

E-learning advancements in the academic foreign language teaching

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1. ABSTRACT

Among the initiatives undertaken within the 2020 Bologna Process strategy for Higher Education, focusing on the development of innovative life-long learning systems and the mobility, multilingualism and employability empowering, an on-line foreign language teaching project was launched (in 2006) at the University of Warsaw. It was implemented by the University Centre for Open and Multimedia Education and realized with the use of an IT educational Moodle platform and the extensive application of e-learning EFL methodology. The paper presents the ways in which the concept of online foreign language teaching has been expanding and growing within the University for 10 years now. Progressively, multi-level and multi-purpose e-courses together with on-line placement tests have been created and the number of the languages taught increased to 14, reaching over 5 000 users in 2015 and more than 37 000 course participants since the very beginning of the project. The paper also describes the major challenges and the future prospects of computer-based foreign language teaching at the University.

2. Introduction and background

Developing an ICT-skilled and knowledge-based society is the priority of the European Union. However, according to the EU 2015 Joint Report on education and training (ET 2020), 25% of adult EU citizens still represent low levels of digital skills and only 10.7% take part in life-long learning process (EU ET2020, 2015). The strategy which enhances the EU goals fulfillment is the 2020 Bologna Process strategy implemented by the European Universities. The integral part of this policy is the development of life-long learning systems as well as the empowering of the mobility, multilingualism and employability. Its main aims focus on the improvement of the learning environment and removal of the study barriers by introducing, among others, student-oriented programmes, enhancing innovation and exploiting the potential of digital technologies.

Hence, the implementation of the innovative and modern didactics is an important goal in the universities development strategies, which is also the case of the University of Warsaw. One of the forms of reaching this objective is the inclusion of the ICT into the didactic process. This expectation is met, among others, within the ICT supported courses at the university. It lets students encounter various forms of learning and introduces them to life-long learning process which in turn makes them more competitive on the labour market and increases their employability.

Among the initiatives undertaken within this policy, an on-line foreign language teaching project was launched (in 2006) at the University of Warsaw. It was based on the existing IT infrastructure - an educational platform and an e-learning methodology worked out by the University Center for Open and Multimedia Education.

3. Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) tools and advantages

Continuous improvement of computer literacy skills within the academic community and easy access to the Internet fostered the development of computer-assisted e-learning courses at the University of Warsaw. As a basic technical tool for embedding the e-courses, an open source educational Moodle platform was set under the supervision of the Centre for Open and Multimedia Education (COME) UW. The enthusiastic feedback from the academic community, which was delivered after the first edition of the e-courses, led to their development in various fields of knowledge covered at the University (Wieczorkowska, Madey, 2007). This success, together with the experience gained at the time of the creation of the first e-learning courses (from various fields), opened the door for the development of the computer-assisted language teaching at the University, being in line with the Bologna strategy for Higher Education.

The tool used i.e. the Moodle platform, perfectly meets the expectations for online foreign language teaching. First of all, it allows students to access all necessary sorts of language teaching materials (audio, video, graphics, and text files) in one environment. It also allows for a variety of knowledge testing ways and ensures immediate automatic feedback (which decreases the risk of inappropriate language learning habits). Additionally, it helps students to identify gaps in their knowledge that needs to be revised with greater care. What is also of importance is that this method of learning corresponds with the psychology of individual differences, taking into consideration that every student needs different amount of time to practise and revise particular sections of the online material depending on their background and skills.

The on-line materials can be easily combined with in-class teaching via blended learning, as it was the case of the first courses created. Not surprisingly, they were highly appreciated both by the students and the lecturers, which resulted in the creation of other language courses making the e-languages idea expand. The materials are also accessible on mobile devices making the didactic process even more flexible for users (Bednarczyk, Krawczyk, 2009).

Additionally, the plug-in integrating the University students' management system with the Moodle platform enrolment was launched to make life easier for all students, teachers and the administration staff.

