A blended learning concept for practice enterprise courses in an international business setting

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The project PELLIC (Practice Enterprise for Language Learning and Intercultural Communication), on which this article is based, is a two-year project funded by the LifeLongLearning Programme, Key Activity 2: Languages, 2009-2011. It started with the idea of using practice enterprise methodology – “playing company”, in short – and embedding it within a task-based blended learning scenario for business language courses. The PELLIC course was set up to enable students to develop their communicative abilities in English within real business communication contexts, using their own English as a lingua franca to communicate within an international business environment. Instead of asking them to produce “dry run” business correspondence for the eyes of their teacher only, they should be given the chance to invest their output with communicative value. Following 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): 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. In order to build up the level of skill necessary to engage in all these communications, students should be given access to a range of supporting activities and resources for autonomous and collaborative learning. In designing the learning materials, the consortium was lead by the three most important principles of constructivist learning theory: autonomy, authenticity and collaboration (cf. Rüschoff 1999). Learners should be able to access the material and engage in the activities in their own time and at their own discretion. The activities and resources should be based on complex and authentic material and involve a collaborative dimension – enabling learners to actively shape their own learning process (cp. Rueschoff 2009: 337).

The PELLIC course was also designed to foster intercultural awareness, and specifically had the goal of making students aware of and familiar with different ways of using English as a lingua franca, increasing their self-confidence in making use of their linguistic abilities. Lingua-franca communication, a common scenario in international business encounters, is subject to the “my English condition” formulated by Kohn: in a
typical lingua-franca situation, participants “do not propose to use some native speaker standard or a particular non-native speaker ELF variety. [...] Each speaker can only use his or her own individual English, i.e., the version of English they have managed to make their own” (Kohn 2011: 80f) in the creatively constructive process of language acquisition. 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 actual language use.

The PELLIC course and the 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 LMS Moodle was chosen as the backbone for a VLE that fulfils these requirements. Reasons for the choice were Moodle’s widespread application\(^1\), 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 geared to the pedagogic needs in the PELLIC scenario – one of them being a seamless integration of Google Apps\(^2\), so that students could make use of Google’s application suite of business collaboration tools.

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\(^1\) 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)

\(^2\) Moodle-Google (http://code.google.com/p/moodle-google/downloads/list)
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 company:

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

The first module provides the basic framework of company life, where the company, its name and business plan are established, and 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, and putting together a company website. In the third module, companies send formal offers, meet for sales talks and try to close deals. The fourth module focuses on tasks relating to trade fairs, making use of the virtual world Second
Life. Each module was planned 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 individual students or teams of students, in their own time and without the explicit need for teacher intervention. Module A, for example, includes tasks such as the following (Figure 2):

![Figure 2: A PELLIC task on the VLE](image)

For writing their business plan, students are encouraged to use the Google Docs service for efficient online collaboration, distribute responsibilities for the different sections of their business plan, and set up internal deadlines, submitting the finished document to the company repository on the VLE.

A detailed questionnaire on self-assessment concludes each 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, reflected on the group dynamics of the company team, and estimated the value of their own contribution.
**Conclusion**

One of the main benefits of the PELLIC teaching scenario, as perceived by the author during the piloting phase, was the possibility to take class time for informed discussion and reflection on communication that had really taken place. This was often lively and sometimes controversial. As, for example, when the question arose whether something that had been written or said had been said in an “appropriate” way in a particular 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.

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. Face-to-face sessions could be predominantly used for briefings on upcoming tasks, reporting on task progress, and de-briefing. Individual preparation was carried out autonomously by students at their own discretion, yet in a collaborative manner. The outcomes of tasks, although fairly complex, were generally 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 Hille, 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)

Systematic use of the feedback facilities offered by the VLE contributed to a high level of reflexivity and discussion about different situational requirements of language use in lingua-franca situations. 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”. The course and all activities are currently undergoing a review phase, taking into account feedback by students and teachers from the piloting. The PELLIC VLE and the complete module A can be accessed and tried out at [www.pellic.com](http://www.pellic.com).

**References**


