



Teaching Chinese with the use of SaaS Model

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Abstract

Chinese for Business project is the result of transfer of good practices, experiences and outcomes generated in the process of Chinese for Europeans (C4EU) project implementation in 2010-2013. Its aim is to teach Chinese language competences to businesspeople from European SMEs sector and at the same time employ them with business and culture knowledge about China and Chinese business customs and habits. Since businessmen have very little time for learning, they have very contoured educational needs. By using two methods: e-learning and micro-learning, the project meets the needs of entrepreneurs, especially those from small and medium sectors.

Chinese for Business develops four key products: language course, cultural and business guide - oriented on diversity in China, business platform for B2B and SaaS system. These results are complementary with one another. The first one is a collection of multimedia educational resources, the function of which is to enable self-education of SMEs representatives in the field of Chinese business language. The second one is a repository of materials presenting how to efficiently conduct business in China. It is done in a simple and intuitive way. The third one is a platform for practical application of the knowledge focused on language and business issues. Finally, the fourth outcome is a system processing the above-mentioned products in a "cloud".

The key concept of the project is an integration of the products which are interrelated. For example, the language course is linked to the content of the cultural and business guide. Also, the content coming from both outcomes: the language course and the cultural and business guide may be used in the B2B platform. In such a case, an entrepreneur may create his/her own business card using ready-made words and phrases coming from these products. Everything is in Chinese, naturally.

The language course is prepared in line with three methods: CLIL - for simultaneous learning of Chinese language and business issues, micro learning - to affect the way of selection (or "batching") teaching materials, and mobile learning to prepare the material and make it readable for mobile devices.

Finally, the most important element of the project is the SaaS system which integrates all products. SaaS enables to treat the learning process as a service and what is crucial, the entire teaching material is uploaded in a cloud. Users have the access to all learning resources both from a browser and mobile applications.

It's worth emphasizing that the content in the language course and cultural and business guide prepared before had been consulted with entrepreneurs. Thanks to such a solution, entrepreneurs may not only learn Chinese and business culture of China, but also create a company profile in the B2B platform with the help of ready-made templates. As a result, the prepared material not only meets the learning objectives, but is also extremely practical.

1. Why SaaS in Chinese for Business?

In recent years, using ICT has become indispensable in maintaining social, business and economic relationships. While following the development of ICT, modern didactics has been irrevocably evolving in the direction of e-learning. Teaching through ICT has occurred particularly useful in language education and is becoming an everyday phenomenon in this field. One of the most frequently mentioned qualities of teaching with the use of state-of-the-art technologies is effective time management as the choice of place and time is tailored to the needs and abilities of the learner. This factor bears particular significance for those working intensively, whom the requirements of their work-life frequently prevent from making use of traditional forms of education. Entrepreneurs working in the SMEs sectors undeniably belong to this group.

The increased importance of China on the international economic stage has been affecting the growing interest of European organisations in trade with the Middle Kingdom. In connection with this phenomenon, the demand for educational materials for learning Chinese available through ICT has been growing. Therefore, the requirements of entrepreneurs do not relate only to the educational materials. The entrepreneur is just as much interested in access to these resources.

The Chinese for Business (C4B) project has therefore emerged in response to a large interest with educational materials for learning Chinese on the European market, and in particular those meant for entrepreneurs. The project offers its users innovative tools for developing language and cultural skills. The contents of C4B as well as their availability are tailored to the needs of entrepreneurs who prefer mobile learning together with intuitive and quick access to educational resources. Meeting the needs of the beneficiaries was made possible thanks to the employment of SaaS model, innovative in the field of language teaching. Owing to this model, a user does not need to devote his/her time to tedious installation of additional programs enabling the use of educational resources. The project products are uploaded in a "cloud", thanks to which getting indispensable linguistic support is made possible any time, any place.

2. What is SaaS?

Software as Service, or SaaS for short, is a relatively new model of IT service provision, in which the software itself is the subject of service. SaaS is a constantly developing method of providing a client with business application without the need to purchase a licence or install software. The significance of business services offered in the SaaS model enjoys a continuously growing interest of organisations, including SMEs. Software as a Service provides these organisations with a range of possibilities, including flexibility unavailable in a traditional model of providing the clients with software, and technological solutions available earlier only for large organisations.

Development of SaaS services has been made available thanks to universal access to the Internet and dispelling clients' doubts about the safety and reliability of this kind of solution. SaaS services remove restrictions in communication, cooperation and trade, which have so far been imposing the use of specific equipment compatible with the software. The possibility of using the software has been limited to computers with pre installed application or corporate network. SaaS, however, is a form of outsourcing of services. Owing to SaaS, clients decrease the costs of their IT departments, which no longer have to take care of implementation, upgrading, and maintenance of complex applications internally. The services made available in the SaaS model targeted at the end-customer are e-services. SaaS is a way of providing services by means of commonly known website interfaces available to almost every user.

Remote access to applications and databases and a quicker implementation of application are some of the most important values of the SaaS System. Standardisation of solutions renders proper operation of the programs in all most popular web browsers. Therefore, they are available for every user, regardless of their hardware and operating system. One of the main implementations of the SaaS system is remote access to business software, its advantage being constant growth. The system keeps pace with IT development and aims toward full integration of SaaS solutions with the customers' systems. The majority of experts claim that SaaS is the future and one of the most important stages of business software evolution.

A clear advantage of the SaaS solution is also the possibility of immediate start of the application without the need to purchase servers, software and a tedious process of its implementation. Benefits of the application most frequently emphasized in the SaaS model from the user's perspective are:

- Simplicity of application use and management, which allow for the focus on the task completion, and not on a struggle with the application,
- Elimination of the necessity to install the application on the user's computer, as a standard web browser is used, and the possibility to use the app from any computer, any place,
- Security guarantee; SaaS services are now provided through IT systems protected physically and logically in a way to rise up to the expectations of the most demanding customers,
- Scalability; SaaS services are easily scalable along with the increase in demand on the side of the customer, as they work on a platform designed for the service of thousands of users,
- Availability; SaaS belongs to constantly available services.

