



FOUNDER SPOTLIGHT: PHILIPP ETZLINGER FROM UUGOT.IT

July 3, 2019 | Aneta Pawlik

What's the future of language learning? Virtual reality, online classrooms, gamification, AI? While all of these exciting technological developments are happening, one cannot deny the effectiveness of watching TV with subtitles as one of the tools to learn a language.

A Viennese start-up, uugot.it, decided to combine the TV approach with new technologies and developed an innovative streaming app, which uses subtitles to help people learn German by watching local TV channels. uugot.it also recently graduated from found! 2019 accelerator program. I spoke to Philipp Etzlinger, the founder and CEO of uugot.it, about his start-up.

Impact Hub Vienna: Philipp, tell me a bit about yourself. What's your background? It must be in technology...

Philipp Etzlinger: No, actually, not at all. My background is in Finance. I worked for Deloitte in the auditing department for

almost seven years. Later on, I moved to ecoplus, the Business Agency of Lower Austria, where I was a project manager in the investor relations' department. So basically I was in negotiations with mayors of villages and investors, who would like to build plants and were looking for the right places for them and consulted them on public grants. These were the main areas I focused on.

When I started ecoplus, I was already working on the uugot.it idea, but it took some time before we got public funding and to find the right people and the team. So actually we founded the company in April 2016 after receiving the pledge for grants in December 2015. That's when we started developing the whole thing.

Your idea had been brewing for quite a while before you founded uugot.it. How did you get interested in language learning?

The roots of this idea reach back to my time in Paris. I was studying in Paris for some time as an Erasmus student. When I moved to France I realised that my French was not good enough to follow the lectures at Grande Ecole. For that reason I first decided not to move in with the other Austrians into a shared flat because that doesn't force you to speak French. Instead, I shared a flat with a French woman. Most of French people do not speak foreign languages, therefore I knew I would be forced to speak French. In the evening I watched the news on TV. During the day I read "Der Standard" and "Die Presse" and by doing that, it was much easier for me to understand the French news as I already knew the context of what was going on. Anyway it was tough as I didn't understand a lot of words - so I was sitting in front of the TV strapped with a biro and a notebook, noting down all the words I didn't understand and looking them up in a dictionary at the same time. Of course, I missed a lot of words and had to realize that I'm not good with that kind of multitasking. The interesting thing was that I discovered that more than half of the international students improved their French in the same way.

When I came back to Austria I didn't think about that anymore. Then in 2013, I was working on another TV project. In a brainstorming session, I thought about what else can you do with a TV and I remembered my time in Paris in 2003. I thought

that today, with all the new technology available, we could improve on that way of learning a language. I stumbled over a research study from Kaplan International, which discovered that 82 per cent of those who learn English as a foreign language, use the TV. I did it myself with French, international students in Paris did it too, we could improve that. The idea of the uugot.it was born then.

It's absolutely amazing that you held onto this idea and developed it when the technology came about.

Yes, but the story continues. Afterwards I didn't use my French anymore as in Finance and at Deloitte one only needs English. As a result, I lost a lot of French. I tried to catch on with songs but without subtitles, it was hard to stay focused on it. Same with English. Then I saw Netflix with the subtitles and, as we had a very basic demo, I tried to click on them but nothing happened. I thought that I would like to make my idea happen. And it wasn't only me, who was struggling.

In 2015, the wave of refugees arrived. We realised very quickly that TV is the mirror of society and if people watch local TV, they get to know what that society is like. They learn about traditions and customs. It was also a driver for me in France, when choosing to watch local channels – I wanted to know what challenges the local people faced and what happens in Bordeaux or Montpellier...

I also found out that the integration courses in Austria are actually only eight hours. You can't help people feel comfortable in a completely new culture in just eight hours. It's a good start but it's not enough. With a companion like uugot.it, when people can watch the local television, we tear down the language barrier, it's easier to catch up with society.

You mentioned that completing your team took quite a long time. Why was that? Did you have a very clear vision of who you were

looking for?

It was really important to find the right people to become crucial team members. You asked me before if I have a technical background. I don't and it was mandatory to find someone who does. We also needed a linguist and someone specialising in didactics. So these were the key positions I was looking out to fill. It was very hard to find the right person for the chief technology officer (CTO) position – during the whole project, we've actually had a couple of different CTOs.

And it's tough if you don't have money to pay people. I mean they lose confidence if you're invited to present at business agencies and you are in the final jury hearing and finally you get negative feedback. The judges would say it's a good idea but they wouldn't believe in the method actually working.

This is something we heard a lot and at some point, I decided that we needed research, academic research, to support our concept with, for example, the University of Vienna, and actually conducted one.

Another feedback we heard was that people couldn't imagine how uugot.it worked. So we've built a very simple demo that people could actually try out and see it. This took some time because I was still looking for the right people to work with. Either I had to discover that people do not have the required skills or didn't fit in the team and our mission: helping to improve the integration process. I think most of the start-ups have these challenges, that the original founders split up because of disagreements. We had someone on the team, who wasn't a good match. I realized that too late and, at that time, I was not the CEO of the company.

