



## European Languages Virtual Network (ELVIN)

Final Report

Public Part

## Project information

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## Executive Summary

The objective of the ELVIN project is to bring together European language learners from a variety of different contexts within a social network framework in dyads and groups. The ELVIN aims to provide a range of opportunities for language practice, in both a professional and university contexts by improving motivation and the overall learning experience.

The principal output of the ELVIN project is **myelvin** which is a multilingual online social network for the practice of languages in an informal learning environment. This environment facilitates access to relevant and up-to-date content based on the connection between the users interests and their professional profiles, and this is supported by a set of help services including language activity protocols, training courses and user guides.

The principal target groups during the ELVIN project have been in the field of public administration, principally professionals that already work in public administration and university students preparing for a career in this field.

The consortium of the project is made up of a mix of institutions from Public Administration and Public Universities with expertise including:

- online and face-to-face language training of civil servants and university students. This was relevant in requirements analysis phases of the project and in the organisation of the pilots
- technical expertise in ICT, which was relevant in the development phases of the project

The approaches used to achieve the objectives of the project involved the following steps: First an analysis of user requirements was carried out. The results of this were used for the development of the first prototype of the portal. This was tested in a first pilot action to ensure the validity of the concept and the tools that made up the prototype. After the first pilot, improvements were made, based on the feedback received from users, which allowed for further developments to be made to the portal. It was then tested again in a second pilot which focused on the learning approach, the protocols developed to facilitate and structure activity within the system and the future viability of the system.

The project website is <http://www.myelvin.eu> which provides public information about the project and access to the **myelvin** portal which hosts the **myelvin** social network.

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# 1. Project Objectives

This report is an overview of the activities carried out during the two years of the ELVIN project and describes the objectives and achievements of the project, as well as how they were achieved. It also covers the plans for the future of **myelvin** after the end of the finance period.

The overall objective of the ELVIN project was to create a network that brings together learners in one online social space, providing them with a place in which engage on meaningful interaction for the purpose of practising languages. The exchanges that take place also help to reinforce intercultural dialogue within Europe.

The idea for the ELVIN project arose from the challenges involved in learning a language. The importance of foreign language learning, especially in the current economic climate in Europe, needs little explanation. In addition to increasing intercultural awareness between countries, it improves job and promotion prospects and provides other types of work related opportunities. Learning a second language requires effective and motivating practice of the target language, and this means it is important to be able to find other learners of the same language with similar needs with whom to practice. Frequently conventional language learning environments focus on general use of the language and do not afford opportunities for practising the language that professionals need in their areas of work.

The extensive use of social network sites, with each person spending an average of 5 – 6 minutes per day on a social network site with 5 billion web links, news stories, blog posts etc. shared each week made it likely that these tools could be used to circumvent the issue of finding appropriate partners with whom to practice a language. The ELVIN project was born out of the idea of the potential of online social networks to connect people with similar interests and facilitate effective and motivating language practice opportunities. The aim was to develop and pilot a multilingual online social networking site for informal language practice.

The idea behind the ELVIN project was to create a social network based on existing social network software enhanced by a range of tools that can be used to actively practice a language, such as blogs, bookmarks, collaborative pages and chat or videoconference integration, for example. The system matches learners based on the information they provide upon registration in the profile section. This profile information allows the system to suggest

practice partners to the user, other people that want to practice the same language as that person and share the same professional interests.

Another important issue that affects the effective practice of a target language is the need for fully relevant and up-to-date content to use as material for practice activities. In order to address this issue the **myelvin** portal, as well as matching users with similar interests and needs, also suggests appropriate practice content. The system facilitates the rapid provision of relevant up-to-date content, through a searchable repository, and requests for new content if existing content is not available.

The project objectives were therefore to create a system that would bring users and content together for the purpose of facilitating effective and motivating language practice in an informal learning context.

## 2. Project Approach

The project focussed on the development of a new approach to the practice of the target language in language learning, based on a multilingual online social network for informal language practice. The aim was for this network, though it would exist independently of official systems, to intersect with existing education and training provision, both private and public and in this way play an important complementary role that would help to improve the quality of language learning in each context in which it was present by providing opportunities for effective and meaningful practice.

