EDUCATIONAL PORTAL FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ADDRESSING THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Mihaela Muresan, “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University, Romania
Florentina Alexandru, “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University, Romania

Summary

The present contribution summarizes the concepts and the methodological approach of a Romanian research project, eMulticult, aiming at increasing people’s adaptability to a multicultural environment in order to address the social inclusion, and to create the conditions for tolerance and harmony in the social life, by creating an educational network and a knowledge portal for the foreign languages learning and adequate attitudes and abilities building. The project develops a holistic approach structured on several phases: the design of a conceptual framework, the development of an educational model for the web based foreign languages learning and for the internalization of the cultural values, the implementation of the model in a virtual environment using an adequate pedagogical approach and complex tools. The main innovation of the project consists in the design and implementation of the educational model based on Anderson’s and Krathwohl’s taxonomy, articulating various dimensions: foreign languages knowledge, communication, cultural approach, intercultural approach and organizational culture. In addition, specific web based paradigm and tools will be used for facilitating the online learning process and the accessibility to the digital content and services.

Increasing the social inclusion and mobility through plurilinguism and multicultural approach

The present contribution summarizes the concepts and the methodological approach of a Romanian research project (eMULTICULT), aiming at increasing people’s adaptability to a multicultural environment, in order to address the social inclusion, and to create the conditions for tolerance and harmony in the social life, by creating an educational network and a knowledge portal for the foreign languages learning and the adequate attitudes and abilities building. The idea of the project emerged in the context of the global knowledge economy where success depends more on knowledge than on labor and capital. The increased globalization requires specific knowledge and skills for an efficient communication, i.e. foreign languages knowledge and intercultural dialogue abilities, as well as using the virtual space. The globalization increases the mobility of the labor force and creates the
premises for the multinational companies to extend their activities. The global markets and the increased external connectivity of the organizations involve the permanent international interaction, the e-business processes implementation and the international partnership development. In this environment, apart from issues related to the social inclusion and efficiency of the current activity, arise also problems of living together in harmony and tolerance, which can be solved only by a mutual understanding and respect of the cultural values. According to these major requirements, the plurilinguism and the intercultural sensitivity represent conditions for an increased accessibility to education and training, and for a better adaptability to a specific social and organizational environment, dominated by intercultural interactions. The foreign languages knowledge represents a premise for the efficient social and organizational communication, and the accessibility to various information resources and services provided by the global market.

In this perspective our project aims at redefining the e-learning paradigms in terms of the multicultural approach, increasing the flexibility and instrumentality of the interaction with the virtual environment. Other important innovation introduced by our project is represented by the multidimensional approach in order to increase the intercultural sensitivity, i.e. the trainee’s cultural set of values, the cultural dimension of the training programme revealed through the e-learning/educational model implemented, the specific cultural context of the knowledge delivered through the training programme, the specific organizational culture.

2. Specific methodological approach

The project develops a holistic approach structured on several phases: the design of a conceptual framework, the development of an educational model for the web based foreign languages learning and for the internalization of the cultural values, the implementation of the model in a virtual environment using an adequate pedagogical approach and complex tools.

In order to identify the opinion of the students and non-students concerning the most appropriate learning processes related to foreign languages and the intercultural sensitivity development, the research team conducted two surveys. The first survey was conducted during 10.01.2008 and 28.02.2008, involved 94 subjects and aimed at identifying the perception of the students and potential students/trainees concerning the eLearning processes. The analysis of the survey revealed that 94,6% of the sample are interested in participating to the e-learning courses for foreign languages and intercultural dialogue. The most important motivation for choosing the eLearning courses is represented by the accessibility to the structured information (58,4 % of the respondents) and the flexibility of the learning programme (31,5% of the respondents). In the same time, the subjects considered that the direct interaction with the professor/tutor is useful (35,1%) and very useful (57.4%). The second pilot research was conducted during 02.12.2008 - 09.01.2009, involved 153 subjects and had as main goal to establish the importance of the cultural sensitivity for a better interaction in a multicultural environment. The spectrum of the subjects covered students of foreign languages and foreign economic relations faculties from Romanian major academic centres, MA's Romanian students which study abroad, employees of multinational companies in Romania and participants to professional development continuous education courses for foreign languages acquisition. Age, profession, levels of education and various occupations of subjects increased the diversity of perception. The questionnaire focused on the determination of the interaction and adaptation manner of citizens in a multicultural environment, through identification of elements which could facilitate intercultural dialogue, as well as the accuracy of understanding of multicultural environment concepts. The explorative analysis for establishing perception and behavioral elements, revealed a stratification of the sample on two lots, as it follows: lot A – people that are integrated in a multicultural environment, representing 52.9% of the sample, and lot B – people that are not involved directly in a multicultural environment. Aiming at conclusive results, a
heterogeneous sample was selected, taking into account the profession, age, occupation or socio-professional group. The most important results of this survey refers to:

