Designing a VLE for
Academic Reading Language Courses

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Abstract

At the Language Centre of the University of Cambridge we offer foreign language academic reading courses for postgraduate students. The vast majority of these student are enrolled in PhD programmes and are researchers.

The students' varied academic, cultural and linguistic background poses acute methodological problems. Furthermore, being researchers (not in a taught course) students don't have a unified reading list and therefore, also have diverse needs.

The selection of adequate reading materials and appropriate methodologies clearly represents a challenge. Apart from transferable reading skills and strategies most students need essential language skills. Therefore, our focus in class is turning towards small group collaborative work. In order to extend the opportunities for such collaborative work beyond the classroom time/space paradigm we are designing a virtual learning environment where students will be able to upload their texts in digital format, have direct access to online dictionaries, glossaries, thesauri as well as other available tools.

At the end of the course, these annotated documents will be validated by the teacher and deposited in an online searchable database for the benefit of the next generations of students on the course. Such a database can also be shared among a number of participating institutions who will be able to use it and contribute to it.

1. The Institutional Context

The Language Centre of the University of Cambridge serves a community of 19,000 students and more than 12,000 academic, administrative and colleges staff. The LC features a self-access and independent learning resource centre, a modern foreign languages programme, the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme and a technical section.

The Cambridge University Language Programme (CULP) offers taught language courses in 12 languages (Arabic, , Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swahili) and focuses on every day real-time oral communication (lower levels) and academic and intellectual contents and presentation skills at higher levels of proficiency. This programmed of general language content and all four skills enrolls around 1,500 students per year. One of the main features of the CULP courses is the use of interactive, multimedia materials that are delivered online instead of textbooks. Most of these materials are designed and produced in-house. The LC design team creates the template, CULP teachers are asked to contribute the content and the technical section takes care of designing the interface, implementing the functionalities, producing the audio/video recordings and ultimately delivering the materials to students.

CULP also features academic reading courses in French, German, Italian and Spanish. These courses are aimed at post-graduate students of the Schools of Arts and Humanities and Humanities and Social Sciences.

2. The student background and needs

One third of the student population at Cambridge is post-graduate students and the vast majority of those are carrying out research (not in taught courses) that leads to the award of a PhD. The background of this student population is very varied as 53% of the students are from outside the UK and nearly 50% do not speak English as their first language. Students enrolled in our FL Academic Reading programmed come from two schools only but nonetheless have a wide range of academic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds that has significant implications in terms of teaching philosophy, approach, methodology and resources selection.

Furthermore, the fact that these students are engaged in research means that there is no unified reading list. In my Italian class last year, I had students reading Giovanni Bottero (philosopher, historian, early 17th century), Niccolò Macchiavelli (16th century), Margherita Isnardi Parente (theology, 20th century), one student who needed to read Venetian 17th century historical archives (in Venetian,

not in Italian) and one who researched the history of the Venetian Biennale between the two wars (1920-1940)

Apart from a varied range of academic interests, the students were of very mixed abilities from complete, *ab initio* beginners to an intermediate level.

3. Student motivation

The vast majority of students taking these courses are enroled in 3-4 years long PhD programmes and are required to read secondary literature in languages other than English and/or the language of their primary interest. Their needs have several interesting components among which the most interesting for our purpose here are: immediacy and specificity. Students need to read specific literature in French (i.e.) and their need is rather urgent. Therefore, in general they are not interested in the language, or the language or academic reading skills *per se*. What they want is to be able to read (i.e.) Giovanni Bottero's *Delle Relationi Universali* and link the content of the text to their own research.

It is important to add that these courses, while not compulsory are free of charge (for the students at least). This will also have an impact on the attendance and retention rates and ultimately, at the success of the course.

The courses do not feature an in-built progression component but students are welcome to enroll in consecutive years.

4. The teaching

In German and French where we have greater numbers (150 and 100 respectively), we offer courses at three levels: basic, intermediate 1 and 2. In Italian and Spanish where the numbers are smaller (20 and 12 this year) we offer one class only that starts from the very beginning but aims at reaching a 'reading' level within five weeks (5 sessions or 7.5 hours of teaching).

