

Using Moodle in the CLIL INTO SCHOOLS project Tamara Vanova, Jitka Kazelleova

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to describe our experience with using the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Moodle for the workflow of a project funded by the European Commission entitled Clil into Schools and using another Moodle installation for the dissemination of its outcomes displayed in a digital library.

First, we shall briefly deal with the general concept of the VLE Moodle and its advantages for university studies in general and specifically for foreign language learning and teaching.

In the second part, the paper will describe a three-year project entitled The Development of Methodological Materials and Procedures for the Introduction of Teaching English through CLIL in All the Subjects in the Second Grade of Primary School and Lower Grade of Secondary Schools. The project has been based on the cooperation of experts from the Department of English Language and Literature at Masaryk University and seven partner schools from three different regions of the Czech Republic. All activities connected with the creation of the teaching materials together with the communication between (sometimes) very distant participants took place in the VLE Moodle. This part of the paper will briefly introduce the project's three phases focusing mainly on the final stage.

Since the main emphasis in the final phase of the project was the dissemination of the project's results in the form of 26 e-learning courses available to the public in a digital library as well as seminars and meetings with teachers, the third part of the paper will deal with the description of the outcomes and the overall experience gained in the project.

1. Introduction

At this conference last year, we introduced an ongoing project Development of methodological materials and procedures for the introduction of teaching English through CLIL in subjects taught at the higher grade of primary schools and lower grade of secondary schools. (short title CLIL into Schools) [3] for which we received funding from one of the Structural Funds of the European Union within the Operational Programme Education for Competitiveness. As this project is slowly drawing to the close of its funding period, we would like to share some of our experience, this time focusing primarily on the electronic environment in which the project was realised and which has also served as the space for displaying and distributing the outcomes. We would also like to point out how using Moodle for learning languages can be beneficial for both the students and teachers.

There were tens of teachers from seven primary and secondary schools plus from Masaryk University and several hundreds of pupils from partner schools involved and, therefore, some kind of electronic communication and working space was needed to manage such a huge enterprise. Since the Virtual Learning Environment Moodle has been used at the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, since 2004, we decided to adapt this environment for our purposes.

2. VLE Moodle

Moodle is a first-class web application that enables not only relatively easy creation of online learning sites, but also the application of sound pedagogy (meaning any appropriate pedagogical approach) through a very user-friendly interface. It is modular environment offering modules that cover all teaching/learning needs. As an open source software (under the GNU General Public License), Moodle is copyrighted, but users have many freedoms, i.e. they are allowed to copy, use and modify the application provided that they agree to make the source available to others; yet not modify or remove the original license and copyrights, and apply this same license to any derivative work. Practically, it means that anybody can download and install it, create study materials and teach using the application.

The Moodle project has been started by an Australian teacher and computer scientist Martin Dougiamas as early as the 90s and is based on constructivist models of teaching and learning. First Moodle installation available for public was launched in 2002 and ever since then it has been developed and improved not only by the core team, but virtually by an enormous world community of enthusiastic users. Just a few facts to show how successful the project has become: at present, there are over 60 thousand active sites registered from 220 countries, the number of users exceeds 60 million, the software has been localised (adapted for specific regions or language) in more than 70 languages. The fact that several language versions could run in a single installation and it is the teachers who decide which version will be applied in their course, makes Moodle an ideal environment for teaching languages. And it makes Moodle also an ideal environment for managing international projects because each participant can choose the appropriate language version provided the language settings are not forced by the administrators and limited to one language only.

3. CLIL into Schools project

In 2009 we received funding from the European Commission for a three-year project identified as CZ.1.07/1.1.00/08.0005. The target group has been primary and secondary school teachers and students who are being led to using elements of English routinely in their everyday teaching.

The main goal of the project was not an attempt to improve the overall level of the teachers' foreign language mastery, which would be a rather unattainable and unrealistic ambition within a three year project, but to increase the awareness of the benefits of CLIL, collect appropriate terminology, complete it with an audio file featuring good pronunciation, encourage teachers to try it out and receive a feedback which could be elaborated into more general conclusions and inspirations based on good practice descriptions published in the form of methodological workbooks. We focused on teachers without any specialized knowledge of English and our aim was to make them realize that using elements of English in everyday teaching could be beneficial both for them and their students. One of the starting points was a notion that if the teachers themselves participate in collecting the appropriate vocabulary, since they know best what can be useful for them, compile their own teaching materials and share them with others, they will discover the advantages of CLIL for themselves and realize that even their low foreign language level might not be an obstacle.

