Experiences and evaluation of a blended learning concept for learning Chinese in higher education

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Abstract

The open-source learning management system ILIAS has gained widespread popularity in educational institutions across Europe. At the University of Passau it was used in a two-year project for implementing a Chinese language learning course. Chinese is a difficult foreign language for German speakers to grasp. There are many distinct difficulties, which we aim to overcome with our Chinese course. This article will describe the development process and our experience in using and adopting ILIAS for learning Chinese, and the evaluation of the blended learning course. The paper shows evaluation results and experiments conducted during and after the project Chinese for the Workplace. Generally they are based on questionnaires and interviews to identify problems and benefits of the Chinese course.

Keywords: Chinese language learning; e-learning; ILIAS; open source; Hanzi; Pinyin; learning-management-system; blended-learning

1. A project for learning Chinese

Overcoming cultural differences and enhancing language proficiency in Chinese were two main aims of the two-year project Chinesisch für Wirtschaft und Beruf. The blended learning concept developed in the project comprises classroom activities and online activities. This paper focuses on the online activities and describes both the technical and the pedagogical decisions made during the project. The project outcomes were evaluated during and after the development phase.

Chinese is part of the Sino-Tibetan language family (SIL, 2005) and is, for Europeans, a ‘distant foreign language’ and harder to learn than an affine one. The Chinese language has specific characteristics which have to be considered when developing a language course with ICT. Most difficult to deal with are the Chinese characters, tonality, and the large intercultural differences. These facts have

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to be considered both at the pedagogic level and at the technical level of the project. I will concentrate on solutions on the technical level in this article.

2. Implementation

The project required software which could meet the demands of a modern language learning course. For this purpose, available learning management systems (LMS) were evaluated (see Müller, 2010), and finally ILIAS was chosen.

2.1. Learning management system ILIAS

ILIAS is a LMS which, in its basic version, already offers numerous possibilities for the creation of learning content, and the possibility to adapt the system to one’s own specific requirements. The system was chosen for multiple reasons. Detailed documentation exists for all users of the software (learners, tutors, authors and administrators). ILIAS is a popular LMS whose usefulness, especially in public educational institutions, has been lauded frequently in studies and by the institutions themselves. The system is highly popular in Germany, with approximately 105 official installations at over 60 colleges. Thus problems and security gaps are fixed by the developer community nearly as fast as they are uncovered. On account of the good evaluation results and considering the additional price/performance criterion, ILIAS was even included in a recommendation letter by the Ministry of Education concerning the use of learning platforms in the educational area in April 2003 (Kristöfl, 2003, 2004; von Kiedrowski, 2004).

2.2. Special Chinese functionality

The following specific language features have to be considered in the development of any blended learning concept for Chinese:

- How can the characters of the Chinese language be displayed and taught best?
- How can the tonality of the Chinese language be presented and taught best?
- How can awareness of cultural differences and solutions for conflict situations be taught?

2.2.1. The Chinese characters

Some learning concepts designed to teach speaking skills as fast as possible leave out Chinese characters completely, instead using the phonetic transcription Pinyin. Our course does not support this concept, but provides a functionality which allows the language student to decide which learning mode he or she prefers by choosing between Hanzi ein/aus and Pinyin ein/aus, switching the display of Chinese characters on or off. The functions are available on each page of the learning modules in the navigation bar (see Figure 1), and were designed to meet the demands of different learners and to give them more autonomy in their learning processes.

