

ICT AS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR LEARNING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the exploitation of ICT in tertiary education, particularly in the teaching of foreign language. The special focus is on eLearning courses which seem to be extremely beneficial in distance education. Apart from the theoretical issues, the article describes a survey carried out among the university distant students and academic staff members in order to discover whether these online courses might be a good solution for the effectiveness of foreign language learning and satisfy different students' needs and learning styles.

KEY WORDS

ICT, eLearning, language learning, teaching approaches.

1 INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the rapid development of ICT, learning takes a new form. This is also true for the learning of foreign languages. As Mothejzickova [9] states, *there is a prime focus on the fields of knowledge in which citizens acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for effective communication, i.e. on the teaching of foreign languages and ICT*. Therefore, the teachers of foreign languages attempt to react to the new situation and prepare their lessons in this sense, i.e. with the help of ICT. Such classes can take different forms across the whole educational system. Language teachers can run traditional, face-to-face classes in which they might use interactive boards, particularly with young learners, videoconferences with some twin classes abroad or power point presentations with older students. Nevertheless, ICT is mainly used in tertiary education since it is a very suitable form for distance learning. Perhaps, the most common form of learning with the help of ICT at the institutions of tertiary education is eLearning.

At present, the key issue of eLearning is its effectiveness for the educational process, particularly with respect to student's learning

styles. Does eLearning really suit teacher's and student's needs? Does it match different learning styles? These are some of the core questions which are being solved by experts in this field in the Czech Republic at the moment (see Poulova [10], Simonova and Bilek [11], Simonova, Poulova and Sabatova [12]). As Poulova [10] states, the effectiveness of the educational process is given by many factors, e.g. learner's intelligence, level of knowledge, motivation, self-confidence, and learner's cognitive and learning style. Teacher's teaching style and the matches/mismatches with students' learning styles influence the efficiency of the educational process to a large extent.

Some authors, such as Felder and Silverman [3] say that mismatching can cause educational problems. It can favour certain students and discriminate others, especially if the mismatches are extreme. On the other hand, if the same teaching style is used repeatedly, students become bored. Gregorc [6] claims that only individuals with very strong preferences for one learning style do not study effectively, the others may be encouraged to develop new learning strategies. Only limited numbers of studies have demonstrated that students learn more effectively if their learning style is accommodated. Mitchell [8] concludes that making the educational process too specific to one user may restrict the others. Thus, it may seem that to make learning challenging, students should be offered a variety of teaching methods, which can be accommodated by ICT. As Coffield [1] points out, the possibility of individualization of the educational process from both students' and teachers' point of view is its greatest advantage.

The process of instruction supported by ICT may become suitable and beneficial for learners of various styles. The reason is that it offers a wide range of tools and activities which can be

tailored to any learning style and used by any teaching style instructor. The possibility to individualize the educational process from both students' and teachers' point of view is one of the valuable advantages of eLearning (Simonova and Bilek [11]). However, these are the issues which still need to be further investigated and evaluated in order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of eLearning in the whole educational process.

2 SURVEY

In order to discover whether students' learning needs can be really accommodated by an online course, medium-scale research in form of an online anonymous questionnaire among the distant students and academic staff members of the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM) of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic, was done. Altogether 85 people participated in the research. Out of these 52 (61%) were males and 33 (39%) were females (Fig.1).

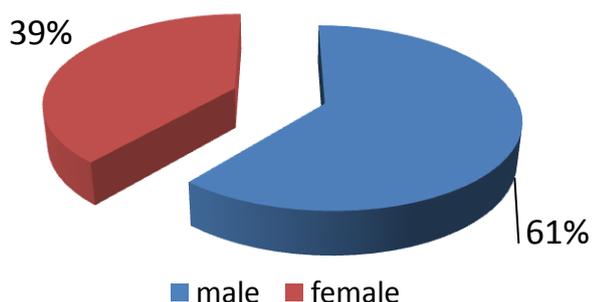


Figure 1. Respondent's sex

The research addressed several aspects of the learning and teaching of foreign languages. However, within the scope of this article, the authors describe only those aspects that focus on the following three issues:

