

**E-content development for languages:
success factors and pitfalls**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the success factors and pitfalls in the development of e-content for languages. The factors discussed draw on several years of experience in developing and implementing 95% distance courses for Dutch as a second language in the adult education sector in Flanders and on PhD research at VUB. The CEFR provides language centers with a profound pedagogical framework necessary when developing language courses. The 10 success factors and 5 pitfalls in the development of e-content for languages discussed in this text comprise practical guidelines, which can affect the process of creating qualitative e-content for languages positively.

Introduction

Constructing qualitative e-content for language learning has recently emerged as one of the main challenges for many language institutions worldwide. While computer-assisted language learning has been the research subject of many academics, little is known about existing fully online courses for less commonly taught languages. Instructional designers challenged with the assignment of designing e-learning courses for languages, are looking for the best tools, the most valuable pedagogical principles and the most efficient interface in order to create the perfect e-content. The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment) provides a sound pedagogical basis for designing (distance) language courses. It adopts an action-oriented approach that regards language users as social agents who develop general and particular communicative competences while trying to achieve their everyday goals. This approach can be traced back to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein in the 1950s and Dell Hymes.

This paper aims at providing insight in the critical success factors that determine the development and implementation of e-content, as well as the possible pitfalls. A correct and realistic estimation of the target audience and knowledge of the CEFR are prerequisites in constructing qualitative e-content, and practical guidelines in the light of e-content development and implementation can affect the process positively.

Critical success factors

1. E-content is useful / covers the learners' needs

Learning a language doesn't equal understanding the grammar and acquiring vocabulary. It is also a matter of cultural insights and awareness, good pronunciation and prosody, not to mention about having a natural sounding conversation. Students in the e-course need to feel that the e-content is useful for them; that they can immediately apply the newly acquired language in their daily lives or jobs. Therefore, the e-content should provide real-life situations, so that the students can train their linguistic skills effectively. Knowing the target audience is of vital importance to achieve this goal. The CEFR is an excellent guideline in choosing the right linguistic resources and setting the standards for the language course. The domains ensure enough freedom to develop e-content for different target audiences. The e-content should bridge the gap between the language needs and the work floor / daily life. The e-content should not only address the general and particular communicative competences as described in the CEFR, but also the individual learners' needs and interests.

2. E-content is personalized / partly constructed by the learner

E-content which is too condensed, will make the student feel unsatisfied. An overload of exercises, on the other hand, might leave the student frustrated. A good dosage is essential. Branching is a good way to avoid the feeling of "drowning in exercises". Most authoring tools nowadays offer the possibility to incorporate branching in the e-content. In this way, not every student will go through the same learning trajectory, but instead, individualized learning paths can be created, addressing the learner's personal needs in a more efficient way. Personalized learning can be achieved in several ways. Branching steers the learner in a specific direction, but it can also work the other way round: the individual learner can apply self-regulatory skills by choosing chunks of the course depending on previously acquired knowledge and skills, or depending on personal interests or needs. Learner agency and autonomy stimulate motivation. Landsiedler (2003) suggested that, in order to improve the efficiency of foreign language teaching and learning, Austrian schools should amongst others become more learner-

centered. Learner agency and autonomy are becoming hot topics in the field of Dutch as a second language too. An in-depth interview with 12 stakeholders in this field revealed a widespread belief that online courses are a good solution for the lack of individual learning trajectories and learner autonomy which are typically seen in F2F-courses.

Josie Fraser (2006) distinguishes three types of personalization. Adaptive personalization means that the organization offers the learner some learning options. The availability of options is based on knowledge about the learners. The system makes a selection of possible choices for the learner. The second type of personalization is customization. In this case, the learner explicitly chooses from a broad learning offer. An example is a language assignments database with learning objects from which the learner can make a personal selection. This is often referred to as "mass customization". The third type of personalization is called dynamic personalization, meaning that the institution engages with the learner by supporting production, reception and relationships but giving the user the ability to create original works and to collaborate with other learners.

