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Les Langues, les Cultures et les Communautés Virtuelles

CEFcult: Online assessment of oral language skills in an intercultural workplace

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Abstract

A lack of foreign-language and intercultural skills is often the cause of a significant lack of business opportunities. In this context, this paper presents the EU-funded CEFcult Project (2009-2011), which aims to develop an online environment for the assessment of oral language proficiency and intercultural competence against the CEF scales, as well as scales for intercultural competence. Here we present the developments made during the first year of the project, including an outline of the pedagogical choices made concerning frameworks and scenarios, and an evaluation of the pilot schemes for the new assessment tool.

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Keywords: Common European Framework; spoken language assessment; intercultural competence

1. Introduction

The Elan report (CILT, 2006) *Effects on the European Union Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise*, commissioned by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission, emphasises the negative effects that the lack of linguistic skills can have on the performance of enterprises in terms of missed business opportunities abroad, and consequently on the European economy in general. According to the report:

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small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which have a languages strategy and invest in staff with language skills are shown to be able to achieve 44% more export sales than those which don’t. Analysis of the survey responses identified some key elements of language management which were associated with strong export performance, and there could be very significant gains to the EU economy if all exporting SMEs employed these techniques.

At the same time, there has been an increase in the importance attached to intercultural skills in the workplace, which has led, for example, to the National Occupational Standards for Intercultural Working drawn up by the National Centre for languages in the UK in 2008.¹

It was as a result of this that the CEFcult project was designed. Most of the partners had been involved in the previous WebCEF project (2006-2009), which saw the development of an online spoken language assessment tool for learners of various European languages, teachers at secondary school and higher education, teacher trainers and trainees in Europe. However, the new CEFcult project brought together the assessment of oral language skills with those of intercultural communicative competence, in an attempt to meet the needs of enterprises in Europe. The target users of this tool are undergraduates and graduates who are preparing for first time employment, participants in vocational training, managers and employees, language teachers, in-company trainers and educators. The consortium is made up of the following institutions: AVNet – K.U. Leuven (Belgium), Open Universiteit Nederland (The Netherlands), Technische Universität Dresden (Germany), Internationale Hogeschool Leuven (Belgium), Université de Savoie (France), Università di Bologna (Italy), Uniwersytet Łódzki (Poland), Helsingin Yliopisto (Finland), Euneos Oy (Finland), Jyväskylän Yliopisto (Finland), The Open University (UK) and Fontys Hogescholen (The Netherlands).

The outcomes of the project will be:

- Web environment: a modular, customizable environment that allows for assessment of oral and intercultural skills;
- Scenarios: a set of authentic communication tasks through which users can assess their oral and intercultural skills in different European languages;
- Training materials: for self-, peer- and expert assessment in education and enterprises;
- Guidelines: research-supported guidelines for foreign language teaching and educational policy;
- Collaborative assessment: viable and tested models for collaborative assessment among higher education institutions, enterprises, and the various stakeholders.

2. Design and development phase

The first year of the project (Design and Development phase) has been characterised by two Partner meetings (November 2009 and June 2010), the creation of the project website, the development of a prototype of the web-based environment for assessment and the selection of rating scales. In addition, the partners have worked on the definition of scenarios and tasks that require the activation of language as well as intercultural competences, and the scheduling and specification of the pilots (involving HE institutions and enterprises).

The partners involved in the development of the platform have also started looking into the development of the social media aspects of the assessment environment. Finally, the advisory board has been appointed and the first dissemination activities have taken place.

¹ See also the recent EIM report “Internationalisation of European SMEs” commissioned by the Entrepreneurship Unit Directorate-General for Enterprise and Industry of the European Commission (2010).
So what will users be able to do in CEFcult? First, they will be offered a choice of scenarios, aimed at independent users or at group users (for example students in a classroom or trainees in the workplace). Once they have chosen the scenario most suitable to their needs, they will be able to record themselves (using FlashVlog) as they work through the various tasks, or upload their samples recorded separately. Finally, they will be given the choice of assessment (self-, peer- or expert assessment). The assessment environment will be enhanced by available Web 2.0 applications, with a number of user-driven functionalities (communities of practice; e-portfolio).

The different types of scenario will take into account work contexts as well as types of performance expected in the workplace – applying for a job, working in a multinational team, etc. As mentioned above, the tasks aim at eliciting both linguistic and intercultural performance through sustained monologues, interactions, etc. The assessment will be carried out using two scales: the CEFR for the linguistic aspects, and the INCA (2004) scales for the intercultural aspects. Regarding the CEFR, the competences tested will include qualitative aspects for oral production and interaction such as range, accuracy, fluency, coherence and interaction, as well as sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. As for intercultural competence, the INCA scales are divided into three aspects, each including two sub-categories: Openness (respect for otherness, tolerance of ambiguity), Knowledge (knowledge discovery, empathy) and Adaptability (behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness).

Table 1.

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<th>Communicative Awareness</th>
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<td>1. Basic</td>
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There were a number of reasons why the INCA scales were chosen, and it would take too long to explain them in detail. However, the determining factors were that INCA was developed for use specifically in the workplace, and that there were three levels of competence (Basic, Intermediate, Full), corresponding to the idea of the three levels of language competence of the CEFR (A, B, C). There are two versions of the descriptors, the Assessor’s (written in the third person) and the Assessee’s (in the first person). As an example, below are the INCA descriptors for Communicative Awareness (Assessee version).
3. Conclusions

There are a number of issues that have arisen during the first phase of this project. Some of them still need to be discussed and defined, and concern questions such as the issue of privacy: should the samples be entirely public, private, or placed within a restricted ‘group’ so that only ‘members’ can see them? Issues of tasks: should they test culture-specific or culture-general knowledge? Issues of stakes: can (or should) this tool be used for high-stakes assessment? Finally, can the INCA scales be integrated with ‘operational descriptors’ (in the form, perhaps, of examples of expected output) specific for each task, in order to assist the user to interpret the descriptors more accurately?

All these and other issues will be dealt with in the coming year, but we are confident that by the end of the project the tool produced will be of great use to anybody interested in the assessment of speaking skills and intercultural competence in the context of the workplace.

References


