
Online Learning

Is on-line learning a viable option for a small school or individual teacher in the English language industry and if so in what forms and to what extent?

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Is on-line learning a viable option for a small school or individual teacher in the English language industry and if so in what forms and to what extent?

Introduction

Over one billion people are estimated to be learning English worldwide¹ and at the start of the millennium there were 750 million people speaking English as a foreign language in their workplace or as tourists around the world. Furthermore 375 million people use English daily as a second language. This broad spectrum of people covers a vast range of reasons and motivations for learning but a growing proportion of English used by non native speakers is used within the work place. Consequently companies big and small are major customers for language agencies and institutions. As the march of globalisation continues the number of people learning English can only continue to rise and the language teaching businesses will grow with it. Prague, a city of only 1.2 million people now supports over 120 language schools. It is also expected that by the end of 2010 there will be more corporate education providers than traditional universities worldwide. These companies will cover a lot more than English language tuition and this explosion in corporate education is indicative of the wider trend towards lifelong learning. “Today’s business and government leaders know that to achieve growth and innovation, and to attract and retain the best people, learning is an essential engine of productivity and competitive advantage.”²

Information and communication technology is also developing rapidly, forcing companies to keep up or get left behind. Whether this technology develops because businesses requires it or vice versa the fact remains that as globalisation spreads we will become the more dependent on internet technology to do every day tasks such as banking and shopping. These internet services are used because people lack the time to conduct such tasks in person and since the start of the millennium internet use has grown worldwide from approximately 350 million to more than 1 800 million³. From this we can only assume that the number of available services will increase to include much more education and training opportunities.

Education is about skills or knowledge being passed from person to person and therefore could be viewed as a transfer of information in much the same way as paying a bill or shopping on-line. Conversely it could be argued that language skills are inherently communicative so there is a limit to

¹http://esl.about.com/od/englishlearningresources/f/f_eslmarket.htm

²www.accenture.com/NR/rdonlyres/03E89D0C-17B1-4178-9965-4F715D25A34D/0/expectations.pdf

³<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

how far into the electronic realm they can be taken. However with so much communication happening in the virtual world perhaps learning within that same world should be a consideration.

Having experience in teaching English in a corporate situation it is clear that time is something many students do not have, yet language lessons are often an important part of their routine. It can be a major frustration to teacher and student and when time becomes the controlling factor over learning and the repercussions of uncertain schedules and last minute changes can be far reaching for the individual teacher and the organisation which they work for. However with the prevalence of computers in everyday life and technology being an increasing medium for communication it may be time the English teaching world made some compromises between the need to talk with people face-to-face and the ever widening possibilities for embracing technology and using it to make life easier for all parties.

I have little experience of e-learning within EFL but based on the problems I and many other teachers encounter with regards to timing and irregularity of lesson I believe that it is an area which should be researched with a view to increasing the diversity of teaching methods available on a day to day basis for teachers.

By using action research I can explore the depth of the problems associated with the time management of face-to-face learning and the effects on teachers and small language schools. By exploring principles and approaches to on-line learning I will be able to make a set of suggestions and strategies for the future that will be economically and practically viable. The resulting suggestions may then be used to improve the functionality of English language classrooms for both students and teachers and make the lives of EFL teachers more predictable. To achieve this I intend to use several methods of gaining information from both academic and human sources by researching appropriate topics and by talking to the people that are most affected. Namely the teachers and the students of English as a foreign language.

Methodologies:

1 - Research

The first step in a study into the viable forms of on-line learning for a language classroom is to establish the forms and uses of e-learning that are already available both for general academia and specifically for language learning. This research should take the form of academic reading relating to the uses, benefits and problems of e-learning to establish a non-biased view of what is available, how it works and the positive and negative aspects of each option. This background reading into the area is the

basis for action research and will provide a solid ground for the development of new ideas for the implementation of such techniques in the language learning sector.

2 - Data

As this research is being carried out in response to the problems with students who struggle to attend face-to-face lessons due to personal or business commitments it is necessary to show how deep that problem is. To show that I will gather and analyse the attendance records for the students from several large companies who have long term contracts for English language courses of varying types with a language institute in Prague. By taking a cross section such as this from companies rather than individual courses or teachers I am able to see attendance records for multiple teachers, different group sizes and different work responsibilities. In addition to this I will also be able to look into the contractual policies such companies have regarding attendance and cancellations. This information will cover three major companies and a cross section of around 35 students allowing assumptions to be made about the situation using objective data from a real business.

3 - Questionnaire

A questionnaire is the means of getting subjective data on the opinions of a selected group of students. For practical reasons the group will differ slightly from that used for the attendance records and it will not only be business clients of the institute but those students who attend public evening courses and individuals who are not currently taking an English course. The group will aim to cover about 50 students of all language levels and will ask the certain background questions about their level and group sizes and their personal feeling about time problems. The main focus however will be on what materials the students themselves currently use on the internet and what materials or activities they would consider using if they were made available. This questionnaire will be translated into the Czech language so as to remove any level related barriers or bias from the results. Completion will be entirely voluntary consequently the expected return of questionnaires is likely to be lower than the output.

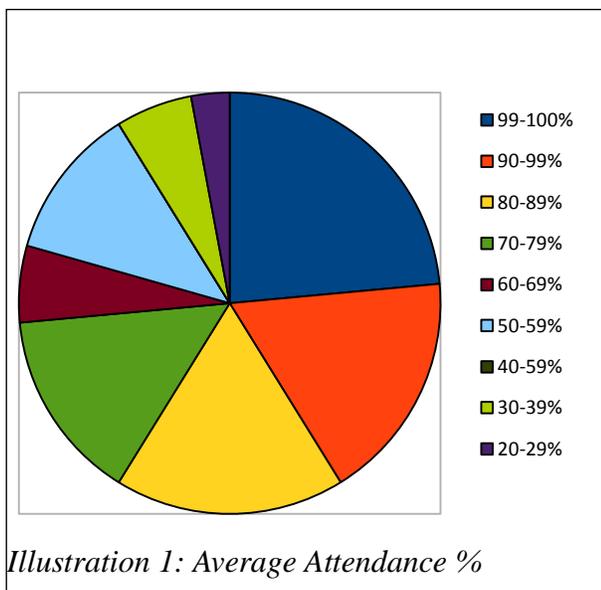
4 - A model

Based on the results of the research done I aim to create a simple e-learning environment, which may incorporate some or all of the possibilities that students would consider depending on their practicality. Ultimately this will be a study of how viable these options are for the private teacher or small institution that does not have access to IT support or a great deal of capital to invest on an e-learning

project. This project will then be tested on students and teachers and those participants will be asked to make comments in a few specific areas to increase the feedback for the project. I will also look further into the possibilities for learning that are not bound by the limits of a small institutions skills and finances. To do this I will need to research the implementation and running costs of any forms of learning that my research shows as viable for learning then I can assess if they are viable from the point of view of the teacher and the institution.

The Problem

The English language is a skill necessary for millions of people worldwide to communicate and traditionally learning that skill in its various forms has taken place by passing skills directly from one person to another. As the language itself is a form of communication it seems only natural that learning those skills should involve contact with another person. However as globalisation increases, so does the need to travel, host business guests from other countries and do business by phone around the world. Business people are often required to attend meetings at short notice or spend several days a week travelling. This combined with the everyday requirements of personal and family life makes time a precious commodity and to successfully learn a language time is a vary important factor.



A range of students enrolled on various courses at a language institute in Prague from evening classes to one-to-one in-company classes were asked some questions about their courses and 16% admitted that they have problems attending regularly (appendix 2). This figure of course only accounts for the students that acknowledge their attendance is problematic. Records from three large companies who have long term contracts with the institute (illustration 1) show that over half of the students have less than 80% attendance. It can also be seen from illustration 1 that

there are some students who, on average, attend less than 40% of their lessons.

It could be suggested that the only person being harmed by irregular attendance is the student themselves but there are several other factors to consider. Approximately 75% of students take lessons in classes of more than three people. It is therefore reasonable for us to take into consideration the effect irregular attendance of one student has on the learning abilities of the other students and the

knock on effects on the teacher and on their time an planning.

If enrolled on a group course missing one lesson can create a gap in knowledge which could widen rapidly if that information is never acquired. This then puts the absent student at a disadvantage to the rest of their class. Such absences can then have a knock on effect on the other students by making group work unbalanced or by forcing the teacher to repeat some sections and take up more time on one subject than is necessary.

Teaching a group of four or above the impact on the teacher is minimal if one or even two students are absent from the class however it is common for companies to request smaller class sizes with 27% of students taking classes with a maximum of three people. For a teacher absences in these classes can become a big problem. Preparations made for a group of three students can be incompatible with two and impossible with only one student. So when faced with an unreliable group of students that could range in numbers from one to three a teacher must in effect prepare several lesson plans or variations on a lesson. Which when multiplied by the 15 or more lessons that a teacher may have in a week this is a considerable time commitment.

Slightly different issues occur with individual courses, appendix 1 shows that all of the students with attendance of over 90% were either company receptionists who are obliged to be on site all the time or students taking individual lessons. The figures shown for individual students may also paint a false picture as they have much more freedom to reschedule lessons when a time conflict occurs. What this means is that although the individual student may not miss as many lessons as a student in a group and therefore not risk falling behind there can be significant disruption to a teachers schedule. A constant need to cancel or reschedule lessons can have an significant effect on the time and finances of a teacher.

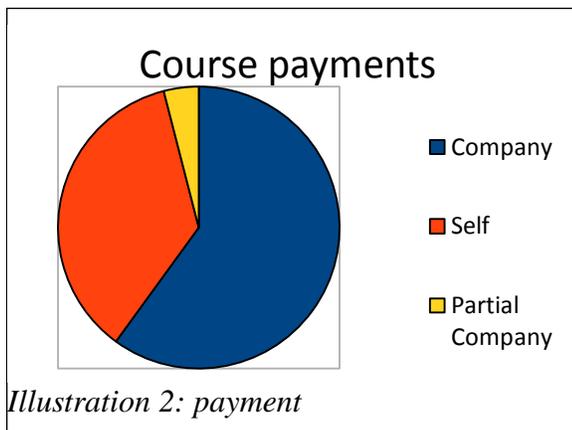


Illustration 2: payment

The students and the teachers are very often not the only people with time and money invested in language courses. The number of students who have their courses paid for by their employer shows just how highly many companies value the English language. Illustration 2 shows that sixty percent of students do not pay for their language courses from their own pocket, which says a great deal about the priorities of large corporations. In

addition to this the cancellation policy is often the point of greatest discussion between a language

school and potential clients. The current policy at the institute states that corporate clients must pay for 75% of their lessons every month irrespective of attendance. Furthermore cancellations made less than 24 hours in advance will always be charged as attended and courses for the public are paid in advance at the start of every semester. The need for such policies shows a generally acknowledged trend towards irregular attendance and the need for small language schools to minimise the damage that does to the business and its teachers. Such policies are not only defined by the providers but by the businesses, it is not uncommon for student attendance to be monitored by their employers as part of the contract between them regarding payment of the course.

