Practice Enterprise for language learning and intercultural communication (PELLIC) – a CLIL course for business English in an international blended learning scenario

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Abstract

The EU-project PELLIC (Practice Enterprise for Language Learning and Intercultural Communication) is a two-year project funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme, Key Activity 2: Languages, 2009-2011. The aim of the project is to make full use of the extraordinary learning potential of practice enterprise methodology for communicative language learning, by supporting international (virtual) business interaction. The Practice Enterprise courses are being treated as blended learning situations, supported via a virtual learning environment (http://www.pellic.com) based on Moodle and enriched with online applications such as the Google Apps collaborative application suite. The target language of the courses is English, the lingua franca of international business. During the piloting phase of the project (Oct.-Dec. 2010), students in four European countries have been made “virtual entrepreneurs”, and have been interacting and trading with each other. This article describes the course scenario, discusses how Moodle has been used and adapted as a pivotal point of the blended learning scenario, and gives a summary of how this affected the teaching in practice during the piloting phase.
The project started with the idea of using practice enterprise methodology – “playing company”, in short – as a special type of CLIL (content and language integrated learning) approach, and embedding it within a task-based learning scenario for communicative business language courses. Students should use and develop their communicative abilities in English within authentic business communication contexts, using their own English as a lingua franca to communicate with international business partners with whom they do not share a common language. They should engage in tasks that are relevant for their future work life, and instead of producing “dry run” business correspondence for the eyes of their teacher only, be given the chance to invest their output with communicative value in a competitive, as well as supportive, business environment. In accordance with Swain’s “output hypothesis”, language learning is most efficient when learners produce the target language as a social activity (“languaging”, cp. Swain 2005:18 and 2006: 6f). The PELLIC students do business as a team, in competition and partnership with other teams, giving each other feedback on their achievements and cross-evaluating each other’s results on an international level. At the same time, students should be given access to supporting activities and resources for autonomous learning and communication support. Learner autonomy is the first of the three most important principles of constructivist learning theory – living up to the other two as well, these activities and resources should be based on complex and authentic material and, where possible, involve the need for collaboration (autonomy, authenticity and collaboration, cf. Rüschoff 1999) – enabling learners to actively shape their own learning process (cp. Rueschoff 2009: 337).

At the same time, the PELLIC course was designed to foster intercultural awareness, and specifically had the goal of making students aware of and familiar with different ways of using their English as a lingua franca, as well as increase their self-confidence in making use of their linguistic abilities. Lingua-franca communication, as it is commonly the case in international business encounters, is subject to the “my English condition” formulated by Kohn (cp. 2011: 80f). Following Kohn's suggestions for lingua-franca oriented language pedagogy, PELLIC learners should be supported in developing not only linguistic means of expression, but also their “communication and community-oriented requirements of performance […]” (Kohn 2011: 80), such as comprehensibility, self-expression, situational appropriateness in different contexts or participation in a
speech-fellowship. To make this possible, ample room should be given in the pedagogic arrangement for individual as well as collaborative reflection on students’ own, as well as their international counterparts’, language use.

The PELLIC Virtual Learning Environment

All this called for (and indeed seemed impossible to achieve without) the support of a comprehensive, robust and easy-to-use online environment, the development and testing of which was a core outcome of the project, along with online learning materials suitable for the course. The following list identifies the core requirements for the PELLIC VLE:

- making available numerous task instructions and supporting documents in a clearly arranged and visually appealing manner
- hosting all supportive learning activities, resources and material produced in the project - sample documents and authentic audiovisual media, pedagogically exploited via different types of focus activities
- providing means for communication and collaboration in different formats (email, VOIP, chat, forums, collaborative documents), as well as a means for teacher exchange
- providing means for implementing and administering different types of assessment questionnaires (student self-assessment and peer assessment)

The LMS Moodle was chosen as the software constituting the backbone for a VLE that fulfils these requirements. Reasons for the choice were Moodle's widespread application¹, its availability free of charge, its status as an open-source development with a lively and productive community, and its extraordinary adaptability. A Moodle platform was subsequently extended and enriched in its possibilities by installing several additional software modules available from the Moodle community, some of which were adapted specifically for pedagogic needs special to the PELLIC scenario. For

¹ the Moodle.org statistics webpage counts almost 54,000 registered installations in 212 countries worldwide, amounting to over 40 million users (cp. Moodle Trust 2011)
reasons of brevity, this article will only briefly highlight in the following how these requirements have been met in designing the PELLIC VLE.

