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Preparing language exams: an online learning system with dictionary and email tandem

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Abstract

We present an on-line learning system for the Italian and German languages especially created to help the people living in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen prepare the so-called bilingual proficiency exam. In the first part of the paper we present the peculiar political, social and linguistic situation of the Province and describe the bilingual proficiency exam. After having clarified the background in which our learning system originates, we will concentrate on the system itself presenting the different parts it consists of. Section 4 will describe the system function, and section 5 will make some final comments and highlight future prospects.

1 The Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen

The Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen, also called South Tyrol, is a bilingual region situated in Nothern Italy, at the border with Austria. Two main linguistic groups and a third small minority group live in this region: the German-speakers (about 287,500 – 68% of the local population), the Italian-speakers (about 27.5%), and the Ladin-speakers (about 4.5%). The total resident population amounts to about 462,000 people.

Though Southern Tyrol is historically a German-speaking region, it was annexed to Italy with the 1919 Treaty of St. Germain at the end of the First World War along with the confining overwhelmingly Italian province Trentino. At that time 86% of the population was German-speaking, and only a minority of 3% was Italian-speaking, but the violent fascist Italianization of the 1930s led to a considerable increment of the Italian-speaking population, which reached its peak, 34.3%, in the early 1960s.

The fascist policy established that Italian was to be the only official language in all public offices and repressed all use of the German language. The result was that all officials not able to master Italian were dismissed and replaced.

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After the Second World War, the Degasperi-Gruber Agreement guaranteed the equality of rights between the German- and Italian-speaking inhabitants and in 1948 an Autonomy Statute was signed. Nevertheless this statute, which joined the two Provinces of Bolzano/Bozen and Trentino, proved to be unfair towards the German-speaking population. The fact that Italian was the only official language hindered the progress of the German-speaking population in achieving parity at a political and administrative level. This situation led to social tensions and disorders, until the New Statute of Autonomy came into force in 1972.

The Statute established the so-called '*package*' of laws (*Südtirol-Paket*) comprising measures to ensure the equal rights of the Italian and German inhabitants of South Tyrol.

One of these measures is the proportional system (*Proporz*), that guarantees a linguistic proportional representation in public administration. Another one is that public officials must use the mother tongue of any person with whom they are dealing. To uphold this principle, all employees in the public services in the province have to pass a compulsory examination, the so-called bilingual proficiency exam, to prove communication abilities in both languages (see Section 2). Since this exam opens the way to all public offices and responsible positions, it is considered very important by the local population and everyone sits for it. It must be said, though, that the term 'bilingual' is used in a very wide sense and does not imply a mother tongue knowledge of both languages, which rarely happens. Unfortunately, since the actual Statute and the proportional system rest on a strict separation of the two language groups, people do not normally grow up bilingual and contact between the German- and the Italian-speaking people is not encouraged by local government. Italian- and German-speakers go to different schools, sports clubs, youth clubs, churches. For this reason, absurd as it may seem in a bilingual region like South Tyrol, there is a strong need to improve and to help social contact between the two main linguistic groups in order to reach authentic bilingualism.

2 The bilingual proficiency exam

Every person employed in public administration and service, of whatever sort and whatever rank, has to pass the bilingual proficiency exam to prove competence in both German and Italian language. The exam is divided into four levels of difficulty, from level D, the easiest one for unskilled workers, to level A, the most difficult one required for the highest grades. The actual bilingual proficiency exam has been in force since 1998. It is divided into a written and an oral part (the D-level has only an oral part).

The written part consists of a special kind of reading comprehension. The candidate has to read a short authentic text in one language and to answer six questions following the text in the other language. Both Italian and German language are tested in production and reception. The texts given at the exam are chosen from 200 German and 200 Italian texts for the A/B level, and 200 German and 200 Italian texts for the C level. The oral part consists of a conversation between the candidate and the board of examiners on general themes such as personal life, hobbies and interests, recent events. All exam texts are collected and published in book form and available in every bookshop. Also the basic vocabulary required, amounting, for the highest level, to about 3,000 words for each language, is collected in two small especially developed learner's dictionaries (Abel & Cavagnoli, 1998a,b). Since all material used in the examination is published

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along with an explanation of the exam procedure and criteria of evaluation (Putzer, Cavagnoli & Schroen, 1998a,b), it is possible for candidates to prepare for the exam in a focused manner. In addition, language schools or public services organise special courses in preparation for the exam.

Nevertheless, recent surveys show that only 20% of the South Tyrolean population profit from the learning material and courses, whereas the majority of the candidates try the exam without preparing for it. On account of this data, the European Academy of Bolzano/Bozen has been supported by local government to develop an on-line learning system for self-preparation for the bilingual proficiency exam with the aim of reaching a larger part of the population, above all students and young people. There is hope that the new learning system, by developing the old material into an integrated and more efficient system, complete with a linked dictionary and an e-mail tandem, will render the preparation for the exam more efficient and more attractive, especially for the younger generation.

