The Design and Implementation of an Online English Course for Police Officers

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Abstract

CEPOL (European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training) has been running and organising courses for police officers for years. For multiple reasons, in 2015 CEPOL management suggested to start replacing residential courses with fully online ones. Since language training was and is very popular among the stakeholders, it was the Police English Language (PEL) course that was decided to be the first purely online course. The five-week pilot was launched in 2015, and as it appeared to be very successful, the length of the course in 2016 was already eight weeks, instead of two trainers the third one was added, and the number of participants increased from 60 to 80.

Since it was desired to issue an acknowledged language certificate, an extra element was added and all participants were offered to take British Council's Aptis test especially tailored for the PEL course finishers. The results were very satisfying – majority of the test takers succeeded in raising their language level.

The paper aims to cover the structure and content of the course, give examples of the activities used, discuss some strong points and places for improvement, give a short overview of the feedback collected from both the trainers and the trainees, and offer some tips for running an online course.

Keywords: *LSP, e-learning, English, in-service training, testing, law enforcement*

1. Introduction

In 2015 CEPOL organised and implemented a pilot online course as part of the continuous development and improvement of the products and services within CEPOL's e-learning portfolio. For the identification of the pilot online course's topic, CEPOL primarily aimed at addressing an existing learning need as well as realising further complementarity with and strengthening of existing training.

The trainers started preparing for the course in the early autumn on 2015 and the five-week course, built on the Moodle platform, was launched in October of the same year. The third edition of the course with minor changes and enhancements is still being conducted during the time of writing this paper in autumn 2017.

2. Aims of the Course

CEPOL is an agency of the European Union dedicated to develop, implement and coordinate training for law enforcement officials. It brings together a network of training institutes for law enforcement officials in EU Member States and supports them in providing frontline training on security priorities, law enforcement cooperation and information exchange. [1] Since English is a lingua franca of the EU, many training sessions are also conducted in English. Clearly, to participate in a course conducted in English, one must have at least some knowledge of the language; therefore, there has always been a great interest in language courses and reaching more trainees was also one of the reasons the online course was introduced.

Before launching the pilot and inviting trainers, CEPOL set the following aims:

1. To create better opportunities for participants of CEPOL residential courses, seminars, conferences, and European Police Exchange Programme to equip themselves with the necessary language skills to be able to take part more effectively in these respective activities;

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2. To create a more comprehensive training activity by combining the use of existing online learning and training resources;

3. To contribute to the professionalisation of English language trainers in the European Union who are working with police and law enforcement officers in the field of cross-border cooperation.

Based on these aims, CEPOL suggested the following topics that would create the backbone for the online PEL course: police station and equipment, offences, cybercrime, money laundering, Europol, joint investigation teams, counterterrorism, Schengen and EU policy cycle.

Having the core set, the trainers stated the following objectives for the course:

1. In accordance with the CEFR learners will be able to express themselves briefly in familiar situations and to deal in a general way with non-routine information in writing, speaking, reading and listening;
2. To enrich their Police English Language vocabulary;
3. To practice cooperation on a European level, which they can later utilise in cross-border communication.

Estimated study time per week: 15 to 18 hours.

Target group: Police officers and law enforcement staff from EU Member States with minimum 3 years of experience whose work position and responsibilities require the use of English Language in the framework of cross border police cooperation.

3. Structure of the course and assessment

Initially the trainers of the pilot course were given a lot of room for their ideas and intentions. The only boundaries set involved the length of the course and the topics listed. Since both trainers working on the pilot course have also worked on the full eight-week courses, most of the initial material and ideas are still being used on the course.

Whenever starting to build anything, especially a new course, one should start with structure that would help the trainees know exactly where they are and where they are heading. Asha Pandey, a learning strategist, has listed six principles to follow when creating effective online courses:

1. Define and align solutions to organisational focus areas;
2. Use "Creative Instructional Design";
3. Follow a learner centric design approach
4. Understand learner expectations and mental models
5. Use innovative approaches to convert user experience to "learnability"
6. Leverage on creativity backed by strong technology [2]

As CEPOL had suggested the focus areas, the trainers could immediately start designing the course itself, and while doing so, they tried to follow the aforementioned principles.

