

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

Language School 2.0: Skype Lessons with Teachers from all over the World
Interview with Tobias Lorenz

Anyone who has ever tried and failed to find a teacher for the African Hausa or Philippine Tagalog languages will find the services offered by a new company very helpful: the Glovico Language School, founded in 2010, refers to itself as a fair-trade company. Language instructors from developing countries teach classes directly from their homelands via Skype. Digital Development Debates talked to Glovico founder, Tobias Lorenz.

What is the advantage of an online language school?

There are a lot! Students can have lessons comfortably from their couch at home or from a hotel room. They don't have to follow a predefined schedule and can set times for lessons themselves. But most importantly: they have private lessons in which the teacher responds to them individually, and for a very reasonable price. Individual lessons cost between seven and eight Euros, a hard price to beat. And this is a lot of money for our teachers. The fact that they work from their homelands also makes lessons particularly exciting. Our teacher Eric from Côte d'Ivoire, for example, continued to teach from a safe house during the unrest last year. He was able to report to his students live from the crisis region.

So your teachers come from a range of different countries. How do you meet them?

That really depends. One of the teachers who has been with us the longest, Victor from Guatemala, was recommended by a friend who had taken lessons with him. We met Iyanatou from Senegal, who teaches French, through Ashoka, an organization that identifies social companies. They are a great bunch and typically also very reliable.

What do your language teachers do when they are not working for Glovico?

Victor's main job is teaching Spanish and he also teaches "offline". But our teacher Eric from Côte d'Ivoire, for example, produces soap on the side. He also has a part-time job as a janitor at the university, which means he has access to the computers and can teach French.

How much do they earn at Glovico on average?

That varies greatly: we have some teachers who can live almost exclusively off their Glovico earnings. But we also have teachers who offer a few lessons on the side and earn 100€ every three months. Teachers set their own hourly rates, and we take an additional commission of two Euro per hour. We use it to pay to further develop the platform and cover the fees for transferring funds. It is important to us that our teachers really receive 100% of their share. Therefore we also pay our teachers for the free trial lessons they give to new students.

What sort of feedback do you get from your teachers?

They are thrilled! And I am particularly proud of the fact that they all say it is not just the money that makes Glovico so attractive to them, but also the opportunity to talk to people all over the world. Sometimes even additional projects develop from these contacts. One of our students, for example, runs a microcredit project for solar energy panels in Senegal. She was so pleased with her teacher that she is now involving her in the microcredit project.

What is the typical Glovico student like?

There is no such thing. We have school children who use Glovico for tutoring, and seniors who want to refresh their language skills after retirement. One of our students is married to a woman from Ethiopia

and wants to learn Amharic. Another one travels to the Philippines on business and is learning Tagalog. We once had a query from an Indian boarding school who wanted to work with us to offer their students Spanish lessons, and someone from Senegal who wanted to learn French through us from a fellow Senegalese.

Glovico was founded in 2010, so it has only been around for 1.5 years. How successful are you now?

We currently arrange for around 300 lessons per month for approximately 2,000 registered users. Right now we have roughly 30 teachers for slightly more than 20 languages. Spanish, French and English continue to be our most popular languages.

Glovico calls itself a "social business". What does that mean?

The firm gives priority to social goals and is less focused on profit. All our profits are reinvested in the company. That doesn't mean that our employees volunteer their time. According to Nobel Peace Prize winner and social business founder Muhammad Yunus, a social business should not pay out any dividends, but it should pay its employees market-rate salaries.

How can a language school be "fair trade"?

According to the European Fair Trade Association (EFTA) fair trade is: "a trading partnership that seeks greater equity in international trade". It offers "better trading conditions to, and secures the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South." We fulfil these criteria by providing all our employees with a fair and transparent wage. And while our teachers are generally less marginalized than smallholder farmers, for example, in future we would like to hire such people as well. They could get a microcredit for a smartphone, for example, and then use it to teach.

How did you get the idea of founding Glovico?

Around the end of 2008, I had been talking a lot to my friend Ole Seidenberg about how web technologies could be used for development (web4dev). We wanted to make development cooperation entrepreneurial. Then, at some point in the night I woke up and remembered that I had studied Spanish with a private teacher in Guatemala a few years ago and skyped back home already then. And so the idea was born.

Considerable time passed then before you actually founded the company.

When I was in Eritrea in spring 2009 doing research for my doctoral dissertation, I was appalled by the poverty there -- especially since there are so many smart people there with entrepreneurial spirit! Yet, the political and economical situation in the country keeps them from applying their skills. It was there that I began writing up a social business plan. When I got back to Germany, I started looking for a web agency and sponsors. The risk was too high though for many social investors, so that ultimately I took my own money and launched Glovico in the summer of 2010.

Who else works for Glovico besides you?

Our current team consists of four people and an IT company that continuously helps us to advance our homepage. We also work with various NGOs and volunteer organizations and a few universities. Our work would be impossible without this network. We couldn't find teachers in Somali or Nepali, for example.

How much competition is there?

There are maybe a handful of online language schools, but their teachers are generally from Spain, France or the USA. There is only one other fair trade school -- and it only offers Spanish and is primarily active in the United States.

What are Glovico's biggest problems?

It is still the internet connection in some countries. After all, we are very dependent on video connections. And for an organization as small as ours, it is not at all easy to make a name for ourselves globally and market the smaller languages in particular, like Tagalog, Indonesian or Wolof. Here we had

really counted on social media, but we have discovered that we also need stronger partnerships with other organizations.

Are there things you still need to improve?

At the moment we are working on providing more learning materials. We are also offering our teachers more teacher trainings to improve their teaching skills.

You even have a code of conduct. Why is that necessary?

In the beginning we were very worried about two things. Firstly, that we could be misused as a dating platform and that students would approach our female teachers in particular with agendas not related to learning a language. Secondly, we didn't want our teachers to suffer from racist attacks. In addition we didn't want the feedback given to our teachers to be too critical. Feedback is something very personal and we didn't want people to handle it irresponsibly. The code of conduct was intended to regulate these aspects from the very beginning. Now, however, we have seen that we needn't have worried at all. None of our teachers has ever reported an attempt to initiate a romantic relationship or suffered any racist comments. And the feedback is so positive across the board, that it is a bit tricky to distinguish between our teachers based on it.

What was the first lesson like, and who was the student?

I was the student for the first lesson, of course, and the teacher still works with us: Eric from Côte d'Ivoire. Today I still do a short trial lesson with each of our teachers as part of our job interview process. Eric also gave the first paid lesson later, which made us very proud back then. His student at the time was very pleased and continued lessons with Eric for more than half a year.

Eva-Maria Verfürth conducted the interview.