

ICT Language Learning and Training for European Equivalency

**Mercedes Rico
Patricia Edwards
Paula Ferreira da Silva
Emilio Hernández
Héctor Sánchez**

Universidad de Extremadura.
Mérida / Spain

*mricogar@unex.es
pedwards@unex.es
paula.br.fer@gmail.com
ehnandez@unex.es
sasah@unex.es*

Abstract

The Division of Language Policy in the Council of Europe has established a modular catalogue of occupations and respective levels of language competency to meet the demands required of working professionals in the European Union. The aim is to provide a reference framework of equivalent guidelines which guarantee a series of language skills that will lead to certification recognized throughout the EU. In view of these dynamic events underway, we have developed the research project entitled "The Creation of On-line/Multimedia Courses for Professional Certification and European Equivalency Recognition in Languages for Occupational Purposes" which is funded by the regional government of Extremadura in southwestern Spain. The objective is based on the creation of web supported (Moodle) multimedia courses in languages for occupational purposes for professional certification and European equivalency recognition in English, French, Portuguese and Italian in two specifically selected job sectors of the aforementioned catalogue (of interest to our regional community), namely, Commerce and Tourism Services. We have applied what we consider to be the most appropriate tools and learning objects to reach the goal of formative education in these foreign languages and sustain that the challenge of language learning and training for European Equivalency Certification can be enhanced by the application of ICT.

1. Introduction

The purposes of ICT language learning and training for European equivalency certification offer a series of advantages as well as multiple positive effects: 1) unification criteria regarding the requirements and characteristics expected of the current European labor force in the command foreign languages, 2) establishment of a methodological base by defining an instrumental model for identifying FL competence within professional profiles, 3) laying the foundations for professional recognition, while at the same time making allowances for particular regional and social demands to be met, 4) regulating validation which recognizes work experience by law and official accreditation, 5) facilitating the technical design, learner content, and measurable assessment of educational programs, and 6) promoting job mobility within the EU member states with these improvements.

2. Course formats and contents

Based on the aims pursued, two online language learning courses targeting the required A1 and A2 basic user levels of FL competence marked by EU guidelines for commercial salespeople and restaurant waiters/waitresses and bartenders have been elaborated.

The language courses are available in two formats: 1) multimedia CD-ROM, and, 2) the virtual learning management platform Moodle. As seen in the tables that follow, each level is distributed into five learning units outlining the program contents in their respective linguistic skills and components.

Tourism Sector (Waiters/Waitresses) Level A1						
Units	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Vocabulary	Grammar
Unit 1 – Introducing people	Can understand people's introductions and greetings. Can understand basic requests.	Reads and understands short texts related to the subject of the unit.	Can write short sentences giving personal information.	Greeting people. Can introduce him/herself/ others. Is able to give some personal information. Spells simple words. Can thank people.	Greetings & Good-byes Introducing oneself. The alphabet Addresses Cardinal numbers. Countries and nationalities.	Verb <i>To Be</i> Personal pronouns Possessive pronouns and adjectives Verb <i>To Have</i> Verb <i>To Live</i> <i>Will, would</i>
Unit 2 – Daily routine	Can understand other people's daily routine, jobs. Can understand instructions related to work.	Reads short texts related to the daily routine, jobs and occupations.	Writes sentences about his/her daily routine. Takes simple notes.	Is able to describe his/her daily routine. Can talk about the time, the days of the week and the months of the year.	Daily routine Time: hours, minutes, seconds Days of the week Months of the year Dates Numbers	Present tense Demonstrative pronouns and adjectives Prepositions Sentence order: Frequency adverbs
Unit 3 – Likes and dislikes	Can understand people's preferences.	Can read and understand texts related to the expression of likes and dislikes.	Describes his/her likes and dislikes.	Can discuss people's likes and dislikes. Can express preferences and make suggestions.	Likes and dislikes Expressing preferences Making suggestions	Verb <i>To Like</i> : affirmative; negative; interrogative Auxiliary <i>Do</i> Past tense
Unit 4 – Food and drinks	Is able to identify food and drinks.	Reads texts related to food and drinks. Can understand and analyse menus.	Can write basic texts describing food and drinks. Is able to write menus.	Can ask for menu orders. Is able to describe food and drinks. Makes requests and suggestions.	Food and drinks Menu vocabulary Making requests Expressing suggestions	Adjectives Present tense <i>Can, could</i> <i>Will, would</i> <i>May</i> Count/ uncountable nouns
Unit 5 - Money	Deals with money and change. Knows what receipts and invoices are.	Understands texts related to money currency, bills and invoices.	Writes bills (with food description), receipts and invoices.	Asks for money. To thank people. Can invite them to come back. Expresses gratitude for preference.	Cash and charge Expressing gratitude Inviting people Counting numbers	Verbs Present tense Present continuous <i>Would like...</i> <i>May</i>

