Hook Up!
Language Learning Gateway

Hook up! Campus Europae Foreign Language Learning Gateway

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Project information

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Executive Summary

Pressed hard by the need to increase a type of mobility between member universities where students do a full year of their degree at a host university, the European University Foundation - Campus Europae (EUF-CE) which comprises 18 universities from 15 countries speaking 12 languages, set out in 2008 to develop an online language learning gateway under the auspices of the Lifelong Learning Programme. The project, known as "Hook up!", offers free of charge online language learning material organised with reference to the CEFR for languages courses in the 12 languages of the network on Moodle. After two years of development and tutoring of students, Hook up! offers both self-learning material from A level to B level and interactive sessions scheduled at specific periods of the year, concurring to offer higher education students a unique opportunity to learn the language and the culture of the host university irrespective of language provisions at the home university.

Based on a blended and collaborative approach, the universities identified contributors from the language departments of the participating universities who set collectively, following various manners, (i) to learn Moodle and Web 2.0 tools, (ii) to elaborate language courses combining material found on internet and their own learning material, (iii) to tutor online and (iv) to motivate students and staff to engage in e-language learning. CE/ERASMUS students from the universities members of EUF-CE were invited to join the language platform on a voluntary basis. Students had the possibility to engage in self-study and to attend weekly interactive sessions via Skype and Wiziq. This approach invited students to spend 4-5 hours per week during 2 to 3 months getting acquainted with the language of the host university partly on their own, but also with teachers and other students across Europe who they would meet face to face months later. Corollary to learning a language, students improved ICT and intercultural skills as well as their English which is the source language. Enhanced by the face to face one month intensive language course which CE/ERASMUS students attend before the start of the academic year, students involved in e-learning were able to take better advantage of these, enabling quicker progress and displayed a more active approach to language learning, predicting a stay abroad more enriching from the academic, cultural and social points of view. Students for whom the Hook up! Language Learning experience was successful, were awarded an attendance certificate and contributed during their stay at the host university to the promotion of their own language, offering "taster courses", creating learning material and in some instances started tutoring students who will be studying at their home or host universities.

Although motivation remains the Achilles' heel for higher education students to learn languages, if one can already reduce the financial cost, increase the offer of languages, adapt content and timing of lessons to needs, offer a fun and social way to learn relevant information, value contributions and reward persistence, then most of the hurdles are taken care of. Notwithstanding, problems linked to access to computers and internet (including speed) still remain a big obstacle for many as well as time constraints.

From the point of view of the teachers involved in the development and delivery, the project presented new challenges encouraging (i) professional development resulting in the acquisition of new ICT and pedagogical skills, and (ii) the development of intercultural competences as they were forced to address a multilingual/multicultural public and collaborate within different teaching styles. With Hook up! the university can provide its staff with lifelong learning opportunities and increase its offer of language tuition at a very low cost based on the exchange of services amongst partners and the accrued involvement of beneficiaries.

Overall, it can be said that Hook up! has contributed to minimise boundaries of various types: institutional, cultural, national, professional and personal to offer "proximity" language courses to higher education students and staff. The Hook up! approach has shown that cooperation across universities to deliver adapted e-language courses including for less widely taught languages can be done if there is an institutional commitment to languages.

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1. Project Objectives

The main objective of this project was to enable higher education students wishing to go abroad for an academic year to prepare linguistically and to enhance the proficiency acquired during the stay abroad by providing language learning material and tuition independent of the linguistic provision of the home and host universities. The underlying hypothesis is that the deeper the knowledge of the foreign language, the greater the chances for the student to fully experience the country, its culture and its academic environment because the relationship will be a direct one and not one mediated by a language which is alien/foreign to both parties as is often the case when using English as the lingua franca. Equally important is that the investment made linguistically is not lost once the student returns home due to lack of practice and opportunities to keep the knowledge of the foreign language alive, preserving the real advantage that the knowledge of an additional language represents at employment stage.

A second objective of the project was to establish a system to be in a position to provide language tuition independently of the provision capabilities of a university which is one of the main caveats for the less widely spoken languages and for universities on a tight budget. For example, if the University of Riga cannot offer Portuguese, but the University of Aveiro can tutor their students in that language with the assistance of students who already know Portuguese because they have spent a year in Portugal, the linguistic offer of the university increases at a lower cost than that it would have had if it were to hire a Portuguese teacher for 2 or 3 students. In turn Aveiro can benefit from Latvian courses… Hook up! aimed thus to break through cost efficiency barriers to enable less widely spoken languages to be available for those students who want to learn them. But also for more spoken foreign languages such as French, Spanish and German which are languages often taught at secondary level and no longer available in higher education at beginner's level and where it is difficult to find "update" courses to enable you to make current the language.

