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Developing a cultural syllabus for business language e-learning materials

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Abstract

The increasing emphasis on 'e-learning' in all sectors of education, including vocational and professional domains, offers great potential to provide interactive, up-dateable multimedia materials which allow greater flexibility of access and use. This paper reports on an EU-funded, e-learning project which aims to exploit on-line technology to develop intercultural business and language skills for European managers in the construction industy. It advocates an integrated approach to language and culture training, describing how a 'cultural syllabus' was designed to develop users' understanding of key aspects of European work culture and practices alongside their professional language skills. The resulting matrix syllabus incorporates insights from theoretical frameworks together with factual information and authentic accounts of cross cultural work experiences. It argues that the growing demand for on-line learning materials needs to be matched by great attention to quality of course and materials design so that technology enhances, rather than detracts from, content and pedagogy.

1 Introduction

There is continuing debate about the emergence or existence of a European work culture. Many researchers claim that the similarities in viewpoints, attitudes and approaches in European business are considerable but that diversity still exists (Calori & deWoot, 1994; Randlesome, 1993; Thurley & Wirdenius, 1991). Randlesome, for instance, claims that:

> "…there is no such thing as a single, homogeneous European business culture. Europe contains as many business cultures as it does countries. Although the similarities between the business cultures in Europe are legion, so are the differences." (Randlesome, 1993:xi).

Indeed, some researchers have also questioned the desirability of convergence between work cultures, claiming that European managers may gain a competitive advantage in

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world markets because of their understanding of culturally diverse home (ie European) markets (Tijmistra & Casler, 1995)

Whatever arguments are proposed, there seems to be growing acceptance of the importance of cultural awareness to facilitate cross border business ventures in Europe and to avoid the miscommunications that can result from ignorance of cultural differences (Hill, 1998; Mole, 1996; Johnson & Moran, 1992). Moran suggests that "accidentally offensive behaviour of a potential foreign partner can raise false alarms, sow mistrust and quickly kill off alliances that might otherwise have flourished" (Johnson & Moran, 1992:xi).

The importance of developing intercultural competence alongside linguistic competence is also increasingly being recognised in the business community, particularly when links between lost business opportunities and communication skills are documented (El Kahal, 1998; Jackson, 1995). For instance, Hagen's (1999) research into European business ventures found that:

- Approximately 14% of UK companies lose business due to language and/or cultural barriers.
- Companies with a turnover of less than ECU 10m and fewer than 250 employees are most likely to experience language barriers.
- Linguistic and cultural diversity within Europe is not declining.

Findings such as these[1] help show why the business community see it as becoming increasingly important for companies to learn about and understand not only the language but also the culture and work practices of their European trading partners. More and more European workers are having to communicate across national borders which can frequently mean encountering linguistic and cultural obstacles.

> "An ability to read and understand cultural orientation across a broad spectrum of people and businesses in Europe is the hallmark of a European manager. It is best developed through exposure to different leadership styles, work styles, communication and collaboration styles. This ability forms not only part of the individual's managerial know-how but also part of the organisation's knowledge base." (Tijmistra & Casler, 1995)

Recognition of the need to improve communication skills is reflected in the European Commission's increasing focus on this objective in vocational training programmes.

In my own experiences, working on two EU-funded language and culture training projects,[2] I have observed a growing awareness by business and industry of the need for

1 From the report of the 'Elucidate' study of language use and practice in European companies, *Business Communication across Borders*, (1999) Hagen, S. (ed) Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, London

2 First, an EU-funded ADAPT project, Language, Culture and Business (LCB) based at the University of Luton, and secondly, an EU-funded Leonardo da Vinci project, LANCAM (Languages for Contract Administration and Management in Construction based at De Montfort University, Leicester.

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the communication skills which are required when working in intercultural contexts. The most recent of these two projects, entitled LANCAM (Languages for Contract Administration and Management in Construction), aimed to provide multimedia e-learning resources to develop language skills and cultural awareness for professionals working in the European construction industry.

This paper describes the development of the cultural component of this e-learning project, illustrating how intercultural theory, factual information and authentic accounts of cross cultural work experiences were integrated to create an 'on-line cultural syllabus'.