Table 1

Tourism Sector (Waiters/Waitresses Level A2)						
Units	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Vocabulary	Grammar
Unit 1 – The Restaurant	Can understand basic requests. Is able to understand people's doubts related to foods and	Reads and understands short texts about restaurant description, food and drinks.	Can write short texts describing the restaurant, food and drinks.	Can help people. Describes the restaurant, food and drinks. Talks about products in a simple way. Is able to give directions.	Tableware Furniture Restaurant vocabulary Food and drinks Giving directions Cardinal	Verb <i>To Be</i> Personal pronouns Possessive pronouns, adjectives Verb <i>To Have</i> Verb <i>To Do</i> <i>Will, would</i>

	drinks.				numbers	<i>Can, could</i>
Unit 2 – Types of restaurant	Can understand descriptions of different types of restaurant, food and drinks, and eating habits.	Reads texts related to different types of restaurant and eating habits.	Writes about several types of restaurant.	Is able to describe different types of restaurants. Can discuss eating habits and food products.	Food and drinks Eating habits Hygiene Colours Shapes Sizes	Present tense Demonstrative pronouns and adjectives Prepositions Sentence order: Frequency adverbs Adjectives
Unit 3 – Requests	Can understand people's requests. Is able to understand people's doubts.	Can read and understand texts related to requests, likes and dislikes.	Takes note of people's requests.	Is able to make suggestions. Can help people.	Tableware Furniture Restaurant vocabulary Food and drinks	Verb <i>To Like</i> : Auxiliary <i>Do</i> Present tense Past tense <i>Will, would</i> <i>Can, could</i> <i>May</i>
Unit 4 – Complaints	Is able to understand people's complaints.	Reads texts related to several kinds of complaints.	Can write basic texts describing complaints.	Can give explanations and convince people.	Menu vocabulary Making requests Suggestions Explanations	Adjectives Present tense of verbs <i>Can, could</i> <i>Will, would</i> <i>May</i> <i>Shall, should</i>
Unit 5 - Bills	Deals with money, change, and money exchange. Understands when people ask for the bill. Knows what receipts and invoices are.	Understands texts related to money currency, money exchange, bills and invoices.	Writes bills (with food description), receipts and invoices.	Asks for money. Is able to make and explain money exchange. Is able to thank people. Can invite them to come back. Expresses gratitude	Money Counting Cardinal numbers Expressing gratitude Expressing preferences Inviting people	Present tense Present continuous <i>Would like...</i> <i>May</i> Future Conditional

Table 2

Commerce Sector (Shop Assistant Level A1)						
Units	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Vocabulary	Grammar
Unit 1 – Introducing people	Can understand people's introductions and greetings. Can understand basic requests.	Reads and understands short texts related to the subject of the unit.	Can write sentences giving personal information.	Greeting people. Can introduce him/herself/ others. Can introduce others. Is able to give some personal information. Spells words. Can apologise, thank people, say goodbye.	Greetings Introducing oneself and others The alphabet Addresses Cardinal numbers Countries and nationalities Jobs/ occupations	Verb <i>To Be</i> Personal pronouns Possessive pronouns and adjectives Verb <i>To Have</i> Verb <i>To Live</i> <i>Will, would</i>
Unit 2 – Daily routine	Can understand other people's daily routine, jobs and occupations.	Reads texts related to the daily routine, jobs and occupations.	Writes about his/her daily routine.	Is able to describe his/her daily routine. Can talk about the time, the days of the week and the months of the year.	Daily routine Time: hours, minutes, seconds Days of the week Months of the year Dates	Present tense Demonstrative pronouns and adjectives Prepositions Sentence order: Frequency adverbs

