of the project, but also the name of the central character within the learning material, developed by the MAD-faculty. Hand in hand with Elena, children between 4 and 8 from the border regions familiarize themselves with their neighbouring languages by means of 8 themes that are taken from a child's immediate environment (e.g. family, school, the body etc.), so that the online learning material suits children's perception of the world. Within the ELENA pilot we explore and exploit the functionality that a mobile phone offers to additionally familiarize children (6-8 years) with a neighbouring language (German) in a 'real world context', in an interactive and playful way. The mobile game connects to the theme 'Elena goes shopping' that is introduced in the online learning material. The game scenario directs and guides children and their (grand) parents to do the shopping that is needed for baking pancakes. Underlying objectives of the game are, next to involving (grand)parents or other family members, to reinforce children's interest in a 'neighbouring' language; to familiarize them with sounds and pronunciation; to learn, repeat and practice vocabulary and to connect language to the direct (living) environment and perception of children. Therefore, the focus is on listening, understanding and speaking the language. Outside the school and in company of a (grand) parent children make a shopping list for baking pancakes on their mobile phone. Subsequently they go with their mobile to a store where they shop, can entertain themselves on their way by means of a song (and 'singing' tasks) in the neighboring language and carry out tasks in a nearby supermarket. This pilot makes use of the ARLearn platform in which educational mobile games can be developed. The game predominantly uses audio instruction and selection of answers by means of 'graphical/picture' buttons, so that the child for the most part (with some help of their (grand) parent) can go through the scenario independently. In this paper the underlying principles of the design as well as the first evaluation results of the mobile game scenario are presented.