1. **the form of learning and teaching (traditional, online, blended);**
2. **the way of acquiring and learning a foreign language; and**
3. **the learning style (auditory, kinaesthetic, tactile, visual).**

2.1 The Form of Learning and Teaching

As far as the form of learning and teaching is concerned, the distant students overwhelmingly prefer the blended form of learning (Fig. 2) while the academic staff members almost

balance the traditional and blended form of teaching (Fig. 3). The reasons for it might differ since the creation and running of the online course is quite demanding and time-consuming. Moreover, the eLearning tutors have to perform a wide variety of tasks:

- organising, delivering and evaluating tutorials;
- providing students with explicit and clear instructions and a study guide;
- helping students to overcome obstacles so that they can achieve their learning objectives;
- correcting, evaluating and delivering feedback on the students' individual assignments – and returning them, ideally within three days;
- resolving potential study conflicts;
- supporting and encouraging the students in their studies by e-mail and discussion;
- reacting to enquiries and giving advice; and
- creating the content of the eLearning course, which also makes them responsible for its quality.

As one can see from the Figures below, except for one respondent, no one prefers the online form.

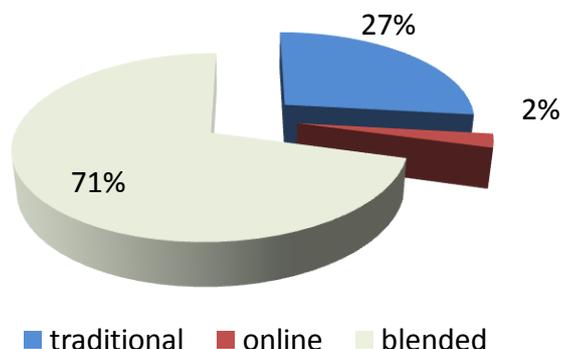


Figure 2. Distant students and their forms of learning

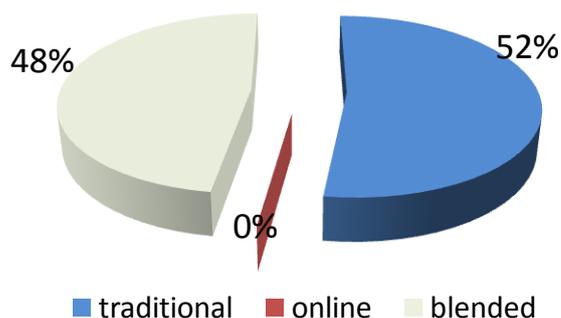


Figure 3. Academic staff members and their forms of teaching

Blended learning has nowadays become quite a fashionable form of learning. It means that certain parts of the traditional, face-to-face teaching, such as lectures or seminars are substituted by an online course. Generally, there are a few tutorials: an introductory tutorial, a mid-course tutorial and a final tutorial. At the introductory tutorial students are acquainted with the e-subject, its content and requirements. Furthermore, they are shown how to use the Blackboard Learn virtual learning environment. During the mid-course tutorial students usually submit a short assignment so that the teacher/tutor can see that students understand the online materials and know how to work in the online course. At the final tutorial students are checked and if they pass, they receive a credit or a grade. For more information on the blended learning approach see Frydrychova Klimova [4] or Frydrychova Klimova and Poulouva [5].

2.2 Ways of Acquiring and Learning a Foreign Language

To acquire, master and subsequently sustain a foreign language is a life-long process. The ways how people learn a foreign language have been discussed by many experts in the field of second language acquisition (e.g. Ellis [2] or Krashen [7]). In addition, the teachers of foreign languages observe during their classes how students learn a foreign language in order to provide them with various teaching methods to enhance their learning.

The survey shows that the distant students acquire, learn and master a foreign language, in this case English, in the following ways (the individual aspects are listed according to their highest frequency of occurrence to the lowest one):

- by listening to music, English news and watching English movies and series;
- by reading fiction, journals, professional literature, meeting minutes or articles on the Internet;
- in most cases by talking to a native speaker;
- by memorizing words and grammar rules;
- through written communication;

- by attending language courses or classes at school; and
- thanks to a business trip or by staying abroad.

