

Lingue in Piazza – Promoting the Possibilities of Learning a European Language Autonomously

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Abstract

Together with the extending of UE towards the East of Europe, we have faced an increase in the number of languages spoken on the territory of EU. The increase of the mobility on the labor market determined the workers from Poland, Bulgaria and Romania to migrate towards countries such as Austria, Italy, Spain where they have the possibility to find better paid jobs. In this context, learning foreign languages becomes important and especially the learning done in an autonomous way. The project promotes the possibility for people to learn individually the foreign languages using the new technologies and the Internet.

Keywords: Autonomous language learning, “lingue in piazza” event, Internet, seminars “for testing foreign languages”, website.

I. Introduction

In several of the countries involved in the project (Britain, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey), the level of language learning is very low. Although Government policy regarding language teaching in schools is improving in Italy, for example, (just last year a law was introduced obliging middle school children to learn two European languages), many adults who have completed their education have missed out on language learning. In Britain, the European country where language learning is completely disregarded (many Foreign Languages Faculties in universities are closing and schoolchildren are increasingly choosing not to study a foreign language), people need to be made aware of the advantages of learning a foreign language.

Another important point to mention is that with the increased mobility of people in the enlarged Europe, people are more in contact than ever before with people from other European countries and therefore need to be able to communicate with them. Poles and Romanians sometimes migrate to Britain, Italy and Spain and therefore need to be able to speak some Italian, Spanish and English. People from Turkey sometimes go to work in Germany and Austria and therefore need to be able to communicate in German. Vice versa, those in the host countries should be able to communicate with immigrant workers. Many Polish women work as carers for old people in Italy and communication is often a problem in the families concerned. Business contacts with Eastern Europe would also be facilitated with better language skills. Tourism is on the increase in the countries involved and people from Eastern Europe are spending more holidays in the West. If people in tourist resorts in Spain and Italy, for example, could speak a little of the language of those tourists who enable them to earn their living, they might be more willing to return.

Despite all these very valid reasons, unless foreign languages are foisted upon them, people tend not to go out and seek them. There is also a general attitude – perhaps instilled by traditional teaching methods in schools in the past – that language learning is boring and difficult. By organizing language-learning awareness activities, we aim to make people think about the advantages of language-learning and realize that it can be fun.

It can be difficult for people to learn a language because there are not any courses nearby or they haven't got time. This is the reason why the partners aim to promote the autonomous learning of languages.

This can be achieved with the help of the computer and the Internet, by developing a site that promotes the foreign languages.

1.1. Target groups

The project is aimed at all those who have completed their education, in particular:

1. Those who have had little education and previously did not see the point of language learning. They may think that language learning is too difficult for them.

2. People who do realize the importance of language learning but don't really know how to go about it.

The project's aim is to give them encouragement and practical advice.

II. Innovative aspects of the project

1. The promotion of European languages in city squares. In Mediterranean cities, social life tends to revolve around the *piazza* or the *plaza*. The main square is therefore, the ideal place in which to promote languages. It will be interesting to transfer this notion to Northern European countries such as England or Poland, where social life tends to be conducted indoors.

2. The promotion of autonomous language learning. According to Galileo (1564-1642) “you cannot teach a man anything, you can only help him to find it within himself”. Studies have shown that merely making available materials to learners does not necessarily make them more autonomous – they need guidance in this. Therefore, the advice given in the website, the *Lingua in Piazza* activities and the activities to be organized afterwards will focus on encouraging a more constructivist approach to language learning – i.e. helping students to understand that effective learning begins from the learner's active participation in the process of language learning.

2.1. Impact of the project

We expect that most people will be interested in the activities but that some, especially those above a certain age or those who have had little formal education, will be skeptical about their linguistic capabilities. There will be these obstacles to overcome. Those who do realize the importance of language learning will be more favorable to the idea of autonomous language learning.

III. Products of the project

The first and most important product developed by the project in order to meet its objectives will be the website. This website will provide useful information about where to study a European language in the cities involved in the project and provide samples of language and exercises to practice. It will particularly focus on giving tools and guidance to learning a language autonomously.

The role of the website in meeting project objectives is to promote the project and introduce the notion that learning languages can be fun and can be done autonomously.

The site will also focus on samples of seldom studied languages so that an Italian or Spanish citizen, for example, can realize that it is not so hard to learn a few words of Romanian or Polish. The role of this is to promote some minor European languages. All the institutions involved will like the website to their own websites in order to let as many people as possible know about the project. In the first phase the website will contain:

- a set of usual expressions in the languages of all the countries partner in the project;
- a short presentation of the English grammar in Italian, German, Spanish, Polish, Turkish and Romanian;
- a summary in English of the grammars of the 6 languages;
- the institutions for learning foreign languages in the partner countries, as well as websites that treat the learning of foreign languages;
- a discussion forum on themes related to language learning.

The main focus of the project will be the *Lingue in Piazza* activities which will consist of promoting languages in the cities involved and the project will develop some products to prepare for this, namely: a brochure, a TV advertisement, posters and a questionnaire designed to gauge attitudes towards language learning in the cities involved.

During the event, the participants will be encouraged to test their level of knowledge of foreign languages through computer tests as well as through other interactive means that use the computer (website, songs in foreign languages, etc.)

The last product is a series of seminars on autonomous learning. Within the seminars, the sites that allow the autonomous learning of foreign languages will be promoted, but also the institutions and organizations that deal with foreign languages, in the respective field.

These will consist of training people to use the Internet for autonomous language learning, exploiting self-access materials, film evenings and discussion groups.

The participants will be encouraged to test different languages but also to find additional information on the culture and language of the countries partner in the project.

IV. Evaluation

Internal Evaluation

The internal evaluation will be undertaken by the means of certain questionnaires that will be filled in directly by the target group during the events organized within the project and by the partners.

The quantitative evaluation will depend on the number of participants that will take part to the event.

The seminars held with the target group will also be evaluated by making a report on the success or failure of this activity.

External evaluation

At two points in the project – after the *Lingua in piazza* activities and after the results have been disseminated, an external expert will be called in to evaluate the project. This external evaluation is vital as we need feedback on the project from someone who is not directly involved.

V. Discussion

The products of the project can be easily transferred also to other activities that aim at raising awareness of the large public on the importance of learning foreign languages. The use of computer and Internet makes easier the access of a big numbers of users and the site developed in the framework of the project will be a real help for all those who want to find information and have a first opinion on learning one of the 7 languages, special importance being given to the less circulated languages (Polish, Romanian and Turkish).

VI. Conclusion

The present project wishes to attract the attention in a pleasant and creative way on the importance of learning foreign languages in the context of a United Europe, with a large cultural and linguistic diversity.

The development of websites specialized in presenting foreign languages that should help the large public have easy access different cultures and languages, as well as to information on this subject represents an important stimulus for all those who want to learn a foreign language in an autonomous way.