

PRMACTL

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(Hypothesis on Transversal Learning Method)

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The PrMaCLT DELTA-model

Starting point

The purpose of any language course is to bring the learner from state **IP**, *his initial proficiency* to state **TP**, the *targeted proficiency*. In reality, learners arrive at state **RP**, which is the *realised proficiency*. The mismatch to focus upon is not the one described above, but the difference, the delta factor, between state TP and RP. In other words, how can we make sure that TP and RP are as close as possible? Or: that Δ (TP,RP) is as small as possible?

In order to reduce the Delta between TP and RP we suggest focusing on in a first step

- **relevant learner characteristics (RLC)** in terms of background, level, culture, mother tongue, motivation, learning style, availability, time management, ...
- **targeted language use (TLU)** for the TP, and this in terms of 'CAN DO' statements. The advantage of these statements is that anyone familiar with the working environment will be able to formulate them; no specific linguistic-didactic terminology is needed.

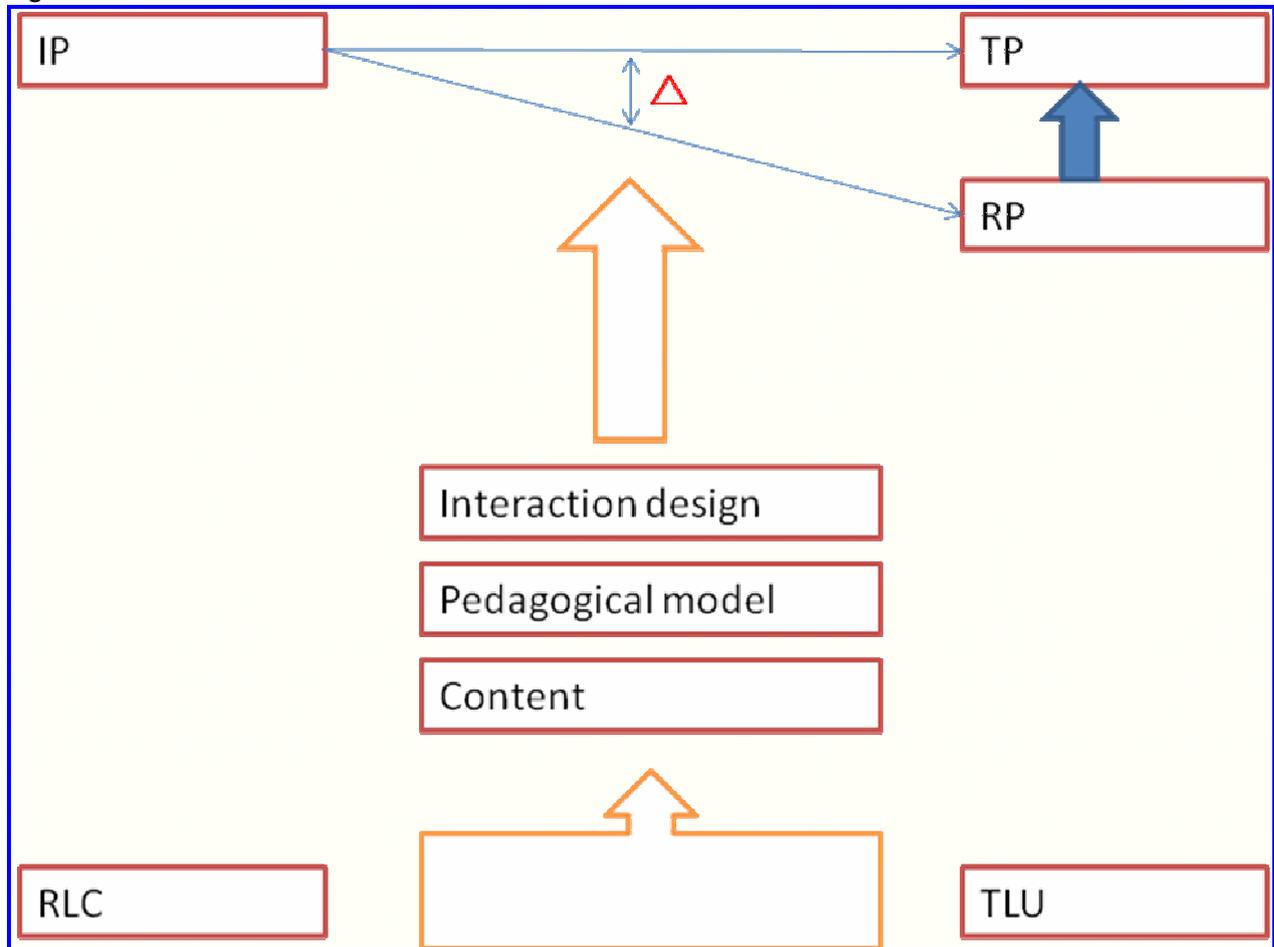
The relevant learner characteristics (RLC) and targeted language use (TLU) form the basis for defining the most appropriate and effective (a) content, (b) pedagogical model and (c) interaction design.

