

Integrating e-Learning in Classroom Based Language Teaching at the Technical University of Liberec, Czech Republic

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Abstract

In our contribution we present the project "English Language Skills Development for the staff at the Technical University of Liberec" introduced in the Czech Republic in 2011. When preparing it, we followed the key principles stated in the strategic documents of the EU and the CR relevant for the lifelong learning process, namely the Integrated Action Programme in Lifelong Learning 2007-2013 and the National Strategic Framework for the CR 2007-2013. The project's target group consists of our employees, who are able to contribute towards the materialisation of the planned university study reforms. The main objectives have been to increase investment into human resources, to develop language skills and to introduce innovated teaching methods, which can become a source of inspiration for teachers of not only linguistic disciplines.

Within the Czech educational system, language competence and ICT skills have been recognised as a component making graduates more marketable, flexible and adaptable. Simultaneously, this area has been highlighted as a weakness of our educational process. Thus, it is necessary to address it with introducing appropriate learning activities for the staff since many of them had not received the relevant training during their previous studies. We believe that learner support through a rich and supportive environment is the best way to nurture language learning. With this in mind, we decided to integrate classroom teaching where we follow the core textbooks face2face from CUP and on-line learning in the LMS Moodle.

The educators responsible for the project are actively involved in the development of content for face to face and on-line delivery underpinned by the appropriate, sound methodology. The learning support environment is developed in-house and complemented by professional materials available on the Internet and via the Macmillan English Campus, for which access has been provided for a major part of the project duration.

1. Introduction

The EU funded project "English Language Skills Development for the Staff at the Technical University of Liberec" was introduced in the academic year 2010-2011. It was designed since the evaluation process at our university revealed this was a significant weakness of our employees. Currently there are more than 270 participants enrolled in 18 courses. They are recruited both from the academic and administrative staff of our institution. The educators providing tuition are from the university, from a private language school in our town and freelance tutors. The course is coordinated by the Centre of Continuing Education and assisted by one technician administrating the LMS Moodle. The project has four main objectives:

- improvement of English language skills of the academic and other university staff,
- development of self study skills and supporting interactive tasks,
- support of the development of academic writing skills, business correspondence, and presentation techniques,

- development of the collection of literature, both specialist and belles-lettres and classroom technology equipment for modern teaching.

1.1 Face to face classes and online support

After initial placement testing, 18 face-to-face courses complemented by online components were offered from CEFR [1] levels A1 to B2. Within the timeframe of the project till 2013, we hope that some participants will proceed on the C1 level, and some will take part in the specialised courses focusing on academic writing and discussions or preparation for IELTS exams. As the main coursebook the CUP series face2face [2] was selected. Each course follows the material in the textbook and participants are expected to pass the assigned number of tests, written assignments and classroom presentations. Each course also has an online support component, Moodle. Students get there information about class-work completed, homework required and continuous results, complete online tasks, and can work with other sources. For many of them the ICT component is a challenge; working with this type of experiential learning, they improve their English skills, but also learn to utilise ICT for their learning. This expertise may be a valuable source for enrichment of their own teaching skills repertoire.

1.2 Interactive tasks

The process of creating and learning to use the interactive and classroom tasks is not limited only to the project itself, but it will contribute to a further enhancement of teaching of English at our university in general. The designers utilise several basic programmes available on the Internet, mainly Hot Potatoes [3] (for others see [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]) etc. Another contribution of the project is the licence obtained for all participants for the Macmillan English Campus (MEC) [10].

Educators and participants are learning to work with them in class and at home. Thus before the end of the project they will have a chance to improve their teaching and learning skills. It is planned that also other university English educators will get access to these materials later on, and learn from their colleagues.

1.3 Academic writing and business correspondence guidebook

The need for and the contents of the guidebook emerged from a detailed survey among potential users completed during the first semester of the project. An experienced American lecturer of academic writing has created a team consisting of four members and their task is to prepare the tailor-made guidebook to help the staff improve their written skills in English, prepare for participation in conferences abroad, and communication with partners and suppliers from other countries.

1.4 Extending library collections of material in English and completion of classroom equipment

After communications across university a bad need for having an access to professional publications in English was identified. The publications can help the staff in communicating with partners abroad, formulating their research findings and continuing with further learning. The list consists of materials directly relevant for linguists dealing with teaching English, specialised dictionaries, and professional publications and journals in various study fields. Apart from professionally relevant literature, additional materials are meant for a general exposure to English written books. A list of literature to be obtained, both printed and digital, was prepared for the librarians to order.

Adding more equipment in classrooms also contributes to further improvement of classes and to educating better qualified graduates successful at the labour market. Extended collections of the

University library will not only meet the actual needs of teaching and learning English but also help the institution to become a true player important for the sustainability of the started process.

2. Accomplishments and experience gained to date

2.1 Evaluation

The evaluation data come from four sources: continuous assessment, Moodle use regular check, classroom observations and participant questionnaire. Almost all participants have met the requirements of the first semester and they can proceed further. Professional tests accompanying the textbook and tasks from the Reading and Writing Portfolio component of the textbook served the purpose of assessment well. They were either used in class or in Moodle. After the initial lack of knowledge of the online Moodle environment, participants have become more at ease with it and they can handle their tasks there.