					Numbers	
Unit 3 – Likes and dislikes	Can understand people's preferences.	Can read and understand texts related to the expression of likes and dislikes.	Describes his/her likes and dislikes.	Can discuss people's likes and dislikes. Can express preferences and make suggestions.	Likes and dislikes Expressing preferences Making suggestions	Verb <i>To Like</i> : affirmative; negative; interrogative Auxiliary <i>Do</i> Present tense Past tense
Unit 4 – Buying and selling	Is able to understand people's buying requests.	Reads texts related to buying and selling. Can understand and analyse requests.	Can write basic sentences describing the process of buying and selling.	Can help people with buying. Is able to describe the products. Makes requests and suggestions.	Buying and selling Sales vocabulary Making requests Expressing suggestions	Adjectives Present tense of verbs <i>Can, could</i> <i>Will, would</i> <i>May</i> Count/uncountable nouns
Unit 5 - Money	Deals with money and change. Understands when people ask for prices. Knows what receipts and invoices are.	Understands texts related to money currency, different prices and invoices.	Writes short sentences, receipts and invoices.	Asks politely for money. Is able to thank people. Can invite them to come back. Expresses gratitude for their preference.	Money Expressing gratitude Expressing preferences Inviting people Counting numbers	Verbs Present tense Present continuous <i>Would like...</i> <i>May</i>

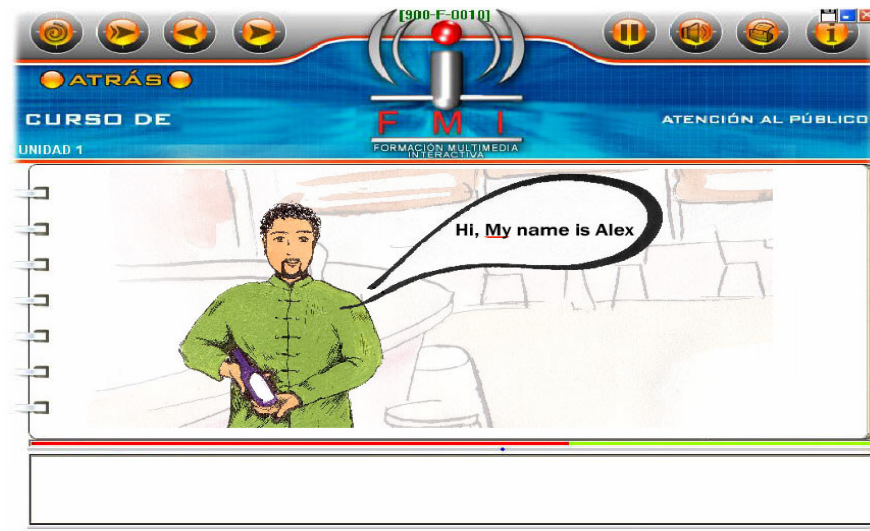
Table 3

Commerce Sector (Shop Assistant Level A2)						
Units	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Vocabulary	Grammar
Unit 1 – The Shop	Can understand basic requests. Is able to understand people's doubts related to the articles he/she sells.	Reads and understands short texts about selling.	Can write short texts describing the products he/she sells. Can write texts describing the sales process.	Can help people. Describes the shop and its products. Talks about products in a simple way. Is able to give simple directions.	Sales vocabulary Giving directions Cardinal numbers	Verb <i>To Be</i> Personal pronouns Possessive pronouns and adjectives Verb <i>To Have</i> Verb <i>To Do</i> <i>Will, would</i> <i>Can, could</i> <i>May</i>
Unit 2 – Types of shopping facilities	Can understand descriptions of different types of shops.	Reads texts related to different types of shopping facilities.	Writes descriptions of different shopping facilities.	Is able to describe different types of shops. Can discuss sales products.	Colours Shapes Sizes Directions	Present tense Demonstrative pronouns and adjectives Prepositions Sentence order. Frequency adverbs Adjectives
Unit 3 – Commerce	Can understand people's requests. Is able to understand people's doubts.	Can read and understand texts related to requests, likes and dislikes, cheques and invoices.	Can write a simple business letter.	Is able to make suggestions. Can help people. Can make a simulation of buying and selling	Buying and selling cheques business letter invoices and receipts	Verb <i>To Like</i> : affirmative; negative; interrogative Auxiliary <i>Do</i> Present tense Past tense <i>Will, would</i> <i>Can, could</i> <i>May</i>
Unit 4 – Telephone	Is able to understand people's requests. Can	Reads texts related to telephone sales.	Can write basic texts describing telephone	Can give explanations and convince people. Can help people	Making requests Expressing suggestions	Adjectives Present tense of verbs <i>Can, could</i>