2 Background to the project

The LANCAM project responded to a recognised need to facilitate the mobility of construction industry professionals within the European Union, by encouraging construction business which crosses national borders. This pilot project was funded within the language stream of the Leonardo Da Vinci training programme of the European Commission and took two years to complete, from 1999 to 2001. De Montfort University, Leicester, was the project contractor working with educational, professional and industrial partners from Denmark, Germany, Ireland and Spain.

The project aimed to help develop the communication skills needed to implement construction project contracts successfully. The inability to operate effectively in markets with different local language, culture and work practices has been seen as a key barrier to the further growth of pan-European construction projects within the single market. This project attempted to address this issue by providing materials and resources to promote the development of vocational language skills and cultural awareness.

Given that this was classed as a pilot project, and the limitations this implies for development and commercialisation, the materials produced were not seen as a stand-alone language skills development course. They were envisaged rather as a set of self-access resources to promote linguistic competence and intercultural awareness, in a structured and integrated way, which could be evaluated and further developed at a later stage.

2.1 Delivery media

A 'hybrid' approach to delivery was adopted, involving a combination of CD ROM and WWW to enable use of a range of 'on-line' and 'off-line' authentic materials and activities. This involved loading the resource-hungry input, such as audio and image files, onto CD ROM while creating access to on-line resources and links through the Web. As advised by Felix (2001), this approach avoids technical problems, such as long download delays and poor quality and unreliable audio and graphics, while also enabling easier editing and updating of files when necessary. Other advantages of a hybrid approach to delivery include more flexible access for users, with greater mobility and reduced cost by not needing to be on-line all the time; unlimited access to 'add-on' resources such as on-line databases, glossaries and websites and the ability to create real-time, task-based communicative activities. Nevertheless, there are also

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disadvantages, particularly regarding the limitations of web-based instructional design using HTML, compared with the sophistication of multi-media authoring tools, for instance to create different task types, provide 'intelligent' feedback and track user activity.

2.2 The materials

The self-access materials are aimed at construction professionals and new graduate employees with an intermediate level of competence in the target language at entry. The target languages are English, Spanish and German. The materials are based around specific stages in the implementation of a construction project and incorporate a range of authentic input. This input was used to produce interactive language tasks as well as activities and information about differences in culture and working practices between countries. Further information is provided in the form of a resource bank containing, for instance, glossaries, sample contracts and pro formas, links to related websites and industry-specific documentation, as shown in Figure 1.

One of the key claims of the project proposal was that the material would be developed from authentic input gathered from various sources within the construction industry. Consequently, the oral input is based on a series of interviews with construction professionals from the project partners' countries (ie Denmark, Ireland, Germany, Spain and the UK), while print-based input incorporates a range of authentic documents including contracts, articles, administrative pro forma and technical drawings.

3 Incorporating culture

Before going any further, it might be best to clarify some terms which are central to this paper. '*Culture*' is being used here in the sense defined by Hofstede as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001:9). The concept of '*work culture*' is seen as incorporating not only this 'social programming' but also the attitudes, values and norms that underpin commercial activities and help shape organisational behaviour in a given society. In this paper 'culture' and 'work culture' are considered primarily at the 'national' level. This is not to dismiss the notion that culture works at other levels, such as 'ethnic'

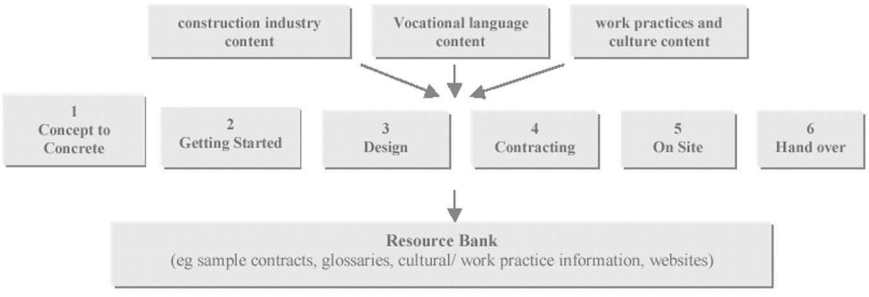


Fig. 1. LANCAM content structure.