Last but not least, the project's underlying objective was that once the external funding disappeared, the teaching platform be maintained by the participating universities with the assistance of students. The EU funding was meant to establish the core of the learning material on the e-learning platform and to train in e-learning and e-tutoring some of the staff. However, it was known from the start that the financial survival of the project could not depend on each institution's budget (and cuts). Therefore from the start, means for providing the more costly staff intensive aspect of Hook up!, i.e. the interactive sessions, had to be identified. To a certain extent, the use of self-assessment tools, the interactive sessions in groups and the involvement of students learning to teach languages and other students as primary providers of "live language experience" were meant to contribute to this. It will be a challenge in the future to link up the participation of "non paid" yet skilled contributors to the language learning effort which Hook up! represents. In contrast, a paying demand has been expressed for some "minority" languages. However, this demand is not from our target public of students and staff within the network of Campus Europae, but from persons who are interested in learning the language for employment reasons.

2.   Project Approach

Initially, the project was to centre on language clusters to research and develop language learning units in a transnational fashion requiring quick identification of language leaders/contributors and good communications within and across institutions. However, due to the "institutionalised" traditional approach and the uneven speed of information flow and project ownership, combined with too early delivery targets aiming to launch the first language courses six months after the start of the project, developments became more "national" than originally intended for the production of most language courses and speeds of implementation varied. In some instances the university which was intended to lead, lagged behind because appropriate staff was not identified timely or other interests had to be taken into account. Fortunately, the same cluster approach enabled the production of "headless" language modules (from the institutional point of view) thanks to the involvement of very active contributors providing an interim product by the deadlines set. Nonetheless, the reintroduction of the intended "coordinating and partner institutions" model once the "coordinating" university could get involved was not always without tensions. So, the transnational approach envisaged for this project has proven more difficult to implement in the actual development and delivery of the courses than had been foreseen. However some language modules tested this approach   (German, Russian, French, Spanish), and were successful in pooling resources from various fronts including students doing doctoral studies and previous beneficiaries.

Corollary to the above, unequal know-how, uneven institutional interest in e-learning, mismatched teaching cultures, different employment characteristics of the language teachers, differences in lifelong learning cultures and underestimation of the staff days required for some languages where there was little internet material, have all had an influence in reshaping the project resulting in a varied approach which although making project management more complex, portrayed different ways of attaining a same product. For a network which existed prior to this project, it was interesting to see that collaboration is something which needs to be fostered everyday at all levels and it seems a 4 month "collaboration development" phase is required before fully embarking in production stage. It is noteworthy that the "ideal transnational" approach will be pursued after the end of the project, where "one coordinator will collaborate with team members" recruited from across the network to deliver the language courses, however the coordinator and collaborators will be chosen based on their competences and not on the institutional affiliation which functioned too much as a constraint during the project in relation to meeting deadlines and outputs.

So there was an added value in transnationality, in particular with regard to building a new common owned tool (the Moodle) and increasing know how across the partners, but from the point of view of project timing and effectiveness, it would seem at this stage, that it may have had a decelerating effect (if we have the more "narrow" approach of considering only the "project outputs" and not the more "soft" results translated mainly in change of attitudes) although yet again depending on the partnership. Conversely, in those instances where transnationality was impossible, the end product was not necessarily inferior or superior. So, although it was intended to, during implementation it was impossible to use a "production model"; and

unfortunately there has been no time to get into a more in-depth analysis of the micro-processes characterising delivery by each language module.

The approach used to obviate the tendencies mentioned above was to modify the format of the face to face meetings. Initially it had been thought there would be language module cluster meetings and FLTEX monitoring meetings, the first more geared to the actual production of the services and the second to more project related aspects and dissemination. But faced with "partnerless" language modules and sometimes a "divorce" between the supplier of the product and the FLTEX who had the overall view, it was decided to invite as many contributors to the project irrespective of their roles, including students, and organise long meetings (3-4 days) where experience exchange was very intense and a training component was added. To prepare these meetings and to follow them, pages were open in the Hook up! Moodle reserved to contributors. This definitely allowed to reintroduce the trransnational element and to bring contributions to a higher level.

