

INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING: THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN PROJECT QULL

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Abstract

In our day and age, collaborative work is of the utmost importance for the development of research projects as well as the establishment of solid networks in a myriad of knowledge areas. It was in this context that the European project QuLL – Quality in Language Learning – saw its first light. Written and coordinated by Pixel-Italy in cooperation with the project applicant and scientific coordinator, the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (Portugal), it is funded by the Erasmus+ programme, KA2 – Strategic Partnerships for Digital Education Readiness. The partner institutions in the project are as follows: Vilnius University, Faculty of Philology, (Lithuania); Cuza University of Iași, Department of Language Learning, (Romania); University of Bologna (Italy); Károli Gáspár University (Hungary); and Universidad de Cordoba (Spain). The first intellectual output (IO) of our international project was achieved, that is the collection of online open educational resources, which enabled us already to put an open-access database together in 18 European languages. This IO followed a collaborative approach, through the interaction among the partners, but also through their multilingual and multicultural teams that oversaw the assessment and validation of these resources by means of case studies, the analysis of the type of resources, the methods suggested, and their application in real learning-teaching contexts. Guided by the same collaboration input, the second IO for QuLL consists in the creation an on-line training package for the identification, use and creation of digital based language teaching and learning sources for teaching languages at higher education level. Regarding the third IO, we intend to publish a document that seeks to highlight and analyse the technological potential for language learning in European higher education systems. Our aim with this paper is not only to reflect on the outputs already achieved or under development and their added value for an increasingly technological education, but also on the strengths and shortcomings of international collaboration, of which QuLL will be a case in point.

Keywords: language learning, higher education, open educational resources, international cooperation, collaborative work.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, collaborative work has undoubtedly become a new buzzword in the business world. Technological advances also fostered this approach, linking people and companies in a faster and increasingly more productive way. The academic world has also accompanied the pace of technological progress adopting new and more innovative methodologies in the workspace and learning context. However, the desire by leaders or “change leaders” of “seeking ways to make organizations more effective, adaptive and relevant” (p. 1), as Beyerlein et al. [1] put it, is not enough as collaborative work systems need to be sustained by “intentional efforts to create structures, cultures, forum, and practices that reinforce collaboration” [1].

Employees of a company/institution, or of any work team, must feel their contribution to the work developed is important and, therefore, they must be given the right tools to work and to learn, feeling valued and integrated in their workspace or team. Every person is singular and knowing how to tackle

possible misunderstandings and deal with different personalities is key to the success of work of a project. According to David and Mary Sherwin [2]: “Great teams aren’t built person by person. They’re built behavior by behavior. Leaders know that the improved teamwork – and the behaviors that surround it – is a critical factor in employee engagement, retention, inclusion and empowerment.” (p. 1). In fact, leadership represents another paramount aspect to success. Without good leadership team members will not feel guided and supported. In our viewpoint, a good leader should be not only a good listener, a promoter of dialogue and cooperative, but also assertive and clear. Additionally, as people are distinctive and behave or react differently, good diplomatic skills also reveal crucial to avoid misunderstandings or hurt someone’s feelings. In this regard, Lorraine Walsh [3] contends that collaborative working in higher education is essentially social in nature as it requires energy, commitment, human and financial resources, enthusiasm and “a good dollop of sheer doggedness to see them through to a successful conclusion.” (p.3)

In the higher education (HE) context, collaborative work has been increasingly strategic to the plans of a HE institution for its scientific and financial improvement. Expanding at both national and international levels will mean higher success prospects. Seeking international consortia meets the demands of a highly complex networked 21st century society, where constant and immediate connection and cooperation imposes new patterns of working, forcing thus HE institutions to engage “in collaborative working and partnerships in a variety of arenas.” (p. 3) [3]. The gains of these partnerships can be immense. If one takes the example of the projects within the Erasmus+ programme, institutions profit financially from integrating consortia [3]. However, at the educational level, collaborative and cooperative work extends “the possibilities for research, opening up new avenues for learning and furthering a multiplicity of aims within the academy.” (p. 5) as Lorraine Walsh argues.