Looking at these problems we begin to see exactly where the problem lies, not with an unwillingness to learn or with laziness but the need to combine as many as eight peoples schedules plus that of a meeting space and the requirements of the HR department (often stating that lessons must be outside working hours). So if a student is unable to attend that lesson that are funded by their employer they are put at a significant disadvantage to their colleagues. Also if individual students are unable to commit to a set time this causes disruption to the schedule of a teacher which again may mean that lessons become inaccessible to the student and furthermore cause planning, scheduling and financial problems to the teacher. Consequently there is a growing need to explore ways of making English learning more accessible to students who have busy and unpredictable lives and hence try to make the lives of English language teachers less erratic and unpredictable.

Hypothesis

Based on the data relating to attendance and the problems with scheduling faced on a daily basis by teachers in the field there is a clear need for a change in approach. What form that change should take and the specifics of how it can be approached need to be researched thoroughly but in general we need to introduce a more flexible and accessible approach to language learning. Thus providing students with options above and beyond one lesson a week in a classroom. As with every other service that has moved onto the world wide web learning needs to be made easier and I believe it is possible to use the internet to achieve this by making certain activities available on the web for increased access. That is not to say however that the classroom can be or should be replaced, more that there should be extras that are associated with it.

On-line learning options

There are many options available to the student or the company regarding language lessons. The decision can involve selecting a language school based on materials, teachers, policies and of course finance. Rarely however is one of the options to consider an on-line course. As discussed people have less and less time but an increasing access to computers so the exploration of extra options that a computer and the internet can add to the choice of language course and provider could give interesting results. There are of course positive and negative aspects to on-line learning, the main advantage being accessibility, the material is available when the student wants it, allowing them to set their own pace. This can also be a disadvantage with less motivated learners as there can be a tendency to develop bad study habits and fall behind. Combine this with the fact that the tutor may not always be available when the student needs them and the myriad problems that can be caused by computers and network connections and you may want to think twice about e-learning.⁴ However to focus on these issues would underestimate the benefits of increased access. Access in this sense means providing education to people who cannot, for whatever reason, attend a course of study. In this way distance learning has been around for many years using more traditional printed and audio media only now it is possible for distance learning providers to use the more interactive and appealing resources available on the web (Owsten 1997). A decision about e-learning is not as simple as deciding to learn on-line or not to learn on-line there are many more factors to consider when making those choices.

Web based learning has at least seven areas of functionality to take into account.

1. Real time announcements so students are as up to date as possible with changes and information.
2. Real time grading and feedback systems allowing students some of the interactions that may be missing by the removal of a tutor in person.
3. A facility for posting materials in any format that will be accessible to both students and teachers on a variety of operating systems.
4. External links and reading lists that students will need throughout their course in one accessible place.
5. Automated quizzes, worksheets and tests to keep the work interactive on some level
6. Discussion boards and chat rooms to facilitate student to student and student to teacher communication

⁴<http://www.dso.iastate.edu/asc/academic/elearner/advantage.html>

7. An email function that allows private communication between students and teachers about topics which should not be discussed on the message boards and forums.

(Roberts, T. S., & McInnerney, J. M., 2007)

These topics are just the beginning of web-based learning and as technology changes so will the needs and demands of on-line learners and their teachers. Creating a platform that includes all of these options is only the tip of the iceberg. Choices must be made on the platform, or course management system to be used. Following this it is necessary to decide on the percentage of the course that will be conducted on-line which could range from 100% to as little as 5% depending on the needs of the students and the resources available and most importantly there is the matter of content, accessibility and availability of that content and the teachers of the course and their familiarity with the technology.

Synchronous learning vs Asynchronous learning

Synchronous learning, or live learning is conducted in much the same way as in a 'real' classroom. The students and teacher are present on-line at a defined time and the lesson is carried out in real time. This type of learning can be achieved via chat rooms or conferencing software which allows two or more people to communicate together remotely. The disadvantage to this type of learning however is the same as that which causes so many problems in the 'real' classroom. Time. Synchronous learning requires the same if not more organization than a traditional environment as you need to manage meeting times, internet connections and possibly even different time zones. It also imposes external factors such as the speed of working on the students who must in effect work to the pace of the slowest student which can easily result in one being left behind or another being left under challenged.

Asynchronous is precisely the opposite, it is a style of on-line course where the student is generally responsible for themselves and can manage their own time. "The more of the course that is conducted asynchronously, the more flexible and available the course is to the student" (Graziadei et. al. 1997) Communication does not happen in real time, a tutor or mentor is available by email and web forums and on-line resources are available 24/7. This is what make this type of learning attractive to many. However the increased accessibility and personal responsibility have their downside, students may feel isolated and frustrated if forced to wait for an answer to a pressing question.

Synchronous learning often involves the teacher or trainer broadcasting live audio or perhaps running a slide show while student from various locations are logged on. The main advantage of this over asynchronous learning is the variations in the types of media that can be used. Asynchronous learning

tends to present information only in the form of text⁵. Which can cause problems with the incorporation of different learning styles and keeping motivation high when there is limited variation in the material. It could be argued that the only limit to variation is the imagination of the teacher but when discussing teaching using technology considerations of the training involved for the teacher must also be made. Someone who may create a very diverse classroom in person may not have the skills to do so on-line. Even with the increasing number of commercially available packages for teacher to use when creating virtual learning environments there is no guarantee that they can be used effectively.

It can be clearly seen that both synchronous and asynchronous learning have their individual problems and benefits and as discussed by Graziadei et. al. (1997) both synchronous and asynchronous aspects are important factors in a virtual classroom. This can also be logically inferred from looking at the traditional classroom where it normal to have a group lesson which includes self study options as homework. In a fully virtual course the ratio of synchronous to asynchronous learning will largely be determined by the availability of technology and resources and would vary greatly depending on the size of the institution. What we are discussing here with regard to asynchronous learning particularly is a radical change in the way we approach education. Synchronous learning virtual or face-to-face still involves the interaction of people but asynchronous learning may have significant effects on motivation caused by essentially limiting the students to self directed solo study.

"Adult learner motivation is an issue in asynchronous instruction because of the lack of interaction to engage the learner, and the lack of controls incorporated into the applications. Concern about adult learner motivation in this on-demand era is also the product of incessant comparison to traditional classroom learning."(Kim, Kyong-Jee 2004). Fisher (2006) discusses asynchronous learning environment with regard to the motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic) of adult learners. Fisher argues that due to the contact, however virtual, synchronous on-line environments have similar motivations to a traditional classroom whereas asynchronous environments rely almost entirely on the intrinsic motivations of the student. The introduction of technology itself could also increase motivation in some people, especially younger generations, while adding a stress factor that could drastically reduce motivation in older generations or those less comfortable with computers and the internet. Jeanne Meister of of Corporate University Xchange, Inc., carried out a survey that showed the completion rate for asynchronous e-learning courses was as low as 30% and in a discussion of the viability of any form of e-learning the reasons for this trend must be considered. Kim (2004) discovered that limited interactivity and integration reduced motivation in adult learners whereas interactive material such as

⁵http://www.e-learningguru.com/articles/art1_7.htm

animations created a more positive learning environment and increased motivation even within an asynchronous learning environment. It could be inferred from this that for e-learning to be motivational there must be an element of interaction to it be it human contact or animated material.

Blended learning

Blended learning or hybrid learning is a slightly different approach to teaching which uses traditional face-to-face methods and combines them with computer-mediated activities⁶. Blended learning should provide improved pedagogy, increase access and flexibility and increase cost effectiveness by linking activities to the process and thus focussing on learner activation rather than content dissemination⁷. This approach is often used to limit the amount of classroom time, for example by meeting every fortnight instead of weekly, and interim work is made accessible on-line rather than on paper. This approach differs from asynchronous learning because of the classroom time given to the students as an integral part of the course. It could be viewed as a compromise between e-learning and a traditional classroom and could be set up to incorporate the best of both formats. Blended learning is a very wide ranging statement and can be used to cover any percentage combination of face-to-face and on-line work but regardless of percentage the creation of resources is highly important and quite challenging and like the fully on-line environment the production of materials and their use may be new to many teachers and students.

Bersin and associates 2003 suggested that blended learning is a way of setting e-learning where it fits well but without forcing it into environments where it is inappropriate. They found that creating an e-learning environment and surrounding it with humans created “high interest, accountability, and real assessment of results” (Bersin et. al. 2003). Blended learning has its problems, infrastructure and technology can cause issues, perhaps even more so than a fully on-line course, as blended learning needs to have a usable interface between the traditional classroom and the on-line materials. Bersin and associates primarily discussed the possibilities for blended learning within the corporate environment and their research showed that in the long run it had tremendous benefits for the company as a whole. Large corporations have the money and the resources to develop such environments and those resources may not be so readily available to smaller educational institutions or those funded by governments or student fees.

To get a fuller picture we must look at blended learning from the point of view of an educational

⁶http://weblearning.psu.edu/blended-learning-initiative/what_is_blended_learning

⁷English Teaching professional September 2008.

institution. The EDUCAUSE centre for applied research at the university of Florida looks at blended learning from another perspective. They see the move towards blended learning as indicative of the current educational trend to move away from teacher centred learning and towards a more student centred approach. Florida University sees blended learning as a way to redesign instructional methods and increase interactions between everyone involved in the learning process. Their research has shown that there is a higher satisfaction rate for both students and faculty in blended learning as opposed to total e-learning based on the increased amount of human contact. Also from a organizational point of view blended learning has effectively created more 'space' for classes and testing and consequently student learning while reducing direct instructional cost by as much as 50%. The Universidad de Concepción, Chile, has likewise responded to an increasing numbers of students requiring English language tuition by creating a b-learning (blended learning) environment. The four tier course includes specially developed software to act as the back bone of a communicative course (Bañados 2006), on-line monitoring of students, face-to-face teacher led classes and conversation classes with a native English speaker. The system has challenged the roles of the teachers who have become guides through the course rather than presenters of it while the students have become more autonomous and have taken on greater responsibility for their own learning. The Universidad de Concepción got very positive feedback and results from its b-learning programme, however, the project as a whole took a large team of people four years to develop(Bañados 2006).