4. Language on-line services developed

The first attempt to introduce online foreign language teaching at the University of Warsaw (via the educational platform) was made in 2003 by the Centre for Open and Multimedia Education, UW. It was assumed that students participating in online courses would need skills of two types: on the one hand, they needed to show computer skills to be technically able to move within an online course, carry out tasks and submit assignments, and on the other hand - sufficient language skills, which led to the conclusion that the language level of the courses offered should not be lower than B2 (according to the Common European Framework for Languages). Two courses in English were launched initially. They were: *Writing summaries in English* and *The language of group discussions*.

These courses were the starting point for a big project initiated for the whole university by COME UW in 2006 called "E-lektoraty" (Language e-courses), covering mainly the courses in English, but with time including the ones in German, Russian and Croatian.

As in every process of development, there were a few interweaving variables that decided about the current shape of online language courses at UW (Rudak, Sidor, 2008).

In 2005, the Senate of the University of Warsaw issued a Resolution on equal access to the languages didactic offer for both stationary and extramural students. There were some organizational challenges though. Due to an insufficient number of classrooms and a shortage of teachers and lecturers meeting the requirements of online education, it turned out to be quite difficult to achieve satisfactory teaching and learning outcomes within the amount of teaching hours set in the curriculum. The students' needs were growing too as the number of students and student groups was increasing, new types of courses and new levels of advancement were introduced, the access to

classrooms was getting limited as a result of the above mentioned growth. Therefore, in 2006, steps were taken to introduce e-learning within the field of foreign language teaching at the University, with a particular focus on the English language.

The concept of online foreign language teaching has been expanding and growing within the University for 10 years now. Progressively, multi-level and multi-purpose e-courses together with on-line placement tests have been created. There are more languages available on the platform, more levels of advancement and more course types to choose from (general language e-courses, placement tests, remedial language courses, mock language certification courses). The number of languages offered increased to 14, exceeding 5 000 users in 2015.

4.1. Placement tests

The question of testing and assessment of the students' level of advancement in foreign languages and ways of group assignment became of importance due to the increasing number of students. To facilitate the process of testing and to help students find out about their language skills and choose the most appropriate course, a set of six online placement tests in English, German, French, Russian, Italian and Spanish (Figure 1.) was prepared to be placed on an educational Moodle platform (maintained by COME UW) and used in an interactive manner to obtain immediate results and instant feedback on the suggested choice of a course. The placement test result was a kind of passport which opened doors to chosen online language courses for both stationary and extramural students.



Figure 1. Number of placement tests attempts in 2015.

For about 10 years now these placement tests have been gaining great popularity among the university students. Table 1. shows the quantitative participation of students in the placement tests in the chosen languages in the years 2006-2015.

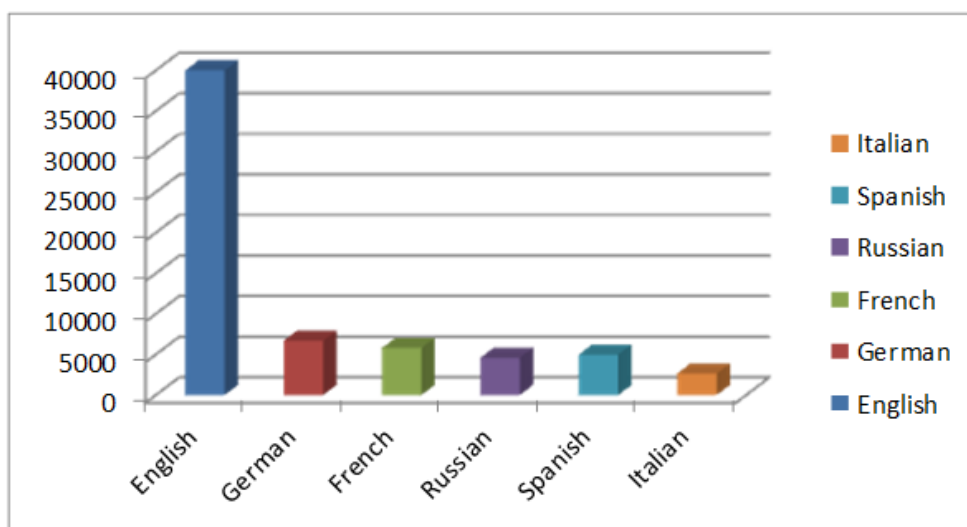


Table 1. The quantitative participation of students in the placement tests in the chosen languages in the years 2006-2015.

