

Moodle to the Rescue to Practice Grammar in Remediation Classes

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Abstract

Remediation classes are a stringent necessity in the context of our school of vocational higher education, where first-year students from very different backgrounds have to meet expectations in Dutch as a foreign language classes, mixing together students having had 4 or even 6 years of Dutch in secondary education with total beginners, who are all supposed to reach the same threshold level at the exams.

In this project, that is currently in its fourth year of existence and was partly funded by the Communauté Française de Belgique, we integrated one hour of on-site Moodle grammar drilling in our three-hour sessions of remediation classes, somehow changing the status of learning platforms primarily designed for distance learning to integrate them in classroom work. In doing so, we could take advantage of the many reasons why a learning platform and an online course are better than typical old-fashioned classroom teaching: versatility of exercises, statistical tools and possibility of catering for different needs for each student. Moreover, the physical presence of a teacher, to help where needed with extra explanations, or to guide students to what to do next in the broad choice offered on the platform, certainly contributed to the success of the program, as well as to deeper involvement of students in their learning.

The first aim of this paper is to testify on how we managed to integrate this grammar drilling in class using the numerous possibilities offered by Moodle, placing it in the broader context of those remediation sessions during which we also tried to appeal to multiple intelligences as described by Gardner, and to offer activities catering to different learning styles as defined by Kolb; and so make grammar drilling, so badly needed but also outmoded and at times vilipended, effective and attractive to students. And the second aim is to report on the way in which, as a developer of the grammar activities on Moodle, I had to change the traditional way of conceiving grammar exercises, finally achieving (or rather trying to achieve) the goals of ease of use, variation, versatility and efficiency to offer students the best chances to succeed in their goals of successfully managing first-year Dutch course.

1. Introduction

The Belgian context, with its three official languages and very open access to higher education, creates a situation in which our institution of higher vocational education (among others) has to cope with first-year students enrolling with high expectations, but not mastering the threshold level required for languages courses. Several systems have been tried already, as grouping those students in separate classes (it didn't work because it somehow stigmatised them), or giving remediation classes one hour a week all year long (it didn't work very well either, because progress was too slow and the schedule – Friday afternoon – wasn't motivating).

Four years ago, supported by funding from the Communauté Française de Belgique, we started a new formula of 10 three-hour sessions including one hour of Moodle on-site training in every session. Even if this still isn't the magic solution we keep looking for, results are encouraging for both students and teachers, and on the long run there is the lasting outcome of an exercises database which is still growing organically and will keep developing and opening new learning paths for students.

2. The New Formula

At the start of the academic year, students perform an online test on mostly practical grammar knowledge and vocabulary, and those whose results are below average are required to attend the remediation classes. There are five three-hour sessions planned before mid-term break, when their motivation is still peaking, the workload in other courses is not too high, and there is more chance to have them catch up with the main course in due time.

In the first hour, the grammar and vocabulary are introduced using various activity types, in which we appeal to various perception modes – visual, auditive, kinaesthetic – and try to cater for different learning styles following D. Kolb's theory of experiential learning [1]. We have also designed activities



making use of multiple intelligences as described by Gardner, thus bypassing a purely linguistic approach in favour of more varied channels [2].

In the second hour, students work individually in the computer lab, navigating the online course to explore the numerous tests available. A teacher is present, and acts as well as a teacher, providing extra explanations where and when needed, and as a coach, making suggestions about what to do next and encouraging students – they may be, at 18 years or older, young adults, but they still often need guidance and counselling together with, sometimes, a reminder that if they want to succeed, there is a long way to go.

The third hour is mainly for oral practice, which we try to start with at the earliest stage of learning, as it will be an important part of the evaluation at the end of the year.

2.1 Moodle vs. classical drilling

Even if I still keep thinking it's cruel not to teach them grammar [3], it is obvious that classical and, we must admit, often tedious grammar drilling is totally out of fashion in a world that is more and more dominated by screens of all kinds, quick or even immediate reward for undertaken action, and a tendency to favour fun over rigor. Moreover, the active teaching of grammar has regularly been questioned as to its efficiency [4]. But without grammar, accurate understanding is in many cases impaired or even made impossible, and the same goes for expressing oneself in a foreign language when wanting or needing to fine-tune the message. Beginners can't achieve accuracy from the start, it takes a lot of time to get used to the rules of a foreign language, but if you don't aim for accuracy from the beginning, you are never going to get there, or even close, in the end. There are also claims that the communicative approach may have gone too far in throwing out contrastive analysis, feedback on error and metalinguistic explanations and guidance [5].

From our experience, we can say that Moodle offers a brilliant compromise between classical drilling and more up-to-date teaching methods with main focus on communicative skills, while allowing us to reach our goal of grammar practice serving the higher aim of global language learning and acquisition. There are several reasons for that.

First, it's still new and hence attractive for our students. When asked if they have already used an online platform in their previous language classes, the few ones who raise their hand are those who had already done the placement test the year before. This is also one more reason why we do the exercises in class: to make sure those who are not so computer-savvy won't be put off by the machine.