In a second step the mentioned components must be developed to match specifically the gap between RLC and TLU

In this paper we focus mainly on the first step, as we are interested in defining first the needs of the learner or customer of a language course. These needs are the ones that will allow us to decide on the most fitting choice for the contents, the pedagogical model and interaction design to apply on a transversal way, examples of which are pulled out from the studied cases and will be further illustrated in the testing phase.

We assume that the second step can be defined and developed by any qualified language course organiser; however we have aggregated in our hypothesis all those transversal aspects that we consider essential for the adequate development of the course.

Fig. 1. The Delta model



Procedure and application

The PRMACLT-partnership has elaborated several hypotheses to elicit the relevant learner characteristics (RLC) and the targeted language use (TLU). They focus learners of a foreign language rather than a second language.

RLC: RELEVANT LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS

The following six hypotheses need to be validated with learners. They can be either:

- A. Learners in schools or organisations with a public mandate (i.e. secondary schools, universities etc.)
- B. Learners of made-to-measure courses (i.e. for a certain company)
- C. Individual learners of a general semester-long courses, trimester-long courses, conversation training, immersion courses etc.

If the group of learners is too big the teacher and other stakeholders can aggregate the opinions of different learners and can validate the hypothesis on their behalf.

HYPOTHESIS RLC1: The mother tongue of the learner has an impact on the design of the language course.

The cases analysed in the PrMaCLT project and the experience of the organisations involved in the project show that the success of a student in a foreign language depends directly on his/ her mother tongue, as well as the method used to learn the mother tongue.

Example 1: Students in Flanders learn generally their mother tongue in an explicit way. This means they learn about the language structure, they have some knowledge of a meta-language, registers and styles. In Chile students learn generally their mother tongue in an implicit way. There is no focus on language structures or basic components and functions.

Example 2: Italian native speakers have an advantage when learning new vocabulary in French due to the similarity of the vocabulary based on the Latin root of both languages. Disregarding the mother tongue of the learner as an element to take into account in the design of the course may lead to unsuccessful results (heterogeneous group, lack of understanding, ...).

HYPOTHESIS RLC2: Having initial target language knowledge has an influence on the success of the language course.

Previous knowledge of the target language, even when this may be obtained in a passive, indirect or informal way, is a valuable asset for the learner.

Efforts are currently put on the promotion of the self-assessment of language skills by the own learners (see for instance the ELP project, on the promotion of the European Language passport), in order to strengthen the value of informal knowledge of the language.

The PrMaCLT project has confirmed in its initial study that skills developed in this way (visual recognition of words-in particular for non-occidental characters-, easy reproduction of the target language sounds, understanding of basic sentences) have an important impact in the acquisition of new skills in the target language.

Example 1: Students with an Arabic migration background (2nd or 3rd generation) might be able to understand some Arabic words, even if they cannot write it. If they decide to learn Arabic as target language, they may focus particularly on the missing skills, writing for instance.

Example 2: Tourists having spent frequent holidays in another country have been exposed to the language of the country of destination for daily activities (menu cards, shop labels, native people conversations). This factor proves useful not only to face the learning of the country of destination language, but also to contextualise situations for the use of this targeted language, therefore making the learning process easier to achieve.