3. 1 Phases of the project

The project started in autumn of 2009 and had three phases. During the first phase, from the very beginning until November 2010, the compilation of appropriate terminology was carried out by teachers of seven partner schools from three different regions. There were three primary and three secondary schools plus one primary school for pupils with special needs. The teachers had been instructed to determine what Czech terminology they might be using in their next lessons and what items of classroom language could be useful, and upload the Czech terms into Moodle. The collection of terminology and all communication between the team members took place in the virtual learning environment of Moodle. Individual terms and sentences were translated into English by teachers of the English Department of the Faculty of Education and proofread by native speakers. The translated vocabulary was then converted into mp3 format and templates were created so that teachers could upload their completed lesson plans together with various attachments, because the role of collectors did not end with the actual data collection, but in the second phase, they compiled their lesson plans describing the course of the lessons and added appropriate vocabulary from the database accompanied by the audio files. The materials were evaluated by the Masaryk University team in two rounds in order to get as many completed lesson plans as possible. The objective of this phase was to collect feedback after the introduction of CLIL into the lessons. Throughout the second phase of the project we have been focusing on the treatment of the materials, evaluation and completion of methodological recommendations. After the materials had been piloted, the partner school teachers developed them into the final form. Some of them prepared PowerPoint presentations, some created HotPotatoes exercises/tests, some designed flashcards, maps or charts. The idea that the teachers would try out lesson plans elaborated by their colleagues teaching the same subject at different schools and comment on them did not work out as we had envisaged. In the rare cases they did try them out, they, nevertheless, did not comment on them.

Sharing experience gained in the project, examples of lessons, including the introduction of CLIL methodology in teaching was the main emphasis in the final phase of the project together with the dissemination of the project results to other schools interested in CLIL. After creating, piloting and evaluating all the outcomes of the project, the e-learning courses together with the materials were transferred to the digital library portal at <http://eldum.phil.muni.cz/>, where they are available to the

public throughout the country. In this way, the network of schools using ready-made materials can grow with other interested parties and lay the bases for an online community. Among the outcomes there were also seminars and workshops disseminating examples of lesson plans, CLIL methods, teaching materials and information on how to use the digital library. We believe that these materials could also become an ESP source for university students of other subjects. Since the disseminating seminars were favourably received, we had to organize twice as many to meet the demand.

4. CLIL in Moodle

For reaching the planned goals we needed a shared working space which would serve the appropriate workflow allowing for the proper phases to be reached in due time: collection of the terminology in Czech from the pilot schools, its translation to English by teachers at Masaryk University, storage of audio files and lesson plans with attachments, and, above all, suitable communication means helping the participants in mastering Moodle and archiving every step of the project. Then we also needed something like a digital library for displaying the final outcomes and making them available to the public. Since the Faculty of Education has been using Moodle since 2004 and we had previous experience with managing even international projects in it, we opted for introducing Moodle in this project too. It also offered an additional value to the teachers from outside of the university to master this environment with the future possibility of adapting it to their students' needs because offering online instruction as a supplement to face-to-face teaching at all levels of education has been one of the issues in recent years.

In fact, we used two Moodle installations in this project - one at <http://moodlinka.ped.muni.cz> for managing the project, and another one at <http://eldum.phil.muni.cz/> used as a digital library. This possibility of easily moving teaching/learning materials and whole courses from one Moodle installation to another is one of the reasons for Moodle being so popular in schools and other nonprofit organization where the financial aspect is always a challenge.

4.1. Standard Moodle modules

At the very beginning of the project we started using standard Moodle modules, such as discussion forums for the communication, books for instructions on how to navigate in the system, how to work with the database for the collection of terminology and what procedures have to be observed in order to keep the workflow organized and efficient. The use of specialized discussion forums was very extensive because the participating teachers were from distant regions so there was not a real chance of meeting them in person beside a couple of meetings, yet they usually shared the same problems.

These two modules proved really useful, but that of the standard database failed due to the fact that the amount of collected terminology was so enormous (initially, we collected over thirty thousand items) that the database slowed down until the complete standstill. But, since Moodle is an open source application and we have had a skilled technical support trained at programming, we could design our own database corresponding to all our extra needs, integrate it with the other modules and the problem was solved. We did use the standard database module, however, for other, less demanding (in the sense of data traffic) purposes, such as the evaluation of individual lesson plans and suggestions for their improvement. Standard database was the only exception that did not meet our requirements, otherwise the rest of the Moodle modules proved efficient enough.

Teachers outside of the university involved in the project were, as a rule, inexperienced in Moodle, yet, since it is a very user-friendly environment, it was very easy for them to master all the necessary skills in a short time. This has been positively commented on by the school managements as well as the teachers themselves. The only problem that occurred had nothing to do with Moodle and online communication - some teachers simply would not read the instructions at all and they worked using the trial and error method, which was rather time consuming for the project management.

Yet, for the outcomes of the project we needed a more open space since the Moodle installation at the Faculty of Education is mainly designed for the use within the university and outsiders would not be able to create their own accounts.

Some of the outcomes of the project were published in the form of a booklet. There were twenty-five methodological booklets, one for each subject, printed in a paper format containing the description of the CLIL practice and our experience, completed with a DVD. They also presented recommendations together with samples of lesson plan created and evaluated at pilot schools. These were handed out during a number of seminars and workshops that we organized in the final stage of the project, but printed matter has always a rather limited impact. So we created twenty-five methodical courses covering each subject in an e-learning format available to the public in another installation of Moodle which we used as a kind of digital library since anyone can create an account there automatically.

Another online course was created in order to summarize the procedures of the best use of the methodological courses.

5. Conclusion

As we expected, Moodle proved to be an ideal environment for managing such a project, not only in its working stage, but also after its termination when the results should be archived, displayed and available to anyone who might be interested.

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