

demonstrate that the effects of climate change are already taking place on all continents and across the oceans. Our graduates remain largely ill-prepared for future risks although numerous opportunities for effective action remain.

Language Centre Online (and beyond)

Kristina Narvet, Department of English Language and Communication,
University of Bedfordshire

Contact: kristina.narvet@beds.ac.uk

Introduction

E-learning, online materials development and computer assisted learning seem to have been in the spotlight for a few years. The use of technology in language teaching has even been proposed to become the norm, e.g. when it is 'used in language education without our being consciously aware of its role as a technology, as an effective element in language learning process' (Bax, 2011), and indeed it feels like it is gradually getting there.

The current project was developed based on the idea of normalisation of technology use for language learning, as well as in an attempt to provide more flexible, easily accessible online English language support for the student population at the University of Bedfordshire (UoB). In addition to these, the project provided an opportunity for volunteering trainee teachers to develop online materials, and increase their understanding of the use of technology in language teaching.

This paper will, first of all, set the background for the project, and explain the choice of the medium of delivery. Then it moves on to outline the project and its aims, after which the research methods and outcomes will be presented and analysed. Rather than a conclusion, the article ends by looking into the future of the current project.

Project background

Among the many student support services available at UoB, there are two main points of language and academic support: Professional Academic Development (PAD), which focuses, as its title suggests, on academic skills, via one-to-one drop in sessions, seminars and workshops; and Communication Skills, which offers weekly timetabled sessions for students, and helps students adapt to the British university culture, and excel their communication skills within their field of studies. However, as practice shows, the students who are in need of support very rarely identify themselves or seek help, let alone taking an active part in their studies. In many cases the reason behind this might be the fear of 'threatening their face' – as making mistakes can damage their 'self-image that every member wants to claim for themselves' (Brown and Levinson, 1987 cited in Mao, 1993). In addition to this, due to lack of time (some students have part-time jobs, or have to travel to the university) or their course design (e.g. part-time courses) students might not be able to come in person for a session or workshop. Having this in mind, the project seemed to be the perfect fit to fill the gap, as online support is impersonal and inherently flexible – allowing to study when, where and as long as, one feels like.

The teacher training courses on offer at the Department of English Language and Communication have a unit dedicated specifically to developing self-access materials – e.g. materials that students can use on their own for language learning – that trainee teachers are required to create, pilot and evaluate, which is all presented in an assignment and graded. As a step further, the current project gives trainee teachers an option to create online materials (with appropriate training and supervision), trial and evaluate them. Having this experience could boost their future career, as online and blended courses are becoming more and more widespread.

Project medium

As for the medium of delivery, among others, the English360 learning management system (LMS) was chosen as the medium, mainly due to the following:

- Availability of in-built, ready-made activities that have been developed in cooperation with Cambridge University Press, and can be ‘mixed and matched’ into a course;
- Availability of tools for creating new interactive activities, such as gap-filling, multiple choice, matching and categorising, etc., as well as essay-type activities and using external content;
- Availability of communication tools (e.g. feedback, comments, discussion tools, etc) within the platform;
- Progress tracking tools.

As compared to other LMSs, the above mentioned features of English360 allowed both saving time and using the existing materials for creating individually tailored courses, as well as creating new online materials. In addition to this, the materials and courses created can be reused, added to or modified at any time within the platform.

The project

Therefore, initially the main aims of the project were: 1. to offer individualised, bespoke (e.g. based on the needs assessment) courses to students in need of language support, who would be identified by their main course tutors and referred for support; and 2. to provide volunteering trainee teachers an opportunity of developing, trialling and evaluating a set of online materials. The underlying aims were to develop students’ independence as language learners, and potentially increasing their employability.

However, as the language support component of the project started, it turned out that the students referred for support – and it must be said that after advertising the project on the staff noticeboard, many members of staff took the opportunity to refer students for support – would not engage with their online language improvement course, even despite agreeing to take part in the project by email. Some of them did not even visit the platform, while a few viewed the Placement Test course, which was created for needs analysis. Only two students finished the needs analysis course, achieving 50-55%, received feedback and agreed on the suggested learning goals, but did not engage in the courses designed accordingly.

This only confirms Berge and Huang’s (2004) ideas on the higher dropout rate and lower retention in e-learning. According to them, two of the top reasons for these are

lack of time and motivation. Another potential problem could be limited experience in studying online and independently, as students referred to take part in the project were international. This is partially confirmed by Baggaley (2007; cited in Latchem and Jung, 2010: 3) who claims that it might be difficult to use technologies in Asia due to poor infrastructure and experience, Internet connection speed, equipment costs and viruses.

