

Only a change is constant - student digital experience in the academic on-line English language courses at the University of Warsaw

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the innovative and modern didactics is an important goal in any university development strategies. One of the forms of reaching this objective is the inclusion of the ICT into the didactic process. The Centre for Open and Multimedia Education UW has been implementing it with the support of the extensive application of e-learning EFL methodology. As a part of this process the on-line foreign language courses have been introduced to the students' curriculum, parallel to the stationary courses, which leads towards obtaining qualifications following flexible learning paths. Progressively, multi-level e-courses together with on-line placement tests have been created. They are currently used by over 5 500 users every academic year.

The paper covers a short description of the nature of the online English language courses as offered to students nowadays. Most of all, however, it focuses on the analysis of the outcomes of the end-of-semester student survey, reporting on their digital experience and the reception of the changes introduced in the chosen task formats in the online English language courses. It may possibly suggest solutions for future online foreign language teaching educational contexts.

1. Introduction and background

The University of Warsaw academic community has been provided with the ICT supported courses on the e-learning educational platform "Kampus" maintained by the Centre for Open and Multimedia Education of the University of Warsaw. It allows students to experience various forms of studying and introduces them to the life-long learning process.

The main drive for this innovation were the goals of the 2020 Bologna Process strategy, implemented by the European universities, which aimed at the improvement of the learning environment and removal of the study barriers by introducing, among others, student-oriented programmes, enhancing innovation and exploiting the potential of digital technologies.

Among the initiatives, an online foreign language teaching (mostly for English) has been developed for over a decade now. It meets the learner individual needs and lets both stationary and extramural students have equal chances to master their linguistic and communicative competence.

All students are obliged to take a Certification Exam in a chosen foreign language at the B2 level. In the case of B1-C1 English (but also German, Russian, French, Czech, and Croatian), every semester they can choose the language course form: traditional face-to-face or blended, with an on-line component.

In 2017, 5 500 students took part in over 200 online language courses (and the number of e-course participants exceeded 45 000 since the e-courses launch), run by over 40 e-teachers of the UW Centre for Foreign Language Teaching and the Centre for Foreign Language Teacher Training and European Education.

The paper focuses on the results of the pilot examination of student speech recordings introduced in online foreign language teaching courses at the University of Warsaw to practise the skill of speaking. The survey was launched within the current academic year (winter 2017 and summer 2018) and evaluates student experience.

2. On-line English language learning and teaching

The English e-courses in a blended form are run as a parallel yet equally valuable option to the traditional in-class courses making it possible for students to enroll in a course of a preferred form.

The on-line component perfectly meets the expectations for online English language teaching, including various teaching materials: audio, video, graphics, and text files in one environment, together with a variety of knowledge testing ways, ensuring an immediate automatic feedback (Clark, Mayer, 2016).

The on-line materials can be combined with in-class teaching (blended learning). As for today, the structure of a (blended) e-course consists of two modules (at B1 and B2) covering 60 teaching hours out of which 45 hours (75%) are taught on-line and 15 hours (25%) in a classroom. Each module consists of 10 thematic chapters containing interactive exercises on listening comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, as well as language sub-systems: grammar, vocabulary, functions and pronunciation. The C1 course is built according to a slightly different scheme.

The structure of each thematic chapter (Galbarczyk, Walewska, 2006b) reflects the most natural scheme applied in a real-life classroom - it begins with an open-ended warm-up task (usually in the form of a forum) introducing the theme and asking for students' initial reaction and sharing of experience. There are also follow up tasks to practise the language skills and sub-systems (in the form of interactive closed-ended quizzes). The chapter ends with an open-ended follow-up activity (in the form of a forum or an online/offline assignment, often including an academic writing task). There is a revision after every second thematic chapter and a test section in a form of quiz with closed-ended tasks (evaluated automatically).

The speaking skill, however, is quite difficult to be practised online due to asynchronous communication, and so it has been dealt with only during the in-class meetings. Even if the learning process is run mainly via the educational platform, the certification in every course is carried out in class. At the end of the semester, students complete the online evaluation forms placed within every course in order to express their opinion.