It is worth mentioning that online placement tests have served their purpose well for both the students themselves as they may access them at any time and place (on condition they have access to the Internet) and for the University itself since there is no need to organize in-class placement testing which would have to be done during the holiday season and would also require the engagement of the teachers and the administration staff.

4.2. General language e-courses

The next step to incorporate online language courses into the university education was the introduction of the large project “Creating curricula for distance learning in the Faculty of Information Technology - the English language component”. Contracted by COME UW, the expert ELT methodologists from the English Teacher Training College in the Centre for Foreign Language Teacher Training UW worked out the concept and methodological assumptions together with both the overall and the detailed syllabi for the four Project modules (Galbarczyk, Walewska, 2006a).


Over 10 years now, these courses have undergone a number of changes resulting from the teachers and students’ needs and feedback. And so today, they take the following form:

The modules provide language practice at two levels of advancement: B1 (two modules) and B2 (two modules). Each of the four modules covers 60 teaching hours (a teaching hour = 45 minutes) and is organized the blended learning way with 45 hours realized on the educational platform and 15 hours - in a classroom. Each module consists of 10 thematic chapters. Every thematic chapter contains interactive exercises developing language skills: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, as well as language sub-systems: grammar, vocabulary, functions and pronunciation (Figure 2.).

Listening 2: Creative thinking

2 ✓
Marks: --/8

Listen to the interview and match the halves of the sentences.



To help people be more creative, Simon Middleton uses

Simon Middleton teaches people to use

We deal more holistically with things with

Edvard de Bono is a great champion of

Daniel H. Pink in his book wrote that it's not sufficient to assume you can only be creative with

Simon Middleton specializes in

The story of the black swan is a metaphor for

Simon Middleton tries to help people use

Page: (Previous) 1 2

Figure 2. An example of an on-line listening task in a general English language e-course at B2.

The structure of each thematic chapter (Galbarczyk, Walewska, 2006b) reflects the most natural scheme applied in a real-life classroom - it begins with an open-ended warm-up task (usually in the form of a forum) introducing the theme and asking for students' initial reaction and sharing of experience. Then there follow tasks to practise the language skills and sub-systems (in the form of interactive closed-ended quizzes). The chapter ends with an open-ended follow-up activity (in the form of a forum or an online/offline assignment, often including an academic writing task) (Figure 3.).

Every second thematic chapter contains a revision and a test section. They take the form of a quiz with closed-ended tasks, evaluated automatically by the platform.

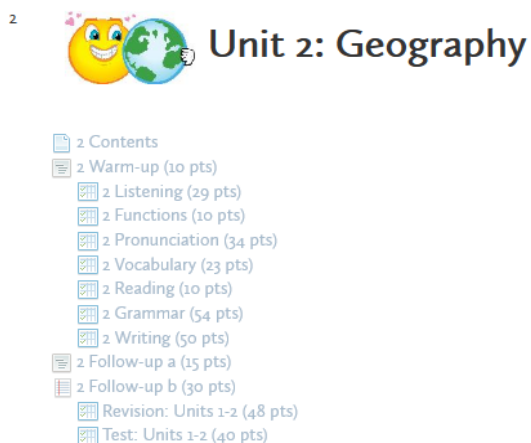


Figure 3. An example of an on-line module structure in a general English language e-course at B2.

The skill of speaking, quite difficult to be practised online due to asynchronous communication, is dealt with during the in-class meetings. The e-teachers, as they become known under this name, are supported with specially prepared stationary lesson scenarios, placed on the platform within a separate course for e-teachers - a kind of repository of teaching materials. The scenarios contain sets of photocopiable exercises (for individual work, pairwork and groupwork) which develop the ideas from particular thematic chapters and give room for the spoken language practice in class. Obviously, e-teachers are entitled to add their own tasks to the ones available on the platform (Figure 4.).



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

The online English language courses received good working reviews during the pilot study (600 people took part in it), from both the e-teachers and the students who were truly interested to continue their language studies this way.