3 The learning system

ELDIT II is an on-line learning system especially conceived to help students prepare for the bilingual proficiency exam. It contains all the material required for preparation for the exam and offers a tandem system which should enable students from the two language groups to get in touch and help each other. The system is made up of five main parts: collection of texts, dictionary, advertisements, user profile and e-mail program. In addition, there is a help feature and useful links to other related sites. Figure 1 gives an overview of this system.

3.1 Collection of texts

This module contains all the texts of the books used for the bilingual proficiency exam grouped together according to levels and languages (A/B Italian, A/B German; C Italian and C German). Each text is followed by its six questions along with special editable textfields provided for the answers and one more editable field for notes and comments. The system offers also different possibilities of ordering and accessing the texts, according to the users' wishes and needs.

3.2 Dictionary

ELDIT II includes the dictionary ELDIT that was the starting point of the whole project,

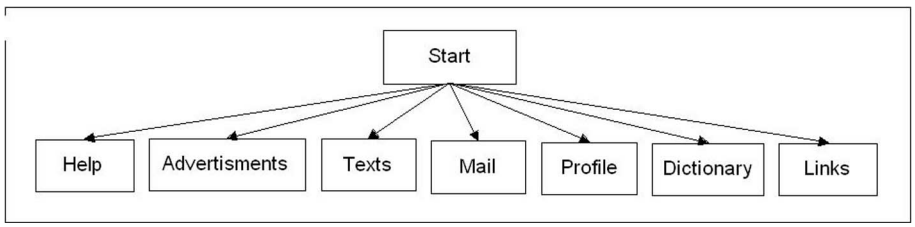


Fig. 1. The system's modules.

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and is still being developed. ELDIT is a semibilingual electronic learners' dictionary for the Italian and German languages, consisting of about 3000 entry words for each language. It is a bidirectional dictionary, addressed both to Italian and German students from beginners to intermediate level (Abel & Weber, 2000). Each entry offers a wide range of information, stored in different modules: one or more definitions together with examples and translations, syntagmatic relations (free combinations, collocations, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, fixed phrases), paradigmatic relations (lexical fields), word families, images, remarks, grammar and pronunciation.

ELDIT is an innovative dictionary which leads the way to a new generation of dictionaries:

- It is new from a typological point of view, since it combines monolingual and bilingual dictionaries and is a combination of different kinds of dictionaries (dictionary of synonyms and antonyms, dictionary of word families, pictorial dictionary, pronunciation dictionary and dictionary of proverbs and idiomatic expressions), all in one;
- It is a pedagogical dictionary which employs hypermedia technology to help students mentally organise the lexical material they are learning in their second language;
- It has an original program design which allows the organisation of the various lexical information in a simple and easily accessible way.

Furthermore, the system includes a user model able to customise and adapt this huge amount of data to the user's personal needs and preferences (Gamper & Knapp, 2001a).

3.3 Advertisements

The system offers a database containing advertisements from people interested in preparing for the exam through our learning program. Each advertisement consists of a number of indications (personal data such as name, mother tongue, exam level) and a personal text (the advertisers can write when they intend to do the exam, how intensively they want to work...). The system orders these advertisements according to different criteria – above all according to exam level and language – so that the users can filter only the advertisements they are interested in. To access the tandem program the potential user can:

- put in an advertisement and wait to be contacted;
- look in the advertisement database and contact one or more partners. In return, the partner can accept the partnership, reject it, or ignore it.

3.4 The user's profile

The user's profile is a kind of personal diary where all the information concerning the single user is stored. There the user can find:

- all his/her personal data and the advertisement he/she put in;
- a list of her/his partners;

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- all the texts he/she has studied and answered (divided into *only stored*, *sent and not corrected* or *sent and corrected* texts);
- different kinds of statistics about his/her work and tandem work (number of texts done, number of corrected texts, frequency and speediness of the partners' answers, etc.).

3.5 The e-mail program

The language learning system includes a simple e-mail program that handles and orders all the correspondence between the partners. Two kinds of mails are possible:

- Short messages no longer than 300 characters, where the partners can exchange brief notes, and
- Working texts, which are grouped into two main categories with regard to the user's work. On the one hand, there are the texts the user works on as a student by answering the questions; on the other, there are the texts the user works on as a teacher by correcting the answers.

Currently, the e-mail program's interface is divided into *inbox, outbox* and *drafts*. In the *inbox* the user can find: short messages from his/her partner(s), incoming partners' texts to correct; incoming corrections from his/her partner(s). In the *outbox* are the short messages sent to the partner(s), the texts sent to the partner(s) for correction, the text of the partner(s) corrected and sent back. In *drafts* are stored the texts that the user has studied but not sent for correction yet.

