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The Linkedup Project: an online repository for language teachers

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Case Studies of Openness in the Language Classroom
Edited by Ana Beaven, Anna Comas-Quinn and Barbara Sawhill

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4 The Linkedup Project: An Online Repository for Language Teachers

Anna Motzo¹

Abstract

LinkedUp is a repository of open educational resources (OER) aimed at language teachers and learners between 4-19 years. The main aim of the project was to tackle the shortage of free high quality online materials. The author examines how the use of technology and a ‘learner-centred’ approach led to the creation of engaging new learning activities. During the creative process, emphasis was placed on collaboration and openness with participants encouraged to share ideas throughout the project. This case study focuses on one project whose aim was to combine language learning with business studies and illustrates how learners, through a mixture of formal and informal activities and settings, contributed to the creation of the learning materials. It reports on how this creative engagement led to an increase in both the learners’ participation in the learning experience and in their appreciation of the importance of gaining transferable skills. At the end of the project a collection of reusable and adaptable digital and interactive materials was added to the site. This case study is part of a growing body of research on how the OER movement is democratising learning. However, as many of these projects still rely on short-term external funding, concerns are expressed about whether OER repositories are sustainable in the long term.

Keywords: Italian, language learning and teaching, learner-centred approach, open educational resources, technology.

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1. Context

The *LinkedUp Award Scheme* ran between 2009 and 2011 and was aimed at producing innovative and creative teaching materials for language teachers in primary, secondary and post-16 settings. It was the product of a fruitful collaboration between various UK based language associations and led by the [Association for Language Learning \(ALL\)](#).

The Association for Language Learning is an association for teachers of foreign languages at all levels which provides professional development activities and is responsible for a series of language learning and teaching publications. ALL led the [LinkedUp](#) scheme together with [Links into Languages](#): a language specialist consortium led by the [Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies](#) based at the University of Southampton (which specialises in educational projects and professional development for language teachers) and the [Specialist Schools and Academies Trust](#), a non-for-profit organisation which aims to raise learner achievement levels in schools in England and internationally.

The main principle of the award scheme was ‘learning through sharing’ and participants were encouraged to share ideas and work together in the creation of an online repository specifically designed for language teachers. The platform was also viewed as a staff development opportunity since the development of new teaching approaches and ideas were an integral part of the projects.

The scheme encouraged collaboration between different institutions and contributions from different areas of expertise. It funded four types of collaborative projects that encompassed ten different themes which reflected national priorities in language learning, such as the need to address aspects of the national curriculum which most required further development. The types of funded projects included partnerships coordinated by a school, a 16-19 college, a local education authority, a teacher training provider or a university language department.

The project themes included re-engaging hard to reach pupils in language learning; supporting and recognising pupils' home languages and/or plurilingual approaches to language learning; developing pupils' linguistic independence and confidence in speaking; encouraging employer engagement in language learning (supported by [CILT](#), the National Centre for Languages); building languages into work-related learning for 14-19 year olds and creating a smooth [pathway of progression](#) between key stages. By August 2011, the scheme had managed to fund 112 projects across the UK.

This case study focuses on a [LinkedUp](#) funded project entitled 'The Language of Business', led by the author in the academic year 2009-2010 while working as Italian lecturer and language coordinator at City of Westminster College (CWC), an inner-London Further Education College. In order to widen learner range of professional competence and future employability in a global business environment, CWC offered a variety of vocational courses including work based [National Vocational Qualification](#) (NVQ) awards in languages (in French, Italian and Spanish) at levels 1 and 2 (equivalent to beginners or A1-A2 Common European Framework), to post-16 learners enrolled in a Business and Technology Educational Council (BTEC) National Diploma in Business, which is a vocational qualification rated at level 3 on the [National Qualification Framework](#). However, as the NVQ Languages units were not formally integrated into the Diploma in the Business course, learners consistently undervalued the language component and its relevance leading to repeatedly low rates of attainment.

In collaboration with the business teaching team, it was decided to run a pilot course of Integrated BTEC Diploma in Business with Italian and the author produced a new syllabus and new interactive online learning material. It was in this context that the [LinkedUp](#) project management team were approached.

2. Intended outcomes

The main purpose of the pilot was to enhance learners' motivation and language skills by increasing their engagement in language learning. The experiment

focused on only one language – Italian – as it was the most at risk within the College.

