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Computer-based Tests as an Integral Component of an EFL Course in Moodle for Non-linguistic Students

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Abstract

The article reveals the role of computer-based tests as an integral component of an EFL course for non-linguistic students who need to communicate effectively in English. In this article computer-based tests are considered effective up-to-date means of control. In addition to this, the role of electronic tests in optimization of the teaching process is reviewed. Electronic English grammar tests, developed for the students and postgraduates studying at the Computer Science Department of Tomsk State University, were compiled to correspond to the content and the level of difficulty and to comply with the students' individual needs. We give reasons for our choice of the Virtual Learning Environment Moodle and its Quiz module to deploy the tests.

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1. Introduction

The progressive development and diffusion of modern media and Internet technologies have resulted in the formation of the new global computer-mediated communication environment (Obdalova, 2009; Sysoev, 2012). In the current situation modern specialists need to communicate in a foreign language and proficiency in a foreign language, English in particular, has become an essential part of specialists' professional qualifications. In connection with the existing situation, the objective of higher education institutions is to train future specialists to build a professional dialogue with their colleagues coming from different cultures.

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The main purpose of teaching a foreign language is to develop communicative competence. The notion of communicative competence is considered to be one of the underlying theories of the communicative approach to foreign language teaching. Communicative competence is defined as the ability to use the knowledge of a language correctly and appropriately in order to communicate competently and accomplish the goals of communication. According to DHAZ-Rico and Weed, communicative competence is the one that allows the user of a language to know “when, where, and how to use language appropriately” (DHAZ-Rico & Weed, 2010, p.58). Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence in terms of three components: grammatical competence: words and rules; sociolinguistic competence: appropriateness; strategic competence: appropriate use of communication strategies. In this paper special emphasis is put on computer-based grammar tests as means of formation and control of non-linguistic students’ grammatical competence.

2. Quiz module of the Virtual Learning Environment Moodle

Given the above-mentioned points, the question arises of how to teach students a foreign language. There are different theories that attempt to explain how to learn a foreign language and how teachers should teach it. According to linguistics expert Stephen Krashen, the most influential theorist in language development and acquisition whose ideas are widely accepted internationally, there are two independent systems of foreign (second) language performance that can be used to learn a foreign (second) language: acquisition and learning. These two systems are different but related. Acquisition is the natural, subconscious process that involves constant exposure to the language. Ideally, the learner is surrounded by native speakers and is required to use a language in order to communicate. On the contrary, learning is the formal conscious process by which the learner is taught rules of the language, for example knowledge of grammar rules. According to Krashen, acquisition is more important and preferable than learning, but when acquiring a foreign language by living with it in daily life cannot be done, drills and other types of methods can be used (Krashen,1982). There are a lot of modern teaching methods used by English teachers to develop students’ communicative competence which is the main objective of teaching a foreign language. In this connection, it is important to choose carefully both the methods of communicative competence formation and the forms of its control.

Along with other methods, special attention must be paid to computer-based tests, which are becoming more and more common in foreign language skills assessment. At present there is a variety of computer-based tests that can be used by foreign language teachers to assess students’ foreign language skills. However, the existing tests do not always meet the needs of certain groups of students. Moreover, these tests often leave out of account the students’ future professional activity specificity, but according to the new curriculum standards, language and communication for professional purposes should be taken into consideration at each stage of the teaching and learning process.

For this reason, in 2010 we started developing electronic English grammar tests for the students and postgraduates studying at the Computer Science Department of Tomsk State University, Russia. The tests were compiled to correspond to the content and the level of difficulty and to comply with the learners’ individual needs. The first test battery was designed for the learners of the intermediate level of communicative competence. It should be noted that grammar was not a random choice. As it was mentioned above, according to Canale and Swain (1980), grammatical competence constitutes one of the three basic components of communicative competence. Grammar is considered as an effective way to train learners’ communicative competence in English language teaching. Grammar as a set of rules plays a significant role in language teaching. A language system cannot exist without grammar. Therefore, it is difficult for students to speak English well without learning English grammar. The tests are aimed at practicing the usage of English verb tenses in different aspects of the English grammar. These are the tests of the multiple-choice format based on the vocabulary familiar to the students and postgraduates. The multiple-choice format is a commonly used type of tests and it was used for our tests.

We have chosen the Quiz module of the Virtual Learning Environment Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) to deploy the tests. Moodle is provided freely in Russian universities as Open Source software, under the License. It was adopted as the University virtual learning environment and has been used at Tomsk State University since 2006 (Obdalova, 2010). The Quiz activity module allows the teacher to design and build quizzes consisting of a large variety of Question types, including multiple choice, true-false, and short answer questions. These questions are kept in the Question bank and can be re-used in different quizzes. There are a lot of

ways to use the Quiz module but what is more important is that the tests can be graded automatically. It saves time and allows the teacher to pay more attention to other kinds of activity at the lessons and, consequently, to use the lesson time effectively. This is considered as a matter of great importance because so little time is scheduled for English as a foreign language in higher education institution curricula but the academic standards for mastering English are being raised dramatically. Another advantage of using Moodle is that the results of grammar tests deployed in the environment are easy to analyse. A wide variety of Quiz reports are available for use by the teacher. The system of reports provides the teacher with the opportunity for developing student's individual educational trajectory. Moreover, feedback about performance can be given to the students in several ways and at different times during the quiz. Moodle provides the use of the grammar tests not only as progress achievement tests at the English lessons at the university level (Shilova & Obdalova, 2014), but also for the students' self-testing and self-training outside classroom at any stage of mastering appropriate English grammar structures (Khakimova, 2012).

3. Conclusion

In this paper we have considered some new opportunities for more effective organization of an EFL course for non-linguistic university students by means of the Virtual Learning Environment Moodle, namely, its Quiz module. As communicative competence is the main objective of teaching English at institutions of higher education, grammatical competence, being one of its basic components, should be given special attention. In this connection, the computer-based grammar tests can be considered effective up-to-date means of its control. Moreover, according to the results of our experimental learning, Moodle provides opportunities for optimization of the teaching process and its individualization. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that along with apparent advantages, implementation of computer-based testing also increases the teacher's working load, who has to spend more time to compile enough quantity of relevant to the learning objectives grammar tests, and this is an incredibly time-consuming and tedious process.

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