3. On-line speaking empowering and the process management

The student-centred learning requires the empowerment of individual learners, new approaches to teaching and learning, effective support and guidance, and a curriculum focused on the learner. In order to check if these objectives are met, the online evaluation forms are placed within every e-course. This helps further analysis of the amendments that are potentially to be introduced. In this way, a gap was identified in the speaking skills component. As already mentioned above, this skill is quite difficult to be practised online within the e-course, as the e-courses are run asynchronously. Therefore they are practised mainly during the in-class meetings or via equivalent activities in the e-course forums (though so far have been realized as a written response). The evaluation questionnaires have shown, however, that the level of satisfaction with the speaking component is much lower in comparison to the other skills practice opportunities, such as: listening, grammar, writing, reading, vocabulary (Diagram 1.)

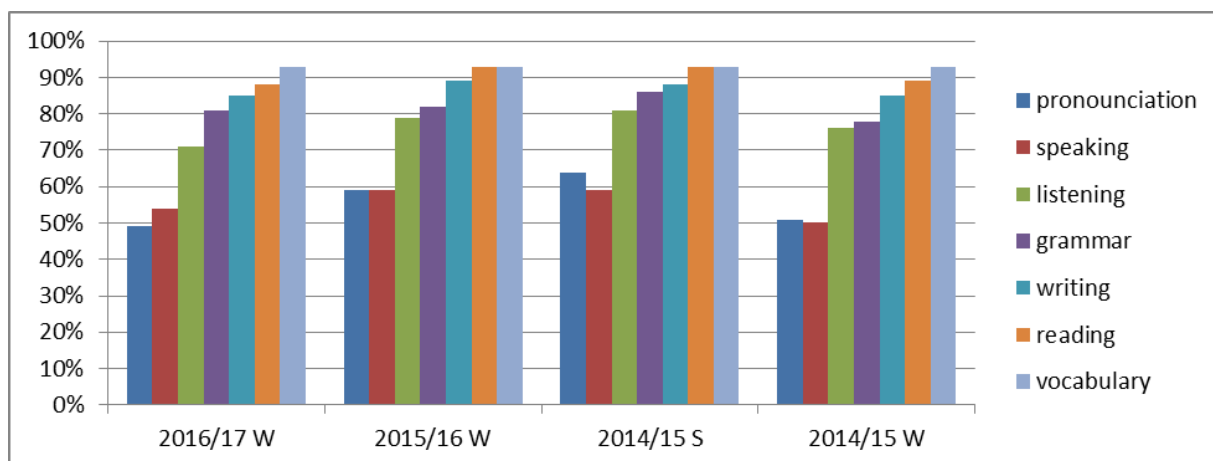


Diagram 1. The percentage of positive replies („yes”) given by students in the evaluation forms (within 4 semesters: W - winter, S-summer; 2016/17W N=113, 2015/16W N=138, 2014/15S N=69, 2014/15W N=139) on their skills increase in: pronunciation, speaking, listening, grammar, writing, reading, vocabulary.

This is why a pilot speech recording option was added among the assignments in the thematic modules. This was proposed to replace written task at the forums of each thematic unit, where students have had an opportunity to express their views and opinions on the personalized topics. The tasks were intended as fluency practice and therefore, they were used to encourage students to “speak” and express their points of view. The assignments occurred to be quite involving and the students eagerly fulfilled them.

Although the topics of the forums were interesting and left a lot of freedom for personal expression, the written form of the responses did not allow e-teachers to actually hear the students’ speech and their speaking skills improvement. They couldn’t evaluate the students’ pronunciation, word and sentence stress, intonation and thoughts organization or text cohesion. They could have only noticed students’ grammatical and lexical mistakes.

Therefore, at the start of the summer semester 2017, a new option was introduced in the English language e-courses, allowing students to enclose audio files in the forum entries instead of providing a written response (Figure 2,3).