HYPOTHESIS RLC3: Motivation is an important factor that influences the success of the language course.

Motivation has arisen in the analysed cases as a factor of success. In some cases, it is the lack of motivation, what has been found in the evaluation of the courses and especially in the drop-outs, as an element of failure.

Motivation is presented frequently together with the fact that the learning of the target language is a key for a higher objective of the learner. In particular, getting the accreditation of the obtained level as a platform to access a professional target or civil status may become an extra motivation for the success of the learner.

Example 1: Learners who pass the exam for a certain language level will get promoted at work. The motivation to pass this exam can be extrinsic, meaning a third person (i.e. husband/wife) encourages them to do so.

Example 2: Polish nurses who reach a certain level in the target language can get access to a job in Sweden. The motivation to do so can be intrinsic, meaning that it is your personal choice and wish to do so.

Example 3: Learners who pass an exam on A2-CEFR-level in Dutch as a foreign language get a diploma (inburgeringsdiploma) that is needed for their naturalization. These cases hint that providing in the design of the course factors enhancing the motivation of the learners is essential for the optimal result.

HYPOTHESIS RLC4: Learning styles of the students should be taken into consideration.

Perhaps this hypothesis is the most challenging one to implement for the language trainer provider, and possibly one of the hypothesis that will need more discussion in the testing phase. What looks clear from the analysed cases is that it is very frequent to face the situation where the funding agent for the course (whether public mandate, private sponsor, or any other setting) defines the boundaries of the course in a way that allows little room for adapting new styles, i.e. the specification of the course normally defines whether the course is in the classroom, blended or e-learning; the resources to be deployed; and the orientation to the time to be devoted to the language skills targeted.

Only in few cases the group of learners was consulted on their expectations and preferences at the time to design the courses.

Example 1: Young students prefer to do part of their target language pronunciation training online and alone then doing all the activities in group.

Example 2: The learner found some of the topics used for the classes too general and little attractive regarding the subject of their actual interest. This is often the case in little homogeneous groups.

HYPOTHESIS RLC5: The existing relationships between the learners (like respect for identity, self-esteem) should be taken into consideration when designing a language course.

In addition to the preferences about the language learning style and directly related with it, it is important to pay attention not only to personal aspects, but also to group related aspects. In particular, when a certain bond already exist among the learners, taking this into account for the design of the course may be crucial to optimize the success, or reversely to avoid conflict situation.

Example 1: Some of the learners have already taken previous levels of the course jointly, and have worked together in the preparation of certain tasks. This is a source of self confidence to endeavour other different tasks, which might result to more challenging tasks: speaking in front of an audience, express friendship feelings in a letter.

Example 2: The company organizes an English course for its employees. The employees come from different departments: the director, the HRM-manager and administrative staff. This might lead to uncomfortable situations: the employees don't want to lose face in front of somebody who has to decide on a potential job promotion in the near future.

TLU: TARGET LANGUAGE USE

There are two different settings:

- A) The course is designed with a general purpose of language training.
- B) The course is designed with a specific purpose of language training.

This hypothesis should be validated by the person or institution paying for the course, which could be:

- a) A public administration
- b) An employer of a company
- c) An individual student

A) GENERAL LANGUAGE COURSES

In order not create false expectations it is important that the learner knows what he will learn during the language course. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has become the basis for the mutual recognition of language qualification throughout Europe. It facilitates a clear definition of teaching and learning objectives and methods and provides the necessary tools for assessment of proficiency. It is therefore recommend linking the final level of a language course to the can-do-statements.

HYPOTHESIS TLU1GL: Is it advisable to describe the final output/level in terms of can-do-statements (linking them to the CEFR¹).

Example 1: A language user at A1 level:

- *Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type.*
- *Can introduce him/her and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has.*
- *Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.*

Example 2: A language user at A2 level:

- *Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography and employment).*
- *Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters.*
- *Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.*

¹ For an overview on the Can-Do-Statements of the CEFR please go to: <http://cefr.linguapolis.be>

HYPOTHESIS TLU2GL: Local or national elements can influence the language course.