I argue that dynamic personalization is indispensable in e-courses for languages. Natural speech production and writing skills can only be deployed if learners can interact with and learn from each other and get feedback on personal work. Task-based language teaching should in no case be restricted in a distance course, on the contrary. EPortfolios, communication tools and learning management systems perfectly allow for original works of students. Suzuki (2013) also argues that CALL (computer-assisted language learning) can promote learner agency and autonomy. The Theory of Constructivism suggests that second language learners construct knowledge out of their own experiences. Not all problems and tasks should be presented by the teacher. In everyday life, people are confronted with unpredictable and unique situations. The e-course should leave room for the personal input of students, so not all learning paths should be pre-structured. From my personal experience as a Dutch teacher in all proficiency levels, I conclude that in high proficiency levels of Dutch (B1 and higher), students are often able to define their linguistic needs and bringing their experiences into the formal learning process, creates a productive and challenging learning environment. I argue that not all e-content should be pre-designed. Striving for a learning environment in which the learning outcomes are not predetermined, is challenging and fruitful, but requires communication between student and teacher on equal terms. (Baumgartner, 2004). It is a prerequisite that the e-learning platform or the LMS allows for this kind of communication. Gröstenberger and Scharl (2005) described this new approach in online language teaching, which bans technology and content to the background and puts the focus on the individual student's language work as a cognitive activity.

3. E-content is motivating

Motivation is based on many factors: the content of the course, the way the course looks, the extent to which the e-content addresses the learner's needs, the contact with the teacher, etc. From a survey conducted among online Dutch second language learners about their experiences with the online Dutch course, the motivational factor number one to go on with the language course, proved to be the contact with the teacher. The weekly Skype talk the students had with the teacher, motivated them to continue with the course, to use the language learned outside the course. It improved their speaking skills and it helped them to gain confidence in speaking the target language. Hampel and Pleines (2013) also found that more instructor involvement had a positive impact on learner engagement. Other motivational factors derived from my own research are usefulness of the e-content, humor in the lessons, contact with the other students and the weekly follow-up and feedback and learner agency.

4. E-content provides active and interactive learning, social learning and communication

Students learn from each other and learning a language requires practice in communication. Social media serve many educational benefits and can make the learning process feel natural. In the last decade, language acquisition is often looked at from the perspective of Dynamic Systems Theory. In this approach, the language acquisition takes place through interaction with other people within a social context. The more people are involved, the more complex the language learning will become and the more linguistic input the learner will get. The learning happens on the individual level (the learner reorganizes the information in his/her mind) and on the social level (through interaction between individuals) (de Bot, K., Lowie, W. & Verspoor, M., 2007). Communication should be at the core of the e-course, linguistics should be regarded as the materials to build communication on. Meaning is

constructed in the process of communication, and many qualitative tools are at our disposal to bring about communication among language learners.

5. E-content uses authentic materials

One of the main merits of the internet in the light of online language learning is that it provides a non-stop stream of interesting, free, up-to-date and authentic learning materials which can be integrated in the e-content. Finding the right articles, video, audio, cartoons, poetry was never as easy as today. The value of authentic learning materials in the e-content should not be underestimated. First, the authentic materials form the basis of task-based learning: authentic resources will enhance the functionality of the tasks. Secondly, working with e-content based on authentic materials lowers the threshold for students who only use the target language for the purposes of the course, and who switch to another language at home, at work or in interactions outside the course.

6. E-content integrates different kinds of feedback

When designing e-content for languages, it is necessary to think about ways of providing students with feedback. **Automated feedback** requires a lot of work from the instructional designer, but has the advantages of providing students with prompt feedback and the possibility of redirecting the student to the appropriate place in the course (eg. to a theoretical overview, an explanatory film, an example, or an extra exercise in the case of failure, or to a more difficult exercise in the case of success). **Teacher-student feedback** is often organized in the form of written or spoken feedback (synchronous, eg. via Skype), but experience shows that audio-feedback is also very much appreciated by the students. Screencasts of students' written texts with spoken feedback from the coach, provide the students with personal feedback, and hearing the voice of the coach, makes the learning experience more personal. **Peer-feedback** (students give each other feedback) and **feedback from the outside world** (for example through a community or field trips for the language course) are also beneficial.

7. E-content is integrated in a suitable and reliable learning platform

Selim (2007) states that – for institutional support – the availability of technical assistance or a help desk was the most critical success factor. Selim's research pointed out that ensuring that the institution's IT infrastructure is rich, reliable and capable of providing the courses with the necessary tools to make the delivery process as smooth as possible, is of critical importance when implementing e-courses. Debevc and Bele (2008) also concluded that LMS usability can significantly affect learning. My own research points in the same direction: the interviewed stakeholders included a user-friendly learning management system as one of the seven most critical success factors for the development and the implementation of online Dutch courses. They stated that the LMS should be easy to use for students as well as tutors.