The online English language courses have served as a model for other courses. Namely, they gave a start to the *General English Course at C1*, the so-called specialist courses above B2 level in *Business English Communication*, *Writing summaries in English* and *The language of meetings and conferences* (though these ones are run without in-class meetings), and online full semestre courses (60 teaching hours per semestre) in other languages like Croatian, Czech, German and Russian. It is important to add that though learning takes place mainly via the educational platform, the certification in every course is carried out in class. Today, students of all faculties and types of studies may freely participate in a chosen online course (Figure 5.). They also have a chance to express their opinion on the courses completing the online evaluation forms placed within every course.



Figure 5. Number of virtual classes and students for General Language e-courses in 2015.

As for the e-teacher preparation and responsibility for the courses they run, they are offered free trainings provided by COME UW experts, developing the e-teachers' ICT didactic and technical skills. They are also equipped with necessary online guide books placed in a separate course for e-teachers, and supported with the online courses helpdesk.

4.3. Mock language certification e-courses



Finishing their language studies, the UW students are obliged to take a certification exam in a chosen foreign language at B2 level. Since 2013, to help students get acquainted both with the format and content of a language certification exam, COME UW has been offering short preparatory courses in 6 languages (English, German, French, Russian, Italian and Spanish). They contain descriptions of the written and spoken parts of the certification exam and provide an online mock test copying the form and content of an in-class paper test which students take during exam sessions. These tests are available without time limits set. So far, over 1500 students have already enrolled in the certification courses.



4.4. Remedial language e-courses

In case a student fails a certification exam twice, they are required to take a remedial course in a foreign language. COME UW offers remedial 10 hour courses in 14 languages at three levels of advancement: A2, B1 and B2 (English, French, Greek, Georgian, Hindi, Japanese, German, Russian, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Persian, Turkish, Croatian) (Figure 6 and 7.).



Figure 6. Number of languages for the remedial language e-courses in 2015.


Repetytoryjny e-kurs języka gruzińskiego na poziomie B1
ქართულია ენის ელექტრონული სწავლების B1 დონის
განმეორებითი კურსი



Repetytoryjny e-kurs języka perskiego na poziomie A2
دوره آموزش زبان فارسی سطح مقدماتی ۲



Repetytoryjny e-kurs języka japońskiego na poziomie A2
日本語復習コース A2レベル


Figure 7. The example headers of the on-line remedial language e-courses.

Some challenges encountered during the Eastern languages embedding on the platform (like Hindi, Georgian, Japanese, Chinese) as a special sort of fonts was necessary to be applied for the students to be able to read the texts in these languages and some of the languages are read and written from the right to the left (like Persian, Hebrew, Arabic). This imposed the need of adding new functionalities and advancements to the platform (elaborated by the COME UW programmers) (Figure 8.).

Pytanie 1
Nie udzielono odpowiedzi
Punkty: 10,00
Oflaguj pytanie
Edytuj pytanie

Lekcja 7 Użycie języka - składnia
To zadanie polega na uzupełnieniu zdań wyrazami podanymi poniżej. Zanim przystąpisz do rozwiązywania go, przeczytaj uważnie słowa już podane w zdaniu, a następnie wyrazy w ramkach. Zastanów się czy rozumiesz wszystkie wyrazy i pomyśl, co mogłoby znaczyć zdanie złożone z nich wszystkich. Postaraj się tak wstawić wszystkie słowa w ramkach, żeby zdanie stworzyło spójną logicznie i semantycznie zdanie. Pamiętaj, że wszystkie wyrazy w ramkach są podane w formach, które mają zostać użyte w zdaniu i nie można ich zmieniać. Aby wstawić wyraz z ramki w odpowiednie miejsce, przeciągnij je myszką.

Część 1

بين الطلاب تبادل
كما أن هناك
الثالثة السنة على
في سوريا إلى السفر
سأحاول الحصول منحة على
شاهدته ميتا مسرورة
منحة إلى من دولة
زالت ما حتى تراسلهن
العربي الذي الذي
لي إنها رأيت

صارت إمكانيات وُقِرصُ الجامعات كبيرة في السنوات الأخيرة.
هناك برامج عديدة منها "إراسموس" مثلاً اتفاقات بين الحكومات في مجال التبادل العلمي.
مونيكا طالبة في كلية الآثار.
عندي أمل كبير .
مدة ستة أشهر.
كانت في عمان في العام الدراسي الماضي وهي .
إذن تستطيعين الاستفادة عربية.
تعرفت على صديقات الآن.
لبست تبسسه الفتيات العربيات.
قالت الصحراء لأول مرة .