The first phase of the project included the development of the three principal areas of the social space:

1. Development of the online social network portal, based on the adaptation of existing software. The platform would be the core of the ELVIN project and the space where the learner interaction would take place. This would be the main outcome of the project.
2. Development of the content tools and implementation of the repository which would be later integrated with the portal.
3. Development of the profiling tool in order to match up users in pairs and groups.

This set of developments constituted the technological core of the **myelvin** multilingual community and the main tangible outputs of the project. These are described in detail in Section 3 of this report.

Once the first prototypes of these tools had been developed (this process involved definition of requirements and exploration of software options, followed by the technological adaptation), they were tested in a first pilot phase in November 2010 in order to try out the pedagogical, technical and organizational aspects of the portal. The first version of the portal incorporated a range of functionalities centred around the effective profiling of the user, and spaces for practice. A common pilot action plan was developed with the aim of demonstrating the validity of the concept. Each partner implemented the pilot with target groups which included people working in public administration and university students, and training organizations and

professionals in the partner countries with the aim of demonstrating the validity of the concept. The main results of the first pilot action included the following:

- Improved usability of the network
- User interaction involving language practice around professional interests.
- Improved site navigability speeds.
- Users found the **myelvin** portal to be a good meeting point for people to practice a language
- Good support from the help desk to guide user interaction

The results from the first pilot action were used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the first network prototype. In the next version, usability issues were taken into account to make the prototype more user friendly so that it would be easier for a person to navigate the site. New functionalities were developed in order to improve the language practice experience with the integration of Skype and a chat application in order to promote synchronous communication. A second important phase of the project then started which involved the pedagogical analysis of the activity of the users in the first pilot phase. The results of this analysis were used to design a set of activity protocols to facilitate and structure the language practice, for those users that needed it. These were included as support material in the help section of the network as free resources for all the users in addition to the rest of the supporting documentation, which was also developed and improved for the second pilot action of the project. These constitute another of the outputs of the project, and are further described in Section 3 of this document.

The second pilot phase, which took place from May to August 2011, had the objective of testing different models of sustainability for the portal. The second pilot also had the aim of exploring the functioning of the CRP (Content request protocol) and the AST (Authoring support tool). In addition to these objectives, another aim of Pilot Action 2 was to confirm the success of the adaptations that had been implemented after taking into consideration the issues identified in Pilot Action1. After changes that were made to the portal after the feedback received in the first pilot action the following resources were tested during the second pilot:

- A collection of video tutorials
- A list of FAQ's (frequently asked questions)

- **myelvin** fora: one group per language dedicated to problem solving activities
- A set of activity protocols to facilitate language practice, for less self directed users.
- Online help system

The results from the second pilot were as follows:

- Users assessed new applications positively.
- Synchronous communication via Skype integration and chat made communication simpler and more relaxed by providing real time communication
- Interaction in the portal increased substantially
- Further work was needed to ensure a smooth transition by users into the network, from the moment the user creates the profile through to the moment s/he engages in language practice and interactions with other users.
- An important number of users focused more on language practice, rather than activity related to professional contexts. For many this was more relevant and thus motivated shared interests among users.

Parallel strategies for dissemination, exploitation and evaluation were set up at the beginning of the project. The consortium carried out these transversal activities simultaneously with the technical tasks of the project.

A dissemination plan was drawn up initially which defined the target groups and types of forums where the ELVIN project could be disseminated. Each partner focused on the dissemination in their own countries and a special effort was made to present the ELVIN project around Europe and even at international level.