- the auto-defining capacity, absolutely necessary in the context of globalization, (77% of the respondents can define themselves, and have generally an idea/ opinion versus the ethnic group they belong to)
- the positive perception of the differences (72.8% from the lot A, and 59.7% of lot B)
- the capacity to understand the others' behavior (91.3% from lot A, and 88.1% from lot B)
- the utility of the organizational culture elements (97% of the respondents of the lot A grant a higher importance to knowing elements of cultural organization, of specific elements of oral/written communication, as well as of cultural values that could generate different interpretation; answers of the lot B score 18.1% lower)

The hypothesis regarding the intercultural sensitivity is confirmed, because over 90% of the cases, interest was displayed in understanding different behavior and availability to accept other cultural values. An increased sensitivity was displayed by the lot A, demonstrating the importance of the intercultural dialogue for the people living or working in a multicultural environment.

For identifying the best instruments used in a foreign language learning process and multicultural approach development, the answers to the specific questions were analyzed, and the following conclusions have arisen:

- 71.24% consider very useful specific oral/written communication elements
- 47.71% consider very useful static/dynamic images which could shed light on stance and behavioral elements based on specific cultural values
- 57.52% consider useful the cultural organizational elements presented comparatively for different cultural contexts.

We would like to emphasize that the majority (over 70%) declare unequivocally the importance of knowing specific oral and written communication elements for a better and easier adaptation to a multicultural organizational context.

The results of the two surveys guided our research team in the training engineering processes aiming at designing the educational model, the pedagogical methods and the specific tools to be implemented through the virtual educational platform.

3. Multidimensional educational model

The main innovation of the project consists in the design and implementation of the educational model based on Anderson’s and Krathwohl’s taxonomy, articulating various dimensions: foreign languages knowledge, communication, cultural approach, intercultural approach and organizational culture. In addition, specific web based paradigm and tools will be used for facilitating the online learning process and the accessibility to these resources.

The first phase of the project focused on the development of the conceptual educational model for foreign languages training. The proposed model is based on the conception of Ulla Lundgren (Lundgren U., 2004) which integrates three areas of competences and we introduced an additional...
view, related to the organizational culture (figure 1). The four perspectives of this model integrate communication skills in a foreign language, cultural competences concerning the foreign language, intercultural competences facilitating the natural behavior in the cultural environment of the foreign language, and the organizational communication competences, representing the ability to have an efficient interaction in an organizational culture, where the foreign language learned is the official language of the organization. The designed model is individual centered, and it is translated in a reference framework for the competences need to be acquired during the training process, as it is presented in the table 1.

Table 1 – Foreign languages and intercultural competences framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1 – mother language</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 – foreign language</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Culture</td>
<td>General cultural behavior, ideas, perceptions, art, belief, literature, history, music etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 – trainee’s culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 – the culture of the learnt foreign language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Interculturality</td>
<td>General competence including adaptability, tolerance, empathy, flexibility, cultural identity, social constructivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X – intercultural communication competences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Organizational culture</td>
<td>General competence to recognize and use organizational patterns, communication stereotypes and procedures, according to a specific organizational culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y – organizational communication competence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The good communication in a foreign language, complemented with the cultural and organizational dimensions, represent the premise for a better interaction in a different environment and for a facile social inclusion. The foreign language knowledge, the cultural knowledge and the organizational culture knowledge are compared with the trainee’s own language and set of values, facilitating the development of a natural behavior and a mutual understanding.

The conceptual model presented is articulated with the Bloom’s taxonomy of the cognitive development and the Krathwohl’s taxonomy of the affective domain (Bloom 1956; Anderson, 2001; Krathwohl 2005), in synergy with a pragmatic perspective. The conceptual framework developed creates the connectivity among the knowledge related to the foreign language, its cultural context and the organizational culture dominated by the business model agreed by the owners of the company. The holistic approach is structured on various levels and facilitates the training engineering process aiming at structuring the virtual courses.

The definition of the competences aggregates the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (***, 2001) the Bloom and Krathwohl’s taxonomies, the expected behavior in order to demonstrate an adequate intercultural sensitivity, and the research team view.