<i>sales</i>	establish a selling phone conversation.		sales interaction.	buy through using the phone.	Giving explanations	<i>Will, would May Shall, should</i>
Unit 5 - Credit	Deals with money, change, and money exchange. Understands when people ask for prices. Knows about the use of the credit card.	Understands texts related to money currency, money exchange, bills and invoices. Is able to deal with credit card payment.	Writes bills, receipts and invoices.	Asks politely for money. Is able to make and explain money exchange. Is able to thank people. Can invite them to come back. Expresses gratitude.	Money Credit cards Counting Cardinal numbers Expressing gratitude Expressing preferences Inviting people	Present tense Present continuous <i>Would like...</i> <i>May</i> Future Conditional

Table 4

Regardless of the possible formats (CD-ROM or Moodle), each unit consists of a series of scenes that gradually introduce the programmed contents through oral and written comprehension of texts, grammatical and vocabulary annexes, and cultural information of interest.



Picture 1: Presentation scene

Presentation scenes are followed by sets of learning tasks, exercises and activities which are linked to the presentation of the scenes built by implementing multimedia tools enhancing the teaching-learning process.



Picture 2: Multiple choice

Construction of communicatively effective audiovisual scenes and activities is considered of prime importance in developing the units. Multimedia courses mainly establish communication with the user by aural and visual means, making adequate graphic solutions powerful ingredients in the proper use of audiovisual tools conducive to learning. According to Frascara (2000), graphic environments of communication should be built on a range of foundations such as fine knowledge of visual perceptual, behavioral psychology, personal preferences, intellectual capacities and a system of cultural values pertaining to the market segment they are addressing.

3. ICT tools and activities

The CD-ROM courses are designed with the FMI (Formación Multimedia Interactiva) authoring tool whose interactive exercise management system is programmed to create static and dynamic content with flash (texts, images, audio and video), in order to generate activities later evaluated such as multiple choice tests, true-false, fill in the blanks, crossword puzzles and matching exercises, and to access links within and outside the application, as well as hypertexts. The hypertext is a graphic element capable of quickly and efficiently establishing hierarchies of information. Because of its quality as a visual communication element, not only for the transcription of written meaning, but also for connotations as signs, aspects of hypertext like shape (fonts/types), color and size are also considered. The adequate use of these graphic parameters allow for the orderly organization of information. Therefore, a well-designed hypertext facilitates navigation so that the information, divided into logical, easily-encountered visual units, will be clearly hierarchical.

The courses created with the Moodle platform incorporate all the necessary linguistic components and skills to ensure the learning process of languages online. We subscribe to a methodological approach that includes tasks for the individualized learning of micro skills (pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, oral and written competence, etc.) through exercises built with tools like HotPotatoes (multiple choice, crossword puzzles, matching concepts, fill in the blanks, etc.), and exposure to theoretical contents and socio-cultural information through PDF documents, Word, OpenOffice, Powerpoint and so on.

In addition to individualized, autonomous tasks, the design of collaborative ones allows for group work and interaction among all the potential users (teachers, students, administrator, instructor and the world of work) through activities such as building electronic glossaries, participation in wikis, educational online workshops, chats and forums. Oral interaction, either individually or collectively, is carried out with Moodle's oral messenger (MoodleSpeex voice recording tool), podcasts, audio and video files, and interactive tools such as chats or phone calls through suppliers like Skype.

Furthermore, the inclusion of multimedia filters permits the incorporation of images, sounds, and audio and video files. Sounds can accompany the majority of the previously mentioned elements in various forms: sound effects, textual locutions, music, etc.



Picture 3: Phone Conversation (Video)

For online courses in foreign language acquisition, optimum sound recordings of audio files exterior to the platform as well as tools for oral interaction by the user, is an especially relevant aspect. Tools facilitating the flow of communication with peers and the teacher are essential for developing oral skills. It is feasible to enrich the platform with a basic tool for audio production and immediate access to the interface wherein the student generates audio materials enabling him/her to share files with fellow users and/or for assessment by the teacher. In addition, video animation with Flash facilitates simulations of real life situations and favors the re-creation of space and familiar environs. Although virtual 3D animation can be introduced and justified, there may be technological limitations faced by some users in this respect.

4. Concluding remarks

It seems reasonable to assume that the design of courses which adhere to EU certification guidelines denoting levels of command can successfully lead to recognition of competency in all of the member states given the promising features available in multimedia and Moodle coupled with the creation of FL preparation online for European language competence for professional purposes. Along these lines, this research actively promotes the online acquisition of foreign languages as convened by the stipulated outlines of minimal competency levels for specific occupations as listed in the European Union Directory.

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