ListenHere: a CALL resource for migrants in Ireland using local community sourced material

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Abstract

We describe ListenHere, an online resource for migrant language education in Ireland, created during the COVID 19 pandemic. The system uses audio and video sourced from the local community as the basis for a range of CALL activities, employs dialogue technology for practice of practical and social situations encountered in the host country, and maintains a resource bank for tutors. The system is available online and in use by migrants and tutors throughout Ireland.

Index Terms: migrant language and integration resources, spoken dialog systems, community education

1. Introduction

All migrants face a number of challenges in adjusting to life in a new country, as they face new cultural, administrative and social norms. Newcomers must learn how to communicate appropriately in a wide range of situations of everyday life, from encounters with government agencies, organising children’s education, to attending medical appointments, and participating in education, training, and work environments. Even more importantly, understanding the host country’s social and cultural life is vital to access local society, reduce isolation and build a full life. When the language of the host community is unfamiliar, all of these challenges are multiplied [1]. It has been shown that skills in the host country’s language are strongly linked to employment success [2]. Adjustment is particularly difficult for refugees and asylum seekers, who have been forced to leave their home countries. Facilitating acquisition of knowledge of the language, customs and daily life of the host country has been recognised at EU level as essential to successful integration of refugees [3].

For migrants in Ireland, a small country with a wide range of often quite pronounced regional accents, learning English can be particularly challenging. Available pedagogical audio-visual material is usually based on ‘standard’ US, UK, or ANZ accents, resulting in a lack of models of local speech. Learners need locally accented language training to really start understanding, speaking, and thus fully participating in Irish life, and unfamiliarity with accented varieties of a target language has been shown to hinder comprehension [4].

The text (written or spoken) underpinning language learning resources is often generic - based on topics of interest to the widest variety of potential learners possible - pop culture, uncontroversial general or human interest stories, sport, and tourism, while texts for specific purpose language education narrowly focus on areas such as medicine or business.

Both accent and text suitability can be addressed by sourcing text from a range of text, audio and video sources in the host country or area - for migrants, lessons based on texts from local health services websites provide the same basis for linguistic or functional learning goals as generic texts, and provide extra motivation as they are clearly relevant to learners’ everyday communicative needs.

Language classes (generally provided by the State or NGOs) are few, and tutors report difficulties in managing the wide skill differentials in learners grouped at the same ‘level’. Many learners, and particularly those who have not worked through a traditional Western modern languages curriculum in a formal learning environment, have ‘spiky’ profiles, with some skills present at much higher or lower levels than others.

Adult refugees in Ireland are a particularly diverse group of language learners, with widely varying educational background - while some learners hold third level qualifications, others have had little or no formal education. Some learners are literate in the Latin alphabet, some in other scripts, while others have no literacy in any language. Many refugees have lived in country for several years while others have arrived very recently. Profiles of language ability can be very spiky, with some learners having high fluency but low accuracy in speech, high levels of comprehension but low or no literacy skills, while others have low spoken interaction skills but high levels of written comprehension and production [5].

Access to independent learning resources which allow study and practice of the particular skills at levels suitable to the individual offers several advantages – learners can improve their weaker skills while learning at times and places convenient to them, allowing access to often marginalised groups such as stay at home parents of young children. An important advantage is that such resources can be offered online free or at very low cost to users.

Below we describe ListenHere, an online language and integration resource for migrants, which was created by volunteers during the COVID 19 pandemic, and is currently in use by migrants across Ireland. The system architecture is based on a (spoken) dialog system, and lessons involve the use of speech synthesis and recognition.

2. ListenHere

ListenHere creates online audio-video based lessons on life in Ireland, and distributes these and existing resources free of charge on the Internet, through the ListenHere website.

2.1. Platform

The language learning platform underpinning the lessons is based on the MILLA [6] and CARAMILLA [7] systems, with extended dialog capacity and a simple user interface. All instructions and interaction with the learner through the dialog component is voiced using an Irish accented synthesiser from
2.2. Content

ListenHere’s novelty lies in the content, which is sourced directly from a wide range of people and organisations involved in Irish life. Members of the public are asked to contribute 1-minute videos on any aspect of life to the NGO, which a group of volunteer teachers and programmers use to build language learning activities. Pre-existing content is gathered from relevant agencies and institutions - e.g., a HSE (Health authority) disease prevention videos, information on voting, explainer videos on driving test. Cultural content is sourced from local writers, film, TV in the form of short texts and clips on all aspects of life donated by their creators. Some additional content for specific topics is created by volunteer teachers. During COVID a large number of Zoom interviews were created with volunteers from relevant organisations (educational, migrant support, housing and social services, sports and cultural bodies), and public figures. All of the material is used to build lessons which can be accessed on mobile, tablet or pc.

The resources are created from the gathered material for 4 levels of competence, tied to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), with particular focus on the range from A1 (Breakthrough) to B1 (Threshold) as these are the levels with most need (higher levels are more independent users of English). Activities can be mixed and matched to address spiky skills profiles. Activities include reading and listening comprehension, cloze tests (dictogloss), matching activities, all designed to foster engagement with the sound and form of the target language and to offer useful practical and cultural information on life in Ireland. The system includes spoken dialog activities based on situations of interest to migrants, such as talking to healthcare providers, teachers, and social services.

2.3. Dissemination and expansion

Throughout the pandemic, volunteers organised online discussions with tutors of adult learners, further education organisers, local and national support agencies and other interested parties. These sessions were used to introduce the system to tutors and learners, perform needs analyses in terms of topics and accents required, and to recruit volunteer tutors for the creation of further resources. Weekly messages on Twitter and Facebook showed video clips from new lessons. At time of writing, ListenHere has gathered over 100 video and audio resources, of which over 40 have been exploited for lessons, on topics including Irish slang, pronunciation of vowels in different parts of the country, local history, sports and music. Over 300 users are active on the platform.

3. Conclusions and Future Work

We have described a language and integration resource for migrants, based on dialog technology, and built by volunteers using material crowd sourced from the host society. As ListenHere’s origin was a response to an unprecedented situation (COVID) and the focus was on rapid deployment, our next steps are to comprehensively evaluate and improve the resource. We believe that the design we have used is replicable and scalable, and could be used for migrants in other countries. The crowding of material, which maintains a steady flow of content relevant to migrants, would easily lend itself to local involvement, e.g., sourcing of videos through high school projects, local media, local community and administrative organisations. We hope the concept and implementation could be useful to State agencies as a medium for initial education, training and career planning for newcomers which then bridges to mainstream provision, and also to agencies who need to ensure information and services are reaching migrant communities.

We will be very happy to demonstrate the working system at the workshop and a brief video explainer of ListenHere lessons can be seen at listenhere.ie.

4. Acknowledgements

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5. References