Another case where blended learning has been used effectively is in Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic where students of informatics are given reading and writing tasks to complete on their own allowing teaching staff more classroom time to focus on speaking, listening and practical activities. "E-learning has been an important feature of the faculty since 1999 and is seen as a useful tool for improving the quality of teaching"⁸. It is generally accepted that while on-line materials are good for some activities face-to-face learning is necessary for any communicative course and the teacher will never be replaced by technology. All of the examples above show that creating a successful blended learning environment for a large number of students takes more than just teachers and their line managers and requires significant time and investment from a wide range of people.

OSOSS - On-line self organising social systems.

An OSOSS is a system which allows large numbers of individual students to organise themselves in such a way that they can solve problems and achieve goals without the need for a centralised authority.

⁸English Teaching professional September 2008.

This self organising social system in concept brings “increased bandwidth to the on-line classroom”. Not bandwidth in the traditional computer sense of the word but “teacher bandwidth”. (Wiley and Edwards 2002) Its creators see this system as a way of allowing a teacher to be responsible for thousands of students rather than the tens of students that is possible in a more traditional learning environment. It is in essence a response to the problem created by e-learning, the ever increasing number of students for the same number of teachers. The OSOSS system relies on automating feedback via an intelligent instructional system. (Wiley and Edwards 2002) While in theory a promising idea there would be inherent difficulties in achieving such a thing in certain areas of learning such as language instruction and consequently limiting the use of such a model in a wider educational environment. What OSOSS does give students is a collaborative approach to learning whereby they negotiate together to gain understanding. It would need a different approach to the work set requiring it to be goal based and focussed on the 'how to, rather than know that' styles of learning and teaching (Wiley and Edwards 2002). Once again this links with the theory that web-based education is biased against liberal learning and the forms of communication that go with it. (Carsten and Worsfold, 2000: 83).

It must also be reiterated that a system in which feedback is automated by intelligent machinery does not mean that students are supported by that machine, the self organising social system is a system which enables the students to support each other and regardless of the pros and cons of this specific system some of the best feedback, encouragement and ideas come from other students and not the teachers. With regard to the English language classroom this type of system may have a future but would need to be designed specifically for the EFL market for it to be really functional.

Course/Classroom management systems (CMS)

A CMS is a piece of software which allows you to manage on-line courses and classrooms from a central location. Such a system is used to consider teaching and learning styles and objectives, create and review learning materials and provide them to the students. It must also facilitate the registering, tracking and reviewing of students throughout the duration of their course of study incorporating their assessment, course plans and any feedback they give and receive. A CMS should also be a platform for distributing appropriate materials to students at the correct time and provide synchronous and asynchronous communication channels between all people involved when appropriate. Finally the chosen system must also have a means to evaluate courses, outcomes and instructors in a way which

will allow the course to be reorganized and run again more effectively.⁹

Of course all educational establishments have their own course management system but how these translate into the virtual realm is a matter of software choice. There are a number of packages available for institutions to install and operate, Moodle and blackboard being among the most popular and each bringing different things to the learning environment.

Blackboard has created a CMS for a range of different learning scenarios which include high school level, higher education, career colleges and a corporate system¹⁰.

“Blackboard Learn features exciting new social learning and teaching tools that foster more logical, visually impactful and active learning opportunities for students. You’ll transform your closed-door classrooms into communities where students remain connected to their educational experience 24 hours a day”

The message is quite clear, the makers of this program believe that their CMS makes learning more active and accessible. To do this the software provides materials, discussion boards, chat rooms, on-line quizzes and academic resources and all it requires is that the student has access to a computer and an email account. The system is also marketed as being intuitive to use for the students and basic training is left to the course tutor.¹¹ Students for whatever reasons make a choice to study on-line, teachers however may be pushed in this directions by their employers and could well be in need of training to provide an effective service to their students. The biggest difference when using a CMS is that most communication happens through a keyboard and teachers are unable to read the body language of their students throughout a course(Blackboard inc.). Assignments must therefore be designed with this in mind and have some form of continuous communication built into them. It must also be remembered that students may not be totally comfortable with the technology and activities to make them feel more at home are needed within a CMS in the same was as warmers and ice breakers are needed in a live classroom. Generally however the formation of a course within blackboard would follow the same basic guidelines as a traditional course the only difference being the medium. That is not to say however that teachers and students do not require training.

Moodle is a completely open source alternative which means that it is free and available to everyone and it is continuously supported, updated and evaluated by the people who use it.

“The word Moodle was originally an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, which is mostly useful to programmers and

⁹http://horizon.unc.edu/projects/monograph/CD/Technological_Tools/Graziadei.asp

¹⁰<http://www.blackboard.com/Teaching-Learning/Overview.aspx>

¹¹<http://itc.boisestate.edu/bbsupport/bbdocs/general/whatisblackboard.htm>

education theorists. It's also a verb that describes the process of lazily meandering through something, doing things as it occurs to you to do them, an enjoyable tinkering that often leads to insight and creativity. As such it applies both to the way Moodle was developed, and to the way a student or teacher might approach studying or teaching an online course. Anyone who uses Moodle is a Moodler.”¹²

While Moodle clearly shows a more laid back approach to on-line education the message is essentially the same as that of Blackboard. That education should be open to everyone to use at their own pace and in their own time. From a students point of view there is little to choose between Moodle and Blackboard however from an educators point of view the CMS, and there are many more available, must cater to the needs of the institution and its students and each package will appeal to a different set of requirements.

Distance learning

Distance learning is exactly what it describes, learning at a distance from the tutor, but this does not necessarily mean on-line learning. Distance learning is traditionally the use of technological components to assist learning from a distance and has been around for much longer than specifically e-learning. Distance learning became popular as individuals, institutions, businesses, and the military looked for different ways access to education as the demands of daily life changed.¹³ The open university was the first widely successful distance learning provider and was started in the 1960's and did not start using the internet until the late 1980's. It is important when investigating e-learning to remember the beginnings of distance learning and how it worked and what materials were used. The internet as a forum may have made the concept more widespread and successful but perhaps there is still a place for video, audio and real books even in a world which is now dominated by computers and on-line learning providers should look to provide links to other materials that may not require an internet connection and a computer screen.

Mobile learning

M-learning is similar to the time honoured tradition of doing your homework on the bus however it has been harnessed and sanctioned by technology. It is, in essence, the use of a hand held mobile device as a learning aid. As these devices get more sophisticated the possibilities for their use grow. However it

¹²http://docs.moodle.org/en/About_Moodle

¹³<http://www.distance-learning-college-guide.com/what-is-distance-learning.html>

is not so different from the early days of language learning when a book came with a cassette tape for your car or walkman. The resources however are much more interactive a for a student it means even greater access than that afforded by an e-learning as the materials are available everywhere not just at their desk¹⁴. This teaching or learning approach could involve such software as Skype for contacting teachers, or the use of podcasts and specially designed radio broadcasts for learners of English. It is well understood that this type of learning will never be comparable with face-to-face learning but there is no reason why they cannot compliment each other and be used as a way of keeping busy people in contact with their lessons and their peers even if they are forced to be away from the classroom.

Courses and resources for learning English on-line.

English language courses are becoming increasingly available via the internet in various forms and including various media sources but the functionality of these course and the extent to which they can be compared with traditional classrooms is worth investigating. In a traditional English classroom a teacher would provide materials for reading, listening, grammatical study, written work and of course speaking the transference of these skill focussed activities into digital media is of course and important aspect of the viability of on-line learning and has been approached in a range of ways through different websites and software packages.

Skype

An increasingly common method of teaching on-line utilises Skype¹⁵, an internet telephone service, which allows real time communication between two or more people and requires only that all parties have an internet connection. “Skype is easily downloaded to the computer and is simple to use. As a result, learn English online Skype courses are considered user-friendly.”¹⁶ By using Skype it is possible to bring an element of communication into an e-learning environment so students can talk face-to-face with their teachers through a web-cam and can use both voice and text chat features, both of which have significant benefits for the students. Voice chat allows more or less normal communication while the text chat facility allows students to concentrate more on written communication and the construction of sentences. Consequently Skype, or other such programmes, can bring an element of writing into a learning situation which may often be lacking from a traditional classroom as the world

¹⁴English teaching professional, May 2010

¹⁵<http://www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/home>

¹⁶<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/learn-english-online-skype-courses-are-beneficial-to-language-learners.html>

becomes more technologically advanced and people become less likely to use pen and paper to communicate. However this brings with it the problems that are becoming more evident, especially in young people, that using instant messenger has a tendency to encourage short cuts in written English that would not necessarily be used otherwise (Lee 2002). On the other hand, as Skype and other internet communication programmes become more widely used in the workplace you could argue that knowing how to communicate on them efficiently and effectively should be a standard part of an English course. Of course using Skype as a teaching tool still requires teacher and student to be in a specific location at a specific time and puts them at the mercy of internet connections and other technical details. Furthermore, despite the evident communicative aspect of using Skype it can never be a replacement for talking to people as many small details of communication like facial expressions, tone of voice and body language can quite easily be lost even with the use of a web cam.

Synchronous on-line courses

Skype is itself is not and never will be a classroom, a teacher can provide reading or listening materials and writing tasks that can be done together with the student or as home work via email but there is no space where these tasks can be displayed for all parties. This may not necessarily be a problem for an organised teacher however this may increase difficulties in communication. Learn2lingo¹⁷ has developed an environment where they have combined these structures on one page. They have text chat, which can act as a blackboard and writing pad for both student and teacher, a video screen so voice chat with a web-cam is possible and in addition there is a space where multiple activities can be posted and accessible. This in effect allows the on-line school to create a resource bank of teaching materials which allows for teachers and students from many locations to work together thus enhancing diversity of students, teachers and materials. Lessons are offered from elementary to advanced and focussed on speaking and listening.

