Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL): Using Internet for Effective Language Learning

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Abstract
This paper presents the design, testing and student evaluation of an experimental English Language course introducing the use of the Internet for instruction, as a source, and as medium. In order to ascertain efficiency and facilitate autonomy in increasing a dynamic vocabulary, different types of Internet facilitated learning tasks were developed and implemented in the course design for students of Informatics at Sofia University, Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics. The tasks incorporated in the course include: choosing and critically evaluating Web-based texts, summarizing articles or writing a review of an Internet site, preparing a glossary using Internet sources. Guidance and monitoring on this process are provided to ensure the quality of the chosen sources. Course evaluation survey1 was conducted in order to ensure course efficiency and to elicit suggestions for further improvement of the course design.


1. Introduction
Recent developments in technology and communication offer new opportunities for facilitating and improving the efficiency of language learning. Bearing in mind the importance of the latter in the context of expanding EU, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has become, with ever-increasing rapidness, both an exciting and highly applicable in language learning practice area of research [1].

Constant growing in the field of IT terminology requires employing flexible learning approaches in order to facilitate students in improving the specific vocabulary [2]. Multimedia programmes provide audio, graphics and video, vocabulary sources such as concordances, dictionaries and glossaries; the Internet offers an affordable, instant access to a vast variety of authentic texts, as well as an unprecedented opportunity for using the target language in real-time intercultural communication. However, the availability of technology does not constitute by itself language learning: there comes the problem of implementing technology in the language classroom.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a series of new implementations in a course design, introduced in order to increase learning by using the Internet in a Project-based CALL course. It also briefly comments on student evaluation of the efficiency of this course.

Background to the study: using the opportunity of integrating students' computer skills with their language study led to designing an experimental course. The specifics of the teaching situation (highly mix-ability groups, with more than twenty students and too few classes per year) forced searching for enhancing course efficiency in order to increase the gain students receive from the programme. Significance of the study is determined by the fact that no language course at Sofia University provides such learning environment. Although the design addresses a particular teaching situation, it is based on combining available equipment and average computer competence which contemporary students share. Therefore, the combination of improvements proposed here can be applied to other ESL courses, with or without modification.
2. Description of the course implementations

The objectives of the course can be defined as follows:

This subject aims to help students to understand the possibilities of information and communication technology in language learning. The emphasis of the course is on helping them improve their level of English by combining this study with their computer skills. It focuses on developing practical skills in making presentations, summarizing information critically, writing academic papers. It raises their awareness on terminology and its use in both spoken and written form. It also deals with ways in which these skills might be used to enhance professional effectiveness of the students by improving both general English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (IT and mathematical terminology) knowledge.

In other words, the goal set for the course was using English as a tool in technical environment, which is generally seen as a highly motivating approach to ESP. In order to ensure achieving this goal I started using the Internet for instruction, as a source of information and, to some extent, as a medium of communication with the students [4].

The Indicative content of the course was: Use of World Wide Web as language resources, reliability; Principles of using terminology: Glossary of IT and maths terminology; Summary writing; Academic papers: format, plagiarism; Presentations.

These elements aimed at facilitating learning in the main aspect of contemporary student-oriented classroom: giving students autonomy and were the practical solutions used to encourage students to use authentic texts. Furthermore, they were meant to develop the ability of the learners to use Web based sources of information to study in the field of IT and mathematics.

Going further, the most pressing problem I had was to apply a reliable method of assessing students’ development. To this end I developed a system of three components: class participation, academic project work, and presentation. The project (term paper) had to be based on a web page and had to concern a problem of mathematics or informatics.

2.1. Instruction: the Internet was used as a medium for web-based instructions. In order to provide information about the course structure, the requirements, the schedule, etc., a special web site was designed and uploaded on the university server. It also provided notes on the pros and cons of using Internet as a source of information as well as guidance through the process of term paper writing. Thus a convenient availability of detailed information was ensured.

2.2. Internet as a source of authentic materials may be the most interesting and challenging part to design. Constant changes in IT require developing flexible learning approaches and using relevant and up-to-date sources of information. A wide variety of such sources is available through the Internet, including e-libraries, university sites, e-magazines, access to which would allow the learner to become an autonomous one. To ensure developing autonomy in increasing a dynamic vocabulary, different types of reading and listening comprehension tasks were developed and were piloted in the course. These tasks include: choosing and critically evaluating Web-based texts, designing a reading comprehension exercise on the basis of such text, summarizing an article or reviewing an Internet site, preparing a glossary using Internet sources, and summarizing information on a given topic from different Internet sources. The development of all skills was based on these tasks, which were seen as developing the ability to use English to enhance professional effectiveness. Another broad area of information from the Net was English for vocational purposes: finding how to write a CV, a Cover Letter, a Motivation Letter and a Letter of Recommendation.