In this framework, QuILL project was submitted to the call “Strategic Partnerships for Digital Education Readiness” in 2020 and was approved in February 2021, with a 24-month duration. Apart from the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (IPB), the partner institutions in the project are Vilnius University, Faculty of Philology, (Lithuania); Cuza University of Iași, Department of Language Learning, (Romania); University of Bologna (Italy); Károli Gáspár University (Hungary), Universidad de Cordoba (Spain), and Pixel (Italy). The latter is also co-coordinating the project together with the IPB that is responsible for supervising the scientific output of QuILL. Most of the partner members are higher education language lecturers.


As its name anticipates – Quality in language learning – QuILL’s main goals are to provide language lecturers, focusing mainly on languages for specific purposes (LSP), with the skills to identify, assess and create digital and ICT-based language teaching resources. All IO meet this very specific first objective. In addition, the project partners also aim to enhance the implementation of digital and ICT-based language teaching resources and methods in the European HE systems by providing decision makers and policy makers with the information and skills to facilitate the accomplishment of this goal. Being language skills of the utmost importance in 21st century society [4], it is therefore urgent to tackle language proficiency difficulties across the European Union. That is why this project put forward the idea of associating technology-enhanced tools and resources with the teaching and learning process in languages for specific purposes. Both lecturers in LSP and language students will be able to enhance their digital literacy and improve their language teaching for LSP. Students can learn LSP in a more autonomous way.

2 METHODOLOGY

This article proposes a descriptive and reflective study on the importance of collaborative work in the context of Erasmus+ projects developed by European partner universities. Using QuILL as a paradigmatic example of such work system, we shall explain the procedures of teamwork management and problem resolution, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses associated with it. As scientific coordinating institution of the project, we are responsible for making sure all the partners discuss and reach concerted positions in a relaxing, positive, and cooperative environment. Additionally, we need to verify if all partners comply with deadlines and content regarding previously discussed and assorted tasks. We shall now describe the intellectual outputs (IO) designed and how we succeeded in carrying out and managing the work regarding the first and second IO, which are now concluded or in the process of completion, namely IO2.

2.1 Intellectual outputs organisation and management

QuILL underlies three IO. The first one, the construction of a database of online language teaching resources for language teaching and learning of 18 European languages, was carried out from March 2021 until October 2021. This IO consisted in the collection of 360 digital open educational resources for LSP. Each partner was responsible for collecting and assessing 60 resources for 3 assigned languages, 20 per language (Fig. 1). The partners also had to create a workgroup of 10 lecturers who applied these resources in real teaching scenarios, thus providing a real-life context and feedback. This experience was then described in the case study area of the IO1 template (Figs. 1, 2 and 3) discussed and agreed by all the partners.



Quality in Language Learning

Project Number: 2020-1-PT01-KA226-HE-094809

IO1.A – Teaching Source

Each project partner is responsible for 3 European languages according to the following bullet point list:

- IPB (Portugal): English, Portuguese, Swedish
- Vilnius University, Faculty of Philology, (Lithuania): Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian
- Cuză University of Iași, Department of Language Learning, (Romania): Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish
- University of Bologna (Italy): Italian, Finnish, German,
- Károli Gáspár University (Hungary): Hungarian, Slovakian, Slovenian
- Universidad de Cordoba (Spain): Spanish, French, Norwegian

Each partner should identify at least 20 OER (Open Educational Resources) teaching sources for each one of the above-mentioned languages. Each resource should be presented in English through:


- A review
- A case study
- Guidelines on how to use the resource

Each partner translates the description and the review of the identified resources into the target language (e.g. a source to teach Italian should be described and reviewed in English and Italian).

For each teaching resource, the following template must be filled in on the project portal.

