E-LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION IN THE LANGUAGE TRAINING

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Abstract: Modern information and communication technologies indisputably affect our lives. Standard of fast data transmission is crucial and influences the way new generation is educated. The language training at the University of Defence is a very important part of the curriculum while English has undoubtedly priority – it is a compulsory subject for all students. E-learning is being implemented especially with extramural and combined form of studies, whereas a computer assistance of training proceeds as well as in the full-time form of studies. The language training centre responded to this trend by creating a system that uses both ICT and videoconferencing technologies.

Keywords: e-learning, information and communication technologies (ICT), videoconferencing technologies, Partnership for Learning Pilot Project.

1 INTRODUCTION

Outside formal educational settings, individuals are no longer content to have access to computers simply for information processing. More and more these individuals are drawn by the powerful and potential outcomes that result when computers help them connect to organizations and other individuals in the local and global community. E-mailing, blogs and chat rooms, although limited to the written word, are a few examples of the now commonplace ways of using computers to make human to human connections possible.

This use of computers for mediating communication is increasingly influencing the formal learning environment as well. With the movement towards using computers as communication tools, a practice that supports and is supported by socio cultural theory, the boundaries of the spaces where learning takes place are becoming increasingly blurred. A new virtual space, or third space, is opening up that is redefining where, when, how and why and what kind of learning takes place.

All parts of the education and training system are enthusiastically exploring and implementing e-learning in many different forms. Some people have made a comparison with the impact on learning of printing and the mass production of books. While it is an appropriate comparison, there are numerous differences, not least the timescale of developments.

E-learning has exploded on the awareness of education and training professionals and widespread use have been achieved in a few years, whereas printing took centuries to reach large numbers of people.

The pace for change is accelerating and new approaches are being tried almost every day (A. Clarke2004).

E-learning is a new development, which means that there is not a lot of good evidence yet of what makes a successful e-learner. However, some characteristics are:

- a positive attitude to learning;
- higher self-motivation;
- confidence as an independent learner;
- competence of ICT use.

E-learning covers a wide range of techniques and methods. It includes the use of technology as part of a conventional or traditional course as well as online course where learners and tutors will never meet face-to-face. Videoconferencing is one of them.

2. E-LEARNING IN LANGUAGE TRAINING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DEFENCE

The language training at the University of Defence (UoD) is carried out in full time and combined forms of studies. E-learning is closely-wedded especially with extramural and combined form of studies, whereas a computer assistance of training proceeds as well as in the full-time form of studies. In some ways it is rather blended learning and its other models such as skill driven learning, attitude learning and competency driven learning.

Skill-driven form of blended learning represents a combination of individual students´ interaction by means of e-mail, discussion forums and individual communication with using webquests. Webquest is a form of progressive application of ICT in the language training and Prof. Bernie Dodge from San Diego State University defines it as "an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that students interact with comes from resources on the Internet" [2]. Webquests enable to apply the individual approach to learners and give the opportunity to shy learners or learners with lower proficiency to adjust the pace of the learning process to their needs.

They may help improve students' motivation and thus their language proficiency level by providing them with authentic materials and tasks, flexible access to teaching materials and individual approach.

Study portal created by a team of English language lecturers and students at the Language Training Centre (LTC), Faculty of Military Technology, in the years 2005-2006 is another possibility how to use internet at the language training. It contains more than 300 electronic theme-based objects organized into 8 sections. All the tasks are provided with interactive feedback, which allows the students and staff to practise English language skills, grammar and military vocabulary on their own, and thus encourages their independent learning.

To provide an illustration, a screenshot of an e-learning object is shown in Figure 1. It comes from the Military Reading section. The aim of the exercise is to practise vocabulary in the context of military training. The user has to fill in the gaps by dragging and dropping appropriate words into the right gaps [3].

