

The application of e-learning in learning and teaching ESP based on the example of e-learning English language courses for border guard and correctional cadets of the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences

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Abstract

The paper aims at presenting and sharing our practice in the field of applying web-based language courses combined with contact classes in teaching ESP for border guard and correctional cadets and students of the Academy. While the history of employing e-learning in the process of learning and teaching ESP at our Academy goes back to only a few years, the application of ICT in the form of online courses is currently at the experimental level and is under constant improvement.

The urgent need for the application of ICT was and still is caused by the policy of the Academy to lessen the number of language classes. Thus, the aim of the web-based materials is primarily to be employed as home assignments meant to be worked on between contact classes.

The two above mentioned web-based courses were supported by European Funds, compiled in the framework of the project called BeSt. Moreover, the courses were completed in dense collaboration with the specialists from Border Guard College and Border Guard Board, as well as the specialists and students of the field of corrections, involving also a visit to a female prison in Tallinn.

The web-based language courses are meant to be learnt both on individual bases and in combination with contact classes. They consist of 8 units (i.e. 8 different topics). Each unit comprises different tasks for practicing and acquiring new skills. The acquisition of language skills is supported and enhanced by the variety of tasks – reading comprehension tasks, listening tasks, watching videos, self-checking and different writing tasks. The written tasks are to be submitted and the teacher provides feedback about students' progress. Combining on-line materials with contact classes has provided cadets/students with the opportunity to apply individually acquired materials (e.g. vocabulary) to oral practical tasks, disputes and discussions with group mates.

The courses have both undergone so called testing period, i.e. first 4 groups of cadets have completed them. Now, after having received oral and written feedback from students, some conclusions can be drawn. Problems with the Internet, new experimental tasks, lack of students' computer skills and not being able to get access to some tasks (due to some obstacles caused by the third party) have been mentioned as drawbacks of the application of ICT in learning languages. Concerning the advantages, the students have mentioned the variety of tasks, self-check, individual learning space, individual learning speed, no time frame, individual feedback, and the possibility to employ the acquired language skills orally in contact classes. Still, there are quite a lot of students, especially among long-distance students who prefer only contact classes and are not thrilled about the future of learning languages online.

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly developing and changing world, there is also a constant need for developing and employing modern technologies and approaches in learning and teaching languages. The last three years have showed urgent need for applying more up-to-date methods and media to language teaching at our Academy, too. It is a broadly known fact that one has to do more than just read grammarbooks and dictionaries in order to learn and also acquire languages [3].

Applying e-learning to ESP courses in our context is a way to enhance traditional language learning experience, as well as to provide long-distance students with possibilities to acquire language skills long distance outside classroom environment. Furthermore, the reason for integrating e-learning into language learning process lies behind the policy of the Academy to lessen the number of language classes, but at the same time maintaining the same level of language skills.

There are different target groups ESP is taught to: one group is young ambitious future state officials in the field of internal security, another target group consists of long-distance students who attend lectures once a month and the third group is formed by officials working in the field of internal security.

In most specialities cadets and students at our Academy learn ESP for 48 classes, in some specialities only 24 classes and in vocational studies cadets are more privileged to learn languages for 72 contact classes.

Thus, to make the learning process more effective and motivating it is useful to apply e-learning, which corresponds to curricula and to both students' and organisational needs.

First e-learning objects in language teaching were compiled in autumn, 2008. That was a challenging new move in the history of language teaching at our Academy. It was a process requiring time, energy, knowledge and skills.

Since 2008, our Academy has been participating in a project called BeSt e-learning programme for universities and other higher educational establishments and that has provided our lecturers also with an opportunity to create e-courses funded by the EU. The project finishes in 2013.

In 2009, in the framework of BeSt project two e-learning courses for teaching ESP for border guard cadets and correctional cadets were compiled and approved.

2. Planning process

An important step after having an idea of a course in mind is to plan one.

When planning the above-mentioned courses it was necessary to create a thorough syllabus, set clear goals and objectives, including learning outcomes, to carry out needs analysis, compile and develop speciality-related texts, tasks and activities, and to consider appropriate formative and summative assessment methods and criteria.

The role of needs analysis for instance, in teaching ESP is to provide a basis for discovering the competence that enables students to perform in target situations and also to learn about the potential knowledge and abilities learners bring to the ESP classroom [3].

