

FlaChi – Foreign Languages for Children

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Abstract

FlaChi <http://www.FlaChi-socrates.eu/> aims at promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism in Europe through the creation of flexible training paths and stimulating learning materials for languages not much spread and studied – as French and German – or even less spread and studied - as Italian and Slovenian – in Primary education and to increase motivation to learn languages among children in addition to the familiarization of children and teachers with the use of technologies for training purposes. The “multimodal” training model for the learning of languages in early age and the learning materials for the training path in the envisaged target languages (Italian, Slovenian, French, German) are designed for children of the last years of Primary school (8-10 Years). The project aims at creating learning resources based on an children-oriented integrated approach focusing on the functional and operational dimension of language.

FlaChi promotes the overcoming of the common perception of the computer as a tool recently added to others in favour of a wider vision according to which new technologies have to be integrated in learning paths to “support” specific activities, increase and realize processes and activities welcomed from the language teaching (glottodidattica) (interaction, individualization of the learning process and active building of knowledge).

FlaChi – Foreign Languages for Children is a multimodal language course for 8-10 aged children in French, German, Italian and Slovenian language. The project is cofinanced by the European Commission under the Socrates Lingua2 Action and has a duration of 2 years. The project activities started in October 2006 and will therefore end in October 2008. The objective of Lingua 2 is to help raise the standards in language teaching and learning by ensuring availability of sufficient high quality language learning instruments and tools for assessing linguistic skills acquired.

The coordinator of the project is the ICoN Consortium Italian Culture on the Net www.italicon.it, made up of 23 Italian universities and aimed at promoting Italian language and Culture all over the world through the Internet. The ICoN Consortium was set up in January 1999 in partnership with the Office of the President of the Chamber of Deputies and with the support of the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Universities and Scientific and Technological Research. It operates in agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through its website www.italicon.it, ICoN offers Italian language courses of different levels and for different audiences (levels beginners, intermediate and advanced and courses in written professional Italian for companies, banks and public bodies) and a Degree program in Italian language and culture for citizens living abroad. ICoN is in charge of the course model and the Italian language version. Partners of the project are Insight&Co. in charge of evaluation and monitoring, Lynx Lab. in charge of technological support, Direzione Didattica of Tarvisio in charge of experimentation, Klett Lernen und Wissen GmbH in charge of dissemination and the German language course, Icademie s.a.r.l. in charge of the French language course and the Capodistria Institute for Educational Sciences and Studies in Computer Science in charge of validating the experimentation activities of the Direzione Didattica of Tarvisio and the production of materials in Slovenian language.

The multimodal model is characterized by the synergy of different teaching methods rather than its side by side placement. The teaching methods used are lab (online and computer-based), classroom (with audio, video and paper supports), play games, role playing, practical experiences and simulations. The basic concept is a play games activity ruled and supported by paper, cd audio, cd-rom and website that commits the teacher a fundamental role not only in terms of process management but also in production and adjustment of teaching materials.

FlaChi promotes overcoming the widespread belief that the computer is a teaching aid which has recently joined ranks with the others, in favour of a wider vision which integrates the new technologies in the learning process, as powerful tools able to “support” specific activities and to develop and achieve processes and educational activities. The computer is not used to do exercises that could be done with pen and paper, nor to do drills and games to enhance regular lessons, but is rather used to create, build, control, integrate,

manage and share. The computer represents both an extension of the course which allows the teachers and pupils to enrich the educational journey with their own productions (audio, texts, images); as a source of “narrative events”, seemingly random (but actually carefully planned by the authors and / or the teachers) that can change the course of the events and state problems that need to be solved; as a tool to share information with pupils in other classrooms or other schools (via the Web). In this sense the approach of FLaChi may be defined as “blended learning”, since it integrates classroom, computer based and web based learning, always under the direction and the management of the teacher.

The model is learner-centred but pupils do not learn target languages in self-paced modality. They are asked to do homework and to produce new materials in cooperation with their mates.

The structure of FLaChi can be defined as “the castle of language”. Children enter in a castle guided by their teacher and meet other children, make things and play with them. The castle is organized in different rooms as the play room, the story-telling room, the kitchen, the park, the breeding ground, the labyrinth, the garret, the cellar, and so on. All these rooms have been projected for different purposes: some are for communication activities, some other for exercising and studying. The castle is built by means of different supports: paper, CDROM, Internet website. The teacher will have to integrate them with each other and create an appealing learning path. The teacher can also add further rooms to the foreseen ones. Learners will be assigned a variety of tasks to carry out individually (in a limited number of instances), in small groups, with the entire class, in cooperation with other classes in the same school and with classes from other schools through the Internet. The story-telling, which is one of the most common methods used in language courses for children, is conceived as a container (the history) to make activities and develop communication and language skills. This means that the course is the story-telling of the possible paths necessary to get knowledge and skills deemed for relevant in the project idea.

Taking into account the “learning by doing” principle and the idea of the shared (between teacher and students) building of the learning path, the story telling here is not intended as a given story that students must read to discover a surprise ending, but rather as a rough draft or a scenario that gives them the chance to weave new stories. Each story created and lived by the students while walking on their own paths will probably differ from those of the students in classroom next door.

The first phases focus on oral activities, whereas reading and writing activities start later on. One of the main features of FLaChi is the use of language to make things (the so-called task-oriented activities).

Apart from children aged 8 to 10, other identified target groups are educators (teachers) and administrators (head teachers) in primary schools and private language schools. These groups are directly using the FLaChi course. Additionally the parents of the involved children need to be addressed. Not directly using, but possibly interested in the FLaChi course materials are potential distributors like publishers and governmental institutions (culture institutes, local school administration, educational ministries, etc.) that might support the introduction of FLaChi. Finally the scientific community as well as the social environment will be addressed, consisting of, for example, scientists and researchers interested in the outcome of the project, etc.

All target groups will be addressed efficiently through distribution activities. Many different types of activities are directed at each target group. The FLaChi marketing strategy is expected to comprise of the following: presentations in conferences and workshops, the FLaChi website, press information, links to the FLaChi Website, teacher meetings to be organized in the participating countries, articles on the project’s research results, discussions and expert talks on FLaChi, etc.

A variety of promotional material will be produced both in printed and electronic form. In order to reach as many potentially interested stakeholders as possible we will particularly promote our website which therefore is the central dissemination channel.

FLaChi’s proposal consists of a strongly innovative linguistic path, that goes beyond some methodological corollaries that guided language teaching in the past (i.e. the establishment of the educational unit, the sequential order of the subjects, the role of the teacher); that’s why a positive impact is expected both in the practice of language teaching and in the promotion of the study of foreign languages, according to more modern and updated principles that are closer to the imagination and know-how of today’s youth.