

Chapter XXX

The LAFEC Experience for Language Skills Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the tutoring methodology adopted in an e-learning language course for students in vocational training and higher education as well as staff from small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) in various European countries. The course concerns the acquisition of basic language skills essential to develop effective e-commerce Web sites in several languages. It is based on a student-centered, peer-learning approach that promotes collaboration between students and tutors. It also includes a set of new tools, such as an electronic ontology-based dictionary that allows new forms of putting theory into practice. The chapter presents results from an initial implementation with students from four European countries and China.

INTRODUCTION

The Languages for e-Commerce Course (LAFEC) is one of the courses that have been developed within a Leonardo project that aims to create a three-part online course on how to communicate in the context of electronic commerce. In addition to the courses, this project includes an electronic dictionary for designers and translators of the Web sites of SME-businesses. Besides being used in the language course, the electronic dictionary will also help those professionals draw up foreign-language versions of their commercial Web sites.

The focus of the products is on the target language and cross-cultural factors influencing verbal communication. It addresses language and communication teachers and experts at universities or institutes of higher education, students in different fields at universities or institutes of higher education, SME-businesses that intend to internationalize their Web sites, and marketing and communication experts in companies. LAFEC is a language competences course targeted at developing writing skills for those in charge of writing informative texts on e-commerce Web sites for foreign customers who must take into account the customers' needs and cultural backgrounds.

This course has been planned to provide five European Credit Transfer Systems (ECTSs), thus corresponding to a total workload of 135 hours. The initial implementation was delivered to Finnish, Polish, Latvian, Portuguese, and Chinese students, and took place from October 14, 2006, until April 2007. The students were tutored by three of the language teachers involved in the course development, whose views are included in this chapter, together with the feedback of the few students that have concluded the course. In the following sections, a description of the contents of each module and the corresponding aims and pedagogical strategies will be described.

BACKGROUND

Computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) promotes the communication of ideas, materials, and information, and the interactive creation of documents for learning purposes. This collaborative model of learning can be characterized by multiparticipant communication, space and time independent communication, and computer-mediated communication. Harasim (1989) proposes that it is "the process of construction of knowledge by the integration of the student, the teachers, and the specialists in discussions and interactive activities." Several related theories further define this educational phenomenon and scaffold strategies to explore it (Hsiao, 1995), such as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, problem-/project-based learning, cognitive flexibility, situated learning, and metacognition.

Bruffee (1983) presented a set of requirements that should exist in exemplary cases of student-centered learning environments:

- Students who participate actively in the learning process
- Students who are responsible for the acquisition of their knowledge
- The teacher is a moderator and a facilitator rather than a knowledge transmitter
- The environment allows peer interaction and its evaluation

Furthermore, the collaborative learning environment is successful when there is an effective and working community. Rheingold (1994) suggests the following four steps in the constitution of the physical communities, which can be extended to virtual ones:

- Each individual develops relations with others
- Each individual establishes residence and interacts with other residents

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