The project priorities were identified as the need to rethink the way languages were delivered and the crucial importance of learners obtaining realistic out-of-classroom language experience designed to develop both their language and business awareness and competence. Five specific outcomes were set:

- to offer an alternative language delivery model for languages at CWC in business diploma courses;
- to increase learners engagement in language learning;
- to improve linguistic progression and motivation;
- to promote integration of language and business by working closely with professionals who use languages in their day to day jobs;
- to produce a new cutting-edge, online learning resource pack specifically tailored to NVQ Italian language students enrolled on a business Diploma course.

In order to achieve the above mentioned outcomes, a new scheme of work, which integrated NVQ Italian into the Business units, was written and new teaching and learning resources specifically based on interactive, authentic and innovative material were devised. Specific task-based activities for the learners were set by the author in collaboration with the business studies representatives and supervised by the business studies coordinator in order to ensure that the tasks fitted with the curriculum.

The crucial innovation of the pilot was that learners, through the *in situ* element, were helped to develop a wide range of appropriate technical business vocabulary and linguistic structures suitable to their levels. The pilot also encouraged students to sharpen their business communication skills by setting

specific tasks which involved: following employers' instructions, carrying out market research, making formal presentations, writing reports and taking part in a focus group.

All the briefs and tasks were filmed and subsequently new interactive learning activities were created and eventually added to the [LinkedUp](#) repository for other teachers to use, adapt and modify. One further aim was to help develop the interest and awareness of students who were not directly involved in the project.

By doing so, 'The Language of Business' project addressed the two main aims of the [LinkedUp](#) award scheme:

- to address national priorities in language learning;
- to tackle the shortage of good online materials by producing a bank of innovative and creative new resources which are freely available to teachers and learners.

3. Nuts and bolts: 'The Language of Business' project in detail

The pilot was organised in accordance with the parameters set by [LinkedUp](#). Specifically, the author was appointed project leader and worked mainly with three business organisations:

- Lavazza, the Italian coffee maker;
- Giacobazzi, an Italian deli shop based in Hampstead, North London;
- I-mage, an Italian PR and Marketing organisation based in London.

The project leader's main duties were to liaise with the other project partners, coordinate schedules of activities, maintain regular contact with the [LinkedUp](#)

management team, produce a report at the end of each phase of the project and eventually write and produce the new teaching material for the repository. In order to guarantee efficiency, all partners and learners had to agree in advance the schedule of work and three meetings (one for each project phase) were organised with each business. The pilot consisted of three phases:

- **preparation:** a period of 6 weeks of detailed planning;
- **implementation:** a period of 3 months during which the project was carried out with a group of 10 students;
- **resources development:** a period of 2 months in which the resources were produced and the materials eventually disseminated.

Initially, a shared *Google* workspace was set up for partners to communicate and share documents, although emails and telephone calls remained the most used forms of communication. Secondly, an action plan was devised to both set the agenda for visits and meetings and set deadlines for the completion of activities.

During the first phase the main representatives planned a set of activities and tasks for students to carry out during the second phase. The team capitalised on each business' particular area of expertise and the activities were planned in such a way that, by completing each task, students would provide evidence of having achieved specific language and business based outcomes.

Specific business areas which would provide the context for the activities were selected:

- Marketing;
- PR;
- Customer Care;
- Market Research;
- Investigating business.

Whereas the focus in the language component was on the:

- development of specific/technical vocabulary;
- development of basic language structures;
- acquisition of basic grammar.

During the second phase, the project involved:

- visits to the business partners;
- producing videos and audio recordings featuring both businesses and students;
- hosting a lecture on Marketing by one of the business partners.

Finally, during the third phase the learning material was produced using videos, *PowerPoint* presentations and *Word* documents. All the resources were tested in the college first and were uploaded in the college's *Moodle* platform so that students could work on the material both in the classroom and independently. Students were also encouraged to use this platform to work collaboratively in the development of wikis to improve Italian business vocabulary.

4. In practice: A practical example of the type of resources produced

‘The Language of Business’ project was designed to be learner-centred, fun and innovative. All the language learning workshops were run face-to-face and they were carried out both in the classroom (formal learning), and out-of the classroom in a business environment (informal learning). The language approach used in both formal and informal settings was communicative and based on the ‘chunks theory’ as it was thought that this would suit beginners

best (Krishnamurthy, 2002). Nevertheless, they occasionally had to deal with quite complex language structures and vocabulary. This approach was reflected in the production phase of the resources. These focused on:

- giving a business presentation;
- giving a demonstration;
- following instructions.

All the material produced, in accordance with the **LinkedUp** scheme's directives, was divided into the following sessions:

- general files: documents providing an overview of the specific project;
- resources for pupils: main learning material pack which included activity aims and objectives, stimuli (audio/visual format) and activity templates;
- further resources for pupils: testimonials, feedback, students sample of work;
- resources from the partner school.

