

## E-Learning english courses for part-time students- B1/C1 Modules Project

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### Abstract

*In accordance with priorities for schools of higher education, studies are supposed to promote generic and transferable skills, i.e. to teach students how to learn, prepare them for performing work, but not as part of a single profession, but to equip them with employability and to promote students' commitment to the learning process. Another important issue is counteracting molecular structure of the society by promoting cooperation, which contributes to enhanced sense of identity and social bonds.*

*The modern course concept promotes social constructivism and reflects changes observed in the world of large international corporations, where during recruitment and professional career emphasis is placed not only on top qualifications and knowledge of foreign languages, but also on self-promotion with the use of media skills indispensable for the promotion of individual and corporate goals, and soft skills, i.e. ability to work in a group, create and actively participate in any community, curiosity and acceptance of constant changes.*

*To meet the needs of higher education and the professional market the University of Warsaw Center for Foreign Language Teaching decided to start a project E-Learning English Courses for Part-time Students- B1/C1 Modules. It was an unknown path especially for the authorities, who were only accustomed to e-courses taking advantage of Web 1.0 technology. Nevertheless, the fear of change and the unknown was overcome by future benefits.*

*The paper will present the benefits the project brought to students and the institution as well as the challenges it still has to work on in the future.*

*The project received very good reviews; moreover, it was awarded the European Language Label in December 2009.*

### Introduction

In so globalised world not only companies have to fight for clients but also higher education institutions. To gain respect, prestige and a big number of enrolled students they have to change their educational offerings, which should be tailored to a new profile of students and should teach them the skills and competences needed in their future jobs. It is quite a difficult task as it requires an investment of a lot of time, energy as well as money.

Authorities of educational institutions started to realise that the best and fastest way to improve the quality of their courses is to take advantage of new technologies; the tools and competences used by would-be students in their everyday life. As Robin and Mason point out (2008: vii), "at least some of these people are looking for the opportunity to use some of these technology applications in the part of their lives related to education and study."

Of course, there can appear doubts if in a formal education teachers should be allowed to experiment with students using the technological applications, which still are used by so few. However, stagnation



and no change in attitudes and opinions do not bring good results; thus, we have to overcome fear and move into the 21st century quality teaching and learning.

### **Project description**

Due to the innovative form of e-learning based on the use of Moodle educational platform on the one hand, and the latest trends in language teaching with the use of state-of-the-art technologies on the other, the project constituted an attempt to meet the demand higher education institutions face today; they are expected that they should help students acquire the skill of obtaining information with the use of new technologies.

The project was based on heuristic approach, which places emphasis on active role of a student in the learning process. The course focused on the development of self-education ability, which involves independent obtaining, processing and selecting information (knowledgeable versus knowledge +able), cooperation within web community, and in this way promoted the acquisition of skills indispensable in the lifelong learning process. Moreover, the course advocated for the usage of teaching methods which develop critical thinking and independence.

The course was adapted to the needs of a new student profile, i.e. the Net Generation, which is characterised by the ability to perform several tasks simultaneously and who prefer to learn through visual stimuli and interactive cooperation. According to the Horizon Report (2008), students who have access to multimodal learning score better than students at unimodal institutions. The use of various forms of instruction boosts internal motivation of students, and thereby promotes independent seeking and expanding knowledge. In accordance with priorities for schools of higher education, studies are supposed to promote generic and transferable skills, i.e. to teach students how to learn, prepare them for performing work, but not as part of a single profession, but to equip them with employability and to promote students' commitment to the learning process.

Another important issue was counteracting molecular structure of the society by promoting cooperation, which contributes to enhanced sense of identity and social bonds. This is especially important in case of part-time studies, where students barely know one another. As part of course work, students establish contacts thanks to work in task groups and various teams, where each group member depends on others and without whom no task may be completed. The modern course concept promoted social constructivism and reflected changes observed in the world of large international corporations, where during recruitment and professional career emphasis is placed not only on top qualifications and knowledge of foreign languages, but also on self-promotion with the use of media skills indispensable for the promotion of individual and corporate goals, and soft skills, i.e. ability to work in a group, create and actively participate in any community, curiosity and acceptance of constant changes.

### **Project setting and goals**

E-Learning English Courses for Part-time Students- B1/C1 Modules Project was developed at the University of Warsaw, Centre of Foreign Language Teaching in 2008-2009. It was the continuation of the project E-learning Materials for full M.A. Studies in IT Science created by the Centre for Open and Multimedia Education at the University of Warsaw in 2006 and financed by the European Social Funds. The language course which developed as part of the project consisted of 120 hours and was divided into two 60-hour modules: B2/C1 and C1.

The courses designed and implemented by COME UW were prepared for students wanting to achieve A2-B2 levels of language competency. They are based on Web 1.0 technology, which is characterised by static course content, asynchronicity, lack of interaction between the users. HTML,



JPG, GIF, and TXT are predominating formats and the main goal of the course is to categorize and organise knowledge. Students make simple exercises, which include reading, listening, vocabulary and grammar provided in an e-book, which are mainly assessed by the system. Each unit includes an open written task, which is evaluated by a tutor. Course participants and the tutor communicate via e-mails and a forum. Course contents are not available for persons who do not belong to a given group.

E-Learning English Courses for Part-time Students- B1/C1 Modules Project's participants were part-time students of Geography and Management Departments who had participated for two or three semesters in online language courses taking advantage of Web 1.0 tools. The groups consisted of people aged 20-25 and came from different parts of Poland (N= 100). All of them had already had job experience; some of them even worked abroad. Online language classes were obligatory; therefore, among students dominated mostly instrumental motivation. The project started with a B2/C1 English course, which consisted of 45 hours of online learning and 15 hours (including 2 hours of test) taught in a traditional way. Face-to-face classes were obligatory.

