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Pressinfo

Palabea.net: „The Speaking World“

Learning a new language just became fun, easy and free

Every language shows us new countries, helps us make new friends and breaks down barriers. Let's share our languages to create a speaking world.

INTERVIEW, 13 November, 2007

1. How was the concept of Palabea born?

I used to work as a Spanish professor in Berlin, and students would always ask me after they completed my course what they should do so that they wouldn't forget what they had learned. I always gave the same answer: either participate in a foreign exchange program or sign up for a study-vacation. However, my students didn't always greet these options with enthusiasm. Living in a foreign country is a huge time commitment, and a study-vacation tends to be a short-term solution without lasting results. The students were even less enthusiastic about trying to retain their language skills by reading books in Spanish. At the same time I was teaching, my friend Sebastian Schkudlara was working for a well-known Internet company. He would always talk about what great potential the Internet has to be a learning tool and, more specifically, how it could be used to enrich traditional methods of teaching. The two issues merged into one concept.

We developed the idea for a free language learning platform with my business (and life) partner, Sebastian. You see, although we both live together in Berlin, I am from Spain, and Sebastian is from Poland, so language learning is a very important issue for us. And we have a toddler son, Tomasz, who, when a little older, will speak Spanish, Polish and German. Needless to say, language learning and multilingualism is very important to my family, as well as many, many other



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families around the world.

So, Sebastian and I had an idea to develop a way in which people can learn languages easily and for free. But we felt that learning foreign languages was just not enough. It was important, we believed, to develop a way in which people can learn a foreign by sharing foreign cultures, customs, and traditions, with other people from around the world. We developed Palabea using the principle of cultural/linguistic respect: basically, we wanted people to share their languages and cultures to create a multilingual world. Palabea arises from this exchange of ideas and research. It is a social network that provides elearning tools in order to learn languages, which is such an important activity in this age of globalization. We are continuing to design and develop more detailed tools and functions.

2. What deficiencies have you detected in the market that you want to cover?

For one thing, we detected a deficiency in Web 2.0 that affects social networks. So far it has mainly been used for entertainment purposes or to increase the number of social contacts an individual has. We wondered if these networks could be integrated into something bigger. Why limit our social networking options to the written word or photographs? Palabea wants to go further. It gives people the opportunity to connect with people around the world and to share each other's languages. Palabea was conceived as a global network, hence the .net domain. Another deficiency we would like to fulfill, and this is actually the most important role of Palabea, is e-learning. Online teaching so far is very limited. As of right now people can find lots of information on the Internet, but there is no such thing as a portal where one can interact with others in so many different ways of studying and learning. This is what makes Palabea so innovative: we have developed a set of tools that allows people to learn languages through a social network.

Here's another advantage of Palabea: so far, e-learning has been based on interacting with software. We have turned things upside down. We allow people to interact with people, and to use e-learning tools just as a support system and not as the primary method of learning. Here's an example to make this point clear: Consider two college students who are preparing for a foreign language exam, and they need a library to study together and share their notes. If they are members of Palabea, they can work together without the need for a physical, common space. They can create a virtual classroom and submit, read and edit documents, get information from native

speakers or professors to resolve any doubts, and of course communicate in real time through the "langphone", our communication tool that allows videoconferencing with no need for installing any additional software. For Palabea, technology is designed to meet human needs, not vice versa.

3. How do you use it?

Palabea is very user-friendly, thanks to its clear interface and simple design. If a user should experience difficulty in figuring out how to use any of the functions, we recommend that they take a look at what other people have created on Palabea. However, we must say that it's very easy for your typical Internet surfer to figure out. In my opinion, the best way to use it is to simply play around and explore all the functions that Palabea has to offer, and then to start using it for the purpose of learning languages. In order to use the site, it is mandatory to register and to declare which language one knows and which ones one intends to learn. At this time, Palabea offers several options:

- Receive lessons and material (text or multimedia) for the language you want at the level you choose. When facing difficulties, you can search for a person with the language skills you are looking for, invite him or her to join your network, and create a productive exchange of knowledge.
- Open a virtual classroom where you can edit and enrich such material. The user can choose to work alone or in a group.
- Download pod casts or video lessons.
- Work with documents, dictionaries, etc.
- If a user still wants to study a language offline with traditional methods, they can:
 - Obtain information about language courses in their own country or abroad.
- Get in touch with people who attended such courses and gather comments, opinions, etc.
- Obtain access to material that schools themselves post on Palabea.
- Offer services to the community (language professor, au pair, host family)
- Create content (that the community may want to pay for)

4. What's the difference between your platform and a conventional e-learning community?

There is no such thing as a social network with e-learning tools. There are communities that offer very basic tools, such as communities oriented to vocabulary learning, which are definitely too specialized in scope to be called e-learning communities. Palabea is a pioneer in this sense, since it actually allows the online learning of a language in a flexible way by removing the rigidity of the steps fixed by offline software.