The Chinese character system is very complex and a special challenge for Chinese language learners. Students need to pay special attention to the character structure and the correct sequence of lines when learning how to write them. Animations support the student in learning how the characters are structured and how to write them correctly by showing the sequence of line directions and line orders. Since it cannot be assumed automatically that animations support the learning process (Schnotz, 2001; Lowe, 1998; Lewalter, 1997), great care was taken in developing the animation to project the correct order and
the direction of lines clearly and to be intuitively intelligible. Students can watch repeatedly and practise writing characters correctly. The character animation tool is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Dialogue in Chinesisch für Wirtschaft und Beruf

Figure 2. Character animation tool
2.2.2. Tonality of Chinese

Chinese as a tonal language distinguishes different pitches. The meaning of a word changes with different intonations of the same syllables. For training and representing the tonal aspect of the Chinese language, audio files coupled with animations are suitable learning tools (see Figure 3). By combining these types of media, a high degree of descriptiveness can be reached, which may lead to better understanding for the learners.

![Figure 3. Visualisation of Chinese tones](image)

2.2.3. Intercultural differences

While the value of text-based e-learning for more ‘theoretical’ content is generally not disputed, widespread scepticism rules where the value of Internet-based learning to appropriating more ‘practical’ action competence is concerned (Petko & Reussner, 2005). A transfer of this discussion to the field of foreign language learning seems reasonable because interaction competence is of great importance here too. Especially in the areas of intercultural understanding and competence, videos are useful tools for providing knowledge and abilities because of their visual and auditory display.

Claims that the distance between two cultures can be overcome by the use of multimedia technologies is, of course, hardly realistic. Nevertheless, multimedia can be of great assistance in making the other culture more easily approachable and understandable, thus helping to deal with one of the main problems in learning Chinese. The course developed here contains a component aiming to improve the learner’s intercultural competence. Theoretical suggestions for how best to teach intercultural competence have led to the inclusion of the following components (Klippel et al., Koller & Polleti, 2007):

- instruction units, with information about interculturally important situations;
- an intercultural learning module – a student of the University of Passau appears during the course and reveals experiences from his own stay abroad in China (Figure 4).

**Evaluation**

After the conceptualization and development phases, extensive evaluations were carried out. The evaluation process began at an early stage while the project was still in development (formative
evaluation). After completion, it was evaluated again (summative evaluation). The overall results will be discussed briefly in this paper.

2.3. Evaluation aims

For Chinese language learning, the blended learning course developed was a new and innovative concept, which was investigated regarding different aspects of utilization at the University of Passau. The evaluation objectives consisted in finding out the basic attitudes, the frequency of utilization, and the acceptance rate among the students taking part in the blended learning course.

2.4. Evaluation results

A blended learning concept consists, by definition, of a mix of face-to-face and online components. There is no strict separation, and content overlaps both parts. The teaching staff is a powerful influence on the success of any blended learning course. Teacher attitudes corresponded with the usage of and the satisfaction with the system among students.

Generally, students showed themselves to be very sceptical towards blended learning before attending the course. 44% would have preferred a Chinese course without the use of ICT, while 36% were in favour of using ICT (pre-course survey). After the course, only 20% said they would have preferred attending a Chinese course without ICT. This shows that most students’ attitudes to this blended learning course improved dramatically once they had taken part in it. The utilization frequency of the online course was not satisfying and the system was used according to the teachers’ motivation to use ICT. In different groups the usage factor varied considerably with the teachers’ attitudes. User satisfaction was good, and only 4% were not content or hardly content with the online course itself. Students were especially
satisfied with the LMS design, the mix of face-to-face and virtual learning phases, and the use of multimedia.

3. Conclusion

The outcome of the evaluation shows that, overall, the online tool itself was accepted and welcomed by the students. After attending the course, they were convinced of the advantages of the online tool, although they complained of some technical problems in using it, for example inputting and displaying Chinese characters on (western) computer systems. The lecturers of Chinese had a strong direct impact on the acceptance rate of the course. Overall, the users would have preferred more online learning phases. They said that the ideal blend would consist of 40% to 50% online content, while in reality the online phase amounted to merely 30% of the total course. Nearly all students (98%) stated that computer assisted language learning should be continued and supported in the future.

These are only a few details out of the evaluation results. Generally, it seems clear that multimedia provides good opportunities to enhance Chinese language learning.

References


