HOW TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN ONLINE LEARNING – WEB-ENHANCED AND BLENDED ESP CLASSES

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Abstract: *Greater engagement in educational activities in an e-learning environment developed for an ESP course could be achieved by providing students with web-based authentic materials and by using various techniques arousing participants' interest. The chosen pedagogical approach, profession-related content, simple structure and navigation should act as engaging stimuli. A well-developed online programme can prepare students for self-directed lifelong learning and for e-learning courses such as MOOCs.*

Keywords: engagement, ESP, Moodle, online courses, e-learning

INTRODUCTION

A regular and monotonous routine may gradually make students lose interest in participating in any course, no matter whether online or traditional. The identical layout of units, similar exercises and activities and the same arrangement of materials, which one can see in many coursebooks, usually result in university students getting bored with learning English during traditional face-to-face classes, which they express when asked to evaluate them.

The paper aims to show how to enhance ESP classes with web-based e-learning, how to create simple e-learning courses that can effectively engage students in developing their knowledge and skills and how to prepare undergraduates to learn online to increase their professional competence. The presented hypotheses are supported by survey results and the observation of students' behaviour in class and during online courses (Wilczyńska and Michońska-Stadnik 2010).

1. PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH AND THE TOPIC OF ON ONLINE PROGRAMME

Students attending regular language courses have to be stimulated in many different ways. The teacher usually uses different teaching techniques as well as exposes their learners to a variety of exercises and classroom activities in order to engage them effectively in the learning process, which is sometimes difficult even if lessons are well prepared and structured (Donelan, Kear and Ramage 2010). The topic is obviously the main stimulus. In the case of university students attending engineering and science courses, the challenge lies in targeting both their language and professional needs. No matter which pedagogical approach has been chosen, instructivist, constructivist or connectivist (Siemens 2005; Can 2010; Bayne and Ross 2013; Ho et al 2014, Mokwa-Tarnowska in press), Web-based and e-learning materials can prove to be a valuable addition to a face-to-face class. What is more, such a blended environment can prepare young people for using Internet courses, e.g. MOOCs available in English on Coursera, edX, Udacity, FutureLearn and other platforms, which in turn can lead to them becoming lifelong learners. Recent surveys have shown that an increasing popularity of instructivist Coursera and edX MOOCs, as well as constructivist FutureLearn courses have attracted people from various age groups virtually from all over the world, who found them engaging, professionally stimulating and rewarding. However, the data do not include much information on Polish participants, as their number is usually insignificant (Wintrup, Wakefield and Davis 2015). Some of the reasons of such low attendance might be low language competence in ESP and the scarcity of online or blended university courses in Poland, at least according to the Ministry of Education statistics. This can result in Polish undergraduates and graduates not being accustomed to learning online professional subjects in English.

2. VARIOUS TRICKS MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO LEARN ONLINE

Increasing Internet students' motivation and engagement requires a great number of techniques encouraging them to learn, to maintain the pace of work and even to access the course (Palloff and Pratt 2013). Therefore any online component whose purpose is to supplement or replace traditional classes should be carefully thought over and laid out. There are many ways to make using an online environment a rewarding experience, from which some are mentioned below, particularly the ones that can be applied even by less experienced tutors or not very technically-minded teachers of English.

To begin with, making the content of the course webpages more attractive is very significant. Students are more likely to access learning materials, knowing that some new issues can appear on course webpages or that some elements of the course structure can change. When they log on to see if there is any new activity for them to

do they can do some exercises which were made available some time ago (Mokwa-Tarnowska 2015: 124). An irregular upload of additional exercises and quizzes keeps students interested in the learning process. They may also get engaged in the process of genuine writing by adding posts to the forum (Wenzel 2001: 96-108).

