



Blended On-Line Language Courses: High Technology and Mixed Motivation?

Richard Chapman¹

Abstract

Funding was obtained to enable students of the University of Ferrara to take a recognised on-line course in B2/C1 English for academic purposes (EAP) free of charge. Along with potential benefit for participants, the University required a research project to analyse the efficacy of specific on-line language courses in raising linguistic competence with a minimum of face-to-face lessons.

An on-line EAP course was selected (Epigeum, OUP), and candidates recruited via email and a limited poster campaign. A total of 113 (BA, MA and doctoral) students took part in a written selection test and 56 candidates deemed to have a level of B2 or above were accepted on the programme. Participants had eight months of access to a complete four-skills, on-line course specifically designed to help students planning to study in British, or English-speaking universities. Individual motivation had been taken into account during the pre-test and was considered an important object of inquiry. Technical assistance was available via email during the duration of the on-line course, but only two face-to-face lessons were planned to take place in itinere.

A final test, identical in format to the original placement test, again at B2 level, was administered to enable researchers to compare results and form an impression of individual and overall improvement. A questionnaire was administered to gauge student reactions, possible criticisms and motivational factors.

Results were mixed, if not disappointing. A significantly reduced number of students completed the course and final test, improvement (represented by improved test results) was very slight, and participants expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of the on-line course.

Results suggest that choosing the correct level of classroom teaching and personal support is fundamental to successful exploitation of on-line language learning material. We also recommend institutions do not succumb to the temptation to reduce teaching responsibilities by relying exclusively on digital courses. Thematic content of on-line materials is seen to be of significant importance in motivation. Besides the complex challenge of choosing the correct blend in course design, the paper concludes with considerations concerning the cognitive effect of computer-based language learning.

Keywords: on-line; EAP; questionnaire; blend; course design

1. Introduction

This experimental research had two distinct aims. First and foremost, the project was intended to assess the efficacy of on-line EAP learning materials in raising communicative competence in English of students enrolled in various departments of the University of Ferrara, Italy. Students were expected to be largely autonomous in their use of material, and motivation was considered an important aspect of the experience. A second, ancillary aim was the hoped-for benefit to the participants themselves. A pre-test and a test on course completion, identical in format, were used as measures of this linguistic benefit, and questionnaires were employed to try to gauge student perceptions and motivation both at the outset, and at course end.

The research attempts to contribute to an important debate concerning the potential benefits (and pitfalls) of using technology in the learning process. Our approach is not highly theoretical or technical, but instead offers a description of the experience of using an on-line package in a university context with the view to offering a wider range of options to Italian-speaking students requiring higher levels of competence in English, professionally or for further study.

Research in this field is timely because of financial investments to be made, both by institutions and individual students, and because of the implicit promise of on-line, take-anywhere learning that it is significantly easier and more successful. We suggest that it is only by observing actual instances of the employment of computer-based material that we can begin to take on-line education out of the realms of novelty and potential and into the harsh reality of linguistic needs, course requirements and budgets.

¹ University of Ferrara (Italy)



2. The on-line course

The on-line material selected was *Epigeum* [1], a complete, four-skills language course explicitly designed for students of approximately B2 level (CEFR) who want to use English in an academic environment. The *Epigeum* platform offers participants a core course of 23 hours' English training with a further 80 hours of additional material. Although the course is intended to be used in parallel with face-to-face tuition, it is claimed that it is flexible and can be adapted to various learning situations and requirements and will foster self-study. It should be noted that there is a small but significant difference in the *Epigeum* approach to EAP: indeed, it is renamed 'English for Academic Studies' and the premise is that academic purposes should be the "driver" for the English learned rather than the other way about. In other words, applied skills will be intrinsic to content from the outset, and not just add-ons or afterthoughts. Language is seen as "embedded in the academic practices, discourses and texts of the academic community" [2]. This is an interesting methodological choice, but might also be challenging to some students.

The course itself consists of an introductory unit, "Preparing for study: Academic culture, language and assessment" and then follows two possible pathways, either theme-based material on the linguistic characteristics of academic English, or largely the same content through a four-skills based approach. There is an additional course for tutors to help programme delivery, and a rich supplement with detailed suggestions for lessons and activities with fully-developed guidelines for teachers and participants.

The *Epigeum* course offers full support for implementation and technical back-up to help the host institution with any glitches that may occur. During the academic year we found the technical support team to be excellent: highly efficient, polite and, most importantly, very fast in trouble-shooting. *Epigeum* is a commercial on-line learning programme developed with the collaboration of numerous academic institutions [3], and so reflects technological developments in learning tools and a likely model for future course development. This made it ideal for our research, while at the same time offering material that appeared to be highly relevant to student needs.