The time and location benefits can extend to both teachers and students as Learn2lingo offers standard thirty minute lessons which can be pre booked to accommodate the schedule of teacher and students. Or on demand which means that anyone who is registered with learn2lingo can log-on when they have free time and teach or learn when it is convenient for them. Evidently in such a scenario students may not be able to select their preferred teachers however they can have a lesson when it is really suitable. The added benefit for the teacher is of course financial and it means they can get extra income with no time commitments. The website has over four hundred teachers registered covering 35 languages and

¹⁷ <http://learn2lingo.com/>

almost three quarters of those teachers are offering English tuition. Although this is by no means a representation of how active those teachers are and how much work they receive from the the site.

Learn2lingo also offers the status of partner language school to traditional establishments around the globe. This allows schools the same benefits such as extra income and resources and allows the school to use the on-line platform to enhance its own business. Compared to the number of teachers registered the number of partner schools is quite small as only 18 schools are registered to teach English. The website clearly promotes the benefits to such a partnership such as the access to greater revenue, convenience and resource banks but there is also a financial aspect to the partnership which is not mentioned in detail.

A similar e-learning environment is provided on the German website <http://www.learnenglish.de/>, although a lot more lo-tech. It provides a large number of resources which explain grammar and introduce vocabulary including a range of interactive quizzes, mp3 dictation exercises and much more. There are two major differences between this site and Learn2lingo, the first being that the German site includes a chat room which is moderated by a teacher but does not provide the Skype style conferencing facilitates of learn2lingo. It is also lacking the space for a teacher to upload and use their own materials however it does still function as a resource area for both teachers and students and under the right circumstances could function as a full language course although the lack of teacher involvement would make that course mostly autonomous. The most significant difference between the two sites is the level of technology used and the amount of equipment needed by teachers and students. Which really goes to show the amount of support and financial backing that is required to create such a highly functional on-line environment but also what is possible based on donations and basic computer knowledge.

Autonomous on-line learning.

Autonomous learning is another option whereby “The language learner takes responsibility for the totality of their learning situation.” (Holec) This does not remove the need for a teacher entirely but there is a vast array of resources on the web that can facilitate language learning without the active input of a teacher. They could perhaps be categorised more as tutorials than lessons but the fact remains that they could have a significant benefit to learners depending on how they are used and what the learners objectives are. Some learners feel more confident learning autonomously at first and maybe

unwilling or simply not ready to enter a classroom where they would be forced to speak. This may be especially true of beginners as there are many sites devoted to explaining the basics of grammar and vocabulary. <http://www.englishpage.com/> offers such resources for students with short tutorials including pictures and diagrams but no interaction. They do provide a forum for students to ask questions of each other which is a form of communication but as it is not carried out in real time it cannot really be categorised as speaking with other students. With an entirely peer directed forum there is a chance that mistakes could be intensified but peer correction and evaluation is regularly used and respected in the traditional classroom so there is no reason at all why it should not be encouraged in an on-line environment with appropriate monitoring and moderation. <http://www.learn-english-online.org/> is another site which encourages autonomous learning. Aimed at beginners it provides explanations of grammar, vocabulary sheets, interactive games, reading materials and listening activities. Everything that you might expect to find in a beginners classroom. It may be difficult however for a student to move up to a higher level if they have never been in an environment that practices speaking but the ability to work at an entirely self determined pace may increase the chance of successfully acquiring the basics of a language. At higher levels however the structures could easily be deemed useless if you do not use them to communicate.

Blended learning

As we have discussed before blended learning in theory combines the best of all worlds. The Vital English Academy¹⁸ is a web based company that provides blended learning solutions to its students.

“The Vital English Academy takes a uniquely professional approach to English tutoring. We mix the best of face to face tuition with engaging on-line lessons. We all learn differently and by combining the two modes of learning we enhance learning and ensure affordability.” Their approach uses the time of both students and teacher as effectively as possible by focussing on productive skills in face-to-face lessons while leaving the receptive skills to the on-line teaching. They also take the same approach to needs analysis and placement as a traditional teacher or school would do only the testing is done on-line. Then a course is created to meet the personal needs of the student and because a given proportion of the lessons take place in a specific location the teachers are not only qualified but quality control tested allowing the institution to make more assurances to its students. Evidently the course is location specific as there is contact time with a teacher but the location and time of the lessons are mutually agreed upon. The on-line section of the course is accessible to the student 24/7 allowing increased

¹⁸<http://www.vitalenglishacademy.co.uk/page/how-it-works.aspx>

freedom to study whenever the student finds it most convenient. The students are also offered a certificate on completion of a course which may enhance learner motivation and the perceived credibility of the institution. “Your course was really good - I got 7.0 (IELTS) bands in reading & 7.5 in speaking. I never bored while studying your academic course because it contains lot of informative material. In the end, I can say, your course is the best. *Amandeep Sekhon, Abbotsford, Canada*” Testimonial.

Resources

If we look at the issue of learning on-line from the point of view of the teacher and not the learner there is a wealth of information on the internet available for the normal teachers to use from anywhere in the world in what could effectively create a blended course for every individual student. These are the resources that are most readily available to every teacher and probably the least utilised in the classroom. Consequently there are many ways that teachers can utilise their students homework time more efficiently by incorporating on-line materials.

The British Council¹⁹ front runners in the provision of certificate based courses and testing for students around the world have entered the on-line market with a web page that has mixed media activities to supplement its courses around the world. It does not provide an English course but it does provide materials which are often hard to come by in a classroom, such as extra listening exercises. They also provide grammar and vocabulary sections which are specific to certain exams and are managed by the British Council. They are also launching themselves into what is perhaps the newest form of e-learning solutions that of applications for mobile phones and other hand-held devices.

The British Council are not the only institution to enter into this market. The BBC also manage a site for learning English (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/>) which offers material both to the autonomous student and the teacher looking to increase motivation by trying to reach students with interesting material that could be relevant to their own lives. The publishers of English language textbooks such as Oxford's New English File (<http://www.oup.com/elt/global/products/englishfile/>) and Macmillan English (<http://www.macmillanenglish.com/BlankTemplate.aspx?id=28164>) are also starting to provide extra materials on the web. These materials are now available to students when and where they need them. It is hard to view these materials as a form of on-line learning as really they are just extra resources for teachers to utilise but the fact that such resources are becoming more popular and more widely used suggests that there is a growing market for them and if teachers could harness them within their own classrooms and use them effectively every course could become become form of

¹⁹<http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en>

blended learning. Unlike Skype or chat room based lessons this kind of e-learning can be used with a group of students as long as they all have access to a computer.

On-line or with a cassette?

The internet is not the be all and end all and many students may remember the days of learning a foreign language with a cassette tape and a book. Some would argue that on-line learning is the same thing but with a computer. Others would argue that it is a far more interactive and productive experience which combines two necessary life skills. Whichever way you look at it the benefits are the same, learning in your own time and at your own pace. The problems are also the same if there is no teacher, there is no one to correct and develop your active language skills, which is why Skype has become a popular tool. However while many may suggest that on-line learning is cheaper for the student²⁰ and in an autonomous on-line course it may be, the fact remains that if you have a teachers time for a sixty minutes you will be charged for sixty minutes of the teachers time and that applies regardless of whether the student is in their own home or if both student and teacher are in the classroom together.

Questionnaire results.

After researching what is available for learning out side of the traditional classroom the views of the students must then be taken into account. A questionnaire was designed based on the research to ascertain what forms of on-line materials the target group of students already use on a regular basis and

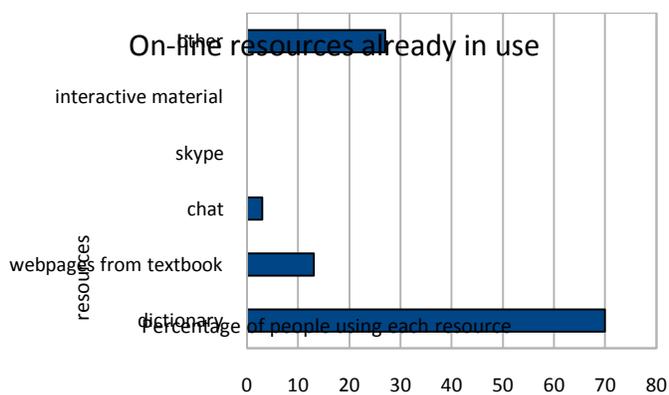


Illustration 3: on-line resources in use now

what other forms of e-learning material they would consider if it was made available to them. An English version of the questionnaire and full results can be seen in appendix 2.

The first question “Do you use on-line materials for studying English?” was asked with a list of options. These options included; dictionaries, websites related to the course book being used, Skype, chat rooms, on-line

tutorials, and other websites. The results can be seen in illustration 3.

The most striking figure from the chart is that 70% of the people questioned regularly use an on-line

²⁰<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/learn-english-online-the-benefits-of-distance-learning.html>

dictionary. This could be a translation dictionary or an on-line learners dictionary but the fact remains that the majority of students use the internet for the simple task of looking up or translating vocabulary. This could be indicative of several things. Firstly the relative ease involved in using an electronic device rather than a book and secondly and perhaps more importantly for this study it shows that 70% of students are using, or have access to, a computer when they are studying or using the English language. This is a large number especially compared with the relatively small numbers of people that answered affirmatively to the other on-line facilities available.

As can be seen from illustration 3 the second largest figure came from that of other on-line materials. Further questioning revealed that this was largely due to quite widespread use of Czech websites that provide help with learning English in a way that is directed towards the specific problems of Czech students and which are presented in the Czech language. Following on from the observation that many students use on-line dictionaries this seems to be the next step in the growing use of e-learning materials. The fact that the use of these websites shows greater popularity than the websites specifically designed to support a course book could be suggestive of two things. Firstly that the students may be more comfortable using and finding learning websites which are presented in their own language. Conversely it could show that there are not enough resources available from the publishers of English language books or that teachers are not promoting them enough as a means of extra learning. If the former is true then there is very little a teacher can do to change the process but to find other resources. If the latter is true then there is a wealth of resources that are being undervalued and underused and teachers perhaps need to be made aware of their existence and trained or encouraged to use them as part of a course. The fact that there is a small proportion of students using these materials however suggests that they are useful to some and that encouraging wider use would not necessarily be a waste of time.