However, the following measures helped to solve the above mentioned problems to some extent:

- Closer co-operation with a part-time course, where course leader felt that students need language support – this allowed for a slightly more targeted approach;
- A video outlining the aims and requirements, e.g. spending at least 2 hours per week on studying online, was made available for students on the course for self-referral – to make sure that students are motivated to take part in the project;
- A video with a basic training on how to use the LMS made available to students – to avoid potential fear of the use of technology;
- Project was also used as part of the International Foundation Course (IFC) for guided self-study, a timetabled session, when students come and do activities online, with a member of staff available for support – this was thought to eliminate all the three problems at the same time.

For the IFC sessions the tutor mostly used the ready-made materials available within the LMS. These elaborated on the grammatical or lexical points that were taught in class, and the role of the facilitator was to find the relevant materials, monitor students' work and answer questions during the session. This falls into one of the definitions of blended learning – 'combining any form of instructional technology with face-to-face instructor-led training' (Nicolson et al, 2012: 5).

The component of materials development for trainee teachers was set up in close co-operation with the course leader. Therefore after covering the essential theory on materials development, the students were informed about the project in the form of a short presentation that took place during their Materials Development session. The presentation outlined some of the advantages of taking part in the project, e.g. getting experience in creating online materials, which can potentially enhance their career, and the students' responsibilities, such as evaluating their volunteering students' needs, creating materials accordingly, trialling the materials and analysing them. The presentation also suggested a timeline, which took into consideration their submission dates, as they needed training and time for developing their materials.

However, towards the end of the project, the LMS was also used to deliver an online course on the use of technology in English language teaching to a group of students doing an MA in Applied Linguistics. The course was created in order to give the students an opportunity to find out about the different ways of using technology for language teaching, as well as experience online/blended learning themselves. The course presented the three main concepts in technology use: Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), blended and online learning; gave some examples of

activities that require technology use, which also included analysing an example online activity from English360 in the course forum; as well as discussing the potential advantages and disadvantages of technology use for language teaching and learning. The students had to start their course during a timetabled session, with a tutor available for support, and finish the course at home.

Project principles

First of all, it might be worth mentioning that all materials used for the courses were properly referenced in order to avoid copyright issues. During their training, trainee teachers were also informed about copyright and advised to reference any external materials (e.g. articles, extracts, audio/video files, pictures, etc.). However, as the platform allows linking which takes students to the original website, some external resources were added to the platform using this feature. The reason for using external materials is that, according to Gardner and Miller (1999: 101), the use of authentic materials (e.g. those that were not originally created for language teaching) are believed to be more motivating for students, as well as promoting language immersion and acquisition.

However, apart from advocating the use of authentic materials, the authors suggest (1999: 115-118) that materials should also take into account students' language level and targets, in other words, learners' needs should be considered. For this reason the first version of the project included a placement test, which would assess students' needs. However, as this has not worked, the author consulted the main course leader regarding their students' potential needs. It was established that the students generally need support with grammar and skills for academic writing. Therefore, the course consisted of two main components – apart from course introduction, which welcomed students, and further materials section – grammar for academic purposes, which included such grammatical structures as relative clauses, passive, modal verbs, linking words, etc., and academic skills, which covered understanding the assignment question, the writing process, analysing resources, the structure and style of academic papers, and referencing.

In addition to using authentic texts and assessing students' needs, another concept that might be worth mentioning is 'language awareness', which lets students to 'discover' the language or regularities in language use themselves. This approach to learning might be more engaging, as learners need to analyse and figure out the rules themselves, as well as it could help memorising their findings (Bolitho et al, 2003). For this reason, most activities which were developed were set up so that the students had to work something out themselves, rather than providing them with a set of rules or the answer. This also provides opportunities for building on students' existing knowledge and linking it with the new ideas, which might encourage students' motivation, according to Latchem and Jung (2010: 116).

The authors also believe that learner support and feedback are very important in online and blended learning. For this reason, students' activity and progress was closely monitored, and every effort was made to provide prompt feedback. The students were also informed of the ways of communication with the tutor (e.g. email,

comments or messaging within platform) in case they have a question or would like some additional topics or materials added to their course.

The course for trainee teachers on the use of technology was also developed on the basis of the above principles, but also made some use of the interaction tools, course forum in particular, which is believed to increase students' engagement and learning outcomes (Latchem and Jung, 2010: 117). Thus the trainee teachers were asked to post a comment regarding their previous experience of teaching or being taught with technology, or discuss potential advantages and disadvantages of technology use in language teaching.

Research methodology

In order to get feedback from the participants of the project, two online questionnaires were created: one for students who joined the project for English language support, and the other for trainee teachers and staff members who used the LMS for the guided self-study sessions. Both questionnaires were voluntary and anonymous, and were emailed to the respective groups.