From a more technical point of view, that of the elaboration of language units corresponding to a given "CEFR level", it was left to each "language module" to select the existing material and to supplement it with own-made material in order to create a series of lessons that put sequentially would offer a certain number of lessons in order to acquire what is expected of the "Basic and the Independent" users. In order to harmonise across languages and to ensure that the objectives were met at each level, an evaluation within levels and across languages was started but unfortunately aborted due to personal difficulties. However, the existing grid analysis do show quite a disparity across language modules with regard to what is dealt with at the 1 and 2 levels as well as a tendency to benefit one form of acquisition against another. A rapid conclusion would be that probably the "transnational" have sinned less in this respect as there has been more discussion between teachers with varied teaching experiences, yet again, in "national" language modules, a balance between activities and smooth progression has also been achieved.

From the formal point of view of the layout and presentation of the lessons, a minimum template was adopted with a view to ease the "transfer" from one language to another for the student as the layout and approach would be similar not only from one level to another but across languages.

As for the dissemination and exploitation of results, this was both central and decentralised. EUF contacted directly potential beneficiaries enrolling them on the Moodle, kept informed the universities through updates in the newsletter of Campus Europae, addressed updates on the project to the Rector and presented these at the Board of Directors. Also, each institution gave information on the project to colleagues and students in the department, faculty, university and in some instances ad hoc events were organised geared towards different publics: students, teachers or researchers sometimes advertised in the press. The emphasis was both on e-learning and languages. But whereas the former helped ensuring institutional support, the latter was more effective in introducing "Hook up!" as a resource to learn languages. In particular, the public appreciated the opportunity to try out online the taster courses advertised via USB bracelets.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

The project set out to create a language learning online platform in all the languages covered by the Campus Europae network: Finnish, French, German, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian, Spanish and Turkish at levels A1 to B2.

Of the 12 languages, the Hook up! Moodle, hosted by E-novation Solutions, (http://languagelearning.campuseuropae.org) presently has online courses for A1 and A2 at all levels. B1 level is available for ten and B2 for three languages. It should be noted that B2 level was to be approached in a more thematic way and collectively constructed following the interest of the students as this explains to a certain extent the reduced number of languages offering B2. (Given the public targeted, if B2 is reached at the host university, there is no interest in an online course, and if B2 is to be pursued upon returning to the home university, the length of the project did not allow to target this subgroup.) All courses allow for self learning and were tested used either as part of a face to face course or for distance teaching at least at A level. Some courses have been delivered more than once to big groups of 20 or more (e.g. German, Spanish, Portuguese) and others have only been used as support to face to face courses due to lack of distance users (e.g. Lithuanian). Success rate and motivation has also been unequal representing 100% for Serbian and 10% for French… It is hence difficult to present results overall as they can conceal marked disparities seen across the language modules and which call for further analysis outside our scope. A common characteristic however is that material developed for Hook up! is being used outside Hook up! to support the delivery of face to face courses and is used to illustrate the e-learning approach in other universities (e.g. Coventry, Ca' Foscari).

Over the 18 months of enrolment of users into Moodle, some 580 users were added to the Hook up! Moodle but almost 30% never logged in. In some instances it was later discovered that the email used to enrol these potential students had a wrong address or ended under the spam, or simply did not interest the student at the time. Some of these users, asked later on to be given access again. Of those having logged in at least once, 20% were contributors to the project (technical, linguistic, student, management) and the remaining 330 were language learners. Amongst the language learners 85% were CE/ERASMUS movers, the other 15% staff, non mobile students from the network and students or employed persons outside the network. Of those enrolled as students, half used Hook up! individually and the other half (around 140 students) accepted to use it within the more structured approach proposed by the teachers/tutors of the language module. Some dropped out, some disconnected for a while and came back later on, but a certain number (estimated at 60%) followed the "structured courses" with success and provided precious insight into student/teacher interaction online and on the courses used to improve the learning material and the approach.