The task of achieving, in Moodle, a clearly arranged course structure is more difficult than it might sound. The PELLIC course is divided into four modules of activity, each of which comprises three to six company tasks. Each task comes with focus activities and resource material for preparation. Furthermore, instructions for each task should be found directly on the course page, with no additional clicks (e.g. pop-up windows) involved. All this, however, would have easily resulted in a very long page full of text, involving the need for excessive scrolling and searching². In order to achieve clear visual structure and keep the length of the course page to a minimum, a special course format

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² a phenomenon that, by other Moodle users, has been aptly named “scroll-of-death”
(“collapsed topics”\(^3\)) has been installed, reducing effectively the length of the course page.

In more recent language course books, great attention is also paid to structuring the content visually, e. g. marking “usage notes” by enclosing them into coloured boxes, or similar. The additional visual information helps learners classify the verbal information they are supposed to process (e.g. as an instruction, clarification, addition, description, etc). This is less than straightforward to achieve on Moodle – the HTMLarea editor allows for standard text formatting (bold, underline, italics, colours), but doesn’t support any kind of systematic visual structuring of material. On the PELLIC VLE, enhanced visual structure for the different types of textual content is provided by especially developed styles templates. They are designed to facilitate student’s recognition of the purpose of different sections of text on the course page, following one of the principles put forth in Mayer’s “Cognitive theory of multimedia learning”: combining information on the “visual/pictorial channel” with information on the “auditory/verbal channel” aids learners in reducing cognitive load (cp. Mayer 2001: 48) and enhances user-friendliness.

As a third measure to keep the course page compact, yet informative, the technical option of hiding sections of text, and displaying them on the page on mouse click, was implemented with the help of the “hiddentext filter”\(^4\) in Moodle. The option of including initially hidden information has been exploited in different focus activity formats, e. g. to give students information on learning objectives and “best practices” within an activity. For the visual style templates used in the PELLIC project, as well as the hiddentext function, a graphical user interface, integrated into Moodle’s HTMLArea editor, has been programmed to allow for easy application and true WYSIWYG\(^5\) editing (see Figure 2). Thus, no knowledge of HTML is necessary to achieve effects such as displayed in Figure 1 (the first part of the module-A topic section). The integration, templates and filters can be installed on other Moodle 1.9 platforms\(^6\). Downloads and instructions will become available at [www.pellic.com](http://www.pellic.com).

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\(^5\) What You See Is What You Get – in this case, it means that the designs, when selected in the HTMLArea editor, are immediately visible and can be checked before clicking on “Save”

\(^6\) Moodle 2.0 includes a new editor (Tiny MCE), so the integrations will not work here; the templates themselves, however, will
For authentic material to be used in supporting learning activities, the PELLIC consortium found a mentor company (West London Business) who provided, for a token fee, material from their own business communications, as well as video material (e.g. interviews with their managers), a business plan and other important documents. These have been pedagogically exploited via numerous “focus activities” that accompany the course tasks, with the purpose of preparing students specifically for task-related linguistic, intercultural, or specifically business difficulties. Moodle’s activity tools were used to implement them – such as the Wiki-activity, useful for small collaborative tasks, or the Quiz-module, used to implement self-evaluating quizzes comprising audiovisual material. A particularly useful format for such quizzes is Moodle’s “Embedded answers (Cloze)” format, as it enables different types of gap-fill activities. A deplorable shortcoming is, however, that Moodle does not come with a graphical user interface for designing this type of questions: gaps have to be encoded manually in a complicated syntax that necessitates a steep learning curve for teachers before they can be put to pedagogic use. To achieve better user-friendliness for PELLIC teachers, an integration
A notable add-on greatly enhancing the communicative as well as the collaborative potential of the VLE is a seamless integration (Single Sign on) between Moodle and Google Apps services. It enables PELLIC users to make use of Google’s powerful commercial suite of online tools, targeted at business users: Google Mail, Docs and Sites (Figure 1 also shows how these services are integrated into the course page). The Google Mail service was used during the piloting as the principal communication facility among PELLIC companies. Each student had a dedicated email address (@pellic.com). The Google Docs service proved useful for more complex collaborative writing tasks, such as compiling a business plan, for which the Moodle Wiki-activity is too limited in its capabilities. With the help of the Google Sites service, students were able to design and put online their company website for everybody to see, without any knowledge of