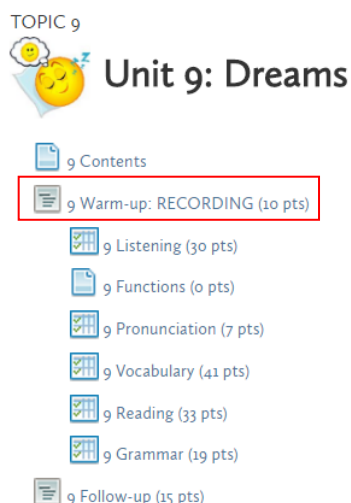


Figure 2. The example of the unit structure with the implementation of the speech recording task.

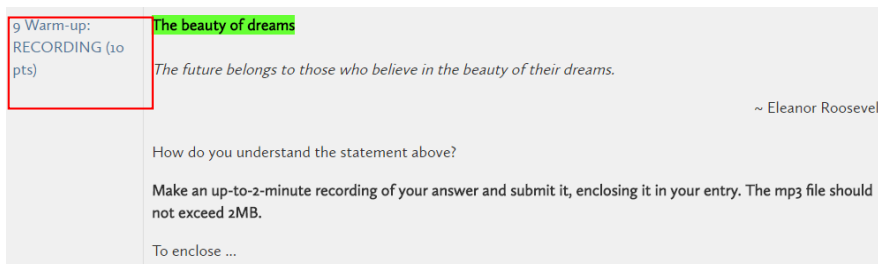


Figure 3. The example contents of the speech recording task.

The students were provided with the instruction on how to submit an audio file and add their recording to the forum entry. The requirement was to deliver the recording not exceeding 2 minutes and not “heavier” than 2MB. It could be made with any device students had at hand, including the mobile devices, on condition it was of an mp3 format.

The e-teachers were trained on how to deal with the change and how to manage with the audio files sent by students. They were also given a choice of how many tasks of the recording they wanted to apply in their e-course (the maximum number was 10). If they felt it would be a great inconvenience to go over all the recordings submitted, they could go back to obtaining the written form of the students’ response.

4. Feedback and survey results

The renewed and updated evaluation forms were designed in order to check how the change introduced met the expectations of students and also to find out what should be modified on the basis of the replies within questionnaires obtained from students. So the prototype change has been tested in that way.

The survey has also shown the approach of e-teachers to the pilot course with the modified tasks. It was up to their decision if the change should be introduced and to what extent. Thus 65% of teachers adopted the new task format out of which 55% left it optional as an alternative to the written form (Fig. 5).

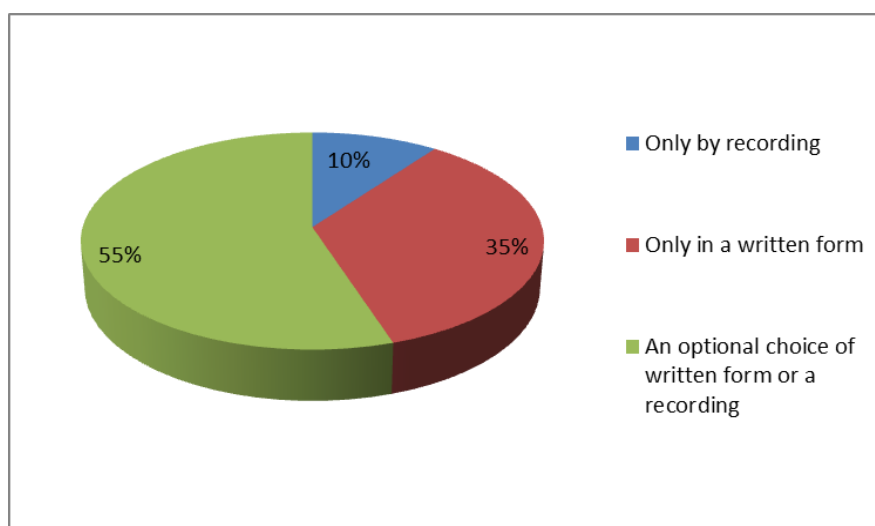


Figure 5. How the assignment was fulfilled within Warm-up task in the new edition of the e-courses: in a written form only, as an recording only, as an optional choice.

