

# Online Language Teaching and EU projects

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## Abstract

### **The paper will cover the following points:**

- Short introduction of the background of the pilot projects & their partners
- Summary of research under the projects
- Demonstrations of websites: virtual tours (animated dialogue), interactive exercises and cultural country-specific information
- Feed-back

### **Description of the Projects:**

*This paper will discuss two Leonardo da Vinci pilot projects, which are dealing with innovative language learning online for students going abroad.*

**Problem SOLVE** won the European Award for Languages 2006 and was a two year project, which had partners from Ireland, Germany, Spain, Slovakia, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland.

*The project designed and tested a multi-lingual, multi-cultural preparation module for students going abroad. This module consists of language and cultural exercises in problem solving via a virtual journey on a placement abroad. This preparation tool encourages students to interactively troubleshoot potential challenges they may encounter while training/studying in a different country. The pre-departure module facilitates students in increasing their language skills as well as giving cultural and practical knowledge of their host country. Users are led through a variety of real life situations relating to: travel, accommodation, socializing, working abroad and emergencies. Website: <http://www.problemsolve.org> (Please note that internet explorer and flash are required).*

**Ready, Study, Go** is an ongoing project, which started in November 2005 and has partners in six EU countries. The project plans a virtual e-learning system for language and cultural training before an on-the-job learning period. The online material is developed by teams of vocational and language teachers. The material consists of written, aural and visual modules and is taking into account different learning styles. The language and cultural training material will be developed for the Hotel, Restaurant, Tourism and Bakery sectors and will be in English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German and Italian. Website: [www.readystudygo-project.net](http://www.readystudygo-project.net) (Please note that more material will be uploaded as the project's duration is until the end of December 2007).

## 1. Introduction

**Problem Student Orientation and Language preparation for Vocational Experiences**

This project won the *European Award for Language* in 2006. The Problem S O L V E project was developed, designed and tested as a multi-lingual, multi-cultural preparation on-line module for students undertaking mobility placements in vocational training. It merges the key concepts of language, culture and vocational education. The modules consist of language and cultural exercises in a number of virtual situations in user-friendly CD-Rom and website format.

The primary objective of Problem S O L V E is to encourage students to interactively troubleshoot potential challenges they may face while on placement in a different country. In addition to improved language skills for students who complete this module, they will also have an increased cultural and practical knowledge of their host country.

The **Ready, Study, Go** project plans a virtual e-learning system for language and cultural training before an on-the-job learning period. The on-line material will be developed by teams of vocational and language teachers in the areas of Hotel & Tourism, Restaurant & Catering and Bakery. This will integrate language teaching into vocational content. An animated figure will guide the learner through the system. The material will consist of written and aural exercises combining professional and

general vocabulary with cultural coaching and information on the work culture. The target group will be students & trainees before a work placement.

## 2. Overview

Problem SOLVE is a Leonardo da Vinci Pilot Project, which received over € 320000 funding from the EU Commission. Leonardo da Vinci programmes are targeting the vocational training sector and are dealing with students/trainees who are going on work placements abroad as part of their vocational training, which is very often accredited.

This was a two year project, which started with its first partner meeting in Dublin in November 2003 and a second meeting in Palermo, Sicily in May 2004. A third meeting was held in Bratislava, Slovakia in November 2004 and the last meeting and launch took place in Dublin in April 2005. The project partners were from Ireland, Germany, Spain, Slovakia, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland. The partners were mobility coordinators, language lecturers and experts in multimedia within Third Level institutions. The languages within the project are English, German, Spanish, Slovakian, Italian, Swedish and Swiss French.

The project has been developed through feedback from mobility coordinators at *Hibernia Learning Partnership's* mobility meeting in Dublin in September 2002. Representatives indicated a need for a preparation tool for students undertaking placements abroad. Deficiencies in language skills relating to practical issues and culturally-biased problem solving abilities were identified as key areas for further development. Most mobility coordinators at International Offices don't have the time to give courses to prepare their students prior to departure for the placement abroad. Some language lecturers do not take into account the necessity to prepare for a placement abroad when only a minority of their students opt for the residence abroad as it is often the case in the IoT (Institutes of Technology) sector. Different core modules of teaching, e.g. literature/translation, might be insufficient to prepare the student for the experience of studying/working abroad. A means of autonomous learning was needed.