+ *please see below an example.*

Title	
Date of Publication	
Link	Please upload the link where the resource is available
Download	If the resource is not available online, please upload it in PDF version on the project website
Target Group	<input type="checkbox"/> Lecturers <input type="checkbox"/> Students
Domain Area	<input type="checkbox"/> Accounting <input type="checkbox"/> Arts & Music <input type="checkbox"/> Bioscience <input type="checkbox"/> Business & Communication <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering <input type="checkbox"/> International Relations <input type="checkbox"/> Journalism & multimedia <input type="checkbox"/> Law <input type="checkbox"/> Medicine & Nursing <input type="checkbox"/> Sustainability <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher Education <input type="checkbox"/> Tourism
Learning Scenario	<input type="checkbox"/> Autonomous learning <input type="checkbox"/> Classroom Context
Target Language	<input type="checkbox"/> Bulgarian <input type="checkbox"/> English <input type="checkbox"/> Estonian <input type="checkbox"/> Finnish <input type="checkbox"/> French <input type="checkbox"/> German <input type="checkbox"/> Hungarian <input type="checkbox"/> Italian <input type="checkbox"/> Latvian <input type="checkbox"/> Lithuanian <input type="checkbox"/> Norwegian <input type="checkbox"/> Polish <input type="checkbox"/> Portuguese <input type="checkbox"/> Romanian <input type="checkbox"/> Slovakian <input type="checkbox"/> Slovenian <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Swedish



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Figure 1. IO1 template. Page 1.

Language of instruction	<input type="checkbox"/> Bulgarian <input type="checkbox"/> English <input type="checkbox"/> Estonian <input type="checkbox"/> Finnish <input type="checkbox"/> French <input type="checkbox"/> German <input type="checkbox"/> Hungarian <input type="checkbox"/> Italian <input type="checkbox"/> Latvian <input type="checkbox"/> Lithuanian <input type="checkbox"/> Norwegian <input type="checkbox"/> Polish <input type="checkbox"/> Portuguese <input type="checkbox"/> Romanian <input type="checkbox"/> Slovakian <input type="checkbox"/> Slovenian <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Swedish <input type="checkbox"/> Any language
Learner's recommended CEFR level	<input type="checkbox"/> A1 <input type="checkbox"/> A2 <input type="checkbox"/> B1 <input type="checkbox"/> B2 <input type="checkbox"/> C1 <input type="checkbox"/> C2
Type of Material	<input type="checkbox"/> Animation <input type="checkbox"/> Activity/task <input type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Game <input type="checkbox"/> Guiding resources (online course/book) <input type="checkbox"/> Laboratory <input type="checkbox"/> Picture/Graphics <input type="checkbox"/> Reference resources (online Dictionaries/ grammar guides/phrasebooks) <input type="checkbox"/> Simulation <input type="checkbox"/> Test <input type="checkbox"/> Video
Linguistic Features	<input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary <input type="checkbox"/> Grammar <input type="checkbox"/> Pragmatics <input type="checkbox"/> Prosody
Skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Critical Thinking <input type="checkbox"/> Writing <input type="checkbox"/> Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Mediation
Description*	<p>Please include information about the general characteristics, the technological solution and the needs addressed, the adaptability to groups of learners most in need of language preparation, and the methods for the validation.</p> <p>Please, provide a text between 100 and 300 words.</p>
Case study*	<p>Please choose one of the following 3 options to describe the case study in terms of target students (e.g. number, degree/course attended), the method used, the results obtained and the risks (if any) to be taken into account when using the resource (options are presented in order of preference):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe how the resource was successfully used directly by you; 2. Describe how the resource has been successfully tested by other lecturers; 3. Describe how you would test it (choose this one only if the previous options are not possible). <p>Please, provide a text between 100 and 300 words.</p>
Guidelines*	<p>Please produce a check list / guidelines on how to use the resource.</p>

Figure 2. IO1 template. Page 2.

<p>Review*</p>	<p><i>Please review the teaching resource according to the following quality indicators. Please use a scale 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest and 5 is the highest.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comprehensive approach: capacity to match the needs of lecturers and students <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 - Added value: the provided tangible improvements <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 - Motivation enhancement: the capacity to motivate students to improve their language skills <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 - Innovation: effectiveness in introducing innovative, creative and previously unknown approaches to LSP learning <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 - Transferability: measurement of the transferable potential and possibility to be a source of further capitalisation/application for other language projects in different countries <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 - Skills assessment and validation: availability of appropriate tools for lecturers to monitor students' progress and for students to assess own progress and to reflect on learning <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 - Adaptability: flexibility of the contents and possibilities for the LSP lecturers to adapt the contents to their and to students' need <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 - Usability: assess the technical usability from the point of view of the lecturer and the student <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 - Accessibility: assess the accessibility from the point of view of the lecturer and the student <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <p><i>Comments: please provide at least one comment on the resource to justify your scores. Please, provide a text between 100 and 300 words.</i></p>
<p>Further documentation</p>	<p><i>Please upload any further useful documents</i></p>

Figure 3. IO1 template. Page 3.