5. What are the main novelties that you are providing?

Palabea offers the user the opportunity to learn a language online in a flexible and customized way. On Palabea, every user can actually adapt his or her learning experience to meet his or her needs. We haven't developed software that requires following a pre-determined path, we have created a virtual environment to learn languages. On Palabea, users can communicate thru audio-video conferencing. This is a big innovation, since at the present time most large online communities do not offer this tool. Another novelty Palabea offers users is a space to get to know one another and share pictures, videos, pod casts, etc. So far, social networks have been centered around and/or limited to one function (posting videos, posting pictures), which requires people to subscribe to several communities to in order to utilize different functions. In this sense, Palabea offers a very wide range of possibilities, in order to bring different communities together.

Another novelty is that Palabea is not isolated from the real world: we have room for both online and offline learning. Palabea does not mean to substitute traditional learning methods, but it means to enrich them and aims to ultimately merge with them.

6. How many languages can one learn?

As many as one wishes. Obviously, the more commonly spoken languages (Spanish and English for example) will make up a lot more content and material than others, but our aim is to allow people to learn even less commonly spoken languages through Palabea. As of right now we already have five languages (Spanish, Italian, German, French, English), and that's pretty good considering that Palabea was just launched a week ago.

By the end of the month we plan to include ten more.

7. How many users do you plan to reach? By when?

We aim to reach 1 million users in a year.

8. What is the theme of this community?

Palabea, the Speaking World.

9. What problems do most people have when learning a new language?

Lack of time, lack of motivation and the high cost of private lessons. Most people study a new language in college, and afterwards only a small percentage of them keeps it up, because it is either too expensive or too time consuming. When it comes to lack of motivation, this is mainly due to the inflexibility of courses, and to the fact that after a long day at work most people are not interested in attending a language course with a group of strangers. It's a big effort, in terms of money and personal commitment. I think this is true for most people, which does not at all mean that they aren't interested in learning languages (most Europeans are very keen on this point), but it shows that most potential learners experience some inconveniences that make learning a new language difficult.

10. Which languages are the most important to know right now and which ones will be in the future?

A language academy carried out a very detailed study on this topic, using data from their 450 teaching centers in 50 countries on 5 continents. It yielded the following results: 69.43% of its students want to learn English, 6.8% French and 5.9% Spanish. Spanish might surpass French very soon. In the period from 1989-2004, Spanish was one of the few languages whose demand has been increasing at a rate of 9.57%. At the same time, Italian and German have lost demand at a rate of 17% and 42% respectively. The language whose demand is growing with the highest rate of demand is Mandarin Chinese (+454%). English gained 43.29% and Latin America is also an area with significant growth.

Another survey carried out by ALTO (an association for travel organizations) shows the most



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desired destinations for learning languages to be:

- Great Britain 79%
- Spain 58%
- United States 58%
- Canada 47%

Followed by Australia and France (42%), Malta (32%), and New Zealand (11%). Other countries like Italy, Germany and Mexico are around 10%.

12. What was most expensive function of Palabea to develop? What part of the website are you most proud of?

The virtual classroom and all the tools that make the site function properly were the most expensive parts to develop. The classrooms are still not 100% complete, because we want to track how people use them so we can continue to edit and add functions based on their feedback. ,These virtual classes will include tools that will make us proud of being pioneers in the latest technology. Another feature we are very proud of is the "lingofon", our communication tool. The essential idea of connecting people from all over the world to help one another improve their language proficiency makes us very proud of Palabea, since we think that little by little some cultural barriers and prejudices can finally be broken.

13. How is the Palabea team composed?

Palabea is run by a team of 15 people. We get together on Mondays and plan all the tasks for the coming week. On the maintenance side, we discuss issues and divvy up the work among seven programmers and one designer. On the planning side, three other members work on the development of functions and the organization of the team so that all the coded parts are coherent by the end of the week and that there are no errors.



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14. How long did it take to launch Palabea?

Since the initial business plan, it's been 14 months of intensive work and stress with no weekends. I want to thank all the Palabea team for their hard work, dedication and confidence. The working environment in Palabea is very special, due to the vision we have that Palabea will become a reference portal for all people interested in learning a language.