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or 'generational' but to reflect the 'inter-national' focus of the EU project which is described here.

It became apparent in gathering the input for the LANCAM materials that there are indeed considerable differences in work practices in construction project management between the target European countries. Furthermore, different ways of working and prioritising activities seemed to result from different values and attitudes which in turn relate to differences in fundamental socio-cultural concepts such as relationships to time, authority and self (Hofstede, 2001; Inkeles & Levinson, 1969; Bond, 1992). Such different cultural perspectives can be reflected in what is seen as appropriate behaviour in the workplace. For instance, differences in views on the role and status of the boss, on who makes decisions or criticisms and how they are made, on what is considered appropriate dress, or use of humour or on attitudes to time-keeping, can result in miscommunications at either linguistic or non-linguistic levels.

An important consideration in developing the materials was how to incorporate this socio-cultural element into the core language learning materials. Earlier experiences producing and delivering business culture training programmes had already raised the issue of potential resistance by some business trainees to what can be seen as 'too much theory and awareness-raising' content and a preference for 'hard facts' and 'practical tips'. From an interculturalist's point of view there is obviously a perennial danger here of ending up with a list of 'do's and don'ts' based on somewhat outdated generalisations which risk reinforcing national or racial stereotypes. However, it can also be argued that there is a place for 'hard facts' in intercultural training materials and that such factual information is an important building block in 'cultural model building', providing an essential link between abstract socio-cultural concepts, people's attitudes and values and the interpretation of their behaviour. As Reed (1992) points out, building up a cultural model by learning and observing as much as possible about that particular cultural group, perhaps from business trips, from reading and from business culture training, can help develop a flexible framework for understanding cultural differences and similarities. This model can then be developed and modified as further information and real experiences are added to it (Figure 2). Obviously, any model will be flawed and cannot be used to predict individuals' behaviour but it can provide a useful reference point, making deviations easier to understand and setting unusual occurrences in context.

So how can such cultural model building be encouraged within a primarily language

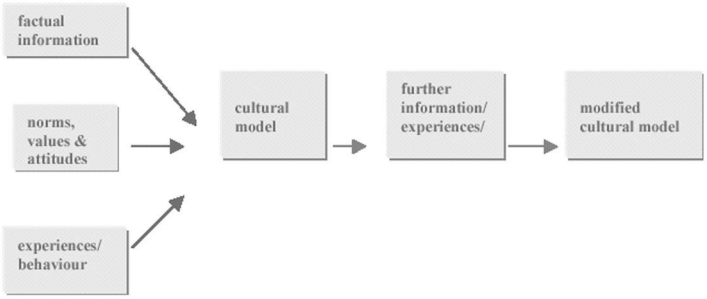


Fig. 2. Cultural model building.

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focused product? The approach adopted in developing the materials has been to help learners consider what are the significant aspects of business culture and work practices that affect day to day work life in their own and the target country; to see how these facts relate to commonly held attitudes and values and see how these are reflected in typical behaviour in the workplace. All of these elements can then be related to underlying socio-cultural concepts and, as described in theoretical frameworks such as Hofstede's (2001) five value dimensions of national cultural difference (ie *high/low power distance, high/low uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, long/short-term orientation and individualism/collectivism*) or in similar frameworks of socio-cultural value orientations such as those proposed by Richard Lewis (1999) or by Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars (2000). The justification for including an element of culture theory in the materials corresponds with the view that people who are introduced to an element of theory in intercultural training are more likely to become 'experts' than those who undergo purely practical training (Bhawuk & Triandis, 1992).

Table 1 illustrates this inter-relationship between facts, attitudes, behaviour and socio-cultural concepts with an example from the construction industry relating to differences in work practices in Germany and the United Kingdom.

Based on such considerations, individuals may wish to modify their 'target cultural model' and consequently their own behaviour and style of communication when working with colleagues in or from the target country. The aim is to show how understanding cultural similarities and differences requires more than a list of stereotypical attributes and behaviour, and is grounded in developing an understanding of the attitudes, values, and concepts which underpin social behaviour in one's own culture as well as the culture of others.