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7 Moodle-Google (http://code.google.com/p/moodle-google/downloads/list)
HTML. In order to provide means of international communication other than the Google Mail service (e.g. forum, chat, etc.), a special course setup was chosen, which makes use of Moodle’s “metacourse” concept. A metacourse offers the possibility of having several courses linked to it, creating an area in which all students jointly participate – making it possible to have an area for the local company only, as well as an “international area”, holding activities were all company members take part. The metacourse area includes a special section reserved for communication of the PELLIC teachers among each other (via forum), which is not visible to students. It was not possible, at the time of implementation, to integrate VOIP (voice over IP) services directly into the VLE. The pragmatic solution was to use Skype for this function in the pilot courses. Students, most of whom were already familiar with the Skype service, used it to make their sales calls, and recorded their conversations via a free Skype plug-in to submit to the repository. Apart from Skype, the virtual world Second Life was also considered as a promising option by the project team, as it can offer even more life-like means of interaction. Eventually, Second Life was not used in the piloting course due to technical limitations within the piloting institutions, as well as lacking familiarity with the tool by some of the students. The currently ongoing review of the VLE and learning materials will involve a deeper exploration of Second Life’s potential in the PELLIC scenario.
Last but not least, in order to provide a means for student self-assessment as well as peer-assessment, the “feedback” module was installed. Self-assessment questionnaires were developed, comprising opportunities for student reflection on individual learning progress and goals. They contain Can-do statements formulated for each course module, modelled on the statements developed by the “ALTE Can do project” for assessing learners in the CEFR (cp. Council of Europe: 2001).

The following will describe the PELLIC course, as it was developed within the project consortium, and give an outline of one of the course modules, highlighting the part played by the PELLIC VLE. Finally, aspects of the teaching scenario, such as the balance of online and face-to-face teaching in the ELF context will be considered, including an appraisal of student feedback.
The PELLIC course and piloting scenario

The PELLIC course scenario was piloted with 45 students in the field of business oriented continuing education and vocational training, simultaneously\(^8\) in the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany and Spain. These students founded, all in all, eight virtual companies, compiled business plans, created advertising material for their virtual products, and started to exchange correspondence with each other, with the goal of promoting and selling their own products.

The author’s own piloting group consisted of 13 students of a private German business school (Europainstitut Dr. Kramer Reutlingen). They were all in the 2nd year of training in the curriculum “International Business Assistant”, and between 20 and 25 years old. The course was integrated into the local curriculum within the subject “business correspondence”. It was set up in a blended learning format, so that face-to-face teaching complemented the e-learning parts. Face-to-face sessions were scheduled once every week for 90 minutes. At the design-and-planning stage, the PELLIC course was divided by the consortium into four sequential modules of activities, modelled on phases and focal areas in the life of a real company:

A. Starting up the company  
B. Advertising the company  
C. Buying and selling  
D. Exhibitions and trade fairs

Each module was scheduled to take approximately two weeks of teaching time (covered by two sessions each in the author’s piloting course), so that the whole course would stretch over roughly two months. Most of the tasks were designed to be accomplishable autonomously by either students or teams of students, in their own time and without the explicit need for teacher intervention. Module A, for example, included the following tasks:

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\(^8\) “simultaneously”, only in the sense that the course began and finished at the same time (mid-October to mid-December 2010), and the speed of progression was roughly the same; course sessions themselves were not synchronized
Personal profile

Students write or record (audiovisual or audio) a presentation of themselves and broadcast it to an international forum in the metacourse area on the VLE. The presentation is supposed to be appropriate for professional purposes. As supporting material, five video interviews with managers from the PELLIC mentor company have been specifically recorded for the project and integrated into the VLE. They are exploited via online-based focus activities such as quizzes (see Figure 3) to help students build up the linguistic means for engaging in this task.

Developing a business plan

Students are asked to prepare and hold a company meeting, in which they decide on key parameters of their business, jointly draft the core items of a business plan, discuss the drafts, subsequently finalize the document and submit it to their company repository. For the meeting, they are asked to circulate an agenda and record minutes. The PELLIC mentor company has provided a sample business plan, as well as a sample agenda and minutes, which are all pedagogically exploited via online focus activities to prepare students for the different facets of this task. For collaboratively writing the business plan, students are encouraged to use the Google Docs service, which allows for efficient online collaboration. In the author’s course, students used a face-to-face session to distribute responsibilities for the different sections of their business plan among each other, and agreed on an internal deadline. They set up a Google Doc and worked on these sections independently, up to their scheduled meeting. They held their meeting during the next face-to-face session, discussing the drafts of each section and deciding on what needed to be changed and amended. They recorded all changes in the meeting minutes and independently finished their sections in the Google Doc, submitting the finished document to the company repository five days after their meeting.

Email exchange

Students are asked to make contact with one of the members of other companies, which they pick from the “personal profile” forum. Using the email service integrated into the VLE, they send a message, introducing their newly formed company and offering their services. They answer messages they get in an appropriate manner. Focus activities to
prepare students for this task include an activity on the formal aspects of business
emails, as well as polite expressions and phrases appropriate for this particular context.
The contacts students have made are entered into a contact database (Moodle database
activity), which can be used later on in the life of the company for follow-up
communication, e.g. for targeted advertisement and offers.