It is also worthy of note that chat rooms provided a positive result whereas the use of Skype did not. It would be unfair to form any hypothesis about why this is without further investigation but the benefits of text chat against on-line voice chat may be a valuable topic for future research. Once again the use of interactive material did not produce any result and it would also be worth perusing in relation to that subject and all of the other subjects if these results are due to the bias of the questionnaire to a single nationality or if this is true of students in general.

The second part of the questionnaire introduced the target group to their feelings on other materials that are not currently being used. The materials were chosen based on the research and the aim was to

discover if they would be used should they be available. Students were asked if they would consider the following

- Individual lessons on Skype
- Group conversation lessons in a 'chat room' (with a teacher)
- Having on-line resources for your specific course
- A discussion forum managed by a native speaker
- Talking with students from other countries on-line
- Doing projects on-line with other student
- Taking tests on-line
- Computer based homework

Illustration 4 below shows the results of these questions.

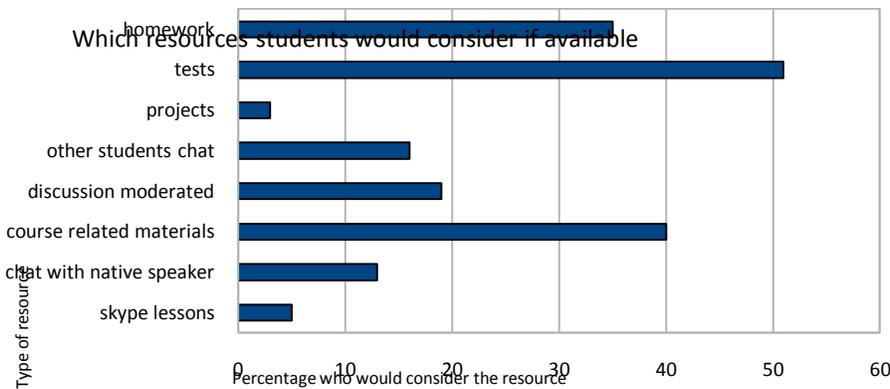


Illustration 4: Forms of learning to be considered

It is obvious from these results that students would consider a wide range of things if they were available. The most striking of which when related to illustration 3 is that of the course related materials. The fact that illustration 3 shows only 13% of people using extra resources from their course books while illustration 4 show that 40% would consider using such materials clearly answers the question that was posed earlier and tells us that teachers need to promote the use of these materials more. It could still be argued that those materials are not available but nearly all major publishers now provide some form of extra material on the internet.

It can also be seen from illustration 4 that over 50% of the target group would like to see tests on-line. Many institutions provide initial placement tests on-line however it is relatively uncommon for progress tests to be on-line. This could be a technical problem but once again with proper training one that could quite easily be overcome. From the research relating to e-learning it is clear that a significant

reasons for choosing an on-line course are the time and freedom aspect that allows students to access work when and where they want to. The fact that a high number of students not only put on-line testing as a definite possibility but also on-line home work shows that even those students who may not be willing to give up their face-to-face lessons would consider moving a lot more of their work into an electronic capacity and it seems natural that if 70% of students regularly use an on-line dictionary that same 70% are on-line when they are studying so on-line worksheets, homework and tests will not reduce their access but may well increase it. It also follows that if well designed such materials can always be printed and completed on paper if the students prefer it. Completion of work on-line can also greatly reduce the amount of class time that is given over to marking and checking work as this can be done by the teacher before the lesson. It also reduces the feedback time as a teacher would not have to collect it during the lesson and return it the following week. It could all be done on-line when it is convenient for everyone.

Once again the results show a preference towards chat rooms over Skype. This again this could be related to a preference for text chat over voice chat or it could be a preference towards group learning over individual lessons. Again I think this is a valuable point of further study. On-line projects were included based on the OSOSS principles of group learning but produced a relatively small result and at this stage can probably be discounted as a viable option for e-learning in EFL.

As we can see resources, platforms, synchronous, asynchronous, autonomous, teacher led, fully on-line or blended courses are all in existence but they have not filtered through to the level language school, teacher and their students. They are currently only in the realm of large corporations and big education establishments. That is not to say however that the resources and the knowledge to bring e-learning to smaller operations is not there but some restructuring and rethinking of the way courses are approached may be needed.

The model

Many programmes and facilities have been discussed however the viability study is related specifically to small language schools and language teachers themselves. Therefore any suggestions must be viable for a single teacher or small organisation, both time wise and financially. With this in mind I decided to create a web page which could be used to present on-line materials and resources for students.

When creating on-line materials that you aim to use as a lesson or part of a lesson you must consider

the basic principles of lesson planning and creation that you would use for a traditional lesson and combine those with the principles involved in creating a good on-line lesson. It is also necessary to work within available means. Many of the platforms discussed, such as Moodle and blackboard and blended learning sites such as that of the Universidad de Concepción in Chile may be excellent learning platforms but are entirely unrealistic for an independent teacher. Mainly because they would require training and IT support to a level which is unlikely to be available to a small establishment.

This forces the teacher to look for other options and a wiki, a simple websites that allows all users access to material, seemed the most practice of the simple websites available. A wiki page is free for anyone to make and the site is easy to use and has clear instructions.²¹ The wiki allows you to include many of the same details as the larger platforms such as a calender, instant messenger or Skype as well as the option to upload files. The major difference being that the wiki is managed by the teacher and accessed by the students. There are no higher management facilities that allow you to send mail or create groups. However these are probably the facilities that would make a site too much for a small organisation to handle and the simplicity of the wiki is ultimately what makes it usable for the individual teacher.

²¹<http://www.wikispaces.com/site/features>

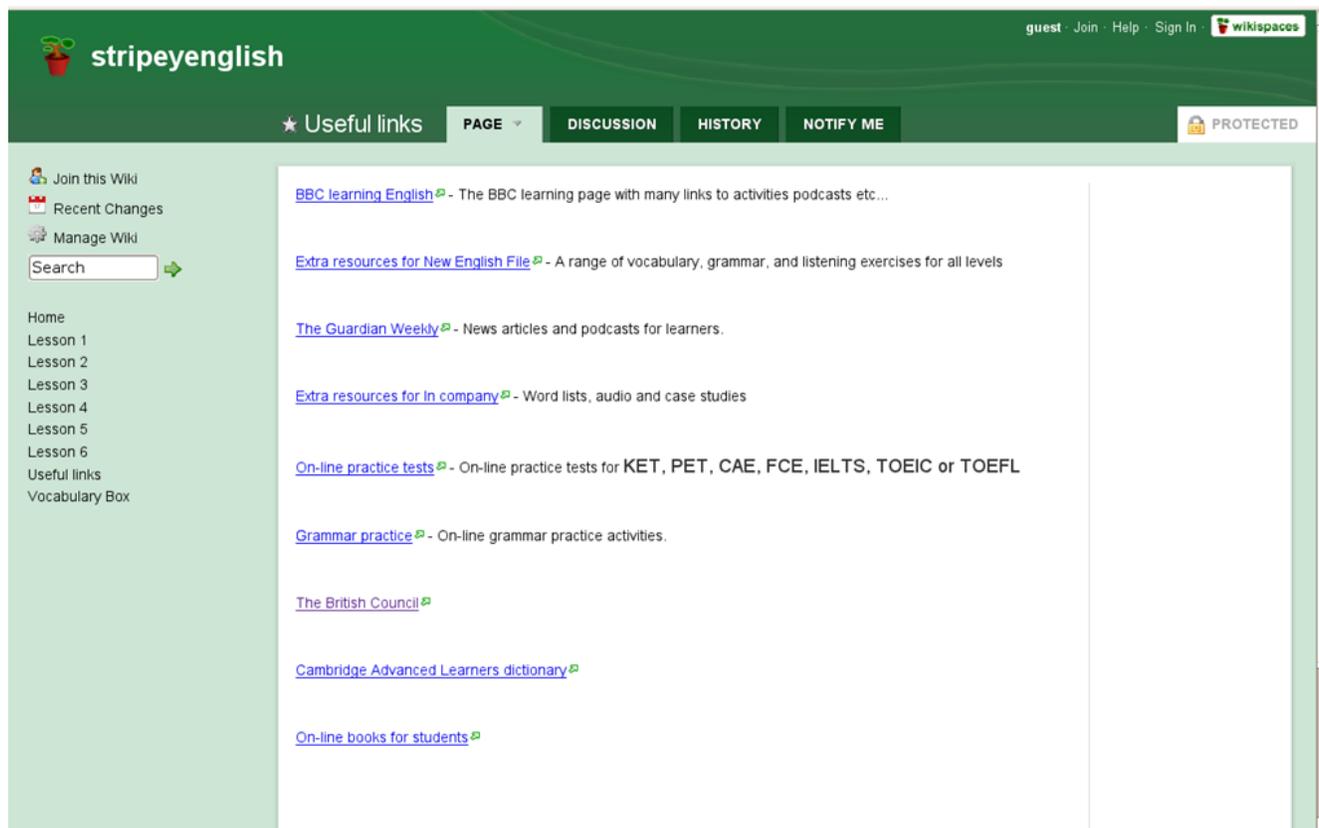


Illustration 5: <http://stripeyenglish.wikispaces.com/Useful+links>

By following the instructions on wikispaces.com I was able to set up a page with a good internet dictionary as many students already use that facility. It was also possible to set up a page of useful links directing users to activities for autonomous learning. It also includes links to the extra materials from textbooks which are used regularly which was something requested by a significant proportion of students. This could of course be extended to other textbooks when and where available and useful. I also included links to the British Council and Cambridge ESOL examination information pages where students can find other information not directly related to studying.

The communicative aspect of e-learning is clearly important and provisions have to be made for it. Using the wiki platform this can be approached in two ways. Firstly as part of a blended learning course where communication is the focus of face-to-face lessons and the on-line resources are used as homework activities. The second option is to use the page as an entirely on-line platform where communication with the teacher occurs via an electronic interface. Something important for both these approaches is timing and the wiki allows the site manager to embed a calendar which allows students to see when teachers are available and allows lessons to be booked when it is suitable for both parties. The page also includes a link to Skype so the student is able to easily communicate with the teacher any

time they are shown as on-line and available. The student centred research strongly suggested that there was a bias towards text chat rather than talk chat and as a programme Skype provides both options making it ideal for students of either preference.