The first impulse to let the educators deal with the contents and formats of their electronic courses independently did not prove totally correct. During the summer break a new template has been prepared, which will make all online components of courses follow the same structure and format, thus making it easier for study, evaluation and monitor purposes. Coordinators check the online components regularly and they are also involved in classroom observations. The end-of-semester evaluation questionnaire has presented favourable responses from the participants, although not everybody responded. All respondents have felt a high degree of satisfaction with refreshing their English skills or laying a sufficient foundation to build upon. The following data citation illustrates the level of satisfaction with the structure and delivery of the courses. The first figure is from those who felt their requirements and expectations were met; the other one is from those who hesitated for some reason.



Fig. 1 Quote from the questionnaire

Some participants expressed their concern for the speed of the course and struggled with the demands imposed on them alongside their other work duties. There was also a surprisingly positive conclusion that they appreciated working with the modern technology. Their practical experience is in correspondence with research findings (e. g. Stacey, 2002) [11] that electronic environment can be structured for effective social constructivist learning. Some of them have recognised the additional layer of flexibility of online interaction for Campus-based learners. Simultaneously, they have become aware of its pedagogical potential for the purposes of distance studies. Last but not least, they have acknowledged the catering for their mastery of digital tools the cohorts of students come equipped with.

2.2 Working with ICT

Some course takers started with discovery of the wealth of materials in the textbook from the accompanying DVD. From there they could proceed with enlarging their experience when working with the in-house developed interactive tasks or appropriate real life materials from the Internet. In this way they have been learning to study independently and when suitable in connection with their time restraints.

From the ongoing evaluation process, we have identified the areas of listening, vocabulary acquisition and speaking as those where most practice was demanded. The participants can find numerous

collections of activities on the Internet, yet their immensity might dishearten them. That is why they value the easy access to authentic materials directly relevant for further practicing of the tasks accomplished in class. These are carefully selected and designed for them by their tutors and placed in Moodle and in MEC. The variety makes learning interesting, challenging and useful for various types of preferred learning styles. Each participant can select what he or she wants to practice and focus on. Should they feel their listening skills need to be boosted, they will work with tasks where audio files are included. If need be, they can devote to extended reading. They can proceed with vocabulary enlargement in a great variety of tasks or select from a bank of grammar activities when some functions are not comprehended. The blended nature of learning offers provisions for their language development and also their systematic grounding in the modern methods necessary in a digital age we live in. They undergo the hands-on process of the shift from lecture- to student-centred instruction where students become active and interactive learners without feelings of isolation and lacking contact with their tutors. Motivation is a crucial aspect of successful learning even for people whose normal role is teaching. Reflecting on this need of theirs met in their learning process will definitely influence how they support their own students within their teaching context.

2.3 First draft of the textbook/ guidebook

The first draft of the textbook has been finalised and it is undergoing a process of evaluation to prepare it for the final draft and for publication. The textbook will be proofread by native speaking experts from the cooperating language school. This is yet another area covered by the project. Those who feel sufficiently encouraged in their English skills are invited to present conference papers, articles, or study materials for their students in English, and they can have it corrected so that the language is flawless. It contributes further to motivation and provides a practical way to assist colleagues who may be reluctant to share the fruits of their work due to their lack of confidence in doing so in English.

Even more than other parts of the project, this task has clearly fostered our awareness of the key role of collaboration. The project focusing above all on communication skills is truly about communication. There are so many participating stakeholders with an enormous complexity of needs, interests and roles, which calls for frequent face to face meetings, electronic communication and discussions.

2.4 Equipment and books

The newly acquired equipment in classrooms and offices, e.g. computers and dataprojectors, has contributed to the implementation of the planned outcomes. Since the classrooms are in use not only for the project itself but for regular university classes too, the improved results are immediately visible and have been reflected upon by regular students. Both learners and educators appreciate the newly accessible opportunities for more effective work.

The extension of the material available in the library has dictated a thorough re-evaluation of the organization of resources in the library. Thus the librarians, who participate in the project as learners, have contributed to its success also as professionals providing their expertise in cataloguing, displaying and making books easily accessible, without which the results would not be so positive.

3. Conclusion

The coordinators and educators responsible for the present project have been convinced that e-learning should play a key role in today's world of education. We appreciate its general flexibility as a major benefit in learning. According to us, many e-learning activities require and facilitate communication and thus serve the main purpose of English language teaching. Simultaneously we deeply believe that the best way to design modern courses is to combine face to face contacts with e-

learning in blended learning scenarios. In doing so, we can fully utilise the collaboration potential. Authentic tasks with a high degree of cooperation with others are more conducive to autonomy than a more conventional setting. Motivation obtained from this model of learning combined with raised awareness and more accurate assessment of outcomes reached individually and through learning with and from their peers lead participants to rethinking learning and teaching.

References

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