Student experience and advancements in the academic on-line foreign language teaching at the University of Warsaw

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ABSTRACT

It has been 10 years now since the University of Warsaw students could try to learn a foreign language (English in particular) via the Internet using the university educational Moodle platform maintained by the Centre for Open and Multimedia Education of the University of Warsaw. The initiative was undertaken within the 2020 Bologna Process strategy for Higher Education, focusing on the enhancement of the innovative life-long learning systems, mobility, multilingualism and employability empowering. All these lead towards obtaining qualifications through flexible learning paths. As a result, progressively, multi-level and multi-purpose e-courses together with on-line placement tests have been created. They were used by 5 000 users in 2016 and by more than 40 000 e-course participants since the beginning of the project. The paper presents the way in which the concept of online foreign language teaching has been evolving at the University of Warsaw. It focuses on the pilot edition of the on-line courses of English, examining student speech recordings to practise the skill of speaking, that has been launched within the current academic semester (summer 2017).

1. Introduction and background

An on-line foreign language teaching project was launched (in 2006) at the University of Warsaw. It was led by the University Centre for Open and Multimedia Education and based on the use of an IT educational Moodle platform and the extensive application of the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) e-learning methodology. 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. As a result, the modern didactics moved toward the ICT supported courses at the University of Warsaw, offering students various forms of learning. What is more, in accordance with the strategy, the Senate of the University of Warsaw issued a Resolution on equal access to the languages didactic offer for both stationary and extramural students. The process of introducing new forms of teaching foreign languages at the University of Warsaw let both stationary and extramural students have equal chances to master their linguistic competence.

To achieve satisfactory teaching and learning outcomes within the amount of teaching hours set in the curriculum, e-learning was introduced into the field of foreign language teaching at the University, with a particular focus on the English language. From that time on, the e-learning of
foreign language courses has been progressively expanded. The courses were based on the existing IT infrastructure and the e-learning methodology worked out by the University Center for Open and Multimedia Education. Continuously, multi-level and multi-purpose e-courses together with on-line placement tests have been created (Pacholak, Galbarczyk, 2016). In 2016, 5 000 students took part in over 200 online language courses run by over 40 e-teachers (exceeding 40 000 e-course participants since the beginning of the project).

2. On-line English language teaching and learning and the services developed

A positive feedback from the academic community was delivered after the first edition of the e-courses at the University (Wieczorkowska, Madey, 2007). The tool used i.e. the Moodle platform, perfectly met the expectations for online English language teaching. It allowed for the application of all sorts of language teaching materials (audio, video, graphics, and text files) in one environment together with a variety of knowledge testing ways and it ensured immediate automatic feedback, decreasing the risk of inappropriate language learning habits (Clark, Mayer, 2016). A student-oriented approach helped learners to identify gaps in their knowledge that needed to be revised with greater care (Allen, 2016).

The on-line materials could be combined with in-class teaching (blended learning). They were also accessible on mobile devices, making the didactic process even more flexible for its users (Bednarczyk, Krawczyk, 2009).

Additionally, the plug-in integrating the University Students’ Management System with the Moodle platform enrolment was launched.

Common access to both Internet and the use of ICT mobile devices fostered the development of computer-assisted e-learning courses within the academic community at the University of Warsaw.

As the first attempt, two courses in English were launched: Writing summaries in English and The language of group discussions. These courses were the starting point for a big project initiated for the whole university by COME UW in 2006, called “E-lektoraty” (Language e-courses), covering mainly the courses in English (but also in German, Russian and Croatian). What is worth emphasizing is that there were a few interweaving variables that decided about the current shape of online language courses at the University (Rudak, Sidor, 2008) and over a decade the online language courses have been constantly and regularly updated and redesigned, both when it comes to their language content and technical maintenance - to make them useful, varied and attractive for academic teachers and students. At present, 5000 students enrol yearly in online English language courses available on the e-learning platform at three levels of advancement: B1, B2, C1.

The e-classes of English contain the same, coherent language content at particular proficiency levels, structured in modules, 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 online English language courses have served as a model for other courses like Business English Communication (run fully online without in-class meetings).