As outlined in the proposal, a conference around the ELVIN project was programmed. The Project coordinator organises an annual e-learning conference in Spain, and during the two years of the project ELVIN was actively promoted at the conference, as is described at <http://www.myelvin.eu/conference.html>. This annual e-learning conference, both in 2010 and 2011, has given great scope for dissemination of the ELVIN project as this conferences is a forum that specializes in e-learning, and is now one of the largest trade shows in the country dedicated to the

online training sector. Since **myelvin** is an online social network dedicated to language learning in an informal educational context it clearly links in with e – learning and online training. The principal problem for people that want to practice languages is that there is a lack of learners with similar needs and the advantage and one of the overall outcomes from both conferences, as expressed by attendees of the conferences, was that the possibilities that **myelvin** offers are great because it offers an alternative to traditional learning methods for languages that focuses on the individual interests, abilities and language skills of each person. One of the conclusions from the conference and indeed the general feedback on the portal is that the idea of connecting language learners through social networks by allowing them to practice informally, in partnerships based on contacts made through their own professional profiles, is very appealing to a lot of people as it offers them the opportunity to practice a language in their own way and reduces the effects of factors that affect a great number of people, such as the lack of learners with similar needs to practice with.

Apart from off-line dissemination, online dissemination was carried out via the corporate webpage: <http://www.myelvin.eu> where there was a continuous flow of news and links to relevant sites. As we are currently immersed in the age of web 2.0 the project was also present in the main social networks: Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/myelvin>, Twitter: <http://twitter.com/myelvin> and Youtube channel <http://www.youtube.com/user/myelvineu>.

### 3. Project Outcomes & Results

Language learning requires opportunities for effective and motivating practice of the target language. Frequently and especially in the workplace and university contexts, the lack of availability of fully relevant and up-to-date content, and of other learners with similar needs with whom to practice makes the activity demotivating and artificial. Agile access to appropriate niche content, and content in less widely used and less taught languages is needed, but this is not usually a focus of attention for large content providers.

The project aimed to address these issues by creating **a multilingual online social community of language learners, based on existing social network software, be enhanced with tools developed by the project.**

This objective was fulfilled and the main project outcomes are:

- **A social network platform** (<http://dev.myelvin.org>): The Elvin platform (**myelvin**) is the main deliverable of the project and since the project initiation in December 2009; the project has been focused on the technological development and prototyping of the main **myelvin** platform as a primary goal. The process for the development of **myelvin** began with an examination of the various open source platforms available to develop social networks. After profiling the different solutions available, the partner consortium, choose to develop the **myelvin** platform based on the popular open source social networking engine “Elgg”, an open source web application combining elements of weblogging, e-portfolios, and social networking. An instance of ELGG was installed on a Linux server with LAMP stack (Apache, PHP, MySQL) and an additional PHP extension “JSON” to support Ajax features. The ELGG platform contains a number of tools which were suitably positioned within **myelvin** to facilitate the practice and transfer of language skills, including blogs, discussion groups, collaborative web pages, messaging functions and an instant messaging tool. In order to achieve the functionalities outlined in the aims and objectives for the **myelvin** platform and to best facilitate language learning via a social network, a number of custom widgets were developed, including both friend suggestion and content suggestion and

a content library widget to communicate with the external **myelvin** digital repository which was based on the DSPACE open source repository.

In addition, the platform was “skinned” (a customized look – based on project branding - was developed and applied) to help contribute to an identity for ELVIN.

Additional work on the platform was undertaken following the separate pilot actions to develop and improve the platform based on the both usability and technical feedback gathered from the pilot participants.

- **Profiling tool:** This is available upon logging into the **myelvin** platform under the section "My Profile". The profiling tool in the **myelvin** platform consists of two additional custom widgets which were developed in-house and consist of both friend suggestion and content suggestion widgets which suggest relevant friends and content to a user depending on commonality in terms of both a common language known at a specific level and a common professional interest or set of interests. In addition to this, a landing page was developed so that the requirements for the profiling tool (providing information on interests and language requirements in the profile information fields) would be clear to users.
- **Searchable content repository:** As part of the development process for the **myelvin** platform, a Learning Object (LO) model was defined and the **myelvin** repository was implemented based on DSPACE – fulfilling the aim to develop a social network platform with a focus on language practice, integrated with a digital repository to facilitate the provision of re-usable learning resources. This repository is able to communicate with the **myelvin** platform and also serves as a means to provide users with relevant requested content via the Content Request Protocol & Authoring Support Tool.
- **Content Request Protocol & Authoring Support Tool:** The Content Request Protocol is available upon logging into the **myelvin** platform under the section "Content Request". The Authoring Support Tool is available upon logging into the **myelvin** Platform as an expert user under the section "Content Request".