Considering the level of English language, the first questionnaire mostly consisted of multiple choice questions, which also had an option of writing a comment. The questionnaire started with enquiring about the students' main course so as to find out whether they joined the project for language improvement or as part of their International Foundation Course. As the questionnaire was disseminated to all participants, e.g. including those who did not finish their course, the next two questions ask whether they finished the course or not, and if not, what is the reason behind it (e.g. because of lack of time, the course being too difficult or easy, personal problems, lack of understanding of how to use the LMS, and a blank for other comments). However, if they finished the course, the system skips next question. As some students still attempted the courses, the questionnaire goes on to ask how interesting and useful the course was, and how useful was the communication and feedback. Another question aimed to find out how easy or difficult it was for the students to use the platform. The last question was an open-ended question asking for any comments on the LMS and/or the project.

The questionnaire for trainee teachers and tutors first of all asked about the respondent's role in the project (e.g. trainee teacher or staff member). Then the questionnaire finds out how easy was it for them to use the LMS, what did they use it for (e.g. creating materials, or using ready-made activities, creating courses, for online or blended teaching, or 'other' activities). Then the respondents were asked to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of the platform, as well as write any other thoughts and ideas about the project.

Outcomes

20% of students responded to the survey. Half of the respondents joined the project as part of their IFC course, 40% - by co-operation with another part-time course, and 10% engaged before the changes to the project (e.g. have been referred by a lecturer or tutor). 20% of the respondents finished their courses, whereas 71% stated that they did not. However, some respondents' (9%) comments on the question stated 'ongoing', as at that point some IFC students were still using the LMS. As for the

reasons for not finishing the course, the majority (60%) answered that their courses were too difficult, 30% stated it was due to lack of time, and 10% found their courses too easy. 60% of respondents found the course very interesting and interesting, whereas 30% did not, and 10% stated that they do not 'do well in online courses'. The courses were considered very useful and useful by 70% of respondents, and not useful by 30%. The majority (85%) of students found the feedback and/or online communication very useful and useful, with the other 15% stating that there was no online communication. As for the platform itself, the majority (71%) of students found it very easy or easy to use, 14% considered it difficult to use, and another 15% commented 'not sure' and 'too many errors' rather than choosing any of the suggested options.

In the last open-ended question, many students commented on their lack of time and finding it difficult to both do their main course and work on their language skills. Some students' comments stated that they believe their grammar or academic skills have improved. A few students stated that 'it is good', and 'needs to develop further'. One respondent mentioned that he found the course slightly lower for their level.

As for the second questionnaire designed for tutors, 62% of respondents were members of staff, and 38% - trainee teachers, who mostly used the LMS for creating online materials (31%), followed by creating courses (25%) and using the materials available within the platform (25%), as well as for blended or online teaching or assessing the online materials developed by the trainee teachers. The majority of respondents from both groups (88%) agreed that the LMS was very easy or easy to use, with 12% of respondents considering it was difficult to use. In particular, they mentioned finding particular exercises and adaptation to the platform as the areas of difficulty. The main advantages of the platform were considered to be the variety of materials available within the LMS, its ease of use as well as its flexibility in terms of 'mixing and matching' both internal and external materials into a course. Among other advantages respondents mentioned the feedback tool, the types of activities that can be created, ease of access and the opportunity for trainee teachers to create, pilot and assess online materials using the platform. Although some respondents claimed that the platform has no disadvantages, other respondents identified the following disadvantages: navigation and search settings; finding some types of content that can be created difficult to apply; saving students' work taking a long time; unavailability of a voice chat; and the exact strictness of marking in most in-built activities (e.g. student's answer must exactly match the answer that was set to be correct). Nevertheless most respondents described using the platform as a 'great', 'new', 'enjoyable' and 'interesting' experience, and a useful approach to language learning. Moreover, one trainee tutor mentioned in an informal talk that the experience of creating, piloting and evaluating online materials was the 'best experience at UoB', because it added a new skill to their CV. In addition to this, a member of staff expressed their hope that the platform could continue to be used for the IFC courses, and another suggested creating interactive materials using BREO (Bedfordshire Resources for Education Online), the UoB blackboard.

Analysis of the results

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, high dropout rates are common to online courses and distance learning (Berge and Huang, 2004). However, the high percentage of students who did not finish their course could be attributed to the course being considered as an addition to students' main course requirements. Its flexibility and accessibility might have worked against it, as it is easier to postpone doing it or completely change one's mind in comparison to credit-bearing, compulsory or paid for courses.

Another reason for poor engagement with the courses could be the fact that most students from the course with which the project co-operated were studying part time and had full-time jobs, perhaps families and friends, too. In a situation like this, one might have to sacrifice something; being impersonal (e.g. no need to apologise for not coming), flexible (the 'I can do it tomorrow' factor) and not obligational, online courses might be considered the least painful sacrifice to make.