Table 1 *Examples of differences in work practices in the German and UK construction industry*

	Germany	United Kingdom
Fact	• The terms 'architect' and engineer' are legally protected names and their fee scales are fixed by law. Similarly, craftsmen must be registered and qualified.	• There is almost total lack of legislation governing the qualifications of those who undertake the procurement, design and construction of the building works
Behaviour	• Architects and designers can rely on competent craftsmen in a way that is not possible in the UK.	• The construction industry has a reputation for using cowboy' builders and contractors.
	• Little risk-taking and speculation.	• Lots of speculation and risk-taking.
Attitudes and values	• Quality and attention to detail are highly valued.	• Speed and cost control can take priority over quality and attention to detail.
Sociocultural concept	• High uncertainty avoidance	• Low uncertainty avoidance

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4 The 'cultural syllabus'

The question then is how can these different components of 'culture' be gathered and organised into some sort of systematic 'cultural syllabus' which in turn is integrated into the wider structure of the vocational language materials? Figure 3 shows the overall matrix structure which was used to develop the LANCAM materials; consisting of four sections, Construction Project, Work Practices Work Culture and Resources with six units in each section.

There are cultural elements across all four sections, integrated into the language materials, but the core cultural input is in the Work Culture section. The 'Construction Project' section contains the core vocational language materials and the bulk of the communicative activities, covering topics related to the key stages in the development of a construction project. A detailed discussion of these communicative language activities is beyond the scope of this paper[3] but the objective was to adopt an integrated skills approach using as wide a range of activity types as technically feasible. The Work Practices section focuses on differences in work-related practices in the construction industry in the project partner countries, such as quality and safety issues and contracting and procurement processes. The Resources section contains country-specific and EU-wide factual reference material of interest to construction managers.

	Construction Project	Work Practices	Work Culture	Resources
Unit 1	**Overview - Stages in construction project administration & management (CAM)** • Key activities **Key players** • Job descriptions	**Differences in European construction industry** • Regulated v unregulated countries • Priorities- quality, time and cost	**Introduction to work culture** • Working in Europe • Perceptions • Understanding cultural differences • Cultural competence	**Country & industry background** • Background statistics • UK Historical development • European web sites • European comparisons • RIBA Plan of Work • ECBP website
Unit 2	**Key stage: Inception/feasibility** • Client requirements. **Key Players** • The Quantity Surveyor	**Roles and responsibilities** • Design team • Construction team	**Routines** • Work hours • Meals • Punctuality • Deadlines	**Education & training** • Qualifications • Professional bodies • Planning/building permissions
Unit 3	**Key stage: Design** • The design process. **Key players:** • The architect	**Approaches to design** • Traditional v 'fast track' methods	**Relationships** • Authority and status • Forms of address • Formality • Criticism & blame	**Briefing & design specifications** • Cost plan & control • Production drawings • Bill of Quantities
Unit 4	**Key stage:Contracting** •The tendering and procurement process **Key Players:** •The marketing director	**Contracting and procurement** • Differences in procurement methods	**Communication** • communication styles • British v International English	**Procurement/ contract** • Types, methods & documents • Target country - major contractors
Unit 5	**Key stage: On Site** • Site preparation, inspection and meetings **Key Players:** •The project manager	**Quality and safety** • Health &safety • Insurance	**Management** • leadership style • decision-making • problem-solving	**Site legislation and regulations** • Health & safety • Site reports & meeting documents
Unit 6	**Key stage: Hand over** • Defects liability, claims and issuing certificates **Key players:** • The architect	**Hand-over period** • Risk and liability **Future trends in Europe** • Standardisation	**Work ettiquette** • Entertainment & meals • Tipping & gifts • Dress	**Future trends** • Insurance & certification • Industry strengths & weaknesses • Construction markets

Fig. 3. Screenshot of course overview; the matrix syllabusw.htm

3 These and all other activities can be viewed in the LANCAM materials. Access details are given at the end of this paper.