3. VIDEOCONFERENCING TECHNOLOGIES

Videoconferencing over the net is an increasingly popular form of on-line communication. This way of conducting face-to-face communication in the real time allows a more immediate, more interactive form of contact than e-mail. Electronic communication, when using this means of communication is more personal and much more effective since one can hear the nuances of tone and see nonverbal language such as gestures and expressions. The effective use of videoconferencing technology for interactive learning requires practice and planning as well as attention to a few important instructional strategies. Two-way video works best as an interactive medium. However, since we all have years of experience watching video rather than communicating with it, instructors must make an extra effort to involve and engage learners.

The language training at the University of Defence (UoD) is a very important part of the curriculum. English is undoubtedly a priority as it is a mandatory subject for all students at the University. The language training at the University of Defence is full time and in combination with other studies. E-learning is closely-connected to the language courses through the use of blended learning skills driven applications, writing based communication-based Webquests, and teacher-created study portals with Internet-based information.

4. VIDEOCONFERENCING TECHNOLOGIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DEFENCE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

At present ICT in language training is enhanced by the Partnership for Learning Pilot Program (PLPP), which is a multinational

project aimed at promoting communication with the support of videoconferencing technology for the purpose of language learning. This project takes place in cooperation with Dr Paula Charbonneau-Gowdy from Montreal Canada who is the author of this program and with ICI Design, a Canadian company that developed the specialized telecommunication technology for this project.

In the ICIWave virtual site, a synchronous communication between the Czech Republic and Canada is made possible. The technology allows participants to enter a secure, private, yet easy to access website where students and teachers can meet in spite of being in different locations. All users are equipped with headsets and web cameras. This ensures a optimal quality in video and audio reception.

Fig. 1 Videoconferencing classroom

The ICIWave multi-stream web conferencing technology allows up to ten people to be present at the website using individual screens at the same time. At the University of Defence in Brno, the project consists in providing a virtual classroom environment for the following two groups:

- military students at the Faculty of Economics and Management.
- PhD students at the Faculty of Economics and Management.

5. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

PLPP is an on-line pilot program using videoconferencing software and desktop computers that takes place via the Internet. The participants of the program are usually eight to ten of our military students and the instructor who teaches from Canada. Each participant is able to view the other participants on the screen. There is one screen for a teacher and another one that is designated as the visitor's screen. This screen is used for various English-speaking guests participating in our discussions.

PLPP is designed to be a learner-centred pilot program. This means that the content of the program is based on the Military University students' needs and interests to the largest possible extent, not on the instructor's pre-planned agenda.

A technician at our site is responsible for explaining to first-time users how to start. However, the process is very simple. There is an instruction sheet so that participants can follow the steps to get to the discussion portal. The instructor is there at the website waiting and ready to conduct discussions in English [4].

6. STUDENTS´ EVALUATION

Student reactions to this program are very positive.

All PLPP participants were interviewed and there reactions were only positive.

The following are some examples of students´ comments about their online experience:

"I take part in PLPP in order to practise listening and speaking skills. There I have to respond instantly. Though I know the topic of our conversation in advance and can read something concerning the topic beforehand, I am not prepared to answer every single question. That is very difficult, but I enjoy it. It is very useful, I mean, to react promptly, and then to write something about the lesson. Actually, it is like a real life conversation: action and reaction. "

"This way of learning is much easier in comparison with the classical one; it is not so complicated and I have a feeling that I can understand things better."

"Technology is speeding forward, there are more and more web sites in English that provide you with material to study not only English, everything is very well developed, easy and done in an amusing way. Besides, when working on my career, everyone will ask me about my knowledge of languages and ICT. Yes, and a driving license, of course."

7. CONCLUSION

E-learning as well as life-long learning are considered to be very important tools for society development since they are thought to have the potential to significantly enhance the quality of life and learning. In line with the growing demands for mastering foreign languages in the civilian sector, the requirements for military professionals' English language skills development have been steadily rising.

To help UoD students reach the challenging goals they will encounter, English language teachers are considering many effective ways of facilitating students' English language acquisition.

One of the strategies employed with success is the use of Information and Communication Technologies accompanied by a wise pedagogical approach for language training.

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