To facilitate the process of testing and evaluation as well as to help students find out about their language skills and choose the most appropriate course, the online placement test in English was embedded on an educational Moodle platform used in an interactive manner to obtain immediate results and instant feedback on the suggested choice of a course. Over 40 000 students used the placement test for this purpose in the years 2006-2016.

3. The structure of General English language e-courses

The concept and methodological assumptions together with the overall and detailed syllabi for the four Project modules were worked out by the expert ELT methodologists from the English Teacher Training College in the Centre for Foreign Language Teacher Training UW, contracted by COME UW (Galbarczyk, Walewska, 2006a).
Over time, these courses have undergone a number of changes resulting from the teachers and students’ needs and feedback. The English e-courses 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.

As for today, the structure of a (blended) e-course is as follows:

- The modules provide language practice at two levels of advancement: B1 (two modules) and B2 (two modules). The C1 course is built according to a slightly different scheme.

- Each of the four modules (at B1 and B2) covers 60 teaching hours (a teaching hour = 45 minutes) and is organized the blended learning way with 45 hours taught via the educational platform and 15 hours - in a classroom.

- Each module consists of 10 thematic chapters. Every thematic chapter contains interactive exercises developing language skills: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, as well as language sub-systems: grammar, vocabulary, functions and pronunciation (Figure 2.).

Watch the programme about Stephen Wiltshire, an autistic person who has got incredible visual memory and is perfect at drawing the panorama of Rome. Then do the quiz below. Decide if the statements are true (write T) or false (write F).

1. Steven is called the living camera.  
2. He finds communication difficult.  
3. He couldn't say his first words until he was 11.  
4. He was able to draw a view of London after only two helicopter rides.  
5. He drew the accurate number of windows in his picture of London.  
6. Steven is going to make a panoramic picture of Rome – the city he has seen before.  
7. He’ll spend 45 min in a helicopter to get ready for his drawing session.  
8. Steven has three days to draw the detailed panoramic view of Rome.  
9. First, Steven draws only a sketch of the church of St Peter's.  
10. At the end of Day 1, Steven has completed half of his creation.  
11. At the beginning of Day 3, he has filled in more than 5 yards of paper in pencil.  
12. However, Steven’s sister is not pleased with his work.  
13. There are a few inaccuracies in the picture of the Pantheon.  
14. The Colosseum is a blueprint of reality, i.e. an exact picture of the existing building.  
15. St Peter's and the Forum and the Colosseum were the easiest things to draw for Steven.
Figure 2. An example of an on-line listening task in a general English language e-course at B2.

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) (Figure 3.).

There is a revision after every second thematic chapter and a test section in a of a quiz with closed-ended tasks (evaluated automatically).

Figure 3. An example of an on-line module structure in a general English language e-course at B2.

Figure 4. An example of an interactive assignment in a general English language e-course at B1.

The speaking skill, however, is quite difficult to be practised online due to asynchronous communication, and so it is 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.

Students of all faculties and types of studies may choose to participate in an online course or the traditional face-to-face classes. At the end of the semester, they complete the online evaluation forms placed within every course in order to express their opinion.

4. The “e-niche” identification

The student-centred learning requires the empowerment of individual learners, new approaches to teaching and learning, effective support and guidance schemes and a curriculum focused clearly on the learner. In order to meet the needs and opinions of students, the online evaluation forms are placed within every e-course. That helps further analysis of the changes/amendments that potentially could be introduced. In this way, a gap was identified in the speaking skills component within the e-course, as already mentioned - quite difficult to be practised online due to asynchronous communication and dealt with mainly during the in-class meetings or via equivalent activities in the e-course forums. The evaluation questionnaires (run online for the last few years) have shown, however, that the development of the speaking skill is an important issue for students (no matter if they are stationary or extramural learners) and that the level of satisfaction with the speaking and pronunciation component is much lower in comparison to the other skills practice possibilities, such as: listening, grammar, writing, reading, vocabulary (Diagram 1.)