The needs analysis was carried out in the way of oral discussion, by brainstorming with cadets and experts in the field of borderguard and corrections. It also involved visits to the border and border points as well as to a prison in Estonia for better understanding the learners' needs in their target situations.



The courses had to comply with the rules and requirements set by BeSt programme. They had to be interactive, with different technologies and media.

The best solution in our context of teaching ESP, was to focus on blended learning. Blended learning in the article refers to a combination of e-learning course and face-to-face learning. The idea of the application of online materials was to support and help cadets/students to acquire and practice language skills between contact classes. Otherwise our noble goal would not have been achieved. Integrating e-learning into a traditional language learning course is to combine the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with active learning possibilities of the online environment [1].

2.1. Why to apply e-learning together with face-to-face teaching?

Generally e-learning is meant to improve learners' learning motivation and interest, thus application of ICT in our context was found to be inevitable.

The advantages of applying e-learning are as following:

- students take their own responsibilities for their learning [2]
- to motivate learners
- to develop and consider different learning styles and individual needs
- to provide learners' with the possibility to study at their own pace and environment
- to affiliate learners in learning process
- to provide various sources and media for gaining knowledge
- to enhance the effectiveness of learning process
- to create interactivity
- to provide variety
- to provide learners with feedback
- to enhance active one-to-one study using multimedia tools
- to encourage learners study whenever and wherever they can connect to the internet, or download tasks assignment and work offline
- to create individual schedule and study what one needs most
- to support learners with online resource packet by topics with its related vocabulary
- to increase student information literacy, providing students with new abilities that benefit them throughout their entire academic and employment career [1].

Combining e-learning and traditional teaching:

- encourages learners to employ the language acquired online in oral discussions in real classroom environment
- aligns learning undertaken in face-to-face sessions with learning opportunities created online [4]
- combines student's online learning with practice, correction and guidance face-to-face with a teacher
- optimizes the environment by enhancing regular face-to-face courses with online courses [2].

Furthermore, some learners cannot survive in the fully online environment but require teacher's support.

2.2. Assessment of learners in the courses where e-learning is applied and combined with face-to-face teaching

It is considered obligatory before compiling such courses, set certain methods and criteria for assessing the learners' progress.

Paulsen [5] and Thorpe [6] have suggested the following assessment possibilities:

- self-assessment (tasks where learners perform self-check tasks while studying the material on-line)
- computer assessment (also self-check tasks where they fill in gaps and get feedback at once about their answer correctness)
- tutor assessment (the teacher/lecturer gives constructive feedback individually on learners' progress)
- peer assessment (fellow students assess tasks by acting as a critical friend)
- oral discussions and activities in the real classroom environment (teacher assessment)
- making topic-related presentations at the end of the course (based on the material covered during the course) and providing summative assessment.

In the above mentioned courses both formative and summative assessment was employed. The final grade was a combination of the progress in e-learning course and tasks performed during contact classes.

3. ESP lower level course for border guard cadets

The main goal of the course is to introduce and practice vocabulary and grammar structures essential in the professional context, as well as to develop oral and written language skills.

The course itself is targeted at lower level language learners in the field of border guard. It comprises a lot of profession-related vocabulary. Some basic, essential grammar is introduced and practiced. More focus on grammar is paid during contact classes.

The e-learning course comprises 8 units. At the beginning of each unit students are provided with learning objectives and learning outcomes (e.g. by the end of this unit students will have acquired ...). Units include an e-learning object and a variety of different self-study tasks, concluding with a final task where the learner has to perform tasks (in written) by demonstrating the acquired skills. All the provided texts, vocabulary, and tasks (listening, reading, writing, answering questions) are in coherence with suggested learning outcomes for the learner to accomplish the final goal of the whole course. The tasks in the unit are interactive. Interactive exercises include crosswords. Students can complete exercises whenever and wherever they wish [2]. Thus, the course embeds various tasks for instance, questions, true/false statements, interactive exercises, matching tasks, answering questions, picture descriptions, crosswords, making sentences, gap-fill tasks and also translation exercises.

Texts in the course are the authors' own contribution that have been completed in close liaison with experts in the field. New, useful words in the text are highlighted and if you click on them, the learner gets an access to a dictionary (mostly English-Estonian because of their level of the language).