From the point of view of the involvement of the students in the delivery of the lessons, this took place in the German, Spanish, Turkish, Latvian and Italian courses, where students who had been abroad the previous year, or who were studying teacher training of that specific foreign language were allocated activities geared to practising the language with the students mainly via Skype. For future developments, the student involvement in exchanging language tuition and cultural know how will be

reinforced as a pilot within Hook up! Teachers have a different approach to this method and experience is controversial, so for the moment this is a feature to which language modules adhere voluntarily. Students were also involved in the production of material, in particular video material for which they were trained and helped in their productions. As from the point of view of the staff involved in the project, for each university, the e-learning jargon has become more familiar and although the situation is very different from one university to another, this project has already resulted in the acquisition of new skills for the staff and in some cases a change in the way the language courses are delivered making greater use of online resources. Furthermore, the staff has connected with the national e-learning bodies and is keen in exploiting Hook up! as basis for research and contributions to conferences. From the technical viewpoint, the Moodle platform has proved a safe choice as it has enabled quick and cheap developments –even if it does not have a fancy finished look. An advantage is that it is used by most universities involved in e-learning and some 8 universities of the network could copy Hook up! onto their respective Moodles at very little cost. Skype has become part of the teaching and working practice and some staff use Wiziq or other blackboards for group work.

The evaluation of Hook up! initially undertaken by the University of Luxembourg and continued by a researcher at the University of Newcastle and by a lecturer in UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia), did not deliver all that had been planned due to a series of personal difficulties. However, various surveys (presented separately) were created to follow the students at different times of their e-learning and to get feedback on the contributors' appreciation of the project. Interviews of contributors and students also supplement these enabling for a more in-depth view of what the project brought and how it could be improved.

4. Partnerships

The partnership for the project does not include all the members of the Campus Europae network, however since the beneficiaries of the project are the students been exchanged within the network, all languages of the partners were developed and promotional activities took place in all universities of the network. The partnership also includes three countries (Republic of Serbia, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey) which are not part of the European Union.

Managed by the European University Foundation-Campus Europae, the participation of the partners occurred at three levels:

1. the "foreign language teaching expert" (FLTEX) who is the person named by the Rector to oversee the provision of language tuition to incoming students and who is at the root of the project, functions as monitoring committee and entry point into the institution, responsible for administrative/financial issues within the university;

2. the "language module leader" who coordinates the contributions of all universities in the development of the language module and which ideally would be someone from a university with that foreign language, and who is responsible to organise the delivery of interactive sessions and monitor student progress overall;

3. the "language module contributor" who "hooks up" with the language module leader to contribute to the elaboration of material and/or teaching.

4. the collaborating students from any university but often CE movers who have a direct experience of mobility and who have assisted in the elaboration of learning material, in tuition or general advice in language learning.

Unfortunately, some partners left the project early on and in other instances unfortunate illnesses or personal problems reduced their participation. Given the relatively short duration of the project, it was difficult to add new partners from the CE-EUF network or from outside which would have been greatly desirable to obviate the problems found of too small language module clusters. In some aspects, the core partnership was active enough to try and find solutions and undertake new tasks and in others, the lack of a more dynamic partner hindered deliveries.

The training and dissemination aspects of the project led the partners to establish local networks in their own communities linked to Moodle and e-learning. Participation in local/national meetings was useful in increasing contacts and bringing added value to the project. So although the Campus Europae Foreign Language Teaching Experts (CE-FLTEX) partners were already used to working together already 2 years before, it was the first time they were doing something together across their institutional affiliation and it was also the first time for some of the staff members to work in a transnational project as well as for students to see the "European approach at work".

The evaluation has shown the desire to add new partners (also in new languages) to increase the offer within the member universities and also to increase the number of persons collaborating in the delivery of any language module. Since the end of the project, this flexible model for collaboration has enabled to include contributions from outside the partnership based on academic interest and exchange of know how.

5.   Plans for the Future

At its closing meeting in Bergamo in October, the partners adopted a series of recommendations presented separately and defined how the project would function from November 2010 onwards.