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The Work Culture section covers what Tijmistra and Casler (1995) refer to as "the dynamics of national approaches to management in European countries" (with limited focus in this case on construction industry management in Germany, Spain, Denmark, Ireland and the UK). This section deals with 'soft management issues' (*ibid*, 1995:407) ranging from business routines to management and communication styles and personal values at work. Figure 4 illustrates how the general aim and structure of the culture section is introduced.

The first unit in the Work Culture section aims to sensitise students to the notion of culture and to their perceptions and understanding of their own and other cultures. Each of the following five units is then built round one of five key work culture issues: *business routines, business relationships, business management, business communication and business etiquette*.



Fig. 4. The general aim and structure of the culture section.

Table 2 *Breakdown of work culure content*

Work context	Issues	Sociocultural concepts
business routines	work hours meal times punctuality deadlines	• public v private life • time (linear/multi-active)
business relationships	authority and status forms of address formality socialising	• power distance • face & politeness
business management	meeting style decision-making problem-solving	• individualism v collectivism • femininity v masculinity • high v low uncertainty avoidance(risk management)
business communication	written v oral communication telephoning & emailing British v International English	• high/low context • topic development • indirectness, humour, face
business etiquette	entertainment & meal tipping dress	• politenes • social taboos

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The core learning resource for each of these five units is authentic audio recordings of group interviews with construction industry professionals representing Denmark, Germany, Spain, Ireland and the United Kingdom. A major benefit of using authentic recordings as topic input was that, as well as focusing on developing intercultural awareness, it provided considerable listening comprehension practice. The semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit discussion around the five topics listed above, drawing upon participants' own experiences of cultural similarities and differences in the construction industry workplace. The resulting recordings were then used to extrapolate commonly experienced differences in work behaviour. The aim was not only to illustrate these but to try and encourage a deeper analysis and understanding of the sociocultural concepts underlying such differences in behaviour and perception, as outlined in Table 2.

For instance, Unit Two deals with differences in 'work routines': the discussion in the interview refers to different perceptions of punctuality and work schedules and how these may be related to underlying culturally relative values and attitudes to the concepts of 'time' and 'public v private life/space'. An example of a listening activity from Unit 2 is shown is Figure 5.

The non-linearity of the multimedia configuration means that the materials can be accessed as required by individual users. Consequently, apart from the first unit which is seen as an introductory unit, the Work Culture content is not organised to be used sequentially. Furthermore, the matrix structure was designed to enable users to work either across sections or within one particular section, depending on their particular needs and interests. Hyperlinks between sections and units also provide connections both between topics, and also from topics to supporting factual information in the Resources section. For instance, between *Relationships* in Work Culture Unit 3 and *Roles and Responsibilities* in Work Practices Unit 2 and *Education and Training* in

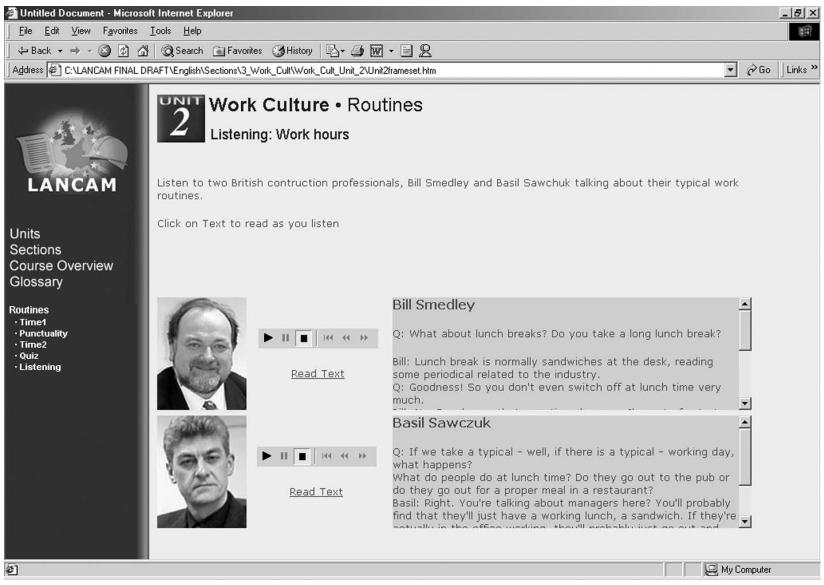


Fig. 5. An example of a listening activity from Unit 2.