Our experience has shown that most students are not interested in acquiring general academic reading skills (scanning, skimming, speed and diagonal reading, etc.) but rather specific language skills that will enable them to deal with their specific texts. In general, Cambridge post-graduate students in the humanities possess sound reading skills that brought them to Cambridge and the post-graduate course in the first place. After all, the tower of the University Library is still, nowadays the tallest building in town and a powerful metaphor for the importance of books, knowledge and the University for the community.

Informed by these considerations, our approach is aimed at bringing the students up to the required level or reading proficiency as quickly as possible. This is most evident in our approach at basic level.

For the purpose of this article, I will only discuss here the methodology applied to the courses at basic level for their represent the greatest challenge.

The course is divided in three parts.

The first five weeks of the course are dedicated to the study of the basic grammatical point of the language. Given the needs of the students, this includes the study of the subjunctive and syntax. The focus is obviously on only one of the four skills – reading. Some attention is also given to correct pronunciation.

In the second part (5 weeks), the class starts reading texts that are supplied by the teacher. The class reads and translates collegially using the relevant monolingual glossaries, bilingual and online dictionaries that are displayed on the electronic board (with internet connection). In each text, attention is given to a specific grammatical point (i.e. usage of *passato prossimo, remoto* and *imperfetto*). Homework is given regularly and students are required to start reading extensively from the reading list provided by the teacher.

In the third part of the course, the teacher complies a list of authors and titles of interest to the students, asks the students to send/bring in a copy of these and makes a number of copies. Classes are then divided in groups of three based on academic background and NOT on language proficiency. During class time, each group will read a text that they contributed. Historians read history, musicians music, students of literature texts on literature etc. At their disposal, they have paper glossaries and dictionaries. The electronic board features online glossaries/dictionaries that can be consulted. Furthermore, most students bring to the lesson their own lap top computers and smart phones with access to the internet. The teacher (facilitator?) monitors the work going from group to group and makes themself available to answer questions and give support. In the last 30 minutes of the session, each group gives a brief contextualisation of the text and author then reads aloud a section (copies of the texts are available for the whole class) and gives comments on some specific features of the language that they encountered. The teacher writes such salient points on the board and offers further comments.

5. Already existing materials and the rationale for new developments

The LC has an 8 people strong technical team that is in charge of the network, the computer hardware, audio-visual materials editing, production and storage as well as the design and production of interactive multimedia materials in a range of languages. Many of these materials are freely available for download from the LC web page: http://www.langcen.cam.ac.uk/opencourseware/index.html.

Among those Open Courseware materials is a set of texts in French, German and Italian for Academic Reading courses. In the case of Italian these materials feature excerpts from Boccaccio, Macchiavelli, Lampedusa and Da Ponte's libretto for the opera Don Giovanni. The texts are supported by glossaries and a range of exercises.

Large databases of texts in major languages are available online. On of those is the *Italian Biblioteca digitale dell'Accademia della Crusca* (http://www.bdcrusca.it/listaautori.asp).

The LC online materials, feature a set number of texts and further development is time-consuming and costly. They fulfill their role of first point of contact for the students enrolled in the course. The large international databases offer access to texts but further support in reading, translation and contextualisation is necessary for the student to make use of the text in their research.

6. The design of the Academic Reading VLE for collaborative learning

The Academic Reading VLE is intended to function as a collaborative environment where students can actively engage with a range of texts and then share the output of their engagement with other students. It is hoped that the resulting documents in the form of annotations to a wide range of reading materials will be made available to students in subsequent years for additional reading practice. Trained native speakers will ensure that the released material is correct and of an appropriate standard.

To this end the VLE will provide the following features:

- an initial store of text
- an active area where students can upload annotations to the text in the form of a Wiki
- a range of tools, including dictionaries, glossaries, annotation guidelines etc.
- a forum for students to exchange ideas and comments
- a searchable store where texts, after suitable editing, are stored in a standard format
- access to the searchable store for students and tutors in comparable institutions

7. Conclusion

Such a VLE will integrate classroom, face-to-face teaching and flexible learning at a distance both technologically (can be accessed from both the classroom and at a distance) and methodologically (collaborative learning activities continue). This environment will offer all the necessary tools to support the reading and establish a platform for the collection, dissemination and exchange of annotated texts. In partnership with comparable institutions, this database of texts can grow exponentially and prove to be a significant tool in the further development of academic reading skills in a very wide range of languages and academic fields.