The implementation of the educational model involves the integration of the pedagogical dimension, reflecting the specific goal of the project. The generic pedagogical approach includes a socio-constructivism perspective and new pedagogical tactics, which stimulates the capacity of the trainee to efficient solve new problems and to have the adequate reaction in a new cultural and organizational environment. This pedagogical approach oriented to a virtual implementation of the educational model, supports the development of various scenarios combining the pedagogical strategies (instructionalism, socio-constructivism,
collaborative learning learning by project etc.) and tactics (exercises, simulations, games, problem solving, brain storming, project developing, innovative solutions finding etc.) with technologies (multimedia, hypermedia/hypertext, virtual environment, synchronous/asynchronous interaction, virtual classrooms etc.), learning types (attitudes, facts, concepts etc.), education formats (lecture, tutorial, independent learning, distance learning, face to face learning, small/large groups etc.).

The pedagogical approach implemented in a virtual environment integrates the collaborative learning based on a specific topic, and the independent learning based on professional e-content (e-books, interactive games, articles, various external digital resources etc.). The portal will provide also the framework for the development of the learning community and advanced learning interfaces supporting both individual and group interactions (Byram, 2003).

The actual implementations of the e-learning models include various methods, such as: Computer Marked Assessment (CMA), Tutor Marked Assessment (TMA), End of Course Assessment (ECA), Continuous Assessment Activity (CAA), Continuous Assessment Test (CAT), and Final Examination (FE). The research team of the project decided to introduce the assessment model CMA – TMA – ECA, as evaluation procedure for the certification of the foreign languages skills and also to develop tools for continuous assessment, as part of the self-regulated learning. The trainees, through the self-assessment tests, have the permanent feed-back concerning their own performance, being able to accelerate and ameliorate the learning process, according to their learning objectives. The web techniques facilitate the design of various tools to support the formative evaluation, including the horizontal and vertical dialogue, the debates and the collaborative work, which facilitates the self-evaluation of the personal achievements compared with other students’ performance. The competencies concerning the foreign language skills, the communication skills and the intercultural sensitiviy are described in the educational model designed, representing the reference framework for the assessment and consequently for the certification of the competences and skills acquired.

The portal provides dialogue and communication tools for the management of various resources and services shared by all the actors interested in the educational processes.

The success of the e-learning process relies on the quality of the digital content and of the online services provided. The structure of the e-content is based on the hierarchy: course – module – learning unit (lesson) – learning object. The e-content generic architecture developed to design a learning unit contains various learning objects, some of them grouped in large objects collections, other independent. The most of the learning objects and learning objects collections are re-usable, being accessed in the context of other learning units. The e-content will be in accordance with the learning objectives for each learning unit, using various tools such as hypertext, multimedia presentations, interactive games and exercises, collaborative work, self-assessment instruments.

The portal will support various actors’ interactions with the e-content, and within the learning community, which includes students, professors, tutors, trainers, trainees, researchers, practitioners. In order to increase the visibility and the usability of the educational portal, the access to the information and online services provided by the educational portal will be free for consumers and producers of digital content. The educational portal will integrate various resources (courses, studies, scientific papers, comments etc) and online services (online surveys, online meetings, fora, e-mail, online debates and brainstorming sessions on various educational and intercultural topics etc.). The interaction of the student with the digital content will be specific for each educational path, designed by the student himself. The student will access the specific resources of one learning unit and also the shared learning objects. The portal supports the students’ asynchronous interaction with colleagues,
professors, tutors, researchers and practitioners. Each course will benefit from two virtual classrooms/meetings, providing synchronous interaction between students and professor/tutor.

4. Main benefits of the educational platform

The originality of the educational portal consists in the synergy among various views and models such as person oriented education, multicultural approach, use of the virtual environment for providing educational services. The portal integrates educational packages for individual beneficiaries, virtual classes, formal or informal educational networks, and the tools for e-content developing. The educational platform offers the premise for building the empathic attitude, through a deep understanding of the own cultural matrix and a greater permeability to the behavior and values of another cultural & organizational environment, increasing the degree of communication and integration at European level.

The virtual environment will contribute to the development of a learning community, facilitating the collaborative processes oriented to the problem solving and new ideas and knowledge creation. The portal promotes a democratic education approach the plurilingualism and the intercultural dialogue. The designed educational model emphasizes on treating the learners as problem-solving persons, by involving them in real-life situations and supporting the collaboration for problem solving. The portal encourages also the wide participation and contribution, concerning the production of the digital content and the intercultural dialogue.

The innovative approach of the project consists in using the virtual environment and the digital content for foreign language knowledge improvement, mentality & attitudes changing, and tolerant behavior development, as main premises for a good social and individual communication and living.

REFERENCES

Book

Journal

Web sources
Junge K., Hadjivassiliou K., (2006), What are the EU and member states doing to address digital literacy?, http://www.elearningeuropa.info/files/media/