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Resources Unit 2. In this way, the Work Culture content is shown as an integral part of the vocational language training materials and the link between 'theory', 'practice' and 'facts' becomes evident.

5 Methodology

As has been well documented (Bennett, 1998; Byram, 1998; Kramsch, 1998, Brislin &Yoshida, 1994), developing understanding of another culture involves the cross-cultural learner in a process of discovery and reflection. The approach taken here therefore introduces learners progressively to important aspects of work culture, encouraging them at each stage to discover more about the target culture and to reflect on similarities and differences with their own culture. The materials described here provide an interactive approach which aims to allow students to build knowledge and understanding of their own and others' values, attitudes and beliefs, in a systematic and multi-dimensional way.

Each unit contains a variety of activity types aimed at promoting cultural awareness, deepening knowledge of culture-specific work practices and developing skills to improve intercultural communication including:

- Self-assessment activities – enabling users to discover and reflect on their own cultural norms.
- Listening comprehension – encouraging language skills development and providing 'real-life' accounts of intercultural experiences for reflection and comparison.
- Presentations – providing graphic and text-based input of key cultural concepts and frameworks.
- Task-based activities – focusing on skills development through a range of interactive tasks on specific culture topics.
- Multiple-choice quizzes – assessing knowledge of variations in work culture norms and practices.
  (adapted from Brislin & Yoshida, 1994)

For instance, the task-based activity illustrated in Figure 7 aims to help trainees analyse cultural differences in organisational hierarchies, building on earlier input on Hofstede's 'high/low power distance' value dimension.

Providing feedback to tasks is fundamental in any teaching and learning situation but is particularly so for self-access multimedia materials. Indeed, computer-based feedback has been shown to be of positive assistance to language learning (van der Linden, 1993;

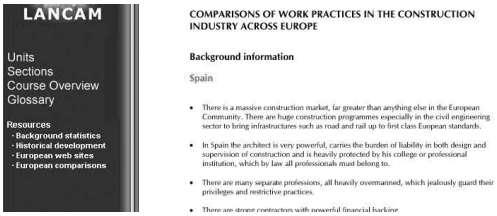


Fig. 6. Comparisons of work practices in the construction industry across Europe.

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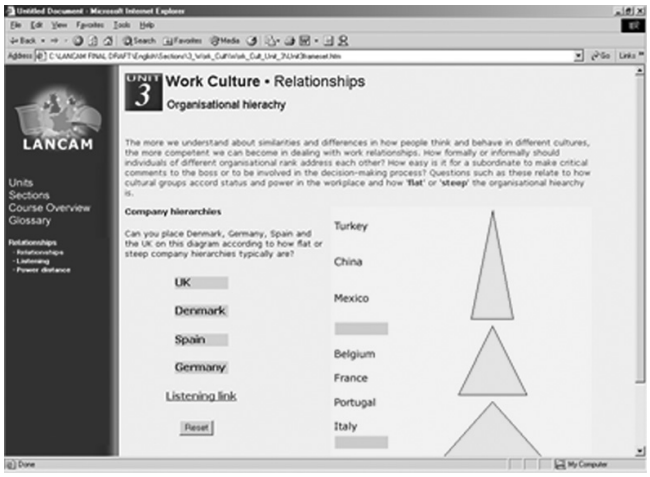


Fig. 7. Work culture relationships.

Nagata, 1993, 1998). The type of feedback on culture-oriented activities varies from simple 'correct/incorrect' or 'tick/cross' responses to detailed explanations. As a major objective of the cultural materials is to encourage reflection and understanding of cultural differences and similarities, as much detailed feedback has been provided as was technically possible. The hyperlinks between topics and sections are also seen as an additional source of related information and input, particularly to the Resources section which contains a variety of links, for instance to on-line glossaries and dictionaries, statistical information and industry or country-specific websites.