So from the perspective of building your team for a project, especially technology-based project like uugot.it, how do you, as a start-up owner, make sure that this external feedback doesn't put your team down?

That's a good question! It's not easy to say what the right way is. I mean, I was kind of frustrated that I needed so many technical co-founders, people who were responsible for technical features and in the beginning, I couldn't judge people's abilities to build uugot.it, I didn't have the insight I have today. And of course, what we developed was not an easy thing to build and we needed expertise from several different fields but didn't have the budget nor the influence to have experts advise us. We needed to take this process, to build this team we have now in small steps, and eventually rearrange the team.

One thing I think is really necessary for team building... When I studied I worked full-time, also beforehand, when I was doing my matura, so I didn't have regular student life. I didn't build my network because I was busy. So when I saw other founders, I was kind of jealous that these people "grew up" together, sometimes went to school together and formed their teams. They had deep relationships and "trust" in each other. And I think this is one of the most important things within the team, that you can trust each other. That you know that the other people are also committed 100 per cent and more – and I would not recommend to hire a consultant for your team. This never works.

Speaking of trust, you mentioned earlier that one of the repetitive comments you received was questioning the viability of your method of teaching languages. How did you organise the research?

This was actually quite simple. We received feedback that the method doesn't seem right and I said, "Ok, let's find out". We researched how to fund a study. Then my first CTO recommended me to contact FFG Innovationscheck and with the funding received from them, we financed the first study.

We asked the University of Vienna, the Department of German Studies to do it, and wanted to get an answer to a very specific question, namely "Are subtitles an appropriate tool for learning foreign languages?". Professor Dr Boeckmann, who led the study, conducted a meta-study, which comprised of about 50 different studies and the feedback was amazing. Results from 43 studies concluded that subtitles led to boosted foreign

language learning.

We also showed the researchers our concept and they agreed that interactive subtitles are the right way. They also helped us to improve our concept!

Let's talk about your application. How does it differ from other learning apps on the market?

We do not see ourselves so much as a language learning tool even though we are connected to that as well. We see ourselves as a streaming tool – you can stream daily broadcasts and what we do is add interactive same language subtitles, intralingual subtitles, so German broadcast will be equipped with German interactive subtitles. The subtitles are generated by our translation algorithms, based on existing machine translation engines.

How it works is when you don't understand a word you click on it and the word will be translated in that very second. At the same time, each word you click on will be stored within the language learning section.

You learn a language using uugot.it but for us, the focus is on the users getting information – you do something you like, watch a broadcast you like and you learn the words you don't understand in a subconscious way – together with the message. And this helps you understanding Austrian peculiarities.

What's the status of the app right now?

It's usable but not rolled out for general use yet. We only did pilot phases, so far with over 650 people. We have been involved with Austrian educational institutions from a very early stage on, such as VHS Linz and VHS Wien, as well as three universities in Latin America, which already use uugot.it in German language learning. I'm very proud to say that Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), the biggest university of Mexico but also the 4th university in terms of reputation in Latin America, is using uugot.it in their language learning courses.

How did you establish these partnerships?

I have been invited to be a speaker at different national and international conferences, German as foreign language conferences, which is how I made these connections. In terms of VHS Linz that was a bit different – we were part of a project, an incubator programme, which had selected people or firms from Upper Austria to help one start-up get more exposure. In our case, the office of the mayor of Linz discovered us and during a photo shoot, we got to show the first prototype to the mayor, who was very impressed with uugot.it. When I mentioned us doing a field test in a couple of months, he suggested to do it in Linz. Within two months we established a close relationship with the city of Linz and this led to other opportunities.

Fast forward to today: where are you now with your start-up?

We are in the seed stage. We have our first clients, for example, we have equipped Wissensturm in Linz with uugot.it. We have some announcements coming up in July with a press conference then we will roll out uugot.it.

Many thanks for your time and sharing your start-up story!

Follow uugot.it on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) or [visit their website](#).



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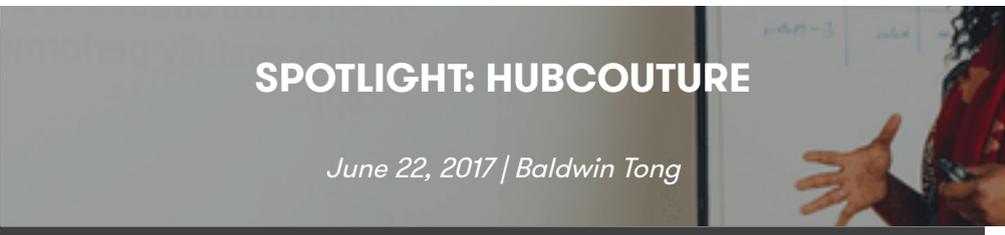
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