

IN-CLASS AND LAPROF: EUROPEAN PROJECTS SERVING BUSINESSES AND LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract

This article aims to present the how educational resources and products elaborated by European projects can be efficiently employed to support the development of SMEs and labour market, especially in connection to language learning and intercultural communication, in the context of the present European economic shifting background. The article focuses on two European projects: LaProf (Key Activity 2: Languages) and In-CLASS (Leonardo da Vinci – Transfer of Innovation), both focused on language learning and intercultural communication instruments, resources and auditing schemes meant to improve international communication competences and professional development of employees and thus support company progress.

The first set of products aimed at supporting company (SMEs) progress is elaborated by In-CLASS: Intercultural Communication and Language Assessment project³. The aim of *In-CLASS* is to enhance the competitiveness of international SMEs within the partner countries by assisting them to identify language and culture barriers which arise from cross-border trade, and/or the development of a multilingual workforce, and to find specific costed solutions to address communication difficulties by the provision of an effective communication audit scheme for SMEs.

The second set of educational products is elaborated by *LaProf*: Language Learning for Professionals in ICT and Agriculture project⁴. The aim of *LaProf* is to equip its target public with a series of tools for learning general and specific vocabulary and for acquiring cultural and social information much needed when going to work abroad. The intended users are ICT teachers living in Estonia (and the Baltic region in general) who want to relocate and work in Finland, and agricultural professionals living in Romania who want to move and work in Greece. At the same time, the project addresses the training institutions and decision makers in this field; providing them with working tools, such as online language courses; the main idea is how to tie up language learning and cultural acclimatization into the training and immigration processes.

Keywords: language audits, foreign languages for special purposes, ICT, agriculture, SMEs, intercultural communication

The aim of this article is to share some insights into the experience EuroEd Foundation currently has with the implementation of two European

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projects: one Leonardo da Vinci – Transfer of Innovation project whose products and outcomes aim to meet the linguistic and intercultural communication needs of SMEs active in the area of import – export, and one Key Activity 2 (Languages) project aimed at promoting language awareness to immigrating workforces in two particular sectors: ICT and agriculture (by providing access to language learning resources that will help candidate immigrants get more familiarized with the terminology and cultural issues in their sectors).

The projects are titled *In-CLASS*: Intercultural Communication and Language Assessment and *LaProf*: Language Learning for Professionals in ICT and Agriculture and are co-financed by the European Union.

Background and rationale

Research commissioned by the European Union shows that in today's Europe, languages at the workplace and international and intercultural communication play an increasingly important role due to the globalisation of businesses not only at the level of multinational corporations but also at the level of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). EuroEd Foundation was directly involved in one such study, called ELAN - Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise⁵, and collected information from about 100 Romanian SMEs working in exporting goods or services. The data specifically points to the fact that 11% of the respondents admitted to having lost at least one contract due to lack of appropriate linguistic competences. As far as the importance of intercultural skills is concerned, more than 10% of the respondents were aware of having encountered intercultural difficulties. The level of linguistic skills is important for individual employees as well, not only for the company. According to the ELAN study, the language competences raise the professional profile of the staff, as 73% of the participating SMEs have a policy for recruiting language-skilled staff and 57% keep track of their employees' language skills. This fact seems even more evident in large multinational companies of which 94% practice "selective recruitment" (staff with linguistic skills).

The assistance provided by the *In-CLASS* project by the implementation of language audits to enable SMEs to improve their competitiveness will enable more to survive and expand through export and, in so doing, retain higher levels of employment. Furthermore this will create new job opportunities by introducing new employment categories through the consultants and scheme managers.

As far as the *LaProf* project is concerned, the partnership found through meetings/discussions and by experiences from previous projects that that

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/key/studies_en.html

there is a strong need for further language learning initiatives that will enable immigrating workers to learn the language and terminology that is required for them in order to professionally function and adapt in the country they are moving to. This is a reality already prominent in two example user groups: Estonian ICT teachers that move and work in Finland, and Romanian workers who move and work in Greece. These two user groups have been chosen as the targeted ones for LaProf, since they belong to two characteristic sectors (ICT and agriculture) that can be considered rather knowledge intensive. A good knowledge of professional terminology in the native language will help their cultural integration in the countries of destination.

Aims and objectives of the projects

The aims of *In-CLASS* project are to enhance the competitiveness of international SMEs within the partner countries by assisting them to identify language and culture barriers which arise from cross-border trade, and/or the development of a multilingual workforce, and to find specific costed solutions to address communication difficulties by the provision of an effective communication audit scheme for SMEs.

The project objectives are to pilot a European communication audit and auditor training scheme, to develop full sets of Communication auditor training materials, in the project partner languages, to implement the new training materials, revised audit framework and a model training scheme (following a common European code of practice; quality assurance procedures; guidelines; terms of reference) for the training of consultants and language auditors to undertake 'Language and Communication Audits' (LCAs) in SMEs with the objective of improving companies' competitiveness and entrepreneurship in other markets; to pilot audit schemes for SMEs in the partner countries, to implement a training programme with an e-learning component for language auditors in the partner countries and in their languages (including English), to develop practical materials adapted for each country's particular environment for the Auditor training workshops, to identify sponsors and/or a self-financing system and to promote the Language Audit concept through the scheme, to establish a website for the exchange of information in the partner languages, to select and train language auditors across the countries participating in the project and to pilot European language audits in 20 SMEs across each country.