Like most on-line courses, *Epigeum* is ambitious. It is described as "designed to be inspirational and transformative," produced "Through collaboration with world-class authors and universities, use of cutting-edge technology..." to achieve "exceptional online learning." [4] It sets an ambitious agenda. We had to measure student progress and attitudes with this in mind.

3. Experimental application

Candidates for the experimental on-line course were recruited via a limited poster campaign and an email sent to all university departments. Of a total of 113 students who took part in a one-off placement test consisting of reading, writing and listening instruments, 56 were deemed to have the requisite level (B2 or above). BA, MA and doctoral students were accepted, along with some administrative staff, who took the same test, but with a lower threshold for acceptance. The decision to recruit from all four sectors of the university population was intentional, as the researchers hoped to identify whether the material was more suitable for one group than another. The writing test instrument specifically focussed on personal reasons for taking part in the experimental EAP programme, and a questionnaire was administered to clarify background information, such as previous experience of language study (years of English courses and type), reasons for studying English and perceptions of its importance in employment and academic contexts. The placement test was designed to be suitable as the format of any final test, enabling direct comparison of participants' scores on each (i.e. before and after completing the course). Reading and grammatical-lexical instruments were emulations of FCE examinations, and listening extracts were commercially available preparation tools with questions developed specifically for the placement test. All instruments had been used previously with other students so that benchmarking could be achieved with some confidence.

Participants had around 8 months of access to the material offered by the platform. Very few technical hitches were experienced and these were overcome either directly by the researcher, or by requesting technical assistance from the *Epigeum* provider. There were only two two-hour, traditional lessons during the whole course. This was a deliberate aspect of project design: students needed to be left largely on their own if the research was to assess the viability of replacing language teaching with on-line courses, and to attempt to measure the potential of autonomous learning for our students. In other words, we were applying a 'hard' version of blended learning, with limited support and high dependence on the quality and efficacy of computer-based materials.



4. Measures

As numbers were not excessive (a total of 56 participants), a mixed approach to measuring outcomes was taken. The aim was to obtain the best of both worlds: an objective table of student scores showing any differences in achievement (and so, by implication, level), and qualitative information gleaned from questionnaires completed at the very beginning and end of the programme. While great care was taken to ensure the similarity of the placement and course-end test, we can never claim that two language tests are of absolutely the same level of difficulty. But the format and timings were identical, and the material was pretested. Attendance at mid-course classroom lessons and the final test was considered an objective indicator of motivation in itself, and any comments made informally to the researcher (in an email, perhaps) were also taken into consideration.

5. Results

Results, both from the final test and questionnaires, were, in the main, quite disappointing. On average, candidates achieved a 5 point improvement in overall scores (out of a hundred) and actually lost an average of one mark (out of 20) in the listening exercises. Perhaps more serious was the low participation rate: only 15 out of 56 students presented for the final test, despite the promise of a certificate for successful candidates. This lack of continued motivation was reflected in the qualitative measures: questionnaires indicated a rather low completion rate for the on-line material and expressed dissatisfaction with the learning experience: 10 students described the course as *somewhat useful*, and four *only a little*, with 1 even saying it was *hardly of any use at all*. Self-reported completion rates were reasonable: 4 students claiming over 80% and another 4 between 60% and 79%, with 6 selecting 40% to 59%. In this context it is not surprising to report that participants' overall descriptions of the course centred on *adequate*.

6. Brief analysis

Results in educational research require subtle analysis and here we can only give brief indicators of any conclusions. Firstly, there are significant caveats to responses to the post-course questionnaire: it was administered with the final test (a situation that could easily influence responses), and there were only 15 respondents in total.

Test scores should be taken with a pinch of salt, as no tests are of perfectly equal difficulty, and perhaps the listening test is particularly sensitive to level variations. The test was over a month after access to the on-line programme had terminated and so could well reflect a natural drop in performance. However, such a small increase after 8 months' intensive study must be seen as disappointing. Cognitive aspects also emerged as an issue: questionnaires described the course as 'a bit boring' and students reported little active engagement. This poses questions about the processes of on-line learning.

In conclusion, we feel obliged to underline the fundamental importance of 'getting the blend right' and there are severe doubts about the efficacy of leaving students to learn English on-line without dedicated support. Content should perhaps be more varied, as a highly relevant course might quickly become uninteresting, and risks being of little use to some users. Technology offers teachers and learners powerful tools, but they require the utmost care in application: we should not avoid them, but we cannot duck our responsibilities in educating, stimulating and supporting our students.

References

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