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Experience in foreign language teaching with ICT support

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Abstract

The foreign language teaching using e-learning usually catches on more slowly than the teaching of sciences or technological subjects. We therefore consider the most suitable method of language teaching the blended learning; i.e. the combination of the traditional, face-to-face and on-line teaching.

For the foreign language teaching we have prepared both the courses using the blended learning and the courses for a distance education. We also have some experience in the teaching of interuniversity studies, but only distance on-line teaching. At our faculty we have now prepared some on-line German and English courses for beginners and for advanced students. We also offer the courses of general, business and banking English and German. The foreign language on-line courses enable to practise individually, for example, some grammar phenomena with the use of a key as a feedback. Moreover, they help to enlarge the vocabulary, give the possibility of using the listening texts and working with a foreign language text. We consider the use of modern technologies very useful. The on-line courses are also useful in the foreign language teaching.

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1. Introduction

The immense development of information technologies causes big changes also in education process. All the time, a considerable number of new information reappears and makes higher demands on the level of education at the same time. Therefore it is necessary to search for new forms, methods and means for transmitting as big volume of information as possible.

Some time ago, a foreign language teaching seemed to need only a traditional, face-to-face teaching. However, nowadays it turns out that the newest methods supported with modern technology can be taken well even in the language teaching. With the ICT support, this teaching has been used at many secondary schools and universities in the last few years and it has been developing very intensively.

The foreign language teaching using e-learning usually catches on more slowly than the teaching of sciences or technological subjects. We therefore consider the most suitable method of language teaching the blended learning; i.e. the combination of the traditional, face-to-face and on-line teaching.

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2. Foreign language teaching with the ICT support

2.1. *Characterization of the courses*

At the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University Hradec Kralove, we nowadays use more than 170 on-line courses of different subjects. For the foreign language teaching we have prepared both the courses using the blended learning and the courses for a distance education. We also have some experience in the teaching of interuniversity studies, but only distance on-line teaching. At our faculty we have now prepared some on-line German and English courses for beginners and for advanced students. We also offer the courses of general, business and banking English and German. The foreign language on-line courses enable to practise individually, for example, some grammar phenomena with the use of a key as a feedback. Moreover, they help to enlarge the vocabulary, give the possibility of using the listening texts and working with a foreign language text.

2.2. *Content and form of our courses*

All of them have been prepared in the virtual environment of WebCT. This kind of environment enables to keep the courses up-to-date continually, to expand them with new materials from foreign websites, which is quite important in the foreign language teaching. You can work with our courses anywhere if you have an access to the Internet. This makes the preparation of students easier, particularly if they cannot for some reason participate in the traditional, face-to face classes. The courses also offer a chance to work with video recordings, which are very popular among our students.

2.3. *Multimedia procedure*

The courses include some short video and audio programmes. The acoustic entries are meant for listening of a text and for the follow-up work with it. A student can listen to the text without following the printed text, s/he can listen to the text and follow it in its printed form at the same time, s/he fills in some hard expressions into the gaps of a specially prepared text (Lückentext). The audio or video programmes of larger extent are commonly used during the regular face-to-face classes.

Also podcasting is very useful for automatic searching for novelties on the web sites chosen by the teacher. This method refers to the means of distribution of sound or video files nowadays used by most broadcast stations broadcasting via the Internet. The user-listener can download these files into his/ her computer or mp3 player according to his/ her own choice and s/he can play them back at any time or make his/ her own programme.

2.4. *Work in the courses and the feedback*

Tests and self-tests are the most important part of the course. They are used for practising the didactic material and as a sort of students' feedback. The tests practise technical and also general vocabulary, grammatical phenomena of German, or its syntactical structure. Several different questions are used (short answer, multiple-choice, matching questions, translation of complete sentences). The student has a choice to solve the tasks by himself/ herself or to use the clue. There is a multiple access to the individual tests allowing some more careful practising. All tests and self-tests are evaluated automatically, a percentage evaluation of results is attached. In this way the student can see his/ her strengths and weaknesses. S/he can compare his/ her results with the results of other students; everything proceeds anonymously. The tests and self-tests are very important means of students' feedback, but the teacher does not use them as an evaluation of students because we do not know to what extent the student works on his/her own. Tests enable the teacher to trace his/ her students only. For the future we count with final testing of students by means of similar tests and with an exam in a smaller group in a computer classroom.

In the part Assignments, several assignments are included and they followed the topics, which have been discussed, revise grammar or tasks based on the listening or the reading texts.