The overall aim of LaProf is to develop, publish online, and provide free access to language learning exercises that will help the immigrating workforce of two particular sectors (ICT education and agriculture) to get more familiarized with the terminology used in their destination countries for their sectors. This will be achieved through developing and disseminating

a number of language learning exercises through an online environment called the *LaProf Web portal*. In this way, LaProf aims at encouraging innovation in the development of effective and high quality language learning and teaching tools for the particular sectors of teacher and vocational education. In addition, it aims to provide a wider variety of language teaching materials for the targeted user groups of LaProf, by especially focusing on language exercises for both widely spoken EU languages (such as English and French) as well as under-represented languages (such as Greek, Finnish, Hungarian, Romanian, and Russian).

More specifically, LaProf has the following objectives: to study the language competencies and learning needs of the two targeted user groups: IT teachers from Baltic countries (mainly Estonia, but also Lithuania and Latvia) that want to work in a Nordic country (with a focus on Finland), and agricultural professionals from Eastern European countries (e.g. Romania and Hungary) that want to work in a Mediterranean country (with a focus on Greece); to study the requirements of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFL) of the Council of Europe, in order to design a language learning framework that will set up the basic guidelines and directions about how/what the targeted users should learn about the vocational training program for the candidate advisors, adopting a blended learning approach; to design and implement a number of LaProf language learning exercises that will help targeted users learn the terminology of their sectors in both the languages of the destination countries (i.e. Finland and Greece) as well as in two widely spoken EU languages (i.e. English and French); to develop a pedagogic strategy to embed the solutions in the immigration preparation process and embedding the acquisition of cultural competencies in the language learning process; to evaluate the LaProf language learning approach through a number of carefully designed evaluation activities, that will involve sample groups of actual learners; to promote the LaProf language learning material and methods to relevant communities, as well as formulate a set of policy recommendations to language teachers, professional associations and decision makers that deal with both language learning, teachers' education, as well as vocational education and training around Europe.

Target groups

The products and outcomes of the *In-CLASS* project address small and medium sized businesses (SMEs) exporting to other countries, primarily within Europe, SME advisers, consultants, export counselors, managers of SMEs and language service providers; ministries of trade/foreign affairs, or chambers, and other providers of LCAs setting up or running audit schemes, workers currently working in SMEs who wish to become more mobile with access to language training and country information.

The *LaProf* project addresses young (and possibly unemployed) teachers of ICT and technology topics from the Baltic countries, who wish to work in Finland and young agricultural professionals (either students in agricultural universities or recent, unemployed graduates) from Romania, who wish to work in Greece.

Products and outcomes

Language skills needs will increase in future across the whole of Europe. In 13 of the 29 countries in ELAN surveyed, at least 50% of respondents believed they would need additional language skills in the next three years. Smaller SME's in particular lack the resource to make forward investment in language skills and may therefore be a legitimate and necessary target for intervention measures such as a Language Audit scheme on a European scale. They forecast an increase in their demand for language skills (both qualitative and quantitative) to service this expansion and will be looking to education and training systems and to labour mobility to provide these skills rather than engaging in training themselves. The Language and Communication Audit scheme addresses this.

English is important as the world business language, but other languages are used extensively as intermediary languages and businesses are aware of the need for a range of other languages in relationship-building. An extended Audit Scheme across these three (Romania, Italy and Hungary) countries develops a greater capacity in the Audit network to address new areas of trade and offers specialist awareness. Nearly half of exporting SME's in Europe are planning to expand into new foreign markets in the next three years. In-CLASS offers a supra-national solution to address this growth.

The Language and Communication Audit focuses on introducing the four elements of language management which were found to be associated with successful export performance at European level: having a language strategy, appointing native speakers, recruiting staff with language skills and using translators/interpreters. All these elements are addressed through the Language Audit scheme. An SME investing in these four elements as a result of deficits identified in an audit is calculated to achieve an export sales proportion 44.5% higher than one without these investments (ELAN Report, 2006). Furthermore, it is likely that there would be productivity gains from exporting which would wash back to the internal economy. Total Factor Productivity for exporters can be as much as 3.7% higher than the industry mean. A 3.7% productivity spillover from exporting could imply a very substantial additional impact from these investments in language skills.

Apart from the Language And Communication Audit Schemes tailored to meet the national specific requirements and contexts of each project country, the *In-CLASS* project will also train and create a pool of 30 consultants and auditors, will carry out LCA audits in 60 SMEs and will produce national

reports on the state of art of the SMEs' language and international communication strategies and approaches.

