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E-learning and language teaching

Blanka Klímová shows how the move towards computer based learning management systems can enhance language teaching and learning.

Background

Over the past decade, the use of computers and new technologies has become an important aspect of foreign language learning. They have enabled the language teaching community to redefine some of the strategies and concepts of teaching and learning. Moreover, teachers have also been looking to increase the quality of their teaching with the help of new and modern information technologies. In this climate, computer-based distance learning courses have emerged.

E-learning at the University of Hradec Kralove

One of the supports for distance learning is the *learning management system (LMS)*; at present the highest form of e-learning. This is special software which provides multipurpose support for teaching and learning. It contains a set of tools for creation, administration and distribution of e-learning courses and the tools for communication, testing and feedback, which distinguishes it from web-based training.

E-learning started to be widely used at the faculty in 2001 (Poulova 2004: 171) when a few selected courses created in WebCT (web communication tools) were introduced for part-time students. In 2002 these and other online courses, often called OLIVA—*OnLine VyuKa* (online teaching)—also began to be used as a new quality support for full-time teaching. At present more than 60 e-courses are being fully exploited in teaching at the faculty. (See http://oliva.uhk.cz/webct/public/show_courses.pl.)

To demonstrate certain advantages, disadvantages, constraints, and evaluation of e-language classes, one e-English subject will be discussed.

E-learning course: Teaching Written Business English (TWBE)

The TWBE online course focuses on the production of learning texts aimed at teaching written business English language because the written language will dominate future communication with the EU, either in writing official documents such as contracts or regulations, or in formal electronic communication. This online course is a component of a one-year course of professional/academic English. The aim of the course is to improve students' knowledge and skills of written business English language; to motivate students to proceed according to their own pace and use knowledge of other subjects, such as

information technology; and to provide students with an immediate feedback on their assignments. Furthermore, the incentive for developing this course came as a response to a lack of students' experience with the written English language, but also with writing their Bachelor paper in English.

The online course can be exploited several times in professional English teaching at FIM. But it means that the entry level of students' English must be lower-intermediate. In the winter term of academic year 2003/2004 the course was used by 30 students who had been registered on the online course by their teacher.

The course consists of the following parts:

- course content,
- communication, and
- evaluation.

Course content makes full use of the following WebCT tools: syllabus, study materials/tools, calendar, glossary, and compile/print. Each part starts with a self-study information input and concludes with tasks, quizzes or assignments. The online course TWBE has nine main chapters and six subchapters. (See Appendix 1.)

Communication is carried out mainly by two WebCT tools: mail and discussion. (See Appendix 1.) In language learning, students still prefer face-to-face contact with a teacher or school e-mail.

Evaluation is based on submission of individual assignments which can be found at the end of the selected chapters. Within the nine content parts, there are five proportionally distributed assignments (Ěch *et al.* 03.05.2003). They are as follows: translation of a formal letter, reply letter, e-mail correspondence, writing a resumé and a letter of application, and writing a C.V. and a letter of application. Students are set dates for the submission of each assignment and a teacher/ tutor assesses them afterwards. The feedback is usually a little bit delayed as it requires the help of a teacher or tutor. The teacher/tutor has to read, check and comment on the overall student's performance, and finally, to mark it. Evaluation also includes many interactive self-tests and quizzes which are employed throughout the course to check students understanding of the subject. However, these are not included in a student's final evaluation. Tests and quizzes range from ordering the skills used in the writing process to gap-filling and translations. Stress is put on giving students' feedback as to whether they are successful or not. The WebCT provides a quiz editor that offers an easy way to create questions for students.

Questions can have the following forms:

- multiple choice,
- matching,
- calculated,
- short answer, and
- paragraph.

To pass this online course students must get at least 60 per cent in each assignment.

Pros and cons of the online course TWBE

Introduction of online teaching contributes to the enrichment of methodology in foreign language teaching (Klímová 2002: 58–60), and a higher motivation for, and intensity of, foreign language learning. Motivation is reinforced by an almost immediate feedback on assignments, the chance to practise more, and by more opportunities for communication (such as the use of discussion tools) and more consultations. The WebCT study materials are more attractive and dynamic. Furthermore, it also means easier access to foreign language learning. Students can proceed at their own pace whenever and wherever they feel like it. Moreover, they can use their knowledge of other subjects, such as the humanities, information technology, or economics. That means further improvement of interdisciplinary relations within individual study programmes at the faculty. In addition, it can be exploited not only by the university's full-time students but also by those studying part-time, or ordinary working people who are interested in taking classes at the university. It can be also used in preparation for the *English for Business* exam, organised and evaluated by the *London Chamber of Commerce and Industry*, which students can take at the faculty. Finally, the creation of a database of formal written documents in English, which correspond to standard written documents of the EU, provides the faculty/ university with better communication with foreign partners and institutions.

On the other hand, there are some disadvantages. In language teaching, a teacher is a necessary face-to-face medium for developing perceptive language skills. As with all online courses, the creation, preparation, and updating of TWBE is time-consuming and demanding. Such courses also require twice as much work as in traditional teaching, because, besides preparation, teachers have to combine them with traditional classes. Sometimes there are problems with technology. Teachers/tutors can be overloaded with assignments which must be marked and assessed as soon as possible. Finally, some students complain about a higher price when accessing the online course from outside.

Conclusion

The above describes the efforts by institutions and teachers to improve the educational quality of teaching and learning at FIM by applying new technologies such as e-learning. Although there are some drawbacks, it attempts to emphasize a certain number of advantages, for example, an opportunity for distance learning, which undoubtedly increases the quality of education and goes beyond traditional ways of teaching and learning, and thus extends further possibilities of learning.

As far as language teaching is concerned, modern information technologies do offer challenging ways of teaching and learning, such as easy access to study materials, individual pace, time and place of studying or almost immediate feedback on writing with email tutorial support. These benefits are, however, a partial solution for learners who need to develop speaking skills.

Appendix 1

Contents of the online TWBE course

- 1 Key characteristics of successful written business English
- 2 Writing formal business letters
 - 2.1 Letter layout and its phrases
 - 2.2 Model letters
 - 2.3 Linking words
- 3 Formal versus informal written business English
- 4 Email correspondence and abbreviations
- 5 Writing reports
 - 5.1 Reports
 - 5.2 Paragraphing
 - 5.3 Punctuation
- 6 Writing C.V. and a letter of application
- 7 Writing a resumé and developing 'revamping' vocabulary
- 8 Miscellaneous business writing
- 9 Final consolidation

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