



## ELVIN (European Languages Virtual Network)

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### Abstract

*The current situation within the area of learning and practicing languages has become more and more demanding but language learning requires opportunities for effective and motivating practice of the target language because of the lack of other learners with similar needs with whom to practice with makes this activity demotivating and artificial. Together with the lack of availability of relevant and up-to-date content especially within the workplace and university contexts.*

*In the ELVIN project, the aim is to address these issues. The target groups are learners in the field of public administration and university students in 6 different European countries. The online community is also supported by an online learning content repository where users can access contents directly from the social network.*

*The central focus of the project is on reinforcing language competence by motivating people to practice languages by giving users a new approach to the practice of the target language and providing them with up-to-date content in order to do so, in the sectors of continuing education and university education in an informal learning scenario. The network will do this by matching up learners according to the language a user wants to practice and also the professional interests of the user.*

*The nature of the tools and services provided by Myelvin network will particularly benefit less well served languages in Europe. In the project these languages are Portuguese, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Latvian which will improve interaction between different countries and cultures and promote employability throughout Europe.*

*Once the validity of the tools and approach has been demonstrated, the valorisation approach will aim to extend the results to other sectors and linguistic contexts in Europe, which will help towards the increasing need for life long learning.*

### 1 Introduction

The growth and popularity within the community of online social networks has become somewhat part of the lives of most people, and has increased tremendously in the past few years. Reports show that there are millions of users of social networks, which links in with one of the fundamental strategies outlined for Europe's success and presence in a global world which is based on the growth of knowledge. Knowledge is the engine for growth which has been brought ever closer by research, innovation and creativity.

This digital era is a key in promoting lifelong learning which goes hand-in-hand with employment and hence avoiding long-term unemployment and the loss of human capital. The acquisition of knowledge and more importantly languages needs to be gained as this is an important instrument in building a better and more competitive Europe. It is especially important to improve Europe's new technologies; innovation, high quality education and skills development in order to bounce back after the aftermath of the Economic crisis.

To counteract the affects of the economic crisis and indeed the aim for 2020 [1] is to achieve a genuine European Knowledge Area and in response to this 2020 framework the ELVIN (European Languages Virtual Network) aims to provide a range of opportunities for language learning in both professional and university contexts within a social network. The ELVIN project plans to make relevant and up-to-date content more accessible, attractive and available for learners, and provide opportunities for useful practice of the target language and thus improving the motivation of learners and the quality of the learning experience.

The central focus of the ELVIN project is on reinforcing language competence by improving motivation to learn and raising awareness of the need for content that is relevant and up-to-date for practice in



the target language, and providing appropriate interlocutors. Through the creation of a portal in which European language learners from a variety of different linguistic contexts can come together within a social framework in dyads and groups, first in the field of public administration and later in other sectors. In this sense a European area for lifelong learning is part of the project vision. The project is coordinated by the School of Public Administration of Castile and Lion, Valladolid, Spain and includes ten institutions from six different. The project is subsidized by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme.

## **2 The ELVIN framework: The ELVIN portal and the development of innovative ICT**

### **2.1 Key Tools: ELVIN social network and content repository**

The myelvin social network [2] was created based on existing social network software called Elgg [3]. The core social network has been enriched with a profile tool which matches up different learners based on self reporting by the user according to their language and professional interests. The myelvin portal is the space where the learner interaction will take place. This space is where language learners will find other learners whose level and background is appropriate to their needs. The profiling tool creates profiles of the learners in order to match them with others with similar needs and background. Once the network has matched up two people with similar interests they can interact with the network as normal users practicing the language by suing appropriate content or become an expert user that acts as tutors and facilitators within the portal. These users can control and guide groups within the network and guarantee the satisfactory use of the resources and content.

The community is supported by an on-line learning content repository powered by DSPACE [4], and the contents from this repository are directly accessible from the social network thanks to a wrapper that connects the social network and the content repository based on web services, and a set of protocols for the facilitation of practice by tutors that will be developed within the second year of the project. These tools are a content request protocol, to allow learners and teachers to request new content in accordance with emerging professional and language needs.

The following image shows the personal file of a user with the profile data and social widgets that facilitates the informal interaction.



News Feed Tools Content People Chat Settings Search Log out

**Gabriela**

My Location: portugal

Skype ID:

Gender: female

Languages I Wish to Learn: spanish, espanhol, español, español

Languages I Know: portuguese, português, english, inglês, inglés, português, portugues, português basic

My Native Language: portuguese, português, english and portugues

Why I am interested in learning languages:: life!

My Area(s) of Professional Interest: e-learning, instructional design, desenho instrucional

My Organisation: ina, portugal

My Function within my Organisation: instructional designer

helpflag: no

**About me**

Sou luso-britânica, interessada em melhorar o meu espanhol e disponível para "teclar" em Inglês! Trabalho no INA, na área do e-learning e estou a coordenar este projecto em Portugal. Os meus interesses extra-profissionais são, neste momento, a jardinagem!

Skype

**IMPORTANT:**

Remember that:

- you need to have skype installed on your computer
- you need to specify your skype ID in your profile
- you need to activate the privacy option which allows your status to be shown on the web

Conectado

**My Suggested Friends**

by Language:

No results.

by Interests:

No results.