Despite the advantageous and exciting features of the first IO, it was also demanding and somewhat daring. It was difficult to find OER resources related the less spoken languages for specific purposes. Due to these constraints, the consortia decided to select resources for more general purposes or for languages taught as foreign languages. The whole discussion was done in online meetings and also in the first in-person transnational meeting in early October 2021, in Cordoba. Everyone addressed this and other issues, related for example to the improvement of the IO1 template, in a cooperative way as different positions were discussed, and a final decision was reached among all the partner members.

About the deadlines, everyone complied with the established time limits, even though there has always been flexibility in managing some justified delays. What is important is to make sure all partners are communicating effectively, and they all understand their tasks and are aware of their responsibilities.

The same procedure was followed as regards IO2 – the online training package for the identification, use and creation of digital and ICT-based language teaching resources for teaching LSP at higher education level. This time, the partners worked in pairs, each overseeing one of the three modules composing the training package. It covered the period of October 2021 and May 31, 2022. The partners all agreed on following a set template (Fig. 4) and on pre-defined contents to be addressed and developed in each module. Coordination of work consisted mainly of reminding them of deadlines and clearing out doubts that arose while carrying out the work. This was done via email or online meetings.



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IO2.B – GUIDELINES TO CREATE THE MODULE CONTENTS

The contents to be developed in each module have been agreed upon and are indicated in the template “2.A – Table of Contents”.

The Modules are divided into sections; each one of the sections consists of 250-500 words. For each section, it is necessary to provide the users with external links to deepen the contents.

Please see below.

Title of the Module
Introduction
<i>Please briefly summarize the contents of the module</i>

(Please copy and paste the following 2 tables for each one of the sections)

Title of the Section
<i>E.g. The opportunities related to the application of digital solutions in Higher education language courses</i>
<i>Please make sure the length of the section is between 250 and 500 words.</i>
<i>The contents should be written using an inclusive approach. It should not have an academic approach. Use simple and straight forward language.</i>
<i>E.g. As teachers we are aware of the existence of; therefore, we suggest/recommend to</i>

Online Resources for Section 1
<i>For each section, please mention at least 2 online resources and media based in depth learning tools (e.g. video, podcast etc.). The structure to be used for the online resources is the following:</i>
<i>Title of the resource (link)</i>
<i>Description of the resource (around 20 - 30 words)</i>

For Each Module please also provide:

Operative tools / check lists
<i>Please describe at least 2 operative tools / check lists for guiding the lecturers in implementing the skills acquired in their teaching activities (e.g., Guideline for the Lecturer in assessing a teaching tool, etc.)</i>
<i>The Operative tools / check lists will be included inside the chapters of each Module.</i>

Case studies
<i>Please describe at least 2 case studies describing the implementation of the module contents in real life case scenario.</i>

Interactive test
<i>Please, use the Template IO2.C – Interactive Test</i>



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Figure 4. IO2 template.

IO3 – Publication on the Implementation of Digital and ICT based Language Learning Opportunities in the Higher Education Systems – will be the last product to be developed from July 2022 to February 2023. Because of that, we are only able to show results of IO1 and IO2.

3 RESULTS

All the work done so far has been uploaded to the QuILL portal (Fig. 5). Anyone can register and become a user of the portal where it is already possible to find the database of more than 360 digital teaching and learning resources and other useful information related to the project.