Emoticons are frequently used in e-learning programmes to increase students' motivation and attract their attention. They are added to headings, bulleted lists, tasks, exercises, longer assignments, posts, comments, explanations, reflective points, that is, to anything that is included in course materials. Students attending regular face-to-face sessions can always be aided by the teacher, at any time during a lesson. By arranging class activities and establishing their hierarchy, the teacher emphasises and highlights more important issues. When students encounter problems, the teacher can immediately help them by adding some exercises or providing more detailed explanations. Moreover, the teacher can verbally encourage learners to participate in class discussions and activities, and can draw their attention to certain issues by pointing to them. Participants of Internet-based courses lack their tutor's direct supervision. The developer or the tutor has to predict as many problems learners can face during the course as possible. They have to work out beforehand what difficulties learners will experience, and which parts of resources can be less attractive for them. As no immediate verbal communication between the tutor and participants is possible in a virtual learning environment, a substitute such as emoticons is used to transmit a message to learners. Whenever the developer or the tutor wants to make a comment on either some content or student work on a course page, they can place an emoticon, which attracts attention, alerts, encourages or points to something important. Emoticons grin, smile, laugh, wink, frown, show concern, embarrassment and various other emotions. On the one hand they can reflect the developer's or tutor's mood, and on the other hand their role is to evoke learners' emotions and increase their engagement. They are like messengers that enable one way communication or guardians whose task is to reduce the feeling of isolation online students are likely to have to cope with.

Online students have to be encouraged and stimulated in various ways. Not only are the contents of course resources and exercises significant but also the way they are displayed on course webpages is of crucial importance. If a page is overloaded with pictures, images, animations, various colours and fonts, students can easily get distracted by too many visual stimuli, which in turn can lead to them having lapses in concentration, and being unable to effectively extract information. On the other hand, materials which include only text and no graphics seem to be boring, as students are accustomed to the razzmatazz of the Internet. Only a balanced blend of information and visual effects can motivate online students to work in an e-learning environment. The teaching materials in any course must be easy to read. They should include no distractive graphics. The primary focus has to be on the simplicity of layout and easiness of gaining knowledge.

Another very important factor stimulating online students to work with resources uploaded to a VLE is easy navigation around webpages. The non-linear arrangement

of resources giving the user new possibilities of finding a required text, and allowing for easy access to indirectly related information poses a threat to learning. Instead of spending time acquiring knowledge necessary to complete assigned tasks, online students can waste it by clicking on different links to access yet another webpage which suddenly arouses their interest. This can happen if the materials are too many layered. A complicated hierarchy of links is a very discouraging element in studying e-learning materials. Knowledge has to be easily accessible, so the number of layers must be carefully thought over by course developers. For instance, Moodle-based materials usually have simple and common sense navigation, thus they are easy to use even by inexperienced tutors. The system does not allow for creating hierarchically structured resources with links to other webpages of the same course. Achieving a multi-layered structure of one document is only possible with the tool *lesson*, which is not very convenient in the case of language materials used to enhance traditional classes. However, Moodle resources and quizzes can provide links to external websites, which enables the user to have instant access to unlimited information packages in text or video format. All in all, links to any outside resources have to be justified by tasks or assignments given to course participants, who must be made to focus on learning rather than on searching for information.

Resources which online students use during a course developed in a virtual learning environment must be written in appropriate language. Since learners work with online resources without their tutor directly supervising their progress, all course materials must be easy to comprehend. Tasks and assignments should be self-explanatory so that participants will not have to seek assistance in understanding what they are supposed to do or what a certain piece of advice means. All grammatical terms which appear on course webpages must be either explained or translated. More difficult ones or rarely used should be avoided if possible. Students can get discouraged not by having problems with their assignments or by the level of the course being too high, but by having to cope with metalanguage expressions, which they may neither understand nor feel like learning. Thus, the language of explanations and instructions must be simple, clear and very precise, especially if lower-level students use e-learning materials (Simes 2007: 323-332).

Supplementing traditional classes with new activities leads to creating more comprehensive learning programmes, which improve student language skills. Blended courses or courses supplemented with web-based materials can offer learners more variety, and being innovative can provide them with a positive stimulus. Highly motivated and self-disciplined students who are open to new methods of acquiring knowledge can gain the most from online learning. Students who are less enthusiastic about learning languages in a new environment, as it requires a great deal of effort from them, when supported and encouraged by the tutor can become autonomous life-long learners, and they may gradually develop a liking for self-directed studying in an e-learning environment.