The Content Request Protocol allows users to request content based on their needs for additional learning objects. The user is able to fill out a form outlining what additional information they need, what language they need it in, the languages which they wish to learn and their current proficiency in that language. This allows the expert user to access this request and to then approve this request and upload the relevant information to the content repository. The Content Request Protocol/ Authoring Support Tools were subject to a number of iterations in order to improve functionality to include providing additional user information (indicating “cultural issues, linguistic issues and pedagogical aspects” to the Content Provider).

- **Set of how-to use manuals including:** activity protocols, community manuals, videotutorials, etc. These are available at: <http://myelvin.org/pilots> - Under "Online Help".

The community tools, activity and training protocols and expert user guides were developed collaboratively by all partners, drawing on the consortium members' individual areas of expertise, in order to develop informed material to help users (“learners”) and expert users (“tutors”) to make best use of the **myelvin** platform. In addition to this, the consortium undertook additional self-initiated research into language learning to help inform and improve the community tools manual and expert user guide. These manuals were translated by partners into 6 different languages and were developed into HTML, CSS and image-based online help manuals and offline pdf supports and made available in an additional section to the **myelvin** platform. In addition to these, a number of video-based tutorials on using the **myelvin** platform have been developed and are available on the help page alongside the manuals.

- Presence on the Internet via the **corporate web page** <http://www.myelvin.eu> where everybody has access to all the public information on the activities developed by the partners during these two years.

## 4. Partnerships

The ELVIN project consortium represented 10 partners from a mixture of organisations from the public administration and university contexts from each of the participatory countries: Spain, Portugal, Latvia, Ireland, Hungary and Bulgaria. The partners included: The Public Administration School of Castilla y León (ECLAP), Cork Institute of Technology (DEIS), University of Salamanca (USAL), University of Coimbra (UC), National Institute of Administration – Portugal (INA), Ecoclean TM OOD (Interspeak Translations), Corvinno Technology Transfer Center Nonprofit Ltd, Riga Technical University (RTU), Asociación de Promoción de Contenidos Digitales e Internet (APROCODI), Latvian School of Public Administration (LSPA).

Different regions were represented in the consortium which assured the European dimension, covering various educational and training systems and learning cultures. The range of contexts also promoted linguistic diversity, through support in the system for less well known languages.

All project partners have had crucial roles to play in introducing and promoting the new learning content, pedagogies and teaching tools. They combined longstanding experience in education with a variety of approaches and backgrounds and the consortium represented both public administration and universities and centres for language learning. The different roles they played within the project are described below:

- I. ECLAP: was the project co-ordinator and was responsible for the management of the project and the overall monitoring of the project progress. They also led the Dissemination Strategy of the project. As a training organization, they were also extensively involved in WP5 where they managed the two pilot actions in their centre.
- II. USAL: The University of Salamanca was the partner responsible for the pedagogical aspects of the projects, and also played a role in the technological development, especially in the design and development of the content repository. They led WP3 in close collaboration with DEIS and played a central role in the design of the repository.