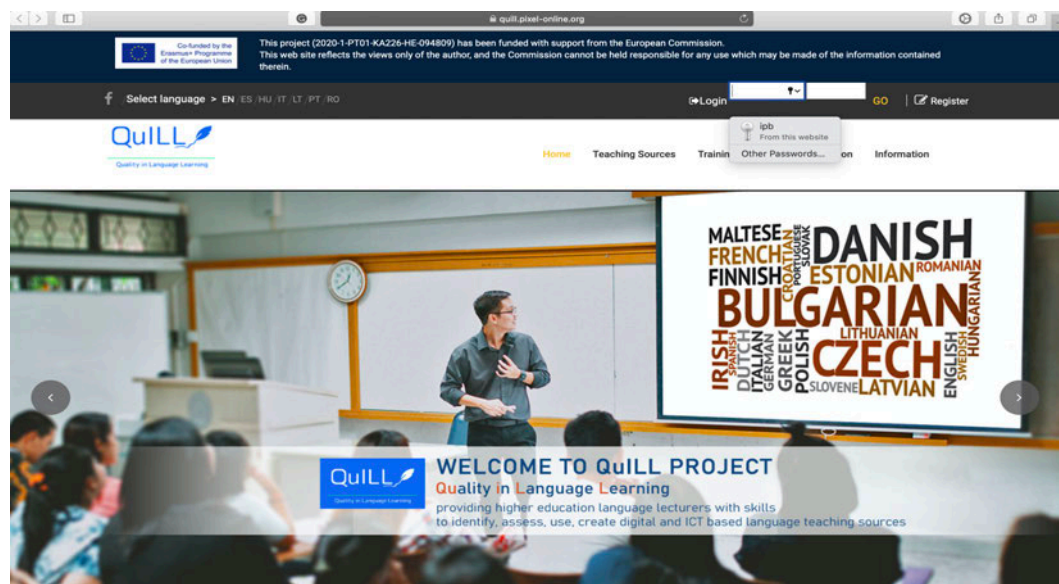


Figure 5. Homepage of the QuILL portal.

3.1 Intellectual output 1: database of open educational resources for languages for specific purposes

The OER resources database for LSP is now available and the resources can be selected bearing in mind the target group, the target language, the language of instruction and the CEFR level, demonstrated in Fig. 6.

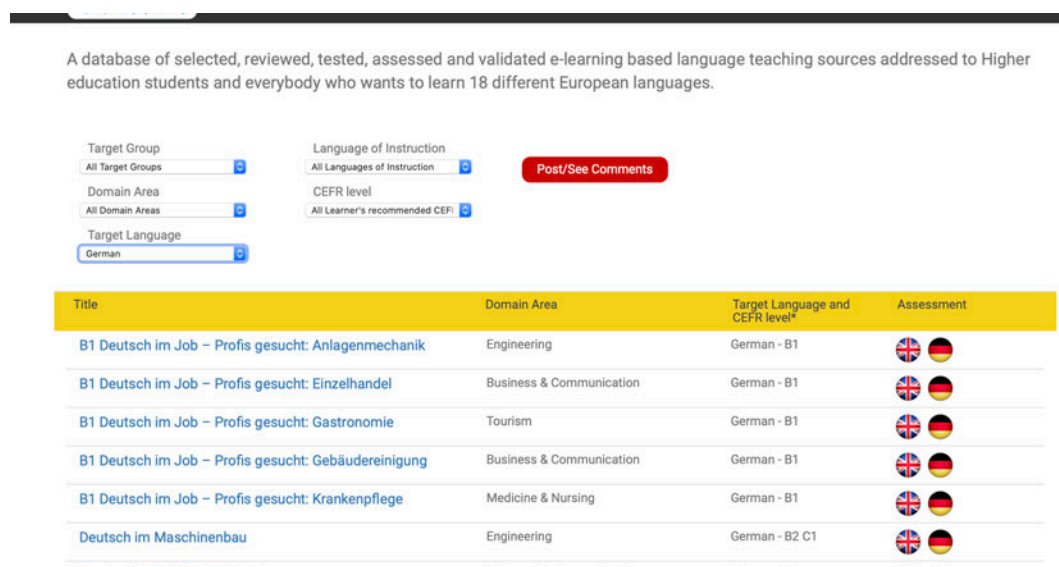


Figure 6. IO1-Example of several teaching resources for the German language.

As abovementioned, it was somehow difficult to find OER resources for LSP concerning the less spoken languages, such as Swedish, Norwegian or the Baltic languages Latvian or Lithuanian, only to name some examples. In some cases, the partners struggled to find the 20 resources due to this constraint. However, the problem was overcome by including resources for languages as a foreign language, being the CERF levels addressed mainly A1 or A2.

Nonetheless, the results are outstanding as the database provides both the language lecturers and students with a wide array of resources for specific purposes that will assist them in the learning and teaching process. Language lecturers have available a countless number of resources already validated by language experts, being also given some useful guidelines on how to use the resource, as Fig. 7 illustrates.

