SiLang Project – Situated Learning and "Serious Games" towards an Effective Multicultural Communication

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Abstract

Nowadays communicating effectively is very important in a multilingual world to be competitive in the professional environments. Individuals are called to communicate in foreign languages on a regular basis in the context of their professional or academic activities. This is not only happen when individuals travel to another country to meet peers face-to-face, e.g. in meetings or conferences, but also when they are involved in on-line services, such as social and professional networks. Now in this networked world, the virtual mobility for know-how exchange and enrichment of informational resources has become a common-place as much as the physical mobility.

Professionals typically resort to a lingua franca, such as English, French, or German, for an efficient communication in the business world. However, most of the current approaches for foreign language learning, including the learning of vehicular languages, focus on developing knowledge of the use of the language in the country of origin without considering the widely varying pronunciations that come out from the native language as well as the so called "transfer effects", such as influences on the syntax of the language, the choice of words and expressions, and more. So even if the vehicular languages are used to achieve communication objectives, it is often not easy to understand each other, since pronunciation, syntax, and choice of expressions from the speaker's mother tongue are naturally introduced into communication. Currently the language learning methods are shifting from forcing all individuals to speak with one particular accent and one particular way, to emphasising the richness of EU cultures emerging in the diverting uses of vehicular languages.

In this framework, situated language learning can be advantageous by enabling the design of learning activities that make an individual more familiar with specific work-related situations in varying cultures. This can be enhanced through "serious-games" where an individual is situated into an actual environment in a foreign country and is driven to communicate on business matters simulating real-life. "Serious games" are a method often used to learn a language, mostly off-line, e.g. games involving learners in role-playing and in verbal communication exercises.

In this context, the siLang project, co-funded by European Commission under Lifelong Learning Programme, intends to produce "serious games" taking into account cultural aspects and transfer effects from the mother tongues. The aim is to develop language and cultural skills among professionals, students and vocational workers, paying attention to vehicular language used by non-native speakers in varying cultural and business environments. This methodology, that simulates the real multicultural and multilingual world, promotes integration empowering users to focus on achieving their objectives, whether at work or in other contexts. It will be validated in Greece, Norway, Italy, Portugal and Estonia.

1. A multicultural communication

We live in a world characterized by globalization, where the mobility of people, goods, capital and ideas is constant. In this context the individuals are called to move also in other countries to search a new job or to improve their own professional careers or they can travel to another country to participate just in meetings, conferences, etc. However the mobility is not only physical, but also virtual. The individuals can virtually travel through the commonly used on-line services, social and professional networks. The virtual and physical mobility becomes a know-how sharing and an exchange of informal resources that are very useful in a networked world. Therefore it is very important for professionals to learn those skills that will enable them to deal with the threats and opportunities of a global economy. One of these needed skills is the ability to effectively communicate especially in the current multicultural society in order to be more competitive in the professional environments.

Professionals usually resort to a lingua franca, such as English, French or German, to communicate efficiently in the labour market. However the use of the vehicular languages is often not easy, since pronunciation, syntax, and choice of expressions from the speaker's mother tongue are naturally introduced into communication. These are named "transfer effects". Intercultural differences can occur also in simple conversations. These will be more evident in those conversations aimed at achieving an external purpose (e.g. a trade negotiation), where the effects of any intercultural communication problem get much more obvious and tangible (e.g. the trade agreement fails) [1]. Everyone knows that currently, the most widely used lingua franca is English. However, it has to be considered that English is not the same if it used by an American, an Italian, a Greek, a Norwegian, an Estonian or others. If there are frequent misunderstandings between two people of different nations on their mother tongue is easy to imagine that even an Italian, who speaks perfect English learned in London, may incur misunderstandings with a German who uses anyway the same vehicular language.

Among the various problems of intercultural communication [2] that can occur, the one resulting from the different use of lingua franca is certainly the most obvious but often overlooked. The various "English speakers" in the world are the expression of the various national backgrounds. Each speaker has its own native accent in pronunciation, idioms, ways of greeting which sometimes differ significantly from each other. Many native English speakers often underestimate this aspect which assumes that beside the simple use of common language a different culture also exists.

The other important aspect relating to the problems of linguistic nature is the balance of power in the discussion between two interlocutors determinated from the mastery that each of them has about the language in which they speak. When the interlocutors use the same vehicular language, communication takes place then in a sort of "intermediate space", i.e. a kind of "interlingua". However this can cause, in the same way, communication problems, mainly because the intercultural space is only partially coincident. The cultural differences come out and influence the communication results and their successful or failure because each of the parties communicating through the lingua franca uses its own cultural patterns. Therefore the behaviour of the foreigner often does not coincide with the expectations of the interlocutor. This facilitates the creation of a so-called "culture bump" (i.e. a culture clash).