Learning doesn't happen in isolation. Learners are influenced by their own background and reflect in an obvious or subconscious way their regional and national origin, traditions and values. This influences the choices when and which languages are learnt.

Example: Regional governments in Spain with border regions in Portugal want to promote exchanges in multiple policies. Therefore, they promote Portuguese as a foreign language in formal education schemes.

HYPOTHESIS TLU3GL: Intercultural competence helps optimising the learning of a foreign language. This effect is even stronger when the learner has an understanding of the targeted culture(s) speaking the target language. Including intercultural learning in a foreign language learning course may help optimising the results.

Psychological aspects have proved to be key in the evaluation of some of the cases studied in the PrMaCLT project. Assumptions, prejudices or neglects on cultural aspects when demanding a language training course can easily lead to dissatisfaction.

Example: A teacher of a foreign language coming from a cultural background different than that of country where the target foreign language is spoken, may be rejected for a language training course due to the assumption that his/ her qualifications cannot be those of a native, even when s/he has been born and educated in that foreign language as mother tongue and is qualified for the job.

B) SPECIFIC LANGUAGE COURSES

Learners of specific language courses learn a language most of the time for professional reasons: They want to negotiate with a foreign client over the phone, to work as a non-native speaker at a reception desk and being able to help customers, deal with foreign customers doing business in his/her own country etc.

In order to guarantee that the learner will optimally profit from a course it is important that he/she knows beforehand which topics and speech acts are dealt with in the course. The can be formulate in simple "can-do-statements" and the first approach will be the same one that for general purposes courses.

HYPOTHESIS TLU1SL: Is it advisable to describe the final output/level in terms of can-do-statements.

Example 1: After the course, the student can do the following tasks in French:

Speaking skills

- *Can receive and welcome customers*
- *Can understand and answer to customers questions*
- *Can refer to the appropriate department*
- *Can make an appointment with a customer*
- *Can react friendly in difficult or sensitive situations*
- *Can answer phone calls*
- *Can deal with numbers and data*

Example 2: After the course, the student can do the following in English:

Writing skills

- *Can write clear, structured and concise letters and emails that all readers can understand, even when dealing with complex messages;*
- *Can draft letters or mails in a clear and fluent style*
- *Can communicate in a friendly and professional style*

HYPOTHESIS TLU2SL: Local or national elements can influence the course.

Local or national elements do not only influence general purpose courses but also specific ones, in particular related to industry and trade.

Example: Participants growing up on the sea-side might have an advantage in understanding terminology related to the maritime industry established closed to the venue.

HYPOTHESIS TLU3SL: Complementary abilities to the use of the language are key aspects for specific language purpose courses.

Specific purpose courses are particularly influenced by other complementary abilities. The cases belonging to this category studied in the PrMaCLT project evidenced that their sponsor's expectations went beyond the acquisition of the knowledge of the language and the general abilities of speaking, understanding and writing the language. Basically, the purpose was of a higher level: to increase the sales of the company, to optimise the marketing strategy via presentations in other markets, and other reasons of similar nature.

The evaluation of the success of this kind of courses is often made with the inclusion of other external indicators not necessarily related to the actual learning of the language, but also to the effects that the use of the language has produced.

Example: A company sponsoring a Chinese language course for the board of Directors is satisfied with the outcome because after the course they have intensified trade with China. The design has been made in such a way that not only language abilities have been practiced, but also: communication skills, cultural behaviours and negotiation skills.

HYPOTHESIS TLU4SL: Vocabulary used in Specific Purpose Language courses should be adapted to local usage.

When approaching a specific purpose language course, terminology (semantics) is often a key aspect to avoid failure or expectations.

Even when words used in different countries/ regions with the same language may be coincident, the meaning of them can be different or their use may cause different interpretations. In extreme cases, an inappropriate use of the vocabulary in a specific local context may lead to dissatisfaction of the learner and, in turn, of the sponsor of the course. In the analysis of the study cases, different examples have been mentioned of such risks like the use of Spanish spoken in Spain in Latinamerican local contexts (or reversely) or the use of Dutch spoken in the Netherlands in Flemish local contexts (and reversely).

