

Why Resort to e-learning in Language Teaching?

ICT as a Support for

Language Learning and Communication

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Abstract

At the University of Tartu by 2010 all distance learning courses and 30% of the full-time courses must have a Web-based support. The project is supported by the EU-funded VANKeR and Best programmes. We would like to share our experience in using the Blackboard (former Web-CT) e-learning environment for teaching general language courses in English and Swedish (different levels); for learning terminology, and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in different fields of specialisation (e.g. aviation).

Our focus will be on how the web-based environment can be used for supporting student-centred learning, individualisation and cooperation in creating the study-materials, at the same time developing a feeling of "us" and of belonging together. Taking a look at our different past and current courses we will view different ways of motivating students by engaging them in building the learning materials: e.g. data-bases on specific research topics, power-point presentations, on-line dictionaries.

We analyse how the ICT solutions can be used as a support for different classroom activities, group-work and pair-work assignments; but also for independent work; for enforcing student-centred learning and the principles of individualisation (different interests/ levels/ needs), and how web-based solutions support the acquisition of vocabulary; forming one's personal opinion, and being able to express it on topical issues. It enables them to see their area of specialisation and many other important issues beyond their university, country, and continent. E-learning as a support for learning in the classroom enables us to make the study process more flexible and to better take into consideration the needs of different students. The students are active and "a part of the process".

With examples from some past and current courses we will take a look at how the Web-based environment can help to develop the sense of belonging together through documenting different joint activities, study visits, etc. ICT can also help to create special "bridges" between the study periods, different study-years and student groups, helping to shape the feeling of "us".

At a meta-level the analysis will feature a development of a not-so-technically-minded language teacher visiting the EU-funded "coffee with e-learning" sessions organised by our university into a teacher who uses e-support for all the courses, although with the development of Web 2.0 and 3.0 there are still endless opportunities for novelties, development and change – to be discovered in the work process together with the students and colleagues from all over the world!