- III. DEIS: As one of the technical partners, they were responsible for the development of the ELVIN social network and the community and profiling tools related to the portal. They worked in closely with USAL who were responsible for the integration of the content repository and tools into the social network.
- IV. Coimbra: They were involved in all aspects of the project but had a special and pivotal role in coordinating the evaluation of the pilots, as well as managing the two pilot actions in their centres.
- V. INA: They were involved in all aspects of the project with a special focus on the management of two pilot actions in their centres providing teachers, and learners as well as evaluating the pilots results.
- VI. Ecoclean: They were involved in all aspects of the project but especially in the management of the two pilot actions in their centres providing learners as well as evaluating the pilots results
- VII. Corvinno: They were involved in all aspects of the project but especially in the management of two pilot actions in their centres providing learners as well as evaluating the pilot results.
- VIII. LSPA: They were involved in all aspects of the project but especially in the management of two pilot actions in their centres providing learners as well as evaluating the pilots results
- IX. Aprocodi: were involved in many aspects of the project but principally in the development of the exploitation and dissemination plan and other instruments. They played a special role in the second pilot phase by providing relevant and up-to-date content according to the requests they received.
- X. RTU: They were also involved in all aspects of the project but they played a special role in the second pilot phase by providing relevant and up-to-date content according to the requests they received.

## 5. Plans for the Future

The second year in the ELVIN project involved the second phase of pilot actions to test the economic sustainability of the portal in relation to future exploitation. In order to identify the future possibilities for the **myelvin** social network portal an in-depth study was carried out on the environment of social media and more specifically on the available social networks for the practice of languages.

This work identified a clear gap in the market for **myelvin**, however the main barrier to entry into this type of market is the high level of economic investment that is needed in order to cover initial launch costs, personnel and the day-to-day maintenance of the portal. The market of social network sites for the practice of languages is an emerging market and the economic crisis does provide **myelvin** with positive opportunities because of the globalization within the workplace and the growing need for professionals to have a second language in order to secure a job in a very chaotic environment. However, due to the current economic and political circumstances in each of the partner countries and the instability in several of the partner institutions, a commitment to a full commercial launch is impossible at the present time. Furthermore, it is also felt that gradual sustained and consolidated growth would be more appropriate for the product. For this reason the decision taken with regard to the future is that all partners are going to continue to work with the product within their institutions and build and consolidate their user base. All partners agree to continue to participate in the network and aim to invite new organisations to join the network in order to build and consolidate the total number of users, with a view to looking into exploitation in the future when the economic climate improves and when all partners have less financial constraints. Until such time all partners agree to make efforts to maintain the network and make common improvements and to introduce new members.

## 6. Contribution to EU policies

EU education and training policies have gained impetus since the publication of the Lisbon strategy in 2000. EU co-operation in education has led to an increased need for foreign language learning, and increasing attention to informal and non informal learning. The ELVIN project had clear links to, and contributed to the multilingualism policy objectives of the European Union in relation to language learning coupled with the use of ICT. The ELVIN project also contributed to the development of lifelong learning by promoting an active approach to practising languages, in this way aiming to increase the quality of lifelong learning.

The ELVIN project contributed to several key policies, which include the following:

- The ELVIN project was part of the lifelong learning programme under Key Action 2, the objective being to create a European languages virtual network. The main objectives of the lifelong learning programme are to help promote creativity, competitiveness and employability, together with promoting language learning and linguistic diversity. ELVIN did this.
- Different regions were represented in the consortium and this contributed to the development of the European dimension. The ELVIN project helped to promote European co-operation between other member states through education and the training. It also helped to raise awareness of the less well used European languages such as Bulgarian, Hungarian and Latvian, which in turn helped to promote an awareness of the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity within Europe.
- Furthermore, the ELVIN project had links to other European programmes such as Key Action 3 (ICT), due to the extensive use of technological tools in the project, and through these tools the development of an innovative pedagogical approach for all learners so that they can make the most of their language knowledge and competencies.
- It also linked with areas such as Cultural and Linguistic diversity especially in the less well served languages and countries and the Education and

Training 2010 Work Programme by reinforcing competences in languages, which is related to employment and employability.

- And it also had complementarity with Erasmus actions as one of the key target groups were university students and with continuing education and the other key target group was adult professionals, which linked to the objectives of the Grundtvig actions with the European Commission.
- It helped to promote the mobility of staff with the help of innovative technologies thus reinforcing lifelong learning and social cohesion and this increases accessibility and promotes gender, race, and age equality, which is one of the key EU policies.
- Finally ELVIN acted as a “think tank” comprising experts in many fields, who are well placed to identify innovative practices and future needs.

