PerLE: an E-Learning Solution for Languages in a Lifelong Learning Context- the Example of *Apprendimento e ICT* at Unical

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present how the PerLE digital platform, developed at the Department of Languages and Educational Sciences at the University of Calabria (UNICAL) promotes the development of language skills through e-competencies and collaborative learning in a blended context, encouraging active participation by considering learner autonomy as one of the main goals of this process. According to research in the field of language learning, an approach is required that allows students to construct their own knowledge and focuses on learning which responds to their needs, and real-life interests [1]. In the 21st Century two essential competencies will be required, the ability to communicate using foreign languages and ICT skills. PerLE, in effect, enables and supports the simultaneous development of both competencies in a context where ICT works as an aid for language learning through e-learning tools. This learning environment also privileges the communicative approach by offering students the opportunity to freely use, for example, blogs and wikis, create animated cartoons, videos and conceptual maps. It is also possible to use software for presentations focusing on what they need to communicate rather than on language analysis and grammatical rules. At the same time, it fosters motivation, by allowing students to take responsibility for their own learning (learn how to learn) since they become authors and consequently more successful learners. PerLE also has relevance in terms of its ability to enable improvement of self-regulated learning, social skills, and cognitive abilities, as proposed by the Lifelong Learning approach and suggested by results obtained in programs carried out in Austria using this approach as part of the Messaggeri della Conoscenza (Knowledge Messengers) project at the University of Calabria [2,3]. In addition, more than being a learning platform, PerLE is a Personal Learning Environment. Personal, since it gives students the opportunity to be protagonists in the learning process through a series of e-tools they use in collaboration with their peers to improve language skills, working in 4 macro-areas (Study, Collaborate, Create, Communicate). It is a learning environment because it facilitates learning and fulfills the four main elements a learning environment requires: tools, resources, people and designs[4].

1. Language Learning and Technology

People involved in language teaching and learning propose those SLA approaches that affirm that languages are best learnt and taught by means of interaction (Interactionist theories); and that language learning is supported by social interaction between learners and interlocutors, especially when there is negotiation of meaning to understand each other's messages. Reflecting on the fact that all tools mediate people's experiences in one way or another, such tools can become a medium for enriching the learner's contact with the language. So it is important to consider that in many cases people's interactions with technological tools are similar to real-life interactions because they are social and natural [5]. The objective is not that computers become human, but rather that they can simulate human characteristics. To do so, the information delivered by ICT tools must be relevant to learner needs, interests, personality and life context [6]. Additionally, with the shift towards communicative approaches, comprehension of the spoken target language has acquired great relevance, and the presentation of varied and original learning materials has become an imperative pedagogical goal. For this reason, technological innovations for language learning must be developed to help students personalize their learning and become more autonomous in deciding how to enrich their own instruction [7].

The web thus permits learners to be active participants in their learning since it provides people with the opportunity to express themselves, promote their self-image and participate in online discussion. This in turn gives authenticity to those activities which promote motivation in students. In the same way, technology reduces stress in young people because surfing the net has become familiar and the internet is the primary and preferred tool for communication today. Furthermore, advances in modern ICT offer language professionals the chance to access and to create L2 materials that can respond to specific learner needs according to the different contexts in which the language is being taught and

learnt. By offering students such materials, their motivation can be increased, and class discussions via e-mail, use of social networks and chat programs can enhance learner interest and increase interaction with peers and tutors [8]. There is, therefore, an important link between the potential of ICT and language learning. It is necessary to bring together the expressive, the communicative and the creative through ICT; where making, composing, reading, speaking and listening are fundamental in promoting lifelong learning [9]. This can be achieved through the use of virtual environments to aid the language learning and teaching process. Virtual learning environment (VLE) means "a software system that combines a number of different tools that are used to systematically deliver content online and facilitate the learning experience around that content" [10]. VLEs also make communication and collaboration tools available, fostering the use of social media software to enhance online interaction.

2. The PerLE Unical Platform

PerLE is a digital platform based learning environment designed at the Department of Languages and Educational Sciences at the University of Calabria, Italy. Its main goal is to promote individual and personalized learning in an environment which makes learning activity student-centred and responsive to developing learner requirements. Following the principles of Etienne Wenger's "Community of Practice", emphasis is on learning taking place in an environment which is essentially social and collaborative[11]. PerLE therefore offers three main elements, which can be defined as Community/Social, Study and Streaming content. As well as a wide range of software tools for learner use, it has a Facebook page, a twitter feed and YouTube, offering students the opportunity to upload their own videos on any subject. PerLE currently hosts a Web radio managed and run by Unical students and there are plans also to develop a Web TV.