The target group concerned are tertiary level participants in the LDV mobility programme. The sector targeted is education, more specifically transnational vocational training placements. Universities and other institutes acting as sending organisations in the LDV mobility programme will utilise the website produced in this project. This provides a teaching tool for educators, language teaching staff and guidance councillors and a learning tool for students.

The **Ready, Study, Go** project is also a Leonardo da Vinci Pilot Project, which received over €390000 funding from the EU Commission. It is a two year project, which started with its first partner meeting in Espoo, Finland in November 2006 and a second meeting in Görlitz, Germany in April 2007. A third meeting in Venice, Italy in November 2006 and the last meeting will be in December 2007 in Tallinn, Estonia. The project partners are from Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Germany and Estonia. The partners are mobility coordinators, language lecturers, experts in multimedia within Third Level institutions and company partners. There is also a monitoring partner for the automotive sector in this project. The languages within the project are English, Estonian, German, Finnish, French, German and Italian. The project was developed through a previous project which was coordinated in Finland.

### 2.1 Aims and Objectives

The aim of the project was to provide students/trainees with a practical and useful preparation tool for placements abroad, which would increase their language skills while supporting autonomous learning. As intercultural competence also plays a vital role in the learning experience it was incorporated in the modules of the on-line material. The ability to exercise problem solving skills in another cultural context would also strengthen the students'/trainees' abilities to cope with the challenges while on work placement abroad.

The overall objective was to provide mobility coordinators with a preparation tool for students/trainees that combined language and cultural modules within vocational education and in doing so increased the labour market mobility of Graduates with the help of well prepared and therefore successful placements.

The aim of the **Ready, Study, Go** project is similar and ITT as the quality manager can share its expertise of the former project. Ready, Study, Go also focuses on the learning styles; the on-line material created in the project will consist of different learning, writing, pronunciation and listening exercises. The material will take into account different learning styles according to Neil Fleming's concept of VARK: visual, auditory, reading/writing & kinaesthetic.

### 2.2 List of Project Partners

- Hibernia Learning Partnership – Dublin, Ireland (Co-ordinator)

- Associazione SINTESI – Sicily, Italy
- ComEAST – Madeburg, Germany
- Halmstad University – Halmstad, Sweden
- Institute of Technology Blanchardstown – Dublin, Ireland
- Institute of Technology Tralee – Kerry, Ireland
- Letterkenny Institute of Technology – Letterkenny, Ireland
- Slovak University of Technology – Bratislava, Slovakia
- Universidad de Salamanca – Salamanca, Spain
- Swiss Occidental Leonardo (SOL) – Sion, Switzerland (SOL is a self-financing partner)

**Ready, Study, Go project:**

- Omnia, Vocational Institution in the Espoo Region, Finland (Co-ordinator)
- IFA Marcel Sauvage, L'Institut des Formations en Alternance, France
- Tralee Institute of Technology, Ireland
- State Institute of Secondary Education « Andrea Barbarigo » di Venezia, Italy
- Kiezkuechen Ausbildungs gmbH, Berlin, Germany
- Tallinn Service School, Estonia
- CFA La Chataigneraie, France (monitoring partner)
- Sodexo Oy, Finland (company partner)
- Suomen leipuriliitto ry, Finland (company partner)

### 3. Methodology and Research

At the beginning more than 130 work placement students in all project partner countries were asked to complete questionnaires in order to provide important information for any future applicants who would avail of the work placements opportunity. Students were requested to list important vocabulary lists or unusual phrases for the linguistic data. For the cultural competence they were asked to give brief anecdotes from personal experiences while being on work placement; cultural misunderstandings, examples of cultural differences etc. were part of this section. The selected topics for students to comment about were Travelling, Accommodation, Work, Socialising and Emergencies. The same topics were used for the on-line material. Any recommendations by the students for placement preparations were also investigated.

In addition to these surveys, each project partner researched orientation, cultural and linguistic preparation for their country.