TRANSVERSAL HYPOTHESIS FOR ADEQUATE COURSE DEVELOPMENT

This section does not intend to be exhaustive, since it would be impossible to make statements or formulate hypothesis to the full range of situations that we may face in different training settings, surrounding circumstances and target groups of learners/trainers.

Our approach is rather straightforward and the Delta model suggests that the first step is to measure the gap to be filled with the language course between the Relevant Learner's Characteristics and the Target Language Use. Therefore our main essential transversal hypothesis is summarised as follows:

HYPOTHESIS TH1: The success of a language training course depends directly on the effort put by the course sponsor in specifying his expectations and needs and the possibility of measuring the relevant characteristics of the group of learners.

The analysis of the PrMaCLT cases has shown that the level of satisfaction of the different parties is very high whenever that an initial advising session between language training course provider and language course sponsor/ client is carried out. On the other side, the few cases of dissatisfaction (for instance learners' drop-outs) relate to unfulfilled expectations of the course.

Example: A language learner enrolls on a language training course without knowing the contents. S/he realises that the topics chosen as basis for the classes do not adapt to her/ his interests, as they are too general and not so practical for her/ his intended use. The company paying for the course just demanded a general language training course to the language provider, without asking itself about the interest of the potential learners.

The following hypotheses concern directly the different elements of the design of a language course from a transversal perspective.

Content

HYPOTHESIS TH1C: The content of the course should be structured according to the level of competences sought. It is advisable to break the design of the contents down to a level of specification on: vocabulary, morphosyntax, syntax, speech, complementary skills and behavioural practice.

The analysed cases in the PrMaCLT project indicate that a close relationship exists between the motivation to take the course and an immediate specific practical purpose. The hypothesis 3 above indicates also a direct influence of the learner's motivation of the success of the course:

Example: An unemployed person is taking a language course with the expectation of obtaining a qualification to find a job in a particular sector (for instance, tourism). S/he will deeply appreciate to count on contents including vocabulary specifically targeting that sector, and related complementary skills, like communication and public relation ones.

Pedagogical model

HYPOTHESIS TH1PM: The pedagogical model should be adapted to the competence gap between the RLC and TLU assessed before the language course design. The adaptation should be structured according to three main axes: optimal instruction model, optimal learning model and optimal evaluation model.

The Delta model requires here a number of axes for decision making on the side of the course developer. The expertise of the language course developer should be applied to the competence gap previously detected. The following questions must be answered:

1. Which is the most optimal instruction model for the course? (*i.e. autonomous / coached, use of media and technology etc.*)
2. Which is the most optimal learning model for the course (*i.e. individual / collaborative, explicit-analytical vs. implicit-global etc.*)
3. Which is the most optimal evaluation model? (*i.e. self-, peer-, co-evaluation*)

Example: A company is interested in buying a foreign language course for the workers of his Commercial Department. The time constraints and frequent travels of the target group detected in an assessment session between the language trainer provider and the Direction of the company result in an autonomous ICT solution accessible from the user's laptop with individual distance coaching.

Interaction design

The Delta model requires to specify the best possible architecture for the learning environment, and to define the possible role of technology. It provides us with an insight on the interaction between actors (learner, teacher, co-learner, parents, general manager) and with content.

HYPOTHESIS TH1ID: The interaction design of the course should make use of all the circumstantial factors (internal and external) that help optimising the gap between RLC and TLU.

Example: A secondary school providing foreign language training purpose the students to create a wiki, or a group in a social network to exchange messages in the target language. The students maximise the language learning at the time they are enjoying other communication skills.

ANNEX

CEFR-levels (can-do statements) <http://cefr.linguapolis.be>

| CEFR levels | Description |
|-------------|---|
| A1 | Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. |
| A2 | Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. |
| B1 | Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. |
| B2 | Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. |
| C1 | Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices. |
| C2 | Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in the most complex situations. |