Then, there are the numerous advantages of online vs. paper exercises. Students can do the tests over and over again, not having the same questions as they are randomly selected from the database, the solutions offered for multiple choice exercises or scroll-down possibilities always being presented in random order, or the different types of questions in one test being mixed differently each time. The factors of choice (students can freely choose from the different chapters according to their specific needs, and inside each chapter, they can choose between different levels and exercise types) and degree of activity (each student working individually on a computer, there is minimal loss of time and maximal personal involvement) also contribute to what we could call Moodle supremacy over other drilling methods. And last but not least: students immediately know how well they performed, and very much appreciate the feedback given, some of them telling us they kept doing the exercises until getting maximum score, just to read the "well done!" comment when they reached that goal.

These advantages are mainly of practical order, creating a comfortable and attractive learning environment. But the most important point is of course efficiency: how well do those exercises contribute to good language learning?

When students do the placement test again after the 5 first sessions, their results are better by an average of 20 % on the whole. This does not necessarily systematically mean that their overall language performance will be better, as transfer from drill exercises to the use of the drilled structure in free language production doesn't occur automatically. But having better results is encouraging for students, for one, and the third hour of each session aims at having them use, in guided practice, the structures they have been working on, highlighting those structures and having students experiment with them in a more open-ended context, thus ensuring long-term acquisition.

Where do these better test results come from? Maybe just from more practice, but there must be more to it. We all know students learn differently, and the versatility of Moodle combined with the activities in the first and last hour of each remediation session allow them to use their preferred learning strategy as well as exploring others. Here we are developing previous work, from before the Moodle era, on the teaching of grammar through the experiential cycle [6].



Kolb's definition of learning is that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience"¹. In each three-hour session, students go from concrete experience (a problem to solve, such as classifying verbs according to their different forms, an activity appealing mainly to logical-mathematical intelligence), moving on from there to observation and reflection. When doing the online exercises, students can use the abstract concepts they have just discovered, or solve the exercises using any other method in harmony with their learning style. In the third hour, it's time for active experimentation of the newly acquired knowledge – and the cycle is complete.

2.2 Creating the exercises database

This course can only work with a database of exercises which is large enough to ensure students won't have a "déjà vu" feeling when practicing, either during class or at home. Not only should the database be large enough for this, but the exercise types should be as various as possible, once again for the motivation factor, but more importantly, as stated before, to cater for differences in perception modes and learning strategies. Luckily, Moodle offers lots of exercises types which can be combined in the different tests, ensuring enough variation. There are plans to add audio exercises, concentrating on micro-understanding (factual information like phone numbers and similar, or sentences which sound very similar but are actually different), as well as more exercises based on visual clues. This all takes (and will take) time, not in the least because we teachers still are in a discovery stadium of all those new tools.

One can wonder why we invested so much time, energy and means in creating our own exercises database, when there are more and more ready-made courses available. If we set aside the cost factor, which is difficult to estimate if you take into account the fact that a teacher had part of its teaching load devoted to the creation of the course, one important aspect is that this course is tailor-made and can be centred on our students specifically, which enhances motivation.

From typewriter to word processing to online exercises is a long and challenging way to go, and has, for me at last, dramatically changed the process of creating exercises. In the past, you had to think of the end product – the exercises the students would have to solve – (chrono)logically from the beginning of the creation process. The conceiver of the exercises would move on from simple to more complex, aware of the fact that the outcome would be rather static. Using Moodle has reversed the process, giving movement and dynamic to those exercises. But from the conceiver's point of view, the creation logic also is reversed. One can start, not from the exercise globally, but from different questions, which can later be integrated in different tests. One more important aspect is that with Moodle, special attention has to be given to the creation of the right categories of questions, from which to select questions for each test. So we are not any longer starting from test titles or even subjects. Creating the right categories is a personal choice, of course, but certainly is a step worth pondering long enough to ensure maximal output possibilities. As embedded categories are possible, it is most important to make sure you only have questions in the last embedded level of each category, otherwise creating tests could maybe not give the expected results. Furthermore, when in the past we could wait for students to perform the exercise, and then in some cases notice when correcting there were answers we hadn't thought of in the first place, but which were correct as well, when creating questions in Moodle you have to think of all possible correct answers in advance. In my view this can be very challenging for inexperienced teachers.

3. Conclusion

No, we haven't yet found the formula to keep student motivation at its highest possible level all year long, thus ensuring they will learn faster, better and more efficiently. But we are a few steps closer, and still moving forward.

In sharing this experience, I hope I could at least slightly contribute to putting grammar back in its according to me right place, i.e. inside the teaching of languages, but with a focus on other than purely linguistic aspects and approaches. The use of Moodle with its many exercises types, combined with other offline activities to open doors for students with different needs, intelligence types, perception mode or learning styles, certainly contributed and will contribute to better teaching and better learning.

¹ Kolb, 1984, page 38.



References

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