In fact, the software of the mind [3], to use a popular metaphor in the field of intercultural studies, are neither coincident nor always commensurable and give rise to the cultural scripts substantially different, although the differences may not be apparent immediately.

Another case is when one of the two interlocutors uses his/her own mother tongue for a negotiation, while the other has to use a foreign language as vehicular language. It is then no doubt that the first one, which handles perfectly the tools of his/her own mother tongue, is in a position of strength, not only because he/she can count on greater ease and effectiveness in the communicative expressions, but also in cultural terms, so his/her approach to communication becomes dominant.

This can occur when we use a vehicular language such as English. While we use a lingua franca, we continue to refer to our mind-sets and cultural customs translating literally our way of thinking and sometimes echoing phrases and typical constructs that have no meaning in the "real" English [4].

In simple conversations, there are no big communication problems when we talk through the typical English used just to survive. The things get complicated when relationships get complex and the words are "weighted" one by one, as in the case of negotiation of a trade agreement, because even using the same language some words change meaning or undertones from country to country.

2. The learning language and siLang approach

Existing training programs support professionals and students to reach high working levels of foreign language in a short period of time. These programs aim to build communicative basic competences to cope with the everyday life activities in a foreign language. In addition, some programs are also enriched with learning content and activities aiming at enabling professionals to understand effectively concepts and use terms related to a particular profession or sector, such as tourism, etc. However, most of the approaches for foreign language learning, including the learning of vehicular languages, focus on developing knowledge (such as grammar, lexicon, etc.) about the use of the language in the country of origin. For example there are some programs for learning English that prepare the users for use of the language in UK, or in the USA; programs for learning German to be used for the language in Germany; and so on. Most widely accessible language learning approaches fail to integrate the diverging use of a lingua franca by non-native speakers.

In this context siLang takes a different approach for the language learning through "serious games". It is a two-year KA2 Languages project co-funded by the European Lifelong Learning Programme, started in December 2012 and it will be finished in November 2014. It aims at producing serious games to develop languages and cultural skills of professional, students and employees especially focusing on the use of the vehicular language from a not mother tongue speaker in different cultural and professional contexts. This learning system will integrate the learning-by-doing and other educational activities, supporting the user to cope with the communication typical scenarios in different professional environments through the *serious games* [6].

Instead of forcing all individuals to speak with one particular accent and in one particular way, it focuses on the richness of European cultures as this is manifested in the diverging uses of vehicular languages. In this respect, the situated language learning can be advantageous by enabling the design of learning activities that let an individual to familiarize with specific work-related situations in different cultures. This approach can be significantly enhanced through the serious-games where an individual is situated into a micro-world of the actual environment in a foreign country and is called to communicate in relation to business activities in order to simulate real-life.

The digital games, including simulations and virtual worlds, have the potential to be an important teaching tool because they are interactive, engaging and immersive activities. There is no uniform pedagogy within serious games. The earlier games tended to be based on the behaviourist model while later games try to include experiential and situated elements thanks to the socio-cultural pedagogical models. In siLang the serious games are focalized on the situated learning that is on information used in context through a creation of a setting close to the real world.

Playing Serious Games, information and sensations experienced remain strongly impressed and they let the user improve his/her own perception, attention and memory, promoting behaviour changing through "learning by doing". In fact, internalizing something, that you actively experienced, is more simple than learning through traditional lessons, through so called "passive learning". Moreover, ludic aspects in the games increase the involvement and let the user be more spontaneous in his/her own behaviour [5].

The project approach intends to reinforce the languages skills needed for professional world focusing on the promotion of local languages' learning and the familiarization of the user/student with cultural, social and professional aspects. The innovative approach of these "serious games" is based on the

integration of the use of the foreign language from a native and non-native user and on the adaptability of learning situations in terms of content, learning objectives, roles, professional, social, cultural and communication elements and semantics. It will support also the instructors through automation of learning activities.

The project will improve effectiveness in professional communication, competitiveness and employability in partner countries, namely Greece, Italy, Estonia and Norway, through language learning at a professional level by using serious games to be accessed also via mobile. The learning activity will also allow users immersed in the workplace to valorise the local and cultural aspects.

References

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