The drawback most frequently mentioned by customers is the necessary access to a reliable Internet connection.

3. What does Chinese for Business offer entrepreneurs?

Chinese for Business Project continues and develops the business module and elements of the cultural product *China. Things To Know Before You Go*, a part of the project *Chinese for Europeans* carried out between 2010 and 2013. It was aimed at four groups of recipients: children, students, entrepreneurs and tourists. In this way, four modules have been created, each meant for each of the four respective groups of recipients. Additionally, one module with the language basics, shared by all groups, came into being. The main factors that contributed to the implementation of the C4B project

were significant interest in the C4EU platform and consultations with SMEs entrepreneurs. The target group of recipients are mainly SMEs businesses from EU that are planning to undertake business cooperation with Chinese companies. C4B also makes use of modern means of education with the use of ICT, already proven effective in the project *Chinese for Europeans*. Didactic resources are based on the methods of micro-learning, m-learning and CLIL that were all recognised most effective in language education of entrepreneurs.

The micro-learning method has been chosen due to the possibility of transfer of knowledge in small batches, which enables learning with the use of mobile devices for businesspeople during their short breaks at work. Micro-learning is a teaching method based on transferring small batches of knowledge, which is then repeated and preserved according to strictly defined rules. Micro-learning also facilitated the process of self-study, as it is easy to integrate in the daily routine by merging different approaches to learning. It therefore facilitates organizing one's learning in a time convenient for the learner. M-learning, being one done via wireless and mobile devices, joins possibilities provided by wifi networks, mobile technologies and e-learning. The peculiar connection of the three methods: micro-learning, m-learning and CLIL facilitates effective and practical learning of the Chinese language with the use of web and mobile tools.

C4B project is composed of four products dedicated to SMEs entrepreneurs. The first one is a language course facilitating self-study of Chinese business language by entrepreneurs. The second is a business and culture guide that helps understanding the specificity of establishing business relations in China. The third is a B2B platform serving practical application of the language and business knowledge gained. An entrepreneur may create his/her business profile in Chinese with the use of templates and vocabulary from the remaining modules. The fourth C4B product is an original system prepared according to the SaaS model which enables the use of the remaining elements of the project any time, any place, from any web browser. The choice of learning content in the project is not random, it results from actual users' needs. Educational resources have been prepared after consultations with entrepreneurs trading with Chinese companies and looking for the chance to develop their company via establishment of such a cooperation. The self-study method has also been chosen on the basis of surveys conducted among entrepreneurs. They have unanimously stated that the key moment for their language learning are breaks at work or the time spent while commuting on a plane or train.

The idea of the innovative project is based on the synergy of all C4B products. The language course contains educational contents that are strictly connected with informational materials contained in the culture and business guide, and the contents of both of the above-mentioned products (the language course and the guide) may be used on the B2B platform, where an entrepreneur may create his/her company profile in Chinese and enter their offers in order to establish cooperation with Chinese entrepreneurs. All products are uploaded into a "cloud" and therefore available from any mobile device and any web browser.

4. The SaaS system and Chinese for Business

Through the preparation of IT solution, the innovative and original SaaS system enabled the C4B users exploitation of the project products as well as self-study via the service by providing the possibility of immediate start of the application. Such a solution enables exploitation of open educational resources without the need to install additional software or plug-ins. The application of the SaaS System made both the tele-information environment and educational resources available for use in three major operating systems used in mobile devices (Android, iOS and Windows) from the level of the www service of the project. To put it shortly, all C4B project products are available from the level of an ordinary web browser installed on a user's computer, tablet or smartphone, and the language course is additionally available from the level of a dedicated mobile application.

Thanks to the SaaS system, C4B is diverting from the most well-known way of software use, in which an application is installed on a computer of every user taking advantage of the application, which requires the purchase of the right number of licences and is connected with time-consuming installation of the application on each computer separately. Indeed, it can be boldly stated that the solution prepared within the *Chinese for Business* project is an interactive web application. Owing to the SaaS model, web browser ceased to be a simple tool serving visualisation of data received from remote servers, and it started to constitute a work and study environment, in which a user may freely run independent applications and make use of various functionalities of the system.

It is worth mentioning that the system fulfils two integration models: internal and external. The internal model consists in a substantial and functional fusion of the above-mentioned elements of the system, while the external one is based on an adequate fusion of the whole system with external social networks, thanks to which users may automatically integrate their resources with C4B's SaaS system.

It's mainly about integration with such systems as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and Pinterest. These external integrations fulfil an important business function, as they enable the creation of an adequate image of the company, and by doing so they actually increase the chances of reaching Chinese companies and embarking upon cooperation with them. Therefore, the synergy of C4B products and their integration means, that entrepreneurs receive a complementary set of tools enabling an effective implementation of development plans of their companies.

From the author's viewpoint, SaaS system is an excellent tool enabling constant monitoring of the project users' activities. Owing to this, it is possible to accurately (based on numbers and percentage) measure users coming from the EU, given regions and cities, as well as from China and other countries interested in making use of the project results. Statistical data, in turn, may help modelling the substantial content of the service and influence decisions concerning development of the system e.g. in the field of designing new functionalities and creating other language interfaces.

What does the SaaS model offer? In the first place, it enables simultaneous and effective implementation of educational and business objectives. The system is based in a cloud, it is adapted to every desktop and mobile device, and being functionally and substantially tailored to the needs of its end-users (SMEs representatives) it is easy to use.