Once the management of the page is successfully achieved and the decision is made on how to approach a course, be it by blended learning, fully on-line or if the page is purely for providing information to students the important question, which will ultimately impact on how functional the page is going to be, is the content. For the purposes of this model each skill was approached as a separate unit as a way of establishing the possibilities and the difficulties of each skill section whereas in reality to create a fully on-line lesson that adheres to accepted teaching methodologies the 'lesson' may be a combination of all of skills.

Reading

An effective reading lesson should involve several steps. Engage, pre-teach vocabulary, a focus question and only at step four should the students actually read the text then following the text there should be some questions which will check comprehension of the reading and finally a task. This task can be oral or written, group based or individual but it must use the information from the text to activate the students into remembering the target language²². It is also necessary when planning a reading activity to be aware of why the students are reading and what their ultimate aim is. With this in mind I created a reading activity loosely based around a CAE reading part 3 text where the purpose is understanding gist and opinion and deducing the meaning of specific vocabulary. The reading text introduces some vocabulary, gives a skim reading task and then the student is asked to read the text. As you can see this does not follow exactly with the ideal as it is difficult to set an 'engage' task when there is no communication. However if this worksheet was being used as part of a real-time Skype lesson that engage phase could be easily introduced. The page then goes on to ask the multiple choice questions which are the focus of the exercise and test comprehension and understanding of opinion. This is then followed with a second vocabulary exercise and a writing task which can be completed as homework as it would in a traditional lesson. The page also includes downloadable files in a range of formats that provide the answers.

The students on which this page was tested all preferred to download the exercises and complete them on paper. This is understandable as there is no interaction for the students which would be difficult to

²²<http://www.teaching-esl-to-adults.com/teaching-reading-to-esl-students.html>

achieve without building a full website. Practically speaking making this exercise into an electronic format took very little extra time than making the 'on paper' exercise. However as mentioned it does not have the interactive element of a 'good' on-line activity. The same activity can be seen as part of a practice test suite (illustration 6) with interactive answers but this page took considerably more time and computer skills to prepare and was completed with the help of an IT specialist.

Choose the answer (A, B, C, or D) which you think fits best according to the text

It's just water. Right?

When the National Consumer Council recently investigated 'rip-off mineral water' in restaurants, it found one in five people 'slightly nervous' or 'too scared' to ask for tap water. The act of specifying tap water is a growing trend across major cities in developed economies. The Council's research also confirmed the fact that consumer are rediscovering the taps in their own homes, with tales of carrying refillable bottles of home or filtered tap water to the gym, to the office and even to schools. In the US, camping shops selling metal water bottles have reported a huge increase in sales as the bottled-water bottle overtakes the plastic bag as the ultimate symbol of unsustainable spending.

During the summer, UK sales of the main brands of bottled water fell by 3.4 per cent, and 8.1 per cent for own brands, although these figures were attributed to a terrible summer rather than environmental consciousness. It is too early to proclaim the demise of the £2bn British water industry, but the industry that was born when, as an ex-chief executive of Perrier once put it, 'all you have to do is take the water out of the ground and then sell it for more than the price of wine, milk or oil,' would appear to be losing its charms.

Given that water bottles suffer from pitiful recycling and reuse rates, the question is: What happens to our enormous pile of empties? The answer isn't encouraging. Most are landfilled (Americans throw 30m water bottles into landfill every day) or, in the UK, increasingly incinerated, where only a tiny proportion of their energy value can be recovered; the rest becomes environmental pollution, particularly in the ocean where, as the plastic slowly breaks up, it poses a serious threat to wildlife.

Globally, nearly a quarter of all bottled water crosses national borders to reach consumers. There are many horror stories of air freighted 'status' waters (such as Bling H2O, which is sold in a glass bottle adorned with Swarovski crystals) but in reality the journey of bottled water normally includes boat, train and truck - journeys that can still rack up considerable water miles and ensuing carbon emissions. In 2004 for example, Nord Water of Finland bottled and shipped 1.4m bottles of Finnish tap water 4,300 kilometres from its bottling plant in Helsinki to Saudi Arabia. Fiji water, a particularly powerful symbol of excess, which can apparently 'trace its origins to rainfall more than 400 years ago in the Fijian mountains' makes a journey of 10,000 miles to get to UK supermarket shelves.

Overall, the ecological burden of carting bottled water internationally (a quarter of all the bottled water we drink comes from France) and between source, bottling plants and central distribution points in the UK generates 30,100 tonnes of CO2.

Show questions one by one

1. The research of the National Consumer Council has shown that.
 - A. People tend to be more and more scared when asking for water in restaurants.
 - B. More and more people demand tap water in restaurants.
 - C. The quality of tap water in people's homes and work-places has increased.
 - D. The popularity of tap of water is on the increase.

2. What is the suspected reason for the sales in bottled water?
 - A. A bad summer.
 - B. An increase in peoples environmental awareness.
 - C. Bottled water is more expensive than wine.
 - D. The British water industry is in financial trouble.

3. What best describes the writer's opinion on water bottle recycling?
 - A. Much of the energy from the bottles is recovered
 - B. Not enough are reused and recycled.
 - C. Recycling is better in the UK than America
 - D. Nobody can give us an encouraging answer about this issue

Illustration 6: http://www.hibernia-institute.cz/testy/cae/cae_reading_part_3.htm

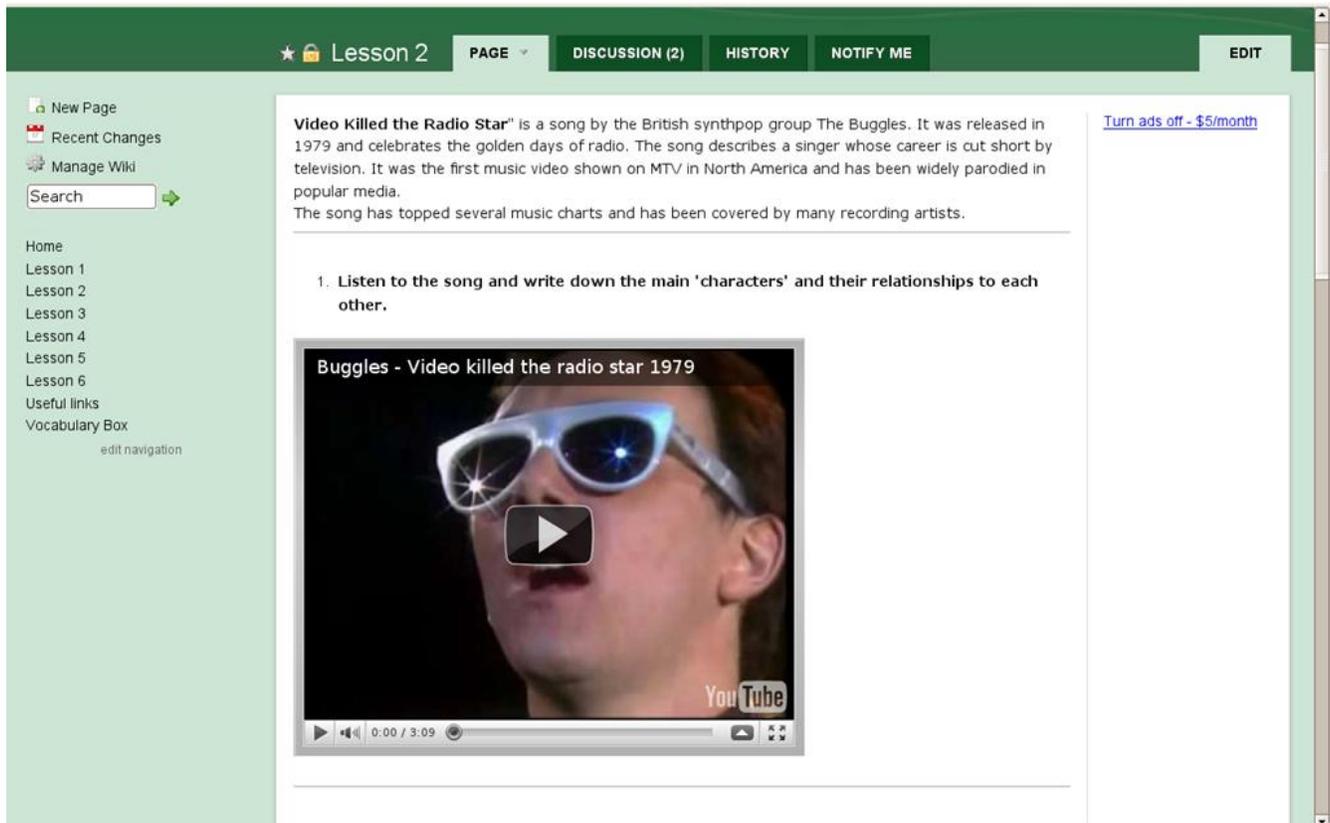
Listening

Listening like reading is a receptive skill and therefore the approach to creating activities is similar . BBC 'six minute English gives a good example of how it can be achieved by using a simple listening extract from their website and providing an audio file and a script for download in addition to some basic comprehension questions.

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/general/sixminute/2010/05/100513_6min_loch_ne ss.shtml)

Similar to the reading activity the listening section is not much harder to achieve in an electronic format than creating a paper lesson as embedding a video clip or mp3 file is quite a simple task. However there is one major drawback with this approach, the availability of appropriate material for

listening. As you can see from illustration 7 I have used a www.youtube.com video clip of a song which adds an interactive element to the task and this activity has proved engaging and interesting to a range of students. However there are limited options for material unless you have access to recording software. Consequently the simplicity of a one off exercise is counteracted by the more long term prospects of including listening into an on-line course. That being said if the course is being run with a Skype element there are more possibilities to be brought by that route.



The screenshot shows a Wikispaces page for 'Lesson 2'. The page has a green header with navigation tabs: 'PAGE', 'DISCUSSION (2)', 'HISTORY', 'NOTIFY ME', and 'EDIT'. On the left, there is a sidebar with options like 'New Page', 'Recent Changes', 'Manage Wiki', and a search box. The main content area contains a paragraph about the song 'Video Killed the Radio Star' by The Buggles, followed by a task instruction: '1. Listen to the song and write down the main 'characters' and their relationships to each other.' Below the text is a YouTube video player showing a close-up of a man wearing white sunglasses. The video player has a play button and a progress bar showing 0:00 / 3:09. A 'Turn ads off - \$5/month' link is visible in the top right corner of the page content.