Description

The resource was developed in Moodle environment. It includes exercises for the training of reading and listening production and comprehension, and all the exercises are easily changeable and adaptable according to the lecturer needs for each specific class. The Moodle platform can be easily downloaded and/or uploaded, giving the lecturer the possibility to create and restore backups of a particular module/exercise and to share it with the students or other teachers. Moodle includes a tracking system, which works perfectly. This tracking system together with the completion tool help lecturer and students to verifying the learning progression. The student needs to have, at least, an A2 level of proficiency (CEFR) in order to successfully complete the module.

Case study

The teaching module was both used in classroom context and e-learning (online course). In both cases, students were enthusiastic, and the success rates were above 70%. The module is entitled "Personal Finances" and it contains exercises that allow working on different language skills, e.g. communicative competence, and linguistic and textual competence, through a diverse set of reading and writing comprehension and production, and auditory discrimination activities, among others. Some exercises were done in the classroom, with the help of the teacher and/or autonomously, and others were sent to them as homework. In either case, feedback was immediate. Another added value of the module is that it includes a glossary of terms related to economic topics, a grammar booklet, and a set of information on how the Portuguese manage their personal finances (taxes, bank loans, etc).

The overall results were quite positive, as, in addition to the results in terms of developing communicative competence, the students always maintained interest and curiosity.

Guidelines

The resource can be used on Moodle, and it can also be upload and restored by the lecturer. There is no special configuration needed, the lecturer can easily restore this module in his/her own learning platform (e.g. Moodle). Students just need to follow the guidelines on Moodle/of the teacher, the structure is user-friendly, so the students just need to follow the instructions, step by step.

Figure 7. IO1-Description, case study and guidelines of a teaching resource of Portuguese for business.

The description summarises briefly the content of the resource, referring to its overall display and usage. The case study is a clearly pedagogical approach, through which the lecture can perceive how the resource was really implemented, how it was received by students, and which were the main results. The guidelines provide an idea of how this resource can be used, whether inside or outside classroom, presenting a clear didactical proposal which lecturers can replicate in a similar context.

3.2 Intellectual output 2: e-learning based training package

The contents of the e-learning based training package are structured in 3 modules:

- 1 IDENTIFICATION of quality digital based OER language teaching sources
- 2 USE of quality digital based language teaching sources as an integration or alternative to classroom teaching approaches
- 3 CREATION of quality digital based language teaching sources

Each module must display 2 operative tools/check lists, 2 case studies and an interactive self-assessment test composed of 15 multiple choice questions and to be taken by the trainee at the end of each module. The aim of this IO is precisely to guide language lectures in innovating their language teaching methodologies through the effective use of quality digital-based OER teaching resources.

The modules and the digital resources and tools presented in each were also tested by language lecturers. The case studies demonstrate the usefulness of the information provided and of the operative tools in guiding them to identify, use or create digital materials, such as apps.

The following testimony of a lecturer who tested module 3 is representative of the efficacy and practicality of the modules: "It shows a panoply of tools that might be used for different purposes and with different levels of expertise. It was also good to get to know about tools I didn't know of and that can give another input to classes". Lecturers tested the resource they created and the over 80 students who tested it all felt interested and motivated to carry out the activities suggested.

This e-training package will be tested in a training activity to be held on 18-22 July at IPB. The main purpose is to follow the different goals of the modules step by step, namely to follow guidelines for identifying sound language sources towards identification of the quality digital based OER language teaching sources. These sources shall then be used effectively in order to incorporate them in the several teaching approaches. The creation of the sources is an issue on its own, since many lecturers have an interest in doing so, but lack the necessary skills to proceed with this time consuming, but rather challenging task.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The Erasmus+ projects underlie the core idea of collaboration and cooperation. Higher education institutions have a lot to gain from the establishment of these consortia stemming from these types of projects. Not only do the partners get familiar with different university contexts, but also consolidate social and cultural links between the different people that integrate the projects.

QuLL project is no exception. Aware of the responsibilities such projects entail, and of the difficulties of managing different contexts and diverse people, the coordinating partners must facilitate communication and create a pleasant, relaxing atmosphere, making sure all tasks are discussed in a democratic way and clearing out all doubts that may still persist.

So far, there is a very cooperative attitude among all partners, and the expected outcomes are in line with deadlines and the quality expected for the different IO.

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