In most units learners have the possibility to listen and read the text at the same time, taking into consideration different learning styles, so they can also practice listening and reading skills. Gap-fill tasks provide students with quick feedback. They can always ask help from the tutor, too.

The e-course also contains 2 videos (at the airport) with suitable tasks, and a lot of exercises have been compiled presuming the learners know at least something about their future profession.

The online materials are to be combined with 72 contact classes as a support, whereas it is possible to cover some contact classes with e-learning, too.

The accomplishment of the goal should be more effective with the help of a teacher or tutor, thus contact classes are based on online material and support learners' progress. For better results cadets are expected to be prepared for each contact class to be able to participate in all activities carried out during the class. The idea of the contact class is to present the acquired skills (e.g. vocabulary) in practical discussions, roleplays, dialogues and other oral activities. The pitfall lies in cadets failing to



do homework properly and it can hinder the whole group progress and cause negative effect on group dynamics.

In case of 72 classes, it is allowed to have 1/3 covered with only e-learning and the rest have to be contact classes.

4. ESP course for correctional students at intermediate level

The goals of the course are twofold: to introduce and support learners to acquire language skills required in their job-related context and to develop learners' oral and writing skills necessary in their field of profession.

The course is targeted at correctional students at intermediate level.

The e-learning course comprises 8 units. The selection of topics is based on the needs analysis. There are objectives and learning outcomes presented at the beginning of each unit. Each unit includes an e-learning object and a lot of interactive exercises for self-check. All units follow the same pattern. It ordinarily starts with a warming-up activity (either a quote or a statement or a picture). There are texts and comprehension tasks in each unit. All those tasks are more for learners self-study. There is some highlighted vocabulary in the text and by clicking on them, a new window opens with a direct access to English-English dictionary (because of their language level no Estonian-English dictionary is needed). The texts are followed by gap-filling tasks, listening activities, true/false statements, picture descriptions and useful vocabulary lists.

All tasks are compiled with an idea to provide learners with the ability to do self-study, requiring a lot of self-discipline, taking responsibility of their own progress and much preparation work before contact classes.

The final task in each unit is an argumentative opinionated essay or a justification, which they have to post to the Discussion site and each student is provided with an individual feedback. The aim of the final task in each unit is for the student to present the acquired knowledge during the unit. If the required vocabulary is not present and it can be easily detected that the learner has not worked on the materials of the unit, the assignment is sent back to the student and he/she has to post it as many times as necessary.

Regarding the low number of language lessons in the course (only 48 contact classes including the final examination), the whole course is compiled as a blended learning course. Students prepare at home, and in most cases one unit /topic takes up more than 3-42 academic hours to achieve better results.

Online materials support students' progress and the process of acquiring new skills by practicing and drilling online. During contact classes students are expected to present the acquired skills in oral discussions. Oral activities engaging all learners are pairwork activities, groupwork activities, whole group discussions, debates, roleplays, presentations, vocabulary games and other practical activities. Grammar revision is also a complimentary part in contact classes.

5. Feedback on the courses

Feedback on the courses has been different. There have been both negative and positive comments. Comments and advice on what could be improved are the following:

- too few listening tasks
- more videos and films and their related tasks
- too much writing

- too little grammar
- too time consuming
- no Internet access and not enough computer skills
- online materials (inside the course) have just disappeared, which hinders doing home assignments (IT support not available)
- some instructions are not clear
- confusing
- contact classes (traditional learning) are more effective.

Positive remarks include:

- a lot of possibilities for self –study and self-check
- interactive activities
- combined learning is effective
- individual feedback
- interesting and interactive tasks
- good to practice earlier acquired vocabulary a lot of times
- group and pairwork
- a lot of job-related vocabulary practiced.
- roleplays.

6. Conclusion

To conclude the article, we have to admit that there is still much to be improved about e-learning and constructive feedback from learners' side should be a food for thought.

E-learning is a challenge for both the learner and the tutor.

Although in our context, the best solution was to apply e-learning integrated in traditional face-to face learning and teaching process, it is quite obvious that it might also work independently, depending on the target group, their needs and the whole situation.

All in all, online material is always present and students can retake any tests or do tasks before or after lessons or after some months as well as check and revise necessary vocabulary.

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