However, the majority of students mentioned the difficulty of the course as the main reason why they did not finish it. This might be because the courses created were designed to be challenging but achievable, as suggested by Krashen's (1995: 23-39) Input Hypothesis within the language acquisition framework: the input (e.g. language or skills) should be slightly beyond learner's level in order to make sure there is the opportunity for learner's progress. Within the context of the current project, though, the students might not have been used to learning online and had to learn how to use the platform and still pay attention to the input.

Some students on the IFC course also brought up the issue of many built-in materials accepting only exact matches with the correct answer (e.g. lacking flexibility in the strictness of marking, which can be exact, close and loose). For example, the system would not accept an answer with a typo or a punctuation mark missing, and in many cases more than one answer is possible. This makes students attempt to retype and alter their answers, and leaving them frustrated when this still fails. Therefore, some students might find it discouraging to see that most of their answers were wrong for reasons beyond their understanding. This was reflected in the feedback both during the guided self-study, and to students doing their courses online, which students found useful according to the survey results.

A potential reason for the 30% of students not finding their courses interesting is very limited use of communication tools between students; for IFC students this was considered rather a hindrance, as students could get distracted by misusing this opportunity (e.g. not using it for learning purposes), and the students requiring online language support were doing their course on an individual basis, and therefore could not communicate with each other. However, the use of communication tools needs to be investigated and tried, as many authors (e.g. Reinders and White, 2010: 69; Latchem and Jung, 2010: 116) agree that interaction and collaboration might increase engagement and motivation.

As for the results from the staff and trainee teachers' point of view, it might be interesting to note that they seemed to have a very positive attitude to using the LMS despite some identified disadvantages and an adaptation period. This could mean that

the trend of the normalisation of technology use in language teaching will continue to develop, as it seems that the teachers see the benefits of using technology, and enjoy using it.

The future

Apart from providing English language support to UoB students, the project has triggered some changes in the delivery and content of some courses within the Department of English Language and Communication. It has provided means to reinforce the content of the IFC course. It has given an opportunity to students on MA Applied Linguistics course to develop, pilot and evaluate online materials, as well as find out more about teaching and learning with technology and experience learning about it online, which is quite important, as it help future teachers to develop new skills that they will take back to their home countries and hopefully develop them further.

However, as suggested by one of the respondents, it might be useful to investigate whether and how BREO can be used for creating interactive materials, which can be accessed by any UoB student wishing to improve their command of English language or academic skills. This would allow students to choose the areas they would like to improve on without worrying about the need to finish the whole course. Exploiting the existing Blackboard would also allow some financial savings, as using English360 requires payment for every student. Using BREO might not allow students to create and pilot materials online and might not be suitable for the 'blended sessions' for the IFC course, as it would require creating many activities on the specific grammatical or lexical points covered in class, because Blackboard does not have any in-built materials. Therefore, there might still be some need to use English360 until any new developments in technology for language teaching appear.

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Harkness Learning: Principles of a Radical American Pedagogy

Guy J. Williams, Philosophy and Religion, Wellington College

Contact: gjw@wellingtoncollege.org.uk

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Abstract

This paper investigates and argues for Harkness learning: an approach to education that inculcates a culture of enquiry, driven by students in dialogue around a table. Tracing the history of the Harkness reforms in education at Phillips Exeter Academy, their pedagogical and philosophical roots are considered. Although partly inspired by the Oxford tutorial system and the Socratic concept of dialogue, Harkness departs from there to a radical classroom dynamic. The teacher is required to be more open-minded and less controlling over outcomes, to take the risk of listening more and saying less. This shift in emphasis fits with a distinctly American philosophical respect for the sanctity of the free thought and originality of the individual, which here is traced to Transcendentalist ideals that have permeated American culture. It can also be compared with Problem-Based Learning and there are certain significant overlaps between these pedagogies. However, Harkness is sometimes narrowly misunderstood as a technique for teaching, which takes the approach out of context. It needs to be understood in the broad frame of cultural reform of an institution – it is a useful symbol for a community committed to student discourse and problem solving. In this respect, Harkness owes a further debt to pragmatism – another great American philosophical-educational tradition.

Introduction

I would make education a pleasant thing both to the teacher and the scholar. This discipline, which we allow to be the end of life, should not be one thing in the schoolroom, and another in the street. We should seek to be fellow students with the pupil, and should learn of, as well as with him, if we would be most helpful to him (Thoreau, 1906 [1837]).

In the United States, specifically in New England, there is a well-known and celebrated intellectual culture of individualism, freedom of conscience, and (theoretically, at least) egalitarianism. It goes right back to the Pilgrim Fathers, in their flight from what they saw as a corrupt monarchy, government, and Church of England. Later on, in the nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau, famed for his self-sufficient and slightly reclusive flight to Walden Pond, also put education within a radical frame, seeing the position of the student and teacher in terms of a journey shared. Even in 1837, Thoreau was talking about learning *of* and *with* a student, to be of *help* in his studies.