Similarly, the academic staff members acquire, learn and master English in the following ways:

- by reading professional literature, fiction or articles on the Internet;
- by listening to BBC, music and watching English movies;
- through both written and oral communication, which does not have to be always with a native speaker;
- by memorizing words and grammar rules;
- by attending language courses; and
- by staying abroad.

The research proves that both groups predominantly learn English by **reading, listening and through communication with both native and non-native speakers** (the frequency of occurrence was over 20 while in other cases it was below 10). Thus, teacher's attention should be focus on the development of these skills during the language classes.

2.3 Learning Style

In the teaching of a foreign language, the following learning styles are the most common:

- **visual** (seeing);
- **auditory** (hearing);
- **kinaesthetic** (moving); and
- **tactile** (touching).

Visual learning style students:

- look at the teacher's face intently;
- like looking at wall displays, books, pictures;
- often recognize words by sight;
- use lists to organize their thoughts; and
- recall information by remembering how it was set out on a page.

Auditory learning style students:

- like the teacher to provide verbal instructions;
- like dialogues, discussions and plays;
- solve problems by talking about them; and
- use rhythm and sound as memory aids.

Kinaesthetic learning style students:

- learn best when they are involved or active;
- find it difficult to sit still for long periods; and
- use movement as a memory aid.

Tactile students:

- use writing and drawing as memory aids; and
- learn well in hands-on activities like projects and demonstrations.

The research findings show that both groups mostly prefer the kinaesthetic style when learning a foreign language. The following comparative Table 1 and Figures (4, 5) demonstrate the representation of the individual styles with both groups of respondents.

Table 1. Representation of individual styles with both groups of respondents

Learning styles	Distant students	Academics
<i>Visual</i>	2/5%	8/18%
<i>Auditory</i>	5/12%	6/14%
<i>Kinaesthetic</i>	18/44%	19/43%
<i>Tactile</i>	16/39%	11/25%

■ Kinaesthetic ■ Tactile ■ Visual ■ Auditory

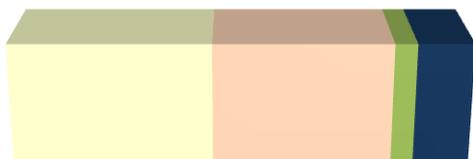


Figure 4. Distant students and their learning styles

■ Kinaesthetic ■ Tactile ■ Visual ■ Auditory

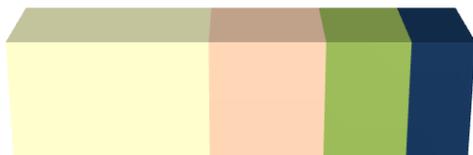


Figure 5. Academic staff members and their learning styles

3 CONCLUSION

The research findings described above indicate that students prefer active ways of learning since most of the respondents favour the kinaesthetic and tactile learning styles. Therefore, the teachers of foreign languages should bear in mind not only the preferred students’ learning styles but also at the same time (re)consider the teaching methods and techniques in the second language acquisition which would match these preferred students’ learning styles.

Furthermore, ICT can be a solution if they are exploited with respect to different students’ needs in the acquisition of a foreign language and their learning styles since the online courses can offer a lot of learning materials and links to other materials on the Internet. Students can exploit blogs, discussion or messages to get in touch with their mates and other foreign speakers. They can listen to the video recordings of their lectures or to the authentic dialogues of native speakers. Overall, anyone can find what suits him/her best. Moreover, the e-courses meet other issues students find hard when they learn a foreign language, such as shyness to speak in front of the other students or a lack of listening exercises. In addition to that, teachers can provide students with almost immediate feedback on their submitted assignments. They can support them in their effort to learn a foreign language with the help of communication tools.

As far as the oral communication with a native speaker is concerned, videoconferencing and/or blended learning might seem to be an ideal solution.

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