2.1 Learning Management Systems (LMS) and Tools in the PerLE platform

LMSs are an important part of PerLE which, adopting an integrated approach, employs more than one of these systems. They offer a wide range of useful functions for the management course materials, yet the PerLE group has adopted an integrated approach because LMSs tend to be characterized by their "one size fits all" nature which can limit system responsiveness to learner needs which are not necessarily satisfied by the instruments available in the "package". This is to the detriment of learner-centredness which is so important to the conception driving the creation of PerLE. It is important to integrate the use of tools which enhance creative freedom of expression and permit self-regulated exploration and personal learning. Spaces are needed for learner expression (blogs, portfolio), for connection with other learners (forums, discussion lists), for dialogue with the instructor (email, Skype, messaging) and for learning in a structured manner (courses, tutorials). Also important in this context is the concept of modularity, which we interpret in terms of adding functions and tools as their usefulness becomes apparent. The platform employs Moodle, but it also uses OLAT, created at the University of Zurich, which allows for the creation of course materials and learning objects which can be incorporated. We also employ LAMS for creating sequences of learning activities and are currently using the XERTE open source tools suite for the creation of content and Learning Objects (LOs) for integration of course materials.

3. Lifelong learning and languages in PerLE: lessons learned from *Messaggeri della Conoscenza*.

Within the sphere of the *Messaggeri della Conoscenza* project [12], promoted by the Italian Ministry for Education, University and Research (MIUR), the Department of Psychology at the University of Vienna and the Department of Languages and Educational Sciences at the University of Calabria collaborated on an experimental initiative entitled *Apprendimento e ICT* (learning and ICT) with a view to developing student motivation along with ICT competence in order to address issues which included violence in schools, gender stereotypes and studies aimed at intervention in the schools themselves.

As outlined in the *Messaggeri della Conoscenza* project, lifelong learning implies a series of factors which include motivation and self-regulated learning, with the concomitant target variables of social skills and cognitive ability development. The social skills refer to cooperative learning skills such as communication skills, conflict and group management and dealing with diversity, while cognitive abilities regard metacognitive competence and creative and critical thinking/problem solving [13]. This practice of uniting the development of motivation with the concurrent acquisition of specific ICT skills finds logical application in the sphere of language learning in a virtual learning environment, in which the competences developed in tandem with the employment of a vast range of digital tools and Web 2.0 social media promote motivational involvement to the benefit of the learner, improving the quality and outcomes of the learning experience.

In order to be able to proceed with efficacious course design which fosters this valuable and dynamic mechanism, it is essential for a digital platform like PerLE to satisfy technical, psychological and pedagogical requirements. Technical requirements regard the provision of networking and computer facilities to language learners with access to the internet, allied to functional support in terms of monitoring and upgrading. Psychological requirements involve institutional support, proper assistance and guidance for students and well-planned induction procedures aimed at obviating psychological barriers related to the use of ICT. In terms of pedagogical requirements, an environment implemented for language learning uses technology to promote the development of the main language skills, yet its main role is to improve the teaching and learning experience, not to substitute effective pedagogy. This is where course design comes into play. Effective course design will seek to unite the principles of modern communicative language teaching approaches and methods with the enhancing capabilities offered by modern digital tools, which promote and encourage the forms of communicative practice which language learning requires[14].

Initially, the PerLE platform was conceived with a view to exploiting digital technology to enhance learning in a formal context with specific reference to its home institution. Course materials have therefore been prepared and made available across a wide range of subjects in a formal learning scenario and have been provided as a blended learning support in the institutional context. These include a considerable number of subject-oriented language courses such as, for example, English for Clinical Pathology, English for Law and English for Tourism. PerLE also currently offers training courses in CLIL and blended learning course materials for schools in the Calabrian region. The PerLE team is also engaged in research into evaluation of learner responses to use of the system with a view to enhancing its capabilities and responsiveness to learner needs. This involves the employment of a purposefully modified adaptation of the TAM (Technology Acceptance Model) questionnaire which aims at gathering information useful to the improvement of induction, guidance and assistance with the platform system. The group is also studying the best solution for the development of repositories for LOs and is currently experimenting with the use of Eprints for this purpose.

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