The screenshot displays the 'View Results' page for 'Test 4' in the 'OHJ5 - Odborný německý jazyk 5' course. The test was taken by user 'suhubam1' on January 26, 2005, at 11:15. The test is unlimited in attempts, and the student spent 7 minutes and 41 seconds. The results for three questions are as follows:

Question	Student response	Grade	Correct answer (Value)
Question 1 (1 point)	1. wartende	100%	wartende (100%)
Question 2 (1 point)	1. steigene	0%	steigende (100%)
Question 3 (1 point)			

Fig. 1. Evaluation of the test

2.5. Students' evaluation of the course

Every participant of the course filled in an evaluation questionnaire towards the end of each term. The students' responses were generally positive. They expressed satisfactions with the contents of the course. Some students could do with more practising tests. Our standpoint is that there would be no problem to add some further tests, but it is necessary to think over the volume of compulsory tests so that they do not overload the students too much.

The students appreciate that the more gifted of them are not hindered at work by the weaker students, they appraise affirmatively the possibility of voluntary attendance of the seminars and their choice of place and time for their studies.

Fig. 2. Most useful items of the course

The questionnaires should map the use of courses and their content. Every question was accompanied by a four-grade scale, the students were allowed to quote one grade only. The responses showed that the contents of the course had been considered to be useful. The students found in the course what they had needed for their learning and possibly for their future jobs. The attendance in the survey was not compulsory, 120 out of 140 course participants submitted their questionnaires.

Fig. 3. Frequency of students' work with the course

Fig. 4. Students' evaluation of (a) grammar and (b) listening exercises

2.6. The blended learning courses in comparison with the distance courses

During the last seven terms, I taught German language in a distance on-line course at Tomas Bata University in Zlin within the interuniversity studies. For seven years I have used my own on-line courses as support/ reference courses for my teaching of German at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University Hradec Kralove (FIM UHK). Therefore I can compare both forms of teaching. In the case of the students at Tomas Bata University (UTB) it is a separate on-line course. The students meet their teachers only at the introductory and final tutorial. The students of the FIM use an analogical course as a multimedia support for the traditional classes. The classes at FIM are held regularly.

2.7. Students' activities in the courses and achieved results

The students are asked to work in the courses regularly. Some tools enable an accurate supervision of students' different activities and help the teacher to check this requirement. Nevertheless, it sometimes happens that the UTB

students join the course too late and they work rather in fits and starts. This may be explained by the fact that some students think that they will cope with the demanded requirements without any regular preparation and that the last two weeks before receiving a credit or doing an exam will be enough time for their preparation. The FIM students are being forced to work in the course regularly because any ignorance of the last lesson contents might be manifested during the next lesson.

The distance course students (UTB) can use the e-mail and even more often the discussion tool, where they can tell to each other their opinions, views, impressions, or observations. The students who attend the traditional classes tell all those things rather verbally during their seminars, but they can also use the mentioned communication tools. Both groups have the opportunity to work with the listening texts meant for voluntary work and expect student's interest. The FIM students lag behind their colleagues in this field. We can see a partial justification of it in the fact that the students think that the listening texts done in the traditional classes are enough for them. From what is said it results that the UTB students work with the listening texts much more often. The tests which actually serve as exercises with the key are for both groups the same. Also the requirement to fulfil the tests at 80% on average is the same and therefore it can be said that the students work analogically in this part. The UTB students come back to the tests more frequently. They do so first of all during the last weeks before receiving the credit or doing the exam.

In both cases the final evaluation is made as a written test. It is based on the textbook and on the on-line exercise tests of the course. It is analogical for both courses again. The UTB students are usually more successful. It is not about a higher number of achieved points, it is rather about a higher percentage of students who are successful in the first exam term. We explain this phenomenon just by the students' richer entrance knowledge.

2.8. Off-line work, work with a ballot tool

Recently we have made an experiment with a new technological tool – with a ballot tool. This device enables to practise and test different phenomena of face-to-face teaching without the necessity of students' connection to the Internet. The tool has met with a lively response because young people usually welcome all novelties and every stimulant of teaching with enthusiasm. By means of this device the teacher can immediately discover in which areas the students make most mistakes. At the same time, s/he can perfect his/ her explanation and make the linguistic material more clear.

After the explanation of the given issues the practice follows and it is focussed on the teaching material. For some time, the students can work with individual questions separately, every student at his/ her own pace, and they can come back to single questions or tasks at the given time. At some other time, the questions are given at the same moment to all students, all of them answer the same question at the same time, they have got an equal time for their answers and all of them proceed to the next question at the same time again. An advantage for the teacher is that the device can serve also as an examination tool without being connected to the Internet. This can to a large extent exclude any possibility of undesirable group work or copying.

3. Summary

We consider the use of modern technologies very useful. The on-line courses are also useful in the foreign language teaching. However, they mean more work for teachers in their preparatory stages, but on other hand they enable easier and more rapid work in the face-to-face classes.

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