2.3. Communication: Another new element in the course was the introduction of forums, based in the Nicenet as a medium. To the purposes of the course, virtual classrooms were arranged, where students could share information and other materials on their own sites, linked to the main teaching site or to the virtual classrooms, see the scheduled tasks, submit their assignments and essays, commenting on sites and interesting links. The pedagogical approach used was communicative and highly student-oriented, allowing for the students initiative in choosing
the range and depth of materials, with immediate peer and supervisor feedback on the task-solving. Another extremely important new feature was the availability of the information the students gathered the sharing and peer evaluation. The problem-solving orientation of the course design was motivating and useful as the skills development was strictly real-life oriented. Guidance and monitoring on the processes were provided to ensure the quality of the chosen sources and the achieved standard of the language improvement.

3. Evaluating the course efficiency

In order to measure to what extent these innovations made the course more efficient, a specialized tool for evaluation was designed [5]. The purpose was to propose a new instrument for measuring and analyzing students' attitudes toward integrating CALL in the EL programme.

The research can be defined as cross-sectional qualitative (measuring attitudes) study of the type summative course evaluation [6].

- Feedback based on students’ actual experiences of the course is widely regarded as providing valuable insights into course improvement and is a vital component of a complete evaluation [7]. A new type of questionnaire was designed to meet the needs of the current investigation. The aim was to elicit reliable student feedback on the new elements in course structure, schedule, design and materials used. To manage this task a new instrument, a questionnaire, was designed. It contained three groups of questions: standard bio-data questions, closed rating attitudes questions to evaluate the new implementations of the programme components: contents of the course (vocabulary, specific terminology, grammar); the different tools of the marking system: essays, assignments, presentations; means of delivery of information about the contents, the aims and the assessment of the course [8]. Three main aspects of these components are to be investigated: to what degree students find them useful, difficult and interesting. The aspects of information considered of importance are availability, clarity and reliability. The scales used are Likert’s attitudinal type, based on standard semantic oppositions (Osgood’s method Semantic Differential) [9]. The third type of questions presented was an open question, eliciting suggestions on course improvement.

The questionnaire measured three standard dimensions of the following aspects of the course [8]:

- To evaluate the syllabus, rated close questions were used. The aspect of the syllabus investigated were
  - The activities in terms of difficulty, interest and usefulness (skills)
  - The contents (vocabulary, grammar)
  - Presentation of the material
- The rating of the aspects of the marked tasks
  - The term papers
  - The essays
- The information about the course, the tasks and the marking
  - How to
  - Assessment

The tool was piloted on 100 students of Informatics at the end of a compulsory course.

The analysis of the student attitudes towards the experimental course design showed that they find the new implementations highly motivating and effective. They also consider the gaining of the course in regard to speaking and academic writing skills well developed. The overall balance between difficulty of the tasks and the course assets was considered to be good; therefore increase in learning efficiency was ensured and manageable. Web-based information about the different aspects of the programme was defined as available, clear and relevant. About half of the respondents gave at least one suggestion on course improvement, concerning mainly course materials and delivery methods: students would rather work without course books at the expense of more up-to-date reading materials from the Internet, which to be discussed during the classes. They would also prefer using computers during the classes for reading and listening authentic speech.

The questionnaire is regarded as giving sufficient information for critical reflection about the course efficiency, as well as eliciting suggestions about how to improve it.
4. Conclusions and Further Research

The new course design for teaching English proposed here is an attempt to combine students’ computer skills and their language study by introducing computer assisted language learning in the curriculum. In order to conduct a student summative course evaluation, a new tool was designed and piloted. As a result of the evaluation, it was concluded that the introduction of CALL improved the course efficiency by providing up-to-date sources of information, an environment for interaction and instruction. Therefore I believe that applying such a course design as a standard will enable enhancement in language learning at Sofia University.

The further research will include: use of Moodle features; making a student-friendly interactive board; developing an on-line testing system (adaptive tests, designed to measure individual improvement in EL and comparing the achieved level to the standards); student feedback on-line (uploading the evaluation questionnaire will make it more convenient for students to fill in and less time-consuming for the teacher to analyze the results).

References