The general benefits of computer technology for learning are obvious, including the flexibility of use it offers and the choice it allows users to control the time, pace, place and approach to learning. More specifically, the main advantages of e-learning for culture training are the opportunities it provides to draw together a wide range of authentic, updateable culture-general and culture-specific input, present this attractively in multimedia formats and give rapid, individualised feedback, while at the same time providing interactive links to an almost infinite number of on-line resources.

As some researchers have suggested (Herring, 1996; Kramsch & Andersen, 1999; Warschauer & Kern, 2000), multimedia can offer the possibility of developing the intercultural competence of language learners more readily than a textbook or classroom can. However, Kramsch and Andersen (1999) also warn of the risks of presenting de-contextualised cultural input. It is not enough to present cultural input *ad hoc* or out of context, without enabling learners to analyse the concepts and values underlying cultural phenomena or behaviour.

6 Evaluation

Evaluation is obviously a central concern of any materials development project, including a pilot project such as this. Consequently, evaluation was built into the development process both at interim and final stages.

Project partners carried out an internal evaluation of the prototype materials,

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mid-project, providing valuable feedback which enabled us to modify both technical and pedagogical aspects of the materials, particularly regarding navigation and activities design. Following the end of the project period, the materials have been used and evaluated in various higher education and professional institutions throughout Europe. Unfortunately, shortage of time and resources meant that only the English version has been substantially completed, together with the earlier units of the Spanish and German materials. Nevertheless, these resources are currently being evaluated both by the project partner institutions as well as external bodies. Evaluations to date have been largely positive and suggest there is considerable potential for the further development of the LANCAM materials.

Indeed, the potential to transfer the project outcomes has been taken into account from its inception and ways of modifying the materials for different audiences, in terms of level or content, were considered during the development phase. After the methodology, structural framework, content and delivery have been trialled and evaluated by this pilot project, it is hoped to transfer some aspects of these to other target sectors and indeed interest has already been expressed by the food industry. Consequently, an important consideration in the design and development of the materials was the concept of reusability. With this in mind, a template approach was adopted as far as possible to facilitate reuse of content. The Work Culture component in particular, being the most generic element of the materials, would lend itself to further development in this way and discussions are currently underway to pursue this possibility, with a view ultimately to commercialisation.

7 Conclusion

There is currently a small but growing amount of multimedia material available to develop cultural awareness and communication skills, most of which has at least initially been on CDROM, such as the SELECT project (Brett, 2000) or Das Delta Projekt (Franklin *et al,* 1997), but doubtless increasing economic transnationalisation will lead to a greater need and demand for such training materials and greater use of the Web.

There is little doubt that Europe is changing, economically, socially and politically. Market conditions are becoming increasingly transnational in Europe to compete with North American and Japanese markets. However, in contrast to this process of transnationalisation, social and cultural diversity is likely to remain a dominant feature of European societies. If this diversity is to become a ‘resource’ rather than a disadvantage, cross-cultural competence will become increasingly important for European managers.

> “The tapestry of business cultures in Europe is rich. Managers who operate transnationally need to understand and work within a mosaic of values and practices. They need to be creative, to recognise and adjust to diverse patterns of thought, judgement, perception and behaviour and to be able to work with many different people, members of different 'national' and organisational cultures.” (Tijmistra & Casler, 1995:408)

One obvious way of developing cross-cultural competence is by integrating a 'cultural' component in business language and management training programmes. Furthermore,

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the increasing focus on 'e-learning' in all sectors of education, including vocational and professional, offers great potential to provide interactive, up-dateable multimedia materials which allow greater flexibility of access and use.

The approach described here seeks to develop practically useful resources which incorporate insights from cultural frameworks, together with factual information and authentic accounts of cross cultural work experiences. This approach is based on the belief that we need to take a broad view of developing communication skills, not only by providing well-structured, context-specific language learning materials but also by taking a similarly systematic approach to developing greater understanding of cultural differences in communication and work practices. The increasing awareness of the role of culture in European business communication, together with the impact of information technology on communication and learning, are creating exciting opportunities for developing cultural learning materials on-line.

The LANCAM materials can be accessed at the LANCAM website http://westworld.dmu.ac.uk/lancam). Please contact the author at pmrr1@le.ac.uk for access permission.

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