The first decision was that Hook up! should not be "distributed" amongst the partners for each university to have its own "copy / version" of Hook up! It was clear to all that the added value of such a platform came from the overall contribution. It was also decided to use 2011 to consolidate and improve the existing language courses and for those partners lagging behind to deliver the missing levels. The hosting of the Moodle would be external to the partnership and the EUF-CE secretariat would finance the hosting and provide a core funding for the provision of language courses for CE movers and any other interested learner contributing to the critical mass of students necessary to have a good functioning level of a group. Each institution would also contribute specifically to Hook up! as part of their general effort within the EUF network to provide CE movers with language tuition. Each language module would have a coordinator in charge of overseeing the quality of the material offered, organising the testing of students and monitoring participation. The tutor who can be the same person or someone else would deliver the interactive sessions. Transnational cooperation is encouraged but not compulsory and the delivery will be evaluated closely by the EUF Secretariat. The enrolment of students will be done centrally and surveys to evaluate progress will be carried out regularly. The idea is to offer the interactive sessions at times of the year coinciding with the probable demand from the mobile students and the specific requirements of CE movers. Hence A1 (or A2 if it is a language more widely spoken) lessons will be offered from February together with B1 lessons which are useful for students at the host university since they will have to pass an exam in May. Another session at A1 (or A2) would be offered at the start of the summer for late comers to enable them to have reached the A2 level at least for when they go abroad in September, time at which they will have a face to face course and where Hook up! Is used to reinforce language learning and obviate to late arrivals or absences. It would also be desirable to start around November the B2 level "interest groups" ideally including ex-CE movers now at their home university and CE movers at the host university to enable practical exchange on the respective subjects, exam tips, etc. whilst keeping the language alive for the ex-CE movers and involving them in a coaching role with the new CE movers. In addition, one partner decided to use the Hook up! Platform to explore the use of Tandems and this will be a new pilot within Hook up! Hence, consolidation but also keep on exploring other ways to provide relevant language exposure to the online student at a low cost.

In order not to have legal problems, it was made clear to the partnership that no fees could be charged for access to the Hook up! Moodle, however, if an institution felt that there was a paying demand for tuition in their language, it could organise itself to charge for a specific public excluding the CE movers.

It was also decided that all languages of the network had to be offered within Hook up! And this presently means adding Greek and Estonian as new partners have joined EUF. It is expected that provided the language centre is interested, it should be rather straightforward to add learning material and organise tuition. Some universities have even considered developing individual cooperation agreements to

do something similar with other languages as their own initiative. It is also interesting to note that staff involved in the project presently working at other universities consider Hook up! An interesting way to organise collaboration for language learning.

Last but certainly not least as this was core to the project, the inclusion of language teacher trainees needs to be approached as an overall project and not solely as an institutional initiative. For this to happen, curriculum development aspects need to be addressed as teacher training is very diverse across Europe. In particular the institutional acceptance of online traineeships together with a commonly agreed course is to a certain extent a project in itself which could not be tackled within Hook up!. However, most partners would be interested in pursuing this.

6. Contribution to EU policies

EUF-CE policy is to move away from the dominant tide of uniformity of the European higher education system which is making English the only foreign language for everyone. Campus Europae believes that it is only by learning the language of a country that proper understanding of the culture and community can be achieved pursuant to understanding the diversity and richness of Europe. Linguistic diversity is one of the key aspects of Europe, and therefore the knowledge of languages is the way to foster, understanding and put away darker times of fighting and killing, replacing it by dialogue and collaboration. The importance of English should not be diminished but Europe would be poorer if it did not preserve and promote its languages. With the Hook up! project, EUF-CE modified its foreign language delivery (previously only face to face) and by doing so moves further in its task to foster multilingualism and the "Europeanization" of today's students and universities and to make language learning accessible (also for "minority languages" and non mobile students).

The European Commission's evaluation reports all point to the fact that acquiring foreign language skills are an absolute necessity. However, the belief that mobility is sufficient to bring about quality language acquirement has been proven wrong by various studies on mobility. So, although mobility endows students with a natural platform to acquire foreign languages, effective learning of host countries languages especially minority languages requires a concerted effort to prevent students and academics falling back into the lingua francas of namely English, but also French and German to the detriment of others. Many efforts are undertaken to motivate all Europeans to learn languages in and outside school, through formal and informal ways, in classrooms and chat rooms, however the bulk of today's university students rarely speak more than two or three languages, one of which is English and seldom those known as minority languages. Universities locked into cost efficiency, seldom rescue foreign language teaching from cut backs and certainly do not see departments of such languages as sources of income and prestige.

Hook up! by offering tuition in "minority" languages and languages which are outside the EU is helping keep these languages alive within higher education, and concretely offers the opportunity to learn those languages to students who will not necessarily study in one of those countries. The project approach (collaborative e-learning) also promotes the acquisition of soft skills and lifelong learning habits. It relies on the cooperation across borders of people with various cultural backgrounds and contributes to foster equal opportunities as it intends to offer these courses for free.

So simultaneously, the e-learning and the lifelong learning and professional development aspects, required to implement this project which are key to strengthening Europe's labour force, have benefited not only the staff but also students by allowing them to experience the importance of being an active member in the knowledge society in a transnational setting.