4 How to use ELDIT II

On the starting page the user can find general information about the system, along with information about the bilingual proficiency exam and about e-mail tandem learning. The first time a user wants to access the program, s/he has to register. The administrator provides a password which allows him/her to log in. Once the user has logged in, s/he can access the different modules and decide whether to work on the text on his/her own, or

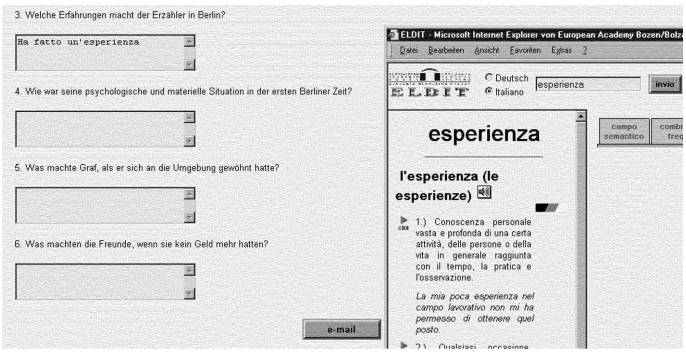


Fig. 2. Two system's interfaces. (a) some questions following text. (b) a dictionary entry.

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to find a partner. In this second case, the user can look at the advertisement database to see if there is a suitable partner, or else place a new advertisement. Once the contact has been established, the e-tandem learning can start. Both students have agreed on level, work pace, and date fixed for the exam.

The student, for example an Italian mother tongue student level C, begins his/her preparation by choosing a text from the Italian texts level C. S/he reads the text and answers the questions in German. If the student has problems with vocabulary, s/he can consult the linked dictionary. When finished, the student can choose to store the text without sending it or to send it straight away to his/her German mother tongue partner. The latter reads the answers, corrects them and sends the correction back, with some comments and suggestions. At the same time s/he can send his/her own text with the Italian answers for correction to the Italian mother tongue partner. Both students can always have an update of their work and progress by consulting their user's profile.

5 A collaborative web based language learning program

ELDIT II can be defined as a collaborative web-based language learning program, since it combines an e-mail tandem learning program with a computer assisted language learning (CALL) program.

Tandem learning is defined as an open form of language acquisition where two people of a different mother tongue work together in order to know better the partner and his/her culture and to help each other to improve their language abilities and skills. It is based on two fundamental principles: autonomy and reciprocity. According to the former, "all tandem partners are responsible for their own learning: they alone determine what they want to learn and when..."; according to the latter, "successful learning in tandem is based on the reciprocal dependence and mutual support of the partners; both partners should contribute equally to their work together and benefit to the same extent". (Brammerts, 2001 a). Usually, e-mail tandem language learning programs are relatively free: they offer the possibility of contacting people from other countries in order to increase their knowledge of the partner's language and intercultural competence by working together in pairs. The goals are not set in advance and it is up to the partners themselves to mutually fix their own objectives (see, for example, The eTandem Europa project, http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/learning/ejs-eng.html). Nevertheless, there are other forms of tandem learning programs which are aimed at precise goals, such as a project for the preparation of the TestDaF (the German equivalent to the American TOEFL) coordinated by the University of Leipzig, Germany (http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/learning/daad-testdaf-deu.html). Our program is still a much more closely defined and structured form of e-tandem learning system, since not only is the aim clearly specified (preparation for the bilingual proficiency exam), but also the learning activities are already organised according to the demands of the exam (reading comprehension).

ELDIT II is also a CALL program that can be used individually. Each user can access the system and study the texts on their own, answering the questions and exploiting the linked dictionary free of charge. Unfortunately, at the moment the program does not provide an authomatic system of evaluation and assessment, which means that the answers

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cannot be corrected without the help of the partner. In the future an on-line assistant could be provided.

5 Conclusions

In this paper we presented an on-line learning program for preparing for the bilingual proficiency exam. This program includes all the paper material already developed and available for this purpose transformed and enriched by its new electronic form. The original individual books are thus integrated into a single system whose modules – in particular the texts and the dictionary – are strictly interconnected. The learning platform complete with its e-mail tandem offers the possibility of preparing for the exam in a new, interactive, more efficient and stimulating way.

At the moment the dictionary includes a user model, that monitors the user at work by counting the number of log-ins as well as the number of checked words and of mouse clicks. This user model will be enlarged for the whole system in order to research how the site is used and to adapt content and presentation of the information to the individual user. Thanks to this user model, ELDIT II in future could be implemented into an adaptive learning program by adapting the presentation of information to individual users and by developing a guided system for vocabulary acquisition. (See Gamper & Knapp, 2001a.)

The system could also be adapted for other goals simply by replacing the actual texts with other texts taken, for instance, from magazines or newspapers, and by supplying them with specific exercises. An extensive evaluation of the system remains a task for the future.

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