At the final phase of the project students were consulted once again with the assistance of questionnaires and were requested to test the draft on-line modules of the project for the selected topics. The students' feedback was used to modify the Master CD-ROM and the website.

For the **Ready, Study, Go** project all project partners were asked to contact students at their institutions who would complete questionnaires in order to provide important information for the design of the on-line material. The researched areas were similar to the ones in the initial phase of the Problem SOLVE project. Each partner was also asked to research orientation, cultural and linguistic preparation for their country. The *moodle* platform is used as a communication tool for sharing the material by all partners, who also use the site as a discussion forum for various work packages.

#### 3.1 Prototype Template for On-line Material

The Irish partners played a key role in the development of the template that was at a later stage used by all other partners in order to design and upload their material.

*Hibernia Learning Partnership* which was founded in 1987 by 12 Irish Colleges as a non-profit organisation, was the coordinator of the project.

Letterkenny IT designed the text files for the Irish localisation. This was used as guidance by all the other partners when they designed their content in their target languages.

IT Blanchardstown were responsible for the multimedia part of the on-line material and had to give instructions to all partners how to upload their material.

ITTralee was the quality manager and had to ensure that deadlines were met and the content of the material was of an approved quality.

Secondary sources were used for the collation of the information for content. These sources included government websites, cultural institutions, general information about Tax and income and the legal requirements of living and working in another country. There are information pages under each heading in the project which offer practical information to the students/trainees. Web links were another important feature.

For the Ready, Study, Go project the multimedia experts designed a prototype template that all partners can use for their work packages. All material is uploaded in moodle for general feedback purposes.

### 3.2 Common Structure

Each of the selected **topics** of Travelling, Accommodation, Work, Socialising and Emergencies had the same structure: **Introduction** page with general knowledge, key words with **audio** files and English translation, **key phrases** with audio files and English translation, animated virtual tours with text files of **dialogues** in target language and English **translation** and audio files. For example the socialising topic has a virtual tour (animated bilingual dialogue with audio files) for a situation in a restaurant, a pub and at a party. Each virtual tour was followed by a mix of various **exercises** that made sure the student/trainee was able to process the provided information from a linguistic and cultural viewpoint as long as they speak English. Instant feedback was given to the student in order to ensure that s/he keeps motivated. Advice from **former** work placement students was compiled in the section of Dos and Don'ts. A text file on **cultural** issues was followed by a **final self assessment** with the individual scores appearing at the end. All text files are **bilingual**.

There is no strict common structure planned for the **Ready, Study, Go** project as there are different work packages which vary in content and design. This will work as long as there is an overall framework for the on-line. Each partner has to follow a previous agreed list of topics for their work package, e.g. for the Hotel, Restaurant, Tourism and Bakery sector and the general culture work package.

### 3.3 Didactic Approach

The project creates an autonomous learning environment, combines user friendly technology and navigational components, open access, native speakers preparing all of the content, virtual tours, questions and quizzes. Problem SOLVE incorporates authentic contemporary situations in an outside classroom environment and task based learning. The availability of high frequency vocabulary as a method, audio files and an in-built feedback system are used throughout the sections. Different learning styles are addressed by providing bilingual text files for reading, visual material through the animated virtual tours in each section and audio files for listening. The interactive nature of the material will ensure that students are self motivated and it offers the opportunity of autonomous learning. In addition to the quantitative research and the didactic approach, LSP (Language for Specific Purpose) is also used as a method, e.g. the section on the work topic. Examples of how to open a bank account, a business phone call or the student's first day in the office differ from the usual language text book content.

The didactic approach for the **Ready, Study, Go** project is similar, but it is hoped to have more video clips and visual material available. There is also greater emphasis on the LSP area.

## 4. Mobility

Today, great importance is attached to enhancing the mobility of the European labour market. However, there are socio-economic, linguistic and practical difficulties which, in one way or another, hamper the international mobility of students. A lack of knowledge of a foreign language and of certain cultural aspects, remain two of the main obstacles to mobility. Language skills must not only include the ability to interact with members of other language communities but also skills that enable workers to understand practices and behaviours of people in other cultures.