3. WEB-BASED ENHANCED LANGUAGE CLASSES FOR STUDENTS OF MECHANICS

Five short online components have been prepared to enhance the learning opportunities for students of mechanics attending regular courses in English offered by the Language Centre at Gdansk University of Technology. They aimed to introduce variety into teaching and learning English for specific purposes, to test to what extent students could benefit from e-learning incorporated into classwork, to prepare them for blended programmes and self-directed learning, and to teach them mechanics vocabulary in authentic context. The tasks either supplemented the topics covered in the coursebook or replaced parts of the units which focused on non-mechanical aspects of engineering. The modules with quizzes aimed to provide the students not only with new knowledge but also with some experience in using a virtual classroom, therefore the automatic assessment done by the course management system, Moodle, was of secondary importance and was not used. The quizzes were based on authentic lectures from, e.g., TED, which the students watched in class. They consisted of various closed and opened questions, which serve as a springboard for discussion.

Questionnaires filled in by all the 78 students who attended traditional classes during the spring semester of 2015 were taken into account to provide the following analysis. They consisted of various multiple-choice and open-ended questions concerning knowledge gained, value of e-learning materials when compared to the coursebook used in class, and attitude to web-enhanced classes. The analysis of the survey results is based on frequency distributions.

All the participants considered the classes to be very interesting and stimulating as they focused on many ideas already covered during their faculty lectures and laboratories. They found the tasks based on authentic materials to be an excellent means of information sharing and language competence development (100% respondents). Most of the students would like to learn ESP only from Internet-based resources including authentic professional talks (Table 1).

Table 1.

Coursebook-based tasks vs Internet-based tasks

Which do you prefer:	Number of students	Percentage
tasks based on ESP coursebook materials?	2	2.56%
tasks based on films, articles and other online materials?	65	83.33%
I would like to learn from both.	11	14.1%

Source: Own work

The majority of the respondents stated that web-based materials should be sometimes used in class. Only two persons would prefer them to be e-learning after-class tasks accessible from home The answers are grouped in Table 2, the students themselves specified their preferences.

Table 2.

Frequency of web-based tasks

How often would you like to do web-based tasks in class?	Number of students	Percentage
Every class (15 classes a semester)	4	5.13%
5–8 times a semester	13	16.66%
3–4 times a semester	45	57.69%
1–2 times a semester	14	17.95%
Never	2	2.56%

Source: Own work

More than 50% of the students would more willingly attend face-to-face classes supplemented with online tasks uploaded to Moodle. Nobody would like to enrol on an entirely e-learning ESP course (Table 3)

Table 3.

Preferred course type

Which ESP course would you prefer to attend:	Number of students	Percentage
An entirely face-to-face course?	23	29.49%
A face-to-face course supplemented with e-learning tasks on Moodle?	55	70.51%
An entirely e-learning course?	0	0%

Source: Own work

4. CONCLUSIONS

The answers and comments given by the students in the questionnaire show a lot of similarities. The vast majority indicate that web-based authentic materials and tasks related to them increase interest in learning English. The students appreciated very much having been given the opportunity to develop their knowledge of mechanics vocabulary in context. A small percentage wanted to do additional exercises based

on the classwork so they were given access to the Moodle course and successfully completed other tasks uploaded to it. The course was designed according to the principles described above. All of the enrolled students, 10 persons, positively reviewed their e-learning experience in a post-course survey.

Surprisingly, although almost all the students who were exposed to web-based enhanced classes expressed their positive attitude to the inclusion of e-learning in the curriculum, not all of them would like to attend a blended course. This inconsistency could result from them not fully understanding what e-learning is about and being unprepared to work online or even being scared of self-directing their learning process. Whichever the reason is, to be able to successfully engage in web-based learning and then e-learning, undergraduate students should be encouraged to use these new learning environments, which could be achieved through well-structured, interesting and supportive programmes.

 Web-based learning offers an opportunity for creating a more comprehensive ESP programme, during which students can increase their knowledge of the subject of their professional interest (Półjanowicz, Roszak, Kołodziejczak and Bręborowicz 2014) as well as develop many language skills. Moreover, by incorporating an e-learning component into a language course which is based on authentic materials and which targets the improvement of specialised listening, speaking, writing and reading, developers provide learners with ample opportunities for developing various literacies. This will very likely result in them becoming self-directed pursuers of knowledge and autonomous workers in the business environment.

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