![Diagram 1](image)


5. The innovation introduced

The results of the evaluation questionnaires have shown evidently that the speaking and pronunciation practice component is insufficient within the e-course (see Diagram 1.), even if some of the assignments within the e-course were thought and designed to play the role of the speaking practice equivalent. Therefore, the technological progress in the area of mobile apps and their widespread usability came up with support for filling this gap. Thus, the speech recording option was added among the other assignments within the thematic modules of the on-line course embedded on the Moodle platform (Figure 5, 6).

It is worth mentioning that prior to a new form of assessment, focus group interviews were held both among the teachers and the students. Both groups were in favour of introducing the new form of the realization of the assignment.
So far, in each e-course, the students have had the opportunity to express their views and opinions via the personalization tasks contained in two forums in each thematic unit. The forums served as warm-ups and follow-ups to the topic. They contained visual material, stimulating the learners to provide answers to the questions posed, accompanying the visual input. The tasks were intended as fluency practice and therefore, they were used to encourage students to “speak” and express their views. They turned out to be quite involving and the students eagerly fulfilled these tasks. They were given a word limit of up to 120 words. However, the students provided their answers in the written form.

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 development. They couldn’t evaluate the students’ pronunciation, word and sentence stress, intonation and thoughts organization or text cohesion. The only thing they could see or rather read, was students’ grammatical and lexical mistakes – which they were not supposed to pay much attention to because the tasks were not accuracy oriented (yet the e-teachers were welcome to provide delayed feedback if they felt it was necessary).

At the start of the summer semester 2017, a new option was taken into consideration and introduced in the English language e-courses, allowing students to enclose audio files in the forum entries instead of providing a written response (Figure 5, 6).

Figure 5. The example of the unit structure with the implementation of the speech recording task.

Figure 6. The example contents of the speech recording task.

The students were provided with the instruction, available on the main page of the e-course, on how to submit an audio file and add their recording to the forum entry (a Warm-up forum). The requirement was that the recording was to be not more than 2 minutes long (which indicated the maximum length and not the required length) 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, who also had their working preferences and teaching habits, were trained on how to deal with the change and how to manage and assess the contents of the mp3 files sent by students. They were also given a choice of how many tasks of the recording kind they wanted to have 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.

5.1 Very first feedback

The work is now in progress and the first feedback from individual e-teachers is returned, namely, that the change let the students have more speaking and listening practice and that it pauses no technical problems in submitting the audio files. The tangible results of the change will be available at the end of the summer semester, when both students and e-teachers will fill in a questionnaire about the application and efficiency of the innovation introduced.

As an added value, the opinions of students are considered 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.

6. Further direction

The renewed and updated evaluation forms are planned to be designed in order to check how the change introduced will have met the expectations of students and also to find out what should be modified on the basis of the replies within questionnaires obtained both from students and e-teachers.

7. Summary and conclusions

The value and the additional benefit of the language e-courses improvement is the consequent and consistent University’s students and teachers’ ICT skills upgrade. The student-oriented ELT methodology should be continuously taken into consideration while preparing online courses, along with the new educational and technological tools being developed. In the language courses, both stationary and online, the more speaking practice reflecting real life students get, the better users of the language they will be in everyday life. Therefore, efforts should be made to ensure the best and most efficient ways of providing opportunities for the development of students’ linguistic and communicative competence.

8. REFERENCES


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AUTHORS’ BIOGRAPHIES

Anna Pacholak, MSc, works in the Center for Open and Multimedia Education, University of Warsaw. She has been engaged in various educational projects involving e-learning such as Doctorates for Mazovia (e-course: Basics of knowledge commercialization), Ministry of Regional Development e-courses on projects’ evaluation, Audiovisual and Media Education Programme (PEAM), Warsaw School of Data Analysis. Her main scope of interest is open access education, e-learning involvement in teaching and learning, motivation aspects in learning process, new technologies for education. She is the member of the Editorial Board of the EduAction open access online journal and the European Journal of Higher Education IT; EDUCAUSE Annual Conference reviewer.

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