The projects Problem SOLVE and Ready, Study, Go increase language skills, cultural awareness and problem solving abilities. This will have an impact on the success of the placement and the ability to adjust to a new culture and environment. Employers are looking more and more for multi-skilled graduates which will require a new focus for trainers and the skill set that they provide for their students/trainees.

We have to recognize the importance of cultural awareness as part of modern language teaching and the fact that native speakers created all the country specific content with cultural issues in mind will hopefully assist that the student/trainee can combine linguistic and cultural awareness.

The extensive research with students before and after the construction of the material made it possible that the content is relevant, user-friendly and based on students'/trainees' own experiences while being abroad. Both projects can be used by incoming and outgoing students/trainees for work placements (*Leonardo da Vinci*) as well as study programmes (*Erasmus*). International experience is directly useful, in terms of language skills and cultural understanding. In addition to practical academic results and employment-related benefits, there is often an invaluable personal advantage to be gained from the experience of working and studying and living in another country. Students report that their

exposure to different aspects of life and learning increases their maturity and self-confidence and better prepares them for life's challenges in general. See also various studies on the year abroad by *Byram, Coleman, Parker, Freed and Walsh*.

It is not only valuable for mobility coordinators, but also for careers officers at secondary level and guidance councillors in tertiary level institutions. Due to the flexibility of the product it can be customised to fit any language level e.g. primary, secondary, third level or general conversation levels. Hence it is of value in both educational and business environments, in particular SMEs (Small/Medium Enterprises). On-line availability ensures that anyone who has access to a PC can use Problem SOLVE and Ready, Study, Go.

## 5. Results

Problem SOLVE is a **website** product that combines linguistic and cultural information for vocational educational purposes. The presence of a web site ensures that the content created is available long after physical products such as CDs and brochures have been distributed.

It shows that a transition from language learning as an academic exercise to language skills as a tool is possible. If we want that our students/trainees are capable of surviving in a foreign language environment then the trainers have to ensure that the necessary skills are provided.

**CD-Rom:** The final version of the CD Rom was available in August 2005 and 500 copies were delivered to each partner. The CD ROM has been introduced to the main stream activities of the partners operations and active dissemination on the part of all partners has created awareness of the pre-departure tool.

**Brochures:** Copies of each language version of the brochures were given to each partner for dissemination/valorisation. These were completed in time for the launch (1000 brochures per country) and each partner has 20 copies of each country version.

**Surveys:** The results from the Needs Analysis questionnaire were used in the partner content. These were particularly important in the useful words and phrases sections of Problem SOLVE and also in the student advice sections.

**User Testing Questionnaires:** 104 students from the partner countries tested the CD and results were returned in hard copy to ITB 15.06.2005. These test results were incorporated into the final CD ROM and web version.

The test versions of the CD-Rom received excellent feedback with almost 97 per cent of respondents saying they would recommend the Problem Solve CD to other students and would use Problem Solve again.

ITT presented a **paper** at various conferences about Problem SOLVE, e.g. ASET 2003 (UK), IDT 2005 (Austria) and IAM 2005 (Switzerland) and received very positive feedback. ITT is hoping to be able to get further funding from the EU commission by participating in the *Life Long Learning Programme* for a **follow on project** with more international partners, more languages and further inclusion of LSP topics. The issue of updating the information on the website could also be addressed by a *Transfer of Innovation* project.

**Ready, Study, Go** is also a website product that combines linguistic and cultural information for vocational educational purposes. The language and cultural training material will be developed for the Hotel, Catering, Tourism and Bakery sector. The material will consist of 40 hours of general language training and 80 hours of sector specific language and cultural training. There will be also a on-line handbook available for instructors and students.

## 6. Location of the Multimedia Learning Resource

See [www.problemsolve.org](http://www.problemsolve.org) – please note that Internet Explorer and Macromedia's Flash plugin are necessary in order to access the modules.

See also [www.readystudygo-project.net](http://www.readystudygo-project.net) for further details. The expected date of completion will be December 2007.

\* An earlier version of this paper was published April 2007 as part of the proceedings of the conference "*Multilingualism across Europe*" (Bolzano/Bozen, 24.-26.08.06).