**My Suggested Content**

**Blogs:**

- Usability study (TeresaFogarty)
- Usability study (TeresaFogarty)
- Welcome to the My Elvin platform, Beta v3.0 (maria)
- Want to speak Spanish, have English (lanaghi)
- Anyone want to practice English? (maria)
- Learn English / Spanish (maria)
- Who would like to learn Spanish / English? (maria)

**Bookmarks:**

- myelvin.org | development version: False friends (comas)
- myelvin.org | development version: Graça Rebelo's blog (Anide)
- Online Dictionary (MARINA\_A)
- English Newspaper (maria)
- Learn English (maria)
- Learning English (maria)

**Friends**

**Blog**

Blog: primeiras semanas do piloto - que tal?  
Gabriela 143 days ago

More blog posts

**Message board**

View all

anabela antunes 108 days ago

My page is " Cartão de cidadão (citizen card)", give your opinion.

reply on anabela antunes's message board | history

Alex Ag 136 113 days ago

**Bookmarks**

- myelvin.org: B castellano  
Gabriela 208 days ago
- teste  
Gabriela 208 days ago

More bookmarks

**Search Library**

**Keywords**

Separate keywords with a comma (,)

Fig. 1 Myelvin personal profile

## 2.2 Target groups

The target groups are learners in the field of public administration: professionals already working in this field and students preparing for a career in this field, from 6 European counties. The countries include: Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Hungary Bulgaria and Latvia. This mix of different linguistic contexts can come together with within this social framework. This will reinforce cultural dialogue within





dialogue within Europe. It will also emphasize the importance of promoting employability and also the importance of languages within these target groups.

The nature of the tools and services developed will particularly benefit less well served languages due to economies of scale generated by the network, in two particular sectors: continuing education and university education. Due to the linguistic diversity and intercultural dialogue, the network of language learners in a range of European educational sectors and countries and professional fields in the project is likely, due to its heterogeneous nature, to promote interaction between people and cultures and hence tolerance and respect. The ELVIN social network does this by providing a new approach to the practice of languages in language learning around relevant and up-to-date content, and with appropriate interlocutors. This network, though outside official systems, will intersect with existing education and training provision, both private and public, and play an important complementary role, thus helping to improve the quality of language learning in each context. The target groups, professionals in public administration, and university students principally learn languages in order to improve their competences for the workplace. Since the aim of the project is to improve the motivation to do this, and thus reinforce workplace relevant competences which will help improve workplace integration.

### **2.3 Methodology**

The methodology behind the myelvin project is to facilitate and help the educative community with a useful tool that can be used to motivate communication and the exchange of information, by joining the strengths of creation and the application of digital curricular content online to help improve the quality and the opportunities of language learning permanently. For this reason, innovative methodology and technology are the main elements of the project and the use of these tools within this multilingual social network will have a substantial impact on the quality and relevance of languages and the importance of lifelong learning especially with the area of languages.

The pedagogical aspects behind myelvin are related to the concept of informal learning which can be defined as any activity that occurs in a variety of places and through daily interactions and shared relationships among members of society. Informal learning occurs in everyday life and may not even be recognized as learning by the individual. It is not structured. The scenarios developed within the ELVIN project are based on these principles.

### **2.4 Pilot actions**

The project started in November 2009 and this paper is devoted to describing the first Elvin Pilot Action that was piloted between November 4th, 2010 and December 10th, 2010, and especially to present the lessons learnt from this experience in order to design the second Elvin Pilot Action.

Following on from the first phase of pilot actions there are many technological and pedagogical decisions to be made. The focus of the project up to now has been the development of a series of tools to facilitate language learning by improving opportunities to practice the language, and to make this practice more relevant, thus enhancing the learning process. Implementing the use of new tools to enhance what are informal learning processes in a network of interactions is by no means a simple task. The dynamics of the process, and the ways in which the network of interactions that emerges can be facilitated and supported, and to what extent it can become sustainable, are the keys to the success of the project, as the tools are just the starting point.

So the second pilot will look at types of user scenarios that will be found within the portal. It will also hope to finalise the usability of the platform so that the final product can be fully functional and marketed and the addition of a help desk to help people. This will also include video tutorials of instruction for those you get lost within the portal. And finally the issue of content, where this content will come from and the role that people will hold in providing this information.

## **3 Conclusion**

The basic starting point for the project is the question of motivation and the lack of relevant content in many of the target groups. By creating a social network in which relevant and up-to-date content and relevant interlocutors are available and accessible to the learner which is a brief overview of this EU funded project. It is part of the lifelong learning programme and it aims to facilitate EU language



acquisition and practice in an informal learning environment as related to the professional or personal goals of the users. It does this by matching people up within the system according to these professional and personal goals or interests.

The ELVIN project aims to combine online social networks, professional profiles and language learning in an informal education context through a web portal based on web 2.0 technology, where these kinds of activates convert users in content providers as well as users. It must be clear that the ELVIN portal is not a tool like other language courses; there is a possibility that courses will be designed from the ELVIN materials. The current situation within the ELVIN project finds it at the stage of further develop of both the portal and content repository taking from the feedback received after the first phase of pilot actions at the end of 2010. All technological and didactic issues are being developed and resolved in order to improve the ELVIN framework for the second phase.

Furthermore, the ELVIN project complies with the 2020 strategy which facilitates the mobility of all citizens, including students and professionals through the two main target groups as outlined before. The acquisition of new technology and languages is important for improving the competitiveness of Europe and promoting suitable skills and training which is a key to lifelong learning and promoting employability. Once the validity of the tools and approach has been demonstrated, the valorization approach will aim to extend the results to other sectors and linguistic contexts in Europe thus improving interactions based on practicing languages whilst promoting different cultures.

## **Acknowledgement**

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## **References**

- [1] Barroso, J.M.: Europa 2020. A strategy for sustainable growth and jobs (2010)
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- [3] Elgg (2010) <http://www.elgg.org>
- [4] DSPACE Home (2010) <http://www.dspace.org>