The LaProf project proposes a different methodological approach, centred on individual users rather than institutions (SMEs), with a special focus on areas as ICT and agriculture. The main results of *LaProf* project are expected to be the following:

- a. a language learning framework defining how candidate learners can be familiarized with the terminology and culture of their sectors in their destination countries, based on a series of carefully designed language learning exercises. This contains a pedagogic strategy to embed language learning in the immigration preparation process;
- b. an online environment (the LaProf Web portal) through which interested users will be able to easily search, identify, retrieve and use language learning exercises in a digital format. It will be developed according to relevant international standards of the learning technology domain;
- c. an online tool through which all producers of digital resources on language learning for the targeted communities will be able to upload their resources, describe them with appropriate metadata in English and in their languages, and to make them publicly available via the LaProf Web portal for all interested users to find (www.laprof.eu);
- d. at least 20 learning exercises that will be translated into five EU languages (i.e. English, French, Romanian, Hungarian, Estonian) and in Russian, which will be made accessible online through the LaProf Web portal. All resources will be described and categorised with rich metadata describing their properties and characteristics (e.g. to which professions, regions or linguistic audiences they apply);
- e. a series of evaluation events (at least one for the learners of each participating region/ country), during which the developed language exercises will be used and assessed;
- f. a focused dissemination event (European Workshop) that will aim to bring together LaProf with other relevant initiatives, in order to exchange experiences and discuss their results;
- g. finally, a network of interested people and/or institutions (such as language teachers, language institutes, professional associations, educational initiatives) will be formulated through an appropriately designed Partner Affiliation Program, in order to create a structure that will further sustain and use the project results.

The main products the project offers to potential users are online learning platforms that include language courses and language learning exercises whose content focuses on the needs of office staff and students or pupils studying economics, business administration or accounting and also

ICT teachers living in Estonia (and the Baltic countries in general) who want to move and work in Finland, and agricultural professionals living in Romania who want to move and work in Greece. To further meet these needs, the ELSTI project has also developed *business culture modules* finely tuned to the national business environments of ten European countries and *a personal development module* aimed at motivating learners to optimise their linguistic and professional achievements.

Significant attention is given to encouraging the learning of European official languages (such as English, French, Finnish, or Greek) as foreign languages in order to help European citizens from Estonia and Romania to understand better the working environment and culture of the targeted countries (i.e. Finland and Greece), which have languages that are notably less widely used and taught. Both awareness raising activities, and development and dissemination of language learning materials will be taking place. To reinforce the acquisition of language and cultural competencies by its targeted user groups, as well as to raise awareness for the targeted languages, *LaProf* will develop and promote language learning methodologies and resources that are aimed at motivating the particular categories of language learners, in order to enhance their capacity for language learning.

Conclusions

The *In-CLASS* project will pilot a European communication audit and auditor training scheme based on models developed in previous similar projects and will also develop full sets of Communication auditor training materials. In addition, will also implement the new training materials, revised audit framework and a model training scheme (following a common European code of practice; quality assurance procedures; guidelines; terms of reference) for the training of consultants and language auditors to undertake 'Language and Communication Audits' (LCAs) in SMEs with the objective of improving companies' competitiveness and entrepreneurship in other markets.

This multi-fold and innovative approach will have a positive impact on the targeted beneficiaries (both institutions and individuals). Consequently, the partnership strongly believes that the structured approach of the professional training (as explained in detail above) will pave the way for the inclusion of the training materials, revised audit framework and a model training scheme in the Romanian national VET system.

Building on the expertise already accumulated in previous similar initiatives, the expected impact is located to Business Service Systems and work-based VET systems in both Romania and Italy and supported by the Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Via networks of new consultants and

advisors new trade links will be developed thus indirectly increasing demand for audits and the extension of the scheme.

Since 2002 Italy has an action plan created in cooperation with CEDEFOP focusing on research and innovation and with the aim of restructuring and reforming the Italian VET system in place. This includes the development of the adult education system with special attention to innovation. Development of the system also particularly emphasises alternance training in VET. In-CLASS addresses these needs and changes through the implementation of the LCA scheme and aids to reform the Italian system by introducing a new type of workforce.

Many small and medium sized companies in Italy face serious communication problems when doing business with other countries. Communication channels are restricted to e-mail and verbal communication. Most of the entrepreneurs know that incorrect communication may ruin their business relation but they don't have any tool to find their weaknesses and opportunities to improve. Training consultants and working out training materials for these target groups will improve their business opportunities and competitiveness abroad. These measures will ensure the provision of high quality VET in concordance with the social demands of the 21st century (the aims of CEDEFOP).

The main approach in *LaProf* project is to develop open and accessible content that is shared in a community of practice, which means that users are involved in the creation and use of the content. The community of stakeholders (especially employers) will be involved in the project continuously and it will be a dynamic environment that will - after the initiation phase – be self-sustaining. One focus can be the use of the concept of “user generated content”, as stakeholders will be enabled to further develop and maintain existing resources. Based on this approach, a refined sustainability model will be worked out during the project, as *LaProf* is designed so as not to need many resources, with an emphasis on networking and target group learning and working together. Also, cooperation with language learning institutions is foreseen by the project developers by means of a tutorial and training material on how to create and use exercises and learning events (as language learning schools can create exercises in *LaProf* under their branding and name given also others can use the exercises). *LaProf* materials can also be used by school teachers in vocational education and other areas.