Dependent on the length of the course, each week was dedicated a central theme or two, which was/were accompanied by a relevant grammar area. The activities were set up following the principle that the trainees could practise and get ready for the weekly assignment to assess the development and understanding of the weekly topic. The type of activities was varied, plugins were used to embed gamification, video recordings but also to prepare learners for the Aptis test that used very similar assessment methods. During the pilot course, the completion of the assignments determined the type of certificate issued at the end of the course – certificate for completion was issued to those having passed all formative and summative assignments (passing rate 50%), and certificate for attendance was issued to those who had attempted all formative assignments but not attempted or passed all summative assignments. The second year these principles were changed for several reasons. Firstly, due to the unreliability of some learners' Internet connection, not all could submit their assignments (in time or at all) for technical reasons. Secondly, in November 2015 Paris suffered from terrorist attacks, due to which some trainees could no longer participate in the course, and since the certification principles stated they had to attempt all formative assignments to receive even the certificate for attendance, their contributions to the first half of the course lost their weight. One might ask why did not the trainers change the certification rules or allow late submissions if technical difficulties were

concerned. Again, there was more than one reason for that – changing the rules in the middle of the course seemed inappropriate, allowing late submissions would have disturbed the grading schedule and making the rules more lenient could have been demoralising. To avoid such problems in the future, the trainers decided to change the rules for certification. Now one must submit 4 assignments out of 7 to receive a certificate, and vocabulary tests have been changed into formative assignments since their vocabulary is assessed in the Aptis test (especially tailored for the PEL finishers) all participants are invited to take at the end of the course.

4. Types of activities and learner involvement

When first starting with the PEL course, the trainers aimed to create a course that besides helping the learners improve their English language skills would also engage them as much as possible, establish an online learning community and develop a friendly and supportive atmosphere. To achieve the aims, there are several activities that have proven to be successful.

Each of the three PEL courses run until today has been opened with a live webinar (online seminar), during which the trainers introduce themselves, explain the structure of the course, and invite the trainees to ask course-related questions. During the years, it has appeared that online learners appreciate this format, they claim it is good to see the face behind the name, and add that knowing your fellow group mates are there at the same time with you, has helped to create a sense of belonging. In addition to that, there are more activities carried out throughout the course which aim is to help establish a learning community. For example, there are forums used not only for learning purposes, but also for solving different problems trainees may come across during the online course. In 2017 the trainers introduced the idea of the question of the week, which embodies the idea of asking students a warm-up question that would be simple yet intriguing and also make them use the grammar acquired the week before. In addition to forums, there are several group activities (group glossaries, wikis) embedded in the course that require trainees to interact and learn from each other. Another Moodle feature that has helped to bring the course more alive is the user-friendly PoodLL plugin that enables learners to audio or video record themselves. This leads to the next point that involves practising and assessing speaking online which has appeared to be the biggest challenge for both the learners and trainers. Since the groups are big, there has been no possibility to organise sessions involving synchronous interaction. Therefore, all speaking activities involve the use of the aforementioned plugin and learners can record themselves at any time. This, however, has resulted in some learners preparing their speech in writing and then reading and recording it. Since the assignments are similar to the Aptis tasks, the learners have been notified of the matter and asked to be very self-disciplined to acquire the desired skills and follow the instructions for the speaking assignments very carefully.

5. Feedback and suggestions

The organisers of the course have expressed general satisfaction for the course because until now it has received mostly positive feedback from all parties. Throughout the years of implementation, the dropout rate, which with online courses can be problematic, has been relatively low (less than 10 percent compared to the average 20-80). Which presumably shows strong student commitment and motivation. Another indicator of the success is evident in the results of the Aptis test that show the course has met its objectives since most of the learners have improved one or more levels (if the self-assessment was correct at the time of the nomination).

The trainees have expressed general satisfaction with the course and indicated it has been an invaluable experience for them. At the same time, there were some suggesting that the course could have benefitted from involving more face-to-face sessions similar to the kick off webinar. This, however, would have resulted in finding a time suitable for most of the participants, which so far has appeared to be nearly impossible even for a group of five, therefore. the trainers decided not to organise another one.

The trainers have also been satisfied with the course. Yet there are some suggestions they believe could also be applied for other online courses. Firstly, participants cannot be expected to know how to work on an online course, therefore some instructions of how to use certain tools must be given. Secondly, deadlines are extremely important time management tools, both for learners and trainers. Thirdly, participating in (and finishing) an online course is very demanding for trainees. To help them, the trainers should seek to introduce even more group activities that would help build good working relationships between the learners and promote more natural use of English.

References

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