Illustration 7: <http://stripeyenglish.wikispaces.com/Lesson+2>

Listening is often a hard skill for many students to practice and part of the concept of blended learning should be to encourage students to work on skills without the need for a real time lesson. For that reason the useful links page provides connections to pages like <http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekly> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/> as these sites offer a range of practice for students to do in their own time and can be set as homework tasks or used as extra material that students are encouraged to use autonomously. Students can also be encouraged to use other media to aid their learning for example by watching a film and answering some questions or writing a review.

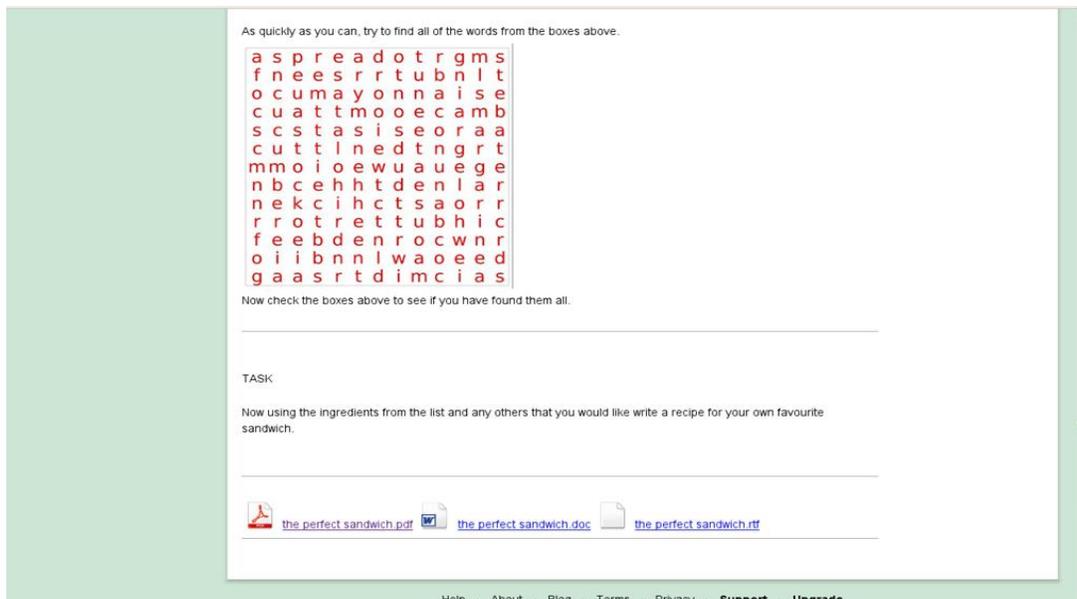
Language

There are several ways of approaching the instruction of grammar. You can teach from rules, exercises or texts using a deductive or an inductive approach (Thornbury). The most appropriate approach will depend largely on the preferred learning style of the student so the best way of generically approaching a grammar subject is the use a mixture of those methods. It is also important, especially when trying to instruct without verbal explanations to keep the rules you provide simple, true, clear and relevant. The grammar lesson included in the wiki therefore uses minimal words and a range of exercises and activities to fit all of the criteria. For additional practice links such as <http://www.oup.com/elt/global/products/practicegrammar/>. can be given or page numbers from a text book. Once again the problem arises of the 2D nature of the finished lesson. Even when used as part of a real time lesson on Skype it would be difficult to achieve animated instructions without white board software of some sort. Furthermore creating this set of rules and exercises was much more labour intensive than the reading or listening as within a traditional class room the initial instruction would be given orally and there would be books available for the practice exercises.

Vocabulary

To effectively teach vocabulary the main points to consider are relevance, context and repetition²³. In the wiki the target language is included in several different activities which use those words in differing contexts. Ideally there would be some visual element in the activities but inserting pictures into the wiki can be very labour intensive when you consider finding appropriate pictures, formatting them correctly and uploading them onto the page. I included a word search (illustration 8) into the page as an interactive reminder of the words. In itself this is fairly simple to achieve as there are multiple programmes on the web that will generate word searches however it would not be my first choice of activity in a traditional lesson. Crosswords are also fairly simple to achieve with programmes available on-line but take slightly longer to produce. Other than material sourcing the main problem in this section, and other sections to a lesser extent, was that of formatting. Using the basic wiki package there are limits to the control the user has over the formatting of tables and text layout. There are more opportunities here for variation than for the listening exercises but like all of the lessons there is very limited opportunity to incorporate activities for all of the VAK learning styles.

²³http://www.ehow.com/how_2069516_teach-vocabulary.html



Writing

Writing becomes more important in a distance learning environment as it is forced to be the primary mode of communication. Regardless of this its general effectiveness depends on why the student is writing, which in turn depends on why they are learning. For example EFL or ESL, learning for business or learning because you live in an English speaking country (Harmer). This in itself makes a generic writing section difficult to achieve as there is no prior knowledge of the students needs. Instead you can make considerations regarding the differences between writing for learning and writing for writing. The first is writing to practice the skill or vocabulary you have already learned and each lesson ends in some sort of written task as a method of actively practising without a communicative exercise. The second type of writing is writing for a specific reason and that purpose needs to be clear to the students. This should be the learning of writing as a separate skill which should warrant its own section within a course. Most activities involve rewriting or filling blanks into a text which as we have already established is almost impossible to animate as a novice website designer but there are other options. Considering all these factors the writing page uses a combination of exercises by way of an ordering activity, an on-line research task to promote not only writing but use the of search engines and finally a writing task with a basic template and once again based loosely on a Cambridge examination style exercise.

The main problem here is the issue of feedback and this is essentially true of all the activities. There is no easy way of making it live so the only option is for the students to complete the written exercises and send them to the teacher by email whereby they can be marked and commented on and then

returned to the student or gone over in a real time lesson. Despite the negative aspects this section was by far the easiest to make into an on-line task as it required very little extra input and in a larger site more templates could be created and uploaded and the bank of writing activities could be expanded greatly.

Functionality

The functionality of the wiki site in general seems sufficiently high for individual teachers or a small organisation. With regard to Roberts and MacInnery's (2007) seven functions required of on-line learning it covers about half. The announcements and private correspondence would need to be carried out through an email client and not through the page itself and there is little or no interactive worksheets available for but it does provide a discussion board facility and a range of external links for students. Feedback from other teachers shows appreciation for the simplicity of the layout and the downloadable features on all of the activities. It must be stated though that for the site to work most effectively there must be teacher input in a real time lesson be it over Skype or in person.

How much it will cost

Money is an important consideration for any business enterprise and for an e-learning site to be viable it must be affordable for those using it. Starting with a basic site like the wiki the set up cost is minimal, however the time input by the teacher may be slightly increased which would inevitably be reflected in the price of a course. Although with some sacrifices to the appearance of the site the time element could be reduced as lessons can be simply uploaded in a file format and downloaded by the student. This should not reduce functionality a great deal as there is no interactive element to the page. Skype software is also free and for the relatively small investment of a headset and web cam a teacher can use it to instruct lessons from home and if anything this will reduce time commitments for all parties by reducing travel time. For a small institution with multiple teachers this is a cheap option although if multiple people are using the page, both students and teachers, the larger amount of material would probably require a person to manage the content. While on the face of it this may seem like it only creates another job for which someone must be paid there could be advantages for the company in the long term. Once material has been uploaded it only needs to be done so once and then it is available to all teachers any time. The negative side to this is one of copyright, if a teacher is using a course book then instructions can be given to a student to complete certain exercises on a given page but any activities published on the web must be created by someone and not copied directly from a book or

website.

The wiki itself is a very one dimensional platform and with a large number of students the materials could easily get out of hand and the page become confusing. To have more functionality and to be able to run courses as separate entities a wiki is not enough and the institution must look into specific Course Management Systems. While the software itself is free a site manager would be a requirement and of course they would need to be paid. It is also probable that the teachers would require some form of training to use the platform efficiently. A Moodle administrator course in the UK costs in the region of £400²⁴ and E-learn design quoted prices for installation at £495 + VAT training at £160 pp + VAT and a limited support package at £995 + VAT for the year.²⁵ This would be a serious financial commitment for a small school to make but may be worth it if it could provide extra income for the business. For an individual teacher however the prices would make it impossible unless they are willing to invest a lot of time in learning how to use and manage the platform through forums and tutorials.

Conclusions

The hypothesis stated that increased access to useful links and resources on-line would be important but only if used as part of a traditional lesson. This hypothesis was generally upheld by the research but with some definite tendencies towards completely on-line learning given the correct set of circumstances. It seems only natural with over 750 million people speaking English as a foreign or second language and 1800 million people with access to a computer that there could be and perhaps should be some cross over. The question at this stage really becomes how much cross over is appropriate? Graziadei et. al. (1997) states that the more asynchronous the course the better the flexibility and availability is for the student, which is in essence what we are trying to achieve. An improvement in the availability of language courses for people who are too busy to attend regular classes. Fisher (2006) and Kim (2004) seem to agree that asynchronous learning is possible but specify that it will only be functional if there is a large interactive component to keep the students motivated. By experimenting with on-line platforms it has been established that for a small institution or individual it is more or less impossible to create interactive courses solely on-line. Furthermore, a synchronous on-line course carries the same scheduling difficulties as a traditional course and in this

²⁴<http://www.howtomoodle.com/moodle-training-and-courses>

²⁵<http://www.e-learndesign.co.uk/>

sense cannot really be seen as a solution to the problem of time management. There are still possibilities for teachers to use internet conferencing software to direct lessons on-line but these would need to be carried out using a course book or other real materials as well as virtual resources to offset the time it would take for a teacher to create a course from scratch and upload it to the internet in a functional format.

Fully on-line courses are only one option, blended learning has come up in many places and contexts throughout the research and seems to have a valid and viable place in the English language classroom. Blended learning however covers a large area and can come in many forms. There are many options to look at and decisions to be made depending on what objectives are set and what outcomes are required. The key to answering these questions however may not be in looking at blended learning and e-learning as new technology but in looking back at where the concept originated. Distance learning has been around for longer than mass Internet use and although we have moved on from using cassettes to learn a language in the car and watching open university videos at 2am the concept and the reason for its existence is exactly the same. Time, or lack of it, providing busy people with the resources they need when they need them. Bersin and associates (2003) approach to creating a blended learning environment and surrounding it by humans could be exactly the approach that is needed for language learning and their research proved that in a corporate environment blended learning gave significant benefits to the company as a whole. It only takes a small step to assume that if it is approached in the right way blended-learning could also be good for the companies that provide educational services to corporations.