Figure 8. The example exercise of the on-line remedial language e-course in Arabic B1.

5. Language e-courses benefits

The process of introducing new forms of teaching foreign languages at the University of Warsaw let both stationary and extramural students have equal chances to master their linguistic competence.

The added value and the additional benefit from language e-courses is the University's students and teachers' ICT skills increase, which closely relates to the University of Warsaw innovative and modern didactic policy. Moreover, the methodological guidelines and teaching materials available on the educational platform can be used by any language teacher who would like to run classes on-line.

From the administrative point of view, the proposed e-languages' solutions save time (in comparison to the administration of paper tests and their checking) and mean less work for teachers thanks to automatic online assessments. Due to the IT advancements, the tests results migrate automatically to the University Students Management System (USOS), which again facilitates the administrative work. And finally, it reduces the overall costs.

A valuable advancement is student-oriented methodology of language teaching. It helps students to identify the gaps in their knowledge within the learning process. It also facilitates the teacher supervision over the individual student's activity on the platform and lets them briskly react and fully motivate the students in order to make their efforts most effective.

6. Further directions

Some new functionalities are still being developed on the platform. Among them, a tool for recorded speech submission is being tested. This tool will make it possible to work on the skill of speaking in greater detail, allowing students to make audio and video recordings of their spoken performance and letting e-teachers evaluate the students' performance in the same manner.

The existing on-line language courses and tests have their say in spreading the target group outside the university, reaching, for example, the Erasmus exchange students. Thanks to the Polish language (local mother tongue) placement tests and e-course development (in preparation), they are able to learn Polish and prepare themselves for studying in Poland beforehand, while still in their own countries.

The foreign language placement tests have already been used by the University staff (both administrative and academic) in order to qualify for language trainings, and in this way they serve well for the university internal purposes.

The achievements reached can be easily implemented for a broader scope of students and other academic target groups for any language taught at the University of Warsaw. They already function as internal academic MOOCs or SPOCs (small private online courses) (Epelboin, 2014, 2015, Fox, 2013). Once created, they serve thousands of students: already in the course of studies and the newcomers ones.

7. Summary and conclusions

The Bologna strategy, adopted by the European universities, emphasizes the important role of mobility, multilingualism and life-long learning. Moreover, life-long learning implies that qualifications may be obtained through flexible learning paths. Student-centred learning requires the empowerment of individual learners, new approaches to teaching and learning, effective support and guidance schemes and a curriculum focused clearly on the learner. All the above requirements are met within the University of Warsaw project on on-line language courses and interactive tests. The concept has been growing along the two collateral ways: one, regarding the form of services (specific kind of courses or tests for different levels of language advancement: general language e-courses, remedial e-courses, mock certification e-courses, placement tests) and the other, regarding the increase in the number of languages taught via this method. As a result, the on-line materials for 14 languages have been created and there are more than 200 virtual classes run annually on the COME educational platform with the engagement of over 40 well-trained e-teachers. In 2015 academic year, the number of e-courses users exceeded 5 000 (comprising more than 37 000 students taught from the beginning of the project). Thus, it may be stated that the e-courses play a

role of internal academic SPOCs (small private online courses), being a form of MOOCs (massive open online courses) (Epelboin, 2014, 2015, Fox, 2013).

The value added of the project is the ICT skills increase in the university students and teachers, which is in line with both the University of Warsaw innovative and modern didactic policy and the European Union strategy on ICT society development. The additional benefit is a significant administrative costs reduction.

Finally, the question on whether the University of Warsaw's achievements in the field of language e-teaching may be applied in other universities is a complex one. The technical aspects depend a lot on the infrastructure already set and developed at a university, the structure of a university itself, its policy and the number of students. This means the benchmarking may apply only to some aspects of the solutions presented above, nevertheless, it still should bring benefits for students, teachers and university administrative staff.

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