Students' approach is therefore crucial for the evaluation of the adhered novelty. Particularly the opinion of those students who had a choice whether to send the task in a written form or via recording is essential.

It occurs that only 38% of students who had had a choice of the task format decided to send the recorded speech. Why? The answer actually lies in the human's nature, that is choosing the easiest way to achieve the aim. And the overriding aim, in that case, was not the mastering of the linguistic competence but getting the highest possible mark for the task's fulfillment. For the most of students the written form of the task occurred easier to manage.

The more in-depth analysis of the replies reveals some interesting findings in the approach of students and their learning tactics. Looking at the results of the survey, several conclusions have been made regarding the impact of introducing a new form of recording speech exercises.

There are two crucial factors that should be taken into account which influenced the students' attitude, that is: the level of English language competence at which their e-course was designed and the level of their ICT skills.

Both of these factors, in the case of low competences, were indirectly indicated in the survey as main obstacles in fulfilling the task in a recorded form.

4.1 Self-assessment (lights and shadows)

It was noticed that the higher the level of advancement of the language skills, the easier and less problematic the task was. And the opposite - the lower the level of language speaking skills, the harder to self-improve the recording made it. It is significant that the students of the higher level e-course (particularly at C1) perceived the recording speech task as an advantage and an added value in the area of self-assessment. When listening to their own speech recording, they were already able to make some self-assessments, correct themselves, and finally record an improved version of their spoken response. At that level of advancement the speaking self-awareness was far higher in comparison to the lower level speakers (B1), who were unsure of own speaking/pronouncing skills. Many of them point out to not being able to correct themselves, even after listening to their own recording. That caused the completion of the task in the written form, which turned out to be more secure and easier, and gave a chance for a better mark.

4.2 ICT skills

The different levels of ICT skills have been also noted among the students. The lower, the more problematic the making of the recording was, together with attaching the audio file to the forum. The lack of an interlocutor, limitation of the speaking time (however, 2-minute recording allow for many thoughts to be expressed and students rarely exceeded the time allocated) and the size of the file have also occurred as stressful factors. All these made students more eager to choose a written form of the task (if they had a choice of), having more influence on the grade obtained by this way, and not to risk the technical error that might have resulted in the lack of points for the task.

Some of the e-teachers didn't make it possible to make the recording within their e-course (35%) (and 55% left it optional). Interestingly, even if students haven't used the recording opportunity (or such an option was not enabled), they still consider it as a precious one for their learning, and indicate that approximately half of these tasks should be assessed in such a form.

In other words, the number of recording tasks should be thought over (preferably as half of all that kind of tasks) in order to assure the fair evaluation of all e-course participants.

4.3 An added value - increased awareness and motivation of the e-teachers

Apparently, out of 51 evaluation replies obtained within the modified "prototype" of the e-courses in winter semester of 2017/2018, 76% of students expressed satisfaction with the speaking component realized via a recording (that is already higher than the results in the previous semesters eg. of 2015/16). One of the explanations might be the fact that e-teachers, informed on the lower level of satisfaction from the speaking component, felt motivated to pay more attention to student's

pronunciation and speaking skills. They might have changed the method of giving feedback focusing more on the individual approach to student and making it more thorough.

5. Further direction

In respect to the findings of the survey the coherent amendments to the e-courses are to be introduced together with the updated evaluation forms in order to check how the change meets the expectations of students. The technicalities of making the recording should be more flexible though.

A student-oriented approach helps learners to identify gaps in their knowledge that needed to be revised with greater care (Allen, 2016), thus a different types of students (different levels of background ICT skills) are to be considered when introducing further amendments within the e-courses.

Among the additional initiatives to be undertaken might be introducing a self-study e-course that would help “beginner” students in mastering their ICT skills, this way facilitating online (and digital) studying, and making the ICT skills more equal among the students.

6. Summary and conclusions

Efforts should be made to ensure the best and most efficient ways to provide opportunities for the development of students’ ICT competence. The self study course on digital learning technologies could be offered in order to facilitate on-line studying for the newcomers. The student-oriented ELT methodology is to be continuously taken into consideration while preparing online courses, along with the new educational and technological tools being developed.

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