**Self assessment**

A detailed questionnaire on self-assessment concluded the module, asking students to
reflect on their learning progress, problems and personal goals for the next module.
Furthermore, students evaluated their own proficiency in doing the tasks of the module
with the help of “can-do” statements. Finally, it included a reflection on the group
dynamics of the company team, an evaluation of the interactive quality for the module
tasks, and an estimation of their own contribution for the collaboration. Self-assessment
questionnaires were included at the end of each module. In later modules they also
included items concerning the international interaction.

As outlined here, the first module provides the basic framework of company life. The
company, its name and business plan become established, and the first contacts are
being made with prospective international business partners. The next module focuses
on advertisement, and includes tasks such as researching into advertisement strategies,
designing and broadcasting ads, as well as putting together a company website. In the
third module, companies begin writing formal offers, meet for sales talks and try to close
deals. Finally, in the fourth module, they make travel arrangements and prepare
presentations for a VIP reception at a virtual trade fair in Second Life, or upload and
share video recordings of their presentations to the VLE (see Figure 5).
Figure 5: uploaded video recording of a trade-fair presentation
Appraisal of student feedback and conclusion

One of the main benefits of the PELLIC teaching scenario, as perceived by the author, was the possibility to take class time for informed collaborative discussion and reflection of authentic communication that had taken place, which was often lively and sometimes controversial. As, for example, when the question arose whether something had been written or said had been said in an “appropriate” (polite, transparent) way in a special communicative situation – an offer that had to be declined, or a business partner that had not answered an email for several days, and perhaps needed to be reminded carefully. In general, class-time in the author’s piloting course has been primarily used for:

- reports and reflection on tasks and communications that had been going on during the week,
- preparation and planning for upcoming tasks,
- review and evaluation of outcomes, including language focus activities in class, using input from international correspondence material produced by students, e.g. to highlight intercultural aspects of their interactions

The availability of a virtual space for students and teachers – accessible every time of day from every computer with internet access – made it possible to use class time in such a way, as most task-related work could be done by students at their own discretion, yet in a collaborative manner. The outcomes of tasks, although fairly complex, were mostly encouraging and displayed a high amount of creativity. A surprising feature that may have contributed to this is that most students started to identify with their virtual companies right from the beginning. Student feedback indicates that the collaborative aspect was the most important for students in the author’s piloting group. Here are two bits of feedback from students’ self-assessment questionnaires:

"It’s a whole different experience sending an email in English to a business partner abroad – from just writing a letter at home that only the teacher will ever see." (Peter Hiller, student)

"The project helped me in several ways: working in a team over a longer period, distributing tasks just like in a “real” company, taking responsibility - and also the consequences, if team members haven’t done their “homework"." (Sonja Kemmler, student)
The second comment highlights another important aspect of the practice enterprise method: students could decide for themselves how much support they needed to perform each task. Most students made good use of the focus activities that were available online. Across all course modules, 66% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that “the material presented [was] useful for their own learning process”. However, there were students who very rarely took the opportunity of making use of these activities, and they were those who also had significantly lower-quality task outcomes. According to a teacher at the institute, these were also students that tended to have lower grades in other subjects. This suggests that not all students are always equally well-prepared for full autonomy, as some of them clearly had trouble judging when they should have engaged with available content more deeply. In one of the two companies in the author’s piloting group this created tensions, and it led to repeated debates within their local company group: team members who felt responsible for the quality of a collaborative task outcome had to jump in for correction, and felt that their team member had let them down. Several of them mentioned, as did the student quoted above, that it was an important and beneficial experience to share responsibility in accomplishing tasks, but that they also realized how difficult it can be if team members do not contribute as much or as high quality as needed. This gave rise to fruitful in-class discussions about strategies for coping with such difficulties. The necessity for students, created by the PELLIC scenario, of working together as an efficient team can be seen as a particular strength of this approach, which was made possible by the blended learning format, balancing online and face-to-face teaching, and allowing for efficient use of precious class time. As regards the specific lingua-franca situation, and its pedagogic implications mentioned in the introduction above, the results of the piloting course were also very encouraging. The particular blended-learning balance, as well as the feedback facilities offered by the VLE contributed to a high level of reflexivity and discussion about different situational requirements of use. A feedback questionnaire administered at the end of the course indicated that 80% of the respondents in the author’s piloting group agreed or strongly agreed that the course had “helped them in becoming aware of differences in the way people use their English internationally (e.g. between the different countries)”. 67% agreed or strongly agreed that their “confidence in using [their own] English has increased as a result of the course”. There were few reported technical problems in the author’s piloting course, and all questions could either be
answered through a Moodle course forum or in a face-to-face session. Students suggested, however, that an additional hands-on workshop would make the start easier, making also the less experienced students familiar with the most important tools at the beginning of the course. The workshop is currently being developed as part of the review phase. The PELLIC VLE and the complete module A, including focus activities, can be accessed and tried out at www.pellic.com.
References


