

BLENDED ON-LINE LANGUAGE COURSES: HIGH TECHNOLOGY AND *MIXED* MOTIVATION?

ICT for language learning

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Aims of the research

The research project had two main aims:

- *assess the efficacy of on-line EAP learning materials in raising students' communicative competence in English*
- *an ancillary aim was to benefit the participants themselves*

Some context

- *Students were from all departments in the university*
- *Motivation was considered a fundamental factor in selection*
- *Students were expected to be highly autonomous in their use of the material*
- *There is a substantial (and commonly-expressed) demand for EAP courses in the University of Ferrara*
- *One-off university funding was available for the research*
- *Participation was free for students*

The on-line course

*The on-line course selected was **epigeum (OUP)**, a complete, four-skills language course for B2 students who want to use English in an academic setting.*

*The **epigeum** course:*

- *offers **23** hours' English training, plus an additional **80** hours of study material*
- *is intended to be used in parallel with traditional, face-to-face tuition (i.e. blended approaches)*
- *claims to foster self-study and to be adaptable to various learning situations*
- *EAS rather than EAP: academic needs should be the **driver** of learning*
- *academic skills embedded in course content*
- ***theme-based** or **four-skills** based material*
- *very rich supplementary material for tutors (e.g. lessons planned)*

The on-line course # 2

Advantages of epigeum:

- *full support for implementation and technical back-up*
- *technical support team excellent*
- *developed with many academic institutions*
- *state of the art*
- *high relevance for students: ‘surrender value’*
- *model for future development?*

But: these courses are highly ambitious and this is no exception

Claims about the course

- ❖ *designed to be “inspirational and transformative”*
- ❖ *using cutting-edge technology*
- ❖ *“exceptional on-line learning”*
- ❖ *five core academic themes:*
 - ❖ *community*
 - ❖ *knowledge*
 - ❖ *identity*
 - ❖ *criticality*
 - ❖ *autonomy*

Our experiment

1) recruitment:

- poster campaign and email to all students
- one-off placement test for gatekeeping/selection
- **113** students presented for test
- test consisted of reading, writing, *UoE* and listening instruments
- BA, MA and PhD students accepted, with *c.*15 participants selected from university administrative staff
- *i.e.* participants from all four sectors of university population
- writing instrument explicitly concerned with motivation

Our experiment # 2

2) *initial information*

- ✓ preliminary questionnaire administered on test day (contextualisation)
- ✓ reasons for studying English and years of study etc.
- ✓ perceptions of the importance of English
- ✓ placement test and final test *identical* in format
- ✓ instruments were emulations of Cambridge ESOL FCE
- ✓ all items previously used and so benchmarked

Our experiment # 3

3) *the course:*

- ✓ participants had about eight months' access to material
- ✓ very few technical issues (and these easily overcome)
- ✓ **only** two, two-hour traditional, face-to-face lessons
- ✓ experiment designed to leave students 'on their own'
- ✓ a *hard* version of on-line learning
- ✓ the essential research question was:

Can *on-line language courses* replace traditional (and expensive) university language teaching policy?

Naturally, this puts a high degree of dependence on the quality and efficacy of the on-line material

Our experiment # 4

4) *measures*

- total of **56** course participants
- not statistically valid, and so
- **mixed** approach to measuring outcomes adopted
- *objective* table of participant scores (*c.f.* placement)
- *qualitative* information from **initial** and **final** questionnaires
- attendance at classroom sessions an indicator of **motivation**
- comments by email and in person taken into consideration

Results

Results were striking and quite disappointing:

- on average candidates achieved a **5-point improvement** in overall scores (out of **100**)
- actually *lost* an average of **1** point out of **20** in listening
- **low** completion rate: only **15** out of **56** candidates present for the final test (even with certificate available)
- qualitative measures were **correspondingly negative**
- **rather low** completion-rate for on-line material
- **dissatisfaction** with the learning experience

Results: some detail

Qualitative indicators:

10 students described the course as ‘*somewhat useful*’

4 students chose, ‘*only a little*’ to describe it

1 student claimed it was “*hardly of any use at all*”

Completion rates:

4 students claimed over **80%** completion

4 students, between **60** and **79%**

6 students, between **40** and **59%**

Overall descriptions of the course centred on *adequate*

Brief analysis

*Conclusions in educational research must always be **tentative** because of the wide variety of variables and contextual aspects beyond our control (or even knowledge).*

*Caveats are not to be forgotten: we only have 15 respondents for our final questionnaire, and 15 final scores for comparison. A **long period** between start- and end-dates can also vitiate against genuine comparison of results. The final test was administered over **one month after** the end of the course.*

*The **epigeum** on-line course was chosen as it was highly relevant to **perceived student needs**, but such a specific course could lack interest and variety. Assumptions as to student needs might also be questioned.*

Some conclusions

- ✓ fundamental importance of '*getting the blend right*'
- ✓ severe doubts about on-line learning without adequate (substantial and costly?) **support** and **structuring**
- ✓ need for varied content, even in focussed courses
- ✓ technology offers powerful tools, but these require the utmost care in application
- ✓ absolute impossibility of avoiding our responsibilities as educators: **teachers** and **institutions** have a **role!**
- ✓ would a good, traditional **course-book** be a better buy?
- ✓ cognitive aspects of digital learning are crying out for research
- ✓ the relationship between *total flexibility* and timetables

In a nutshell

Some brief concluding comments:

no technology offers answers without posing new questions

the experience of using a computer screen and memory to study is significantly different from 'the old days'

postmodern education is a balancing act (resources; stakeholders; devices; society etc.)

we should beware of unrealistic (dishonest?) promises

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