8. E-content is an all-in one package

E-courses for languages should contain all the necessary handles to solve linguistic problems, like a Swiss knife contains a spectrum of handles to solve technical problems. These handles comprise – but are not limited to - grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, the four skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking. It is important that students can easily find the linguistic resources which are at their disposal; that all the components of the e-course are easy to find. Like in the case of a Swiss knife, there should be a main frame that keeps all the components of the e-course together.

9. E-content is based on the KISS-principle

KISS is an acronym for "Keep it simple, stupid", and was used as a design principle by the US Navy in 1960. The principle sets simplicity as the main goal in design and states that all necessary complexity should be avoided. Even before that time, Mies Van Der Rohe's phrase "Less is more", was immensely popular. In terms of e-content design, this principle is very helpful: many studies have pointed out the importance of a clear interface design, and a straightforward course design. Simplicity differs from visually unattractive: it means that all unnecessary distractions should be avoided, that the interface should be clear and that the tools used should be user-friendly. Hampel and Pleines (2013) concluded from a four-year study that a simpler structure with fewer tasks and tools has a positive impact on learner engagement.

10. E-content is developed from a matrix-approach

In designing e-content, the use of a content matrix and a detailed planning is very helpful. The e-content matrix could give an overview of themes (or contexts), specific topics or lessons, various sectors of social life (or domains), competences, descriptive knowledge, skills, assessment, etc. Adding a checkbox window shows the progress of the e-content development at a glance. A clear and defined project plan is indispensable when designing e-content, in view of course structure, timing, contexts and domains, assessment, tools and distribution of the four skills.

Pitfalls

1. Time-management

Institutions that are new in developing and implementing e-courses for languages, often underestimate the workload. A solid long-term planning and a more detailed short-term planning with strict deadlines is of great value when platforms, but also time to put the pedagogical choice (eg. for communication strategies and the use of portfolio) into practice.

2. Familiarity with tools and media

One of the great challenges for the instructional designers, is to choose the right tools for presenting the e-content. A prerequisite in the choice of software and tools is to know the target audience. Is online learning new for your audience or are they experienced in online learning? What is their (educational) background? A rule of thumb is that the tools and media used should in any way benefit the learning process and not be a hindrance to its users.

3. Permissiveness for students

Learning a language online requires a lot of self-discipline from the students. From my research, I can conclude that regular contact with a tutor (preferably each time the same tutor) strongly enhances the motivation and self-discipline of the students. Too much freedom, i.e. isolated time in the course without virtual meetings with the tutor or other students, results in drop-out. Regular follow-up by a tutor, on the other hand, seems to be a strong motivational element for online Dutch students to go on with the course and use the language in their daily lives. When designing online language courses, it is valuable to include regular assignments and deadlines for the students.

4. Support

For online students, as well as for online tutors and instructional designers, support from the institution is indispensable. Students need a contact person to get linguistic and technical support from. Online tutors and instructional designers need the institution's support in terms of realistic project plans, technical back-up, belief in online language learning, a reliable and suitable learning platform and last but not least pedagogical support in the form of training. The possibilities in setting up online language courses are endless, and so are the challenges. Participation in trainings and attendance at conferences on online language learning are necessary if one wants to keep up with the latest developments.

5. Financial restrictions

In my research, not less than 10 out of 12 stakeholders in the field of Dutch as a second language in Flanders and The Netherlands pointed at the financial restrictions associated with the development of online language courses. Not only the educational sector, but also private companies state that the development of online learning materials requires a huge investment from the institution. They stipulate that the cost is high for two main reasons: designing an e-course is time-consuming, and furthermore, it also assumes expensive technical requirements. This is certainly the case for institutions who want to work with an open learning center.

Conclusion

The ultimate success of online language courses is its ability to spread its power across geographical, social and linguistic boundaries, and across different time zones. The internet provides us with a wealth

of authentic study materials that we can deploy in the e-content to make language learning fit the purposes. Social learning is one of the key motivational elements in online language courses, and personal learning trajectories achieved by the use of branching and dynamic personalization, add to the key success ingredients. Part of the challenge of developing e-content for languages lies in the adaptation of an underlying framework for feedback and support. A reliable LMS needs to go hand in hand with user-friendly tools and an efficient interface.

This paper also discussed the main pitfalls institutions encounter in the process of developing e-content for languages, comprising time management, familiarity with tools and media, a framework for the follow-up of the students' progress, (pedagogical) support from the institution and financial restrictions.

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