## **Project objectives**

The aim of the course was to prepare students for proficient use of English at the C1 level in accordance with Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and Language Framework Curriculum of the Centre for Foreign Languages at the University of Warsaw.

Upon the completion of the course, students should:

- Develop self-discipline and habit of independent work on the language.
- Develop the ability to learn thanks to integrating formal (regular classes and contents uploaded at the Moodle platform), informal learning outside the classroom and learning beyond the control of a teacher (projects, blogs, logs, webquests, case studies).
- Develop the ability to cope in work, academic and other official and formal environments.
- Expand knowledge of cultural diversity in academic and professional environment.
- Develop receptive and productive linguistic skills.
- Develop the ability to make logical, correct and convincing oral and written statements.
- Develop linguistic and communication related competences.
- Develop vocabulary and language functions in the scope of thematic areas related to various aspects of life.

## **Results**

Having analyzed feedback from the students (questionnaires and interviews) and scrutinized their results after the first semester of the course implementation, some improvements to the course structure and evaluation scheme were made. More weight was allocated to student-to-student interaction and external (outside the e-learning platform) language activities, such as writing blogs, doing web-quests etc. It became apparent from our analysis that in the primary version of our course students did as little as possible or notoriously avoided doing more demanding open-web tasks. To counteract their passivity in this area as well as facilitate the use of different types of intelligence, multisensory tools of Web 2.0 were employed. The students were encouraged to choose from a variety of equally scoring tasks those that suited them best and enabled them to make the greatest use of their potential. Moreover, each blog entry had to be commented on by each of the students participating in the course thus putting to work the notion of collective intelligence. Furthermore, the content of the open-web activities was made public inviting anybody willing to contribute to the activities, discussions and presentations made by the students. Now not only the classmates but also

friends and acquaintances could see the students' performance. The sheer awareness that their output was to be commented on or seen by their peers motivated the students to work much harder on completing the tasks assigned. On the other hand, occasional input or observations from non-participants, sometimes happening to be experts in the field discussed, rendered the job done much more rewarding and consequently secured even further encouragement and far more industrious approach on the part of the students.

The other challenge that had to be addressed was the students' unwillingness to cooperate when doing collaborative tasks. It is generally accepted in our society that molecular development and single-handed effort is much more appreciated and thus thought of as more worthy. In order to overcome this obstacle, each time a collaborative task was conducted, students were divided into different teams and the roles of an organizer, facilitator etc. were allocated to each team member hence even the most adamant students were forced to pull their weight and contribute to the task realization. Consequently, the otherwise unavoidable division of students into 'eager beavers' and 'stowaways' was eliminated.

By means of heuristic approach to teaching and learning we designed courses that guide thinking; they are not 'a computable model to predict the outcomes of learning' (Entwistle, 2009, 114).

We, e-teachers and students, created a Virtual Learning Environment that is not only friendly to its users but also the one that builds on their characteristics, their learning habits, prior knowledge, learning paths and feelings. What is also important, we concentrated not just on high quality content of the course but first and foremost on developing learning techniques, which helped students improve linguistic competences, generic and transferable skills etc.

Additionally, by resorting to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow and autotelism (1992) we paid particular attention to students' enjoyment of the course. Their enthusiasm for learning and deep engagement in the proposed e-tivities, however quite difficult at first, increased significantly when they were encouraged to concentrate on the 'fun' aspect of language learning, allowing themselves to trust their own abilities. Anxiety and frustration on the side of students can only lead to their disappointment, course failure and dislike of that mode of learning/teaching. Having guided them through this difficult period by building their self-confidence through, e.g. showing them how to set reachable goals they managed to relax and started to guide their own process of learning. Especially it was perceptible for us seeing their collaborative projects: webquests.

Learning a language in the distance mode helps students to become more autonomous; nevertheless, it does not per se make them autonomous learners (White, 2003, p.150). In our courses we attempted to train students to be more independent through providing them with rich repertoire of language activities. We believed, as Garrison and Archer state (2000), that collaborative control of language learning is central to the development of autonomy; therefore, we placed so much emphasis on their active involvement in the course content preparation and delivery. We 'created' not only independent thinkers and learners but also interdependent ones; the ones that rely on one another in their work and by doing so become more responsible and mature learners.

On the whole, the novel approach presented in the paper, as it can be easily seen after four semesters of the course testing and evaluation, has proved successful. Most students reported greater contentment, involvement and learning motivation with the Web 2.0 aided classes. Thanks to the innovative form, the gap between outdated and current language materials and resources could be nicely bridged, with the new up-to-date content arousing a lot of interest among the students. The students found the application of the latest technological achievements extremely appealing and practical, because it is the language and form they encounter and use in everyday life. Of considerable importance for the students turned out to be the opportunity to influence the course content and decide in which direction the topic would evolve. Those individuals who wanted to share

their passions and views could do it freely without the fear of ruining the class and upsetting the teacher. And those less dedicated as well stood a chance of broadening their minds through their classmates' output, various webquests and other similar tasks. There is little doubt that in today's world openness, curiosity, the pursuit of knowledge, the joy of learning, the acceptance of change and the ability to critically assess the incoming information are of utmost importance. Our course was a trial of promoting those values along with language knowledge. And so far it seems to have proved to be a promising one.

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