4.1. Structure of the activities

Each set of activities has clear language and business objectives (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Each set of activities starts with a *stimulus*. In this example (see Figure 3), a video interview with the Marketing team of Lavazza UK was produced, followed by the creation of learning activities which were used both interactively via an interactive whiteboard and as a printed worksheet¹.

1. See 'Lavazza filmed interview in Italian', <http://www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk/resources/2354>.

Figure 1. The front page of the Lavazza Case-study



Figure 2. The unit's objectives

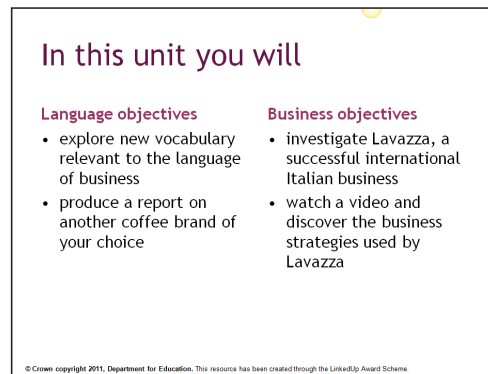


Figure 3. The video interview



Figure 4. First learning activity

Watch the video again and concentrate on expressions which relate to Business and Marketing

Example

- Dipartimenti
- Catene di supermercati
- Settore
- Strategie marketing
- Sampling

Recognising vocabulary related to business and marketing

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Figure 5. Second learning activity

Dipartimenti in Lavazza UK

For each department match the area of competence

1. Settore "casa"	A. Organizza la campagna pubblicitaria
2. Settore "fuori casa"	B. Distribuisce i prodotti nei supermercati e negozi
3. Settore "vending"	C. Distribuisce prodotti in uffici
4. Marketing	D. Contatta clienti e rivenditori
5. Training	E. Distribuisce i prodotti nei ristoranti, hotels, bars
6. Vendite	F. Seleziona il personale

Write then complete sentences:
Il settore casa distribuisce i prodotti nei supermercati e negozi

Practising writing full sentences

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Figure 6. Third learning activity

Now is your turn...

Writing a short text: report

- Look again at slide 8 and use it as an example
- Investigate another coffee brand and write a short report using the vocabulary learnt
- Use the questions featured in the video as a framework for your research

Image from www.pdsipart.org
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Then, learning activities (Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6) were created and used both interactively via an interactive whiteboard and as a printed worksheet¹.

5. Conclusion

As stated, the author's rationale for taking part in the [LinkedUp](#) award scheme was to develop more innovative and engaging materials which could be shared openly as an example of good open educational practice.

During the development of the project material, the principle of openness was applied by:

- opening up the context of language learning into out-of classroom activities;
- sharing ideas with fellow colleagues and the project management team on how best to meet the set outcomes. This aspect of the process was pivotal to keep standards high and to minimise production of less relevant resources;
- opening the language learning experience to the use of different tools and new media in order to make it more engaging for the learners.

Once tested, the resources produced were published under Crown copyright licensing, which allows users to reproduce the material for internal circulation, research and teaching or training purposes, provided that the material is acknowledged as Crown copyright. The material can also be adapted, provided that the original source is acknowledged.

The [LinkedUp](#) Scheme now contains a valuable repository of educational resources with a wide range of teaching materials. The dissemination of this

1. Ibid.

initiative has been very successful and it was unfortunate that the scheme was closed in 2011 due to government funding cuts and that there are no plans to curate and manage the resources beyond 2013.

Although it is conventional that government-funded projects of this kind have a short shelf life, it is to be hoped that some means will be found to allow the resources in the [LinkedUp](#) repository to find a new home, perhaps through some form of cross institutional collaboration.

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Reference

Krishnamurthy, R. (2002). Language as chunks, not words. *Jalt 2002 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 288-294). Retrieved from <http://jalt-publications.org/archive/proceedings/2002/288.pdf>

Useful links

Association for Language Learning: <http://www.all-languages.org.uk>

Centre for Languages, Linguistics & Area Studies: <https://www.llas.ac.uk/>

CILT, the National Centre for Languages: <http://www.cilt.org.uk>

Language of Business resources: <http://www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk/resources/2354>

Linkedup Project: <http://www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk/linkedup/index.html>

National Curriculum: <https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/overview>

Qualifications Frameworks: <http://ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-and-assessments/qualification-frameworks>

Specialist Schools and Academies Trust: <http://www.ssatuk.co.uk>