From an academic point of view EDUCAUSE research showed that students and teachers gained more satisfaction in a blended than a fully on-line course based on human contact. In addition to that they found instructional costs were reduced significantly by creating more space for classes which is another worthwhile consideration for small business.

In general there are many resources available for the average teacher to use the Internet much more in and around the classroom and there are definite improvements which can be made in day to day teaching simply by highlighting what is available and encouraging teachers to use technology without being afraid. By giving students homework on-line they are then freed from desk based paper homework and free to study when and where it is best for them. This can be achieved in small institutions primarily by staff training and the provision of a list of useful links. For more adventurous schools and teachers there is also the endless possibilities provided by creating a small, simple website

which puts all the links you might want to use in one place in order to make it as quick and simple as possible for the students to do an activity.

Resources and materials are one thing and can be achieved to a certain level of success by anyone but it must be reiterated that in a language classroom communication is vital “Human interactions, with all the real life quirks which make language so interesting, are essential if you are to become fluent.”²⁶

Communication is important for any course and that is the part that must not be forgotten when providing e-learning materials. 50% of students wanted a lot more of their materials on-line but only 5% said they would consider Skype lessons. If taking English teaching into the electronic world is to be considered then communication channels must be open, user-friendly and plentiful.

Further research.

Although conclusions have been drawn relating to e-learning and its scope for small language schools the research has thrown up some interesting questions that could be answered by further research. Firstly the study in general could be widened to cover more than one nationality and generate more results and therefore more accurate data. Questions have also been raised about the preferences of students towards text chat rather than voice chat. This could be an interesting point for further study both to confirm if this is an actual trend or just an anomaly and if a preference is shown in what way could it be encouraged and used as a teaching tool. The concept of the OSOSS was also touched on in the research and dismissed by student questionnaires however I think it is a valid area for further discussion and development as to whether it is possible for a large body of students from different countries to use a facility alone and without moderation and still learn from it.

²⁶<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-11286290>

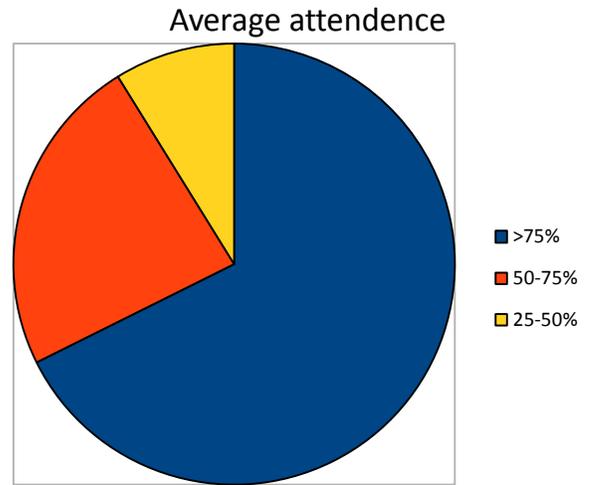
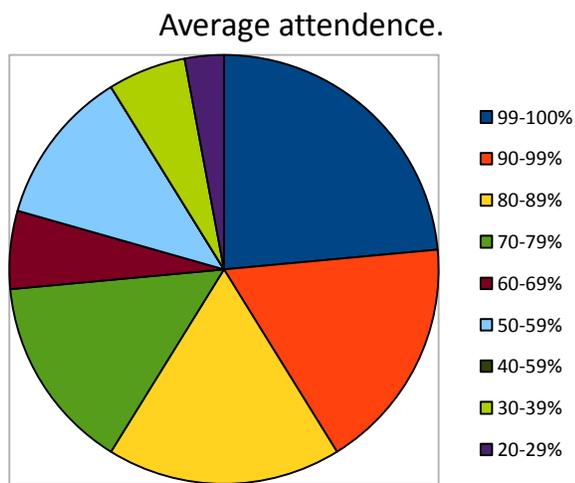
Appendix 1 – Student attendance records for four large companies with long term contracts at xxx

Student	Company	Attendance %
J	A	67 **
P	A	75 **
J	A	100 *
R	A	97 **
R	B	71
A	B	93
L	B	68
P	B	93
T	B	84
M	B	100 *
L	B	100 **
C	B	72
T	B	33
P	B	96
D	B	100 **
V	B	86
T	B	83
T	C	58 ***
M	D	100
A	D	75
P	D	88
R	D	25
M	D	75
D	D	83
P	D	57
J	D	36
P	D	56
O	D	53
L	D	95
P	D	100
O	D	100
P	D	82
Z	D	100

* company receptionists who are required to be in the office at all times

** Individual lessons

*** Had a 12 lesson course the figure shows his average monthly attendance



Appendix 2 – Questionnaire distributed to the students and the results gained from it.

On-line learning questionnaire

What language level are you?

Beginner	Elementary	Pre-intermediate	Intermediate	Upper Intermediate	Advanced
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Are you enrolled on an English course?

Yes	No
-----	----

Is your course paid for by your company?

Yes	No	Partially
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How many people are in your class?

Individual	less than 3	between 3-7	more than 7
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Do you study

Business English	General English	Conversation	Exam Preparation
------------------	-----------------	--------------	------------------

Do you have problems attending classes regularly?

Yes	No
-----	----

Do you use on-line materials for studying English?

Dictionary	
Web sites related to your textbook	
Chat rooms	
Skype	
On-line tutorial packages	
Other web sites	
Other	

Would you consider:

- Individual lessons on Skype
- Group conversation lessons in a 'chat room' (with a teacher)
- Having on-line resources for your specific course
- A discussion forum managed by a native speaker
- Talking with students from other countries on-line
- Doing projects on-line with other student
- Taking tests on-line
- Computer based homework

Comments

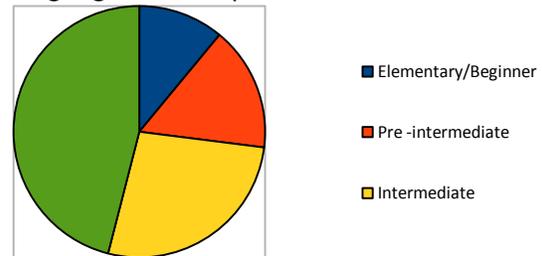
Results

In percentages

Level

Elementary/Beginner	11
Pre-intermediate	16
Intermediate	27
Upper intermediate/advanced	46

Language level of questioned students



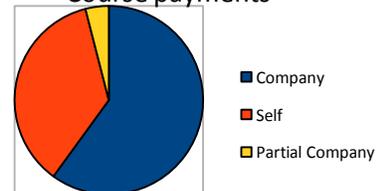
89% of those questioned are enrolled on a course

16% say they have problems attending regular classes

Payment

Lessons paid by company	60
Lessons paid by students	36
Lessons partially paid by company	4

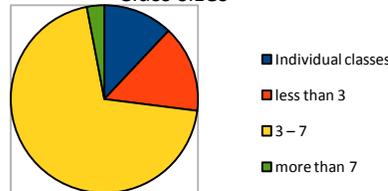
Course payments



Class sizes

Individual	12
less than 3	15
3-7	70
more than 7	3

Class sizes



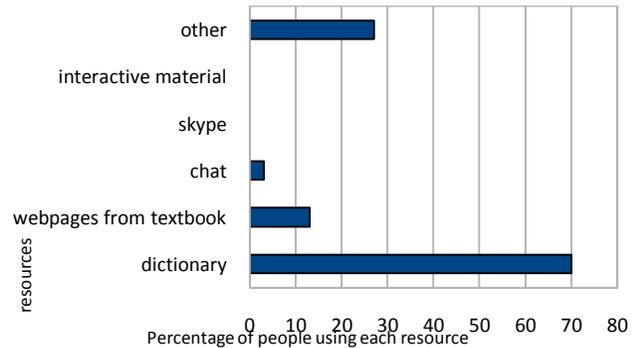
Type of class

General English	51
Business English	12
Exam preparation	30

*many students take combinations of lesson types e.g general English + exam preparation

Types of on-line resources currently used

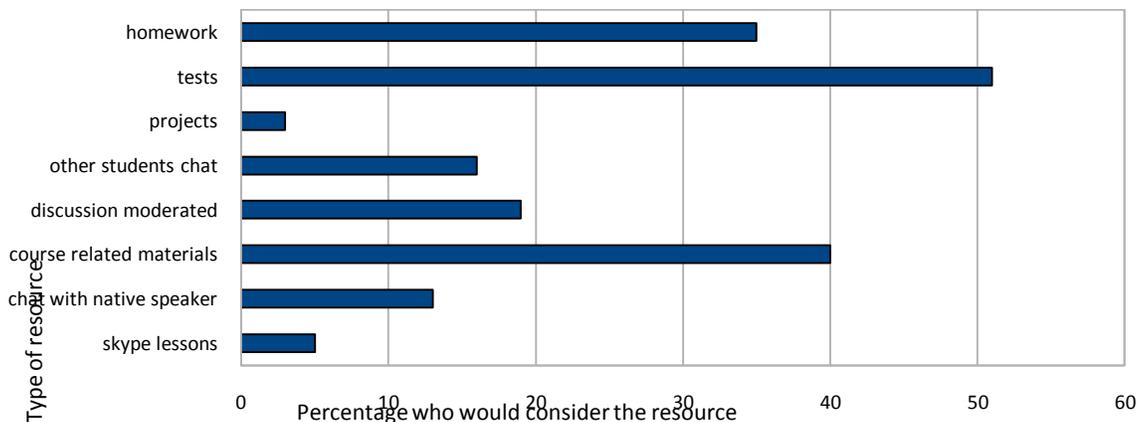
Dictionary	70
Web-pages from a textbook	13
Chat rooms	3
Skype	0
On-line tutorials	0
Other	27



On-line resources that students would consider using if available.

Individual lessons on Skype	5
Group conversation lessons in a 'chat room' (with a teacher)	13
Having on-line resources for your specific course	40
A discussion forum managed by a native speaker	19
Talking with students from other countries on-line	16
Doing projects on-line with other student	3
Taking tests on-line	51
Computer based homework	35

Which resources students would consider if available



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