

E-SUPPORT FOR BLENDED LEARNING

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Abstract

During the past years, English language teachers at ŠKODA AUTO University have been free to develop their own extra study materials and test items, which incorporated a wide range of teaching approaches. However, the results of a students' needs analysis proved that a system of standardisation in teaching and assessment was needed. Firstly, the design and implementation of standardised e-testing was initiated. This was followed by the development of extra e-sources for students. Currently, e-support is being developed for distance students on Moodle as a substitute for their limited classroom time. In addition, this resource could also be provided to full-time day students for extra practice. The e-support will cater to the majority of learner types (*visual, auditory, reader and writer, and kinesthetic*) to complete at their own pace, and includes materials based on listening, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary and language in use. The presenters will show participants the main problems they overcame and provide examples.

E-OPORY PRO BLENDED LEARNING

V předchozích letech lektori jazyků dostávali velký prostor k vytváření doplňkových materiálů a testových položek, což zahrnovalo široké spektrum přístupů k výuce. Na základě výzkumu potřeb studentů se ukázalo, že určitý systém standardizace je nutný nejen ve výuce, ale i v systému hodnocení. Nejdříve se zavedlo standardizované e-testování. Poté následovalo vytváření elektronických studijních materiálů. V současné době se pracuje na e-oporách pro studenty dálkového studia v systému Moodle k nahrazení nižší dotace přímé kontaktní výuky. Tyto materiály mohou být rovněž využity studenty denního studia pro samostudium a doplňkové procvičování. E-opory se zaměřují na všechny studijní typy (vizuální, auditivní a kinestetický), tak aby studenti mohli pracovat svým vlastním tempem. Zahrnují materiály zaměřené na poslech, čtení, gramatiku, slovní zásobu a praktické využití jazyka. Přednášející seznámí účastníky s hlavními problémy při tvoření a ukážou příklady

ELEKTRONISCHE UNTERSTÜTZUNG UND BLENDED LEARNING

In den letzten Jahren wurde den Sprachlehrern ein großer Raum zur Erstellung von ergänzenden Materialien und Testaufgaben zuteil, was ein breites Spektrum von Unterrichtsansätzen beinhaltete. Auf Grundlage einer an Studenten gerichtete Bedarfsanalyse stellte sich heraus, dass ein gewisses Standardisierungssystem nicht nur im Unterricht

vonnöten ist, sondern auch im Bewertungssystem. Als Erstes wurde ein standardisiertes elektronisches Testverfahren eingeführt. Dann folgte die Erstellung elektronischer Studienmaterialien. Zurzeit wird an einer elektronischen Unterstützung für Fernstudenten im System Moodle gearbeitet, welche den direkten Unterricht vor Ort ersetzen soll. Diese Materialien können ebenso von den Vollzeitstudenten zum Selbststudium genutzt werden. Die elektronische Unterstützung richtet sich an alle Studienarten: die visuelle, die auditive und die kinästhetische. Auf diese Weise können die Studenten mit ihrem eigenen Tempo arbeiten. Zur Verfügung stehen Materialien für das Training von Hörverstehen, Leseverstehen, Grammatik, Wortschatz und der praktischen Anwendung der Sprache. Die Autorin macht in ihrem Beitrag auf die Hauptprobleme bei der Erstellung aufmerksam und führt praktische Beispiele an.

Introduction

ŠKODA AUTO University is a non-profit Business school providing both bachelor and master's degree programmes to approximately 1100 students. Currently, the majority of students study 5 modules of English courses at B2 level in the bachelor degree programme and have 2 x 1.5 hours instruction per week in the full-time mode of study (80% of students) and 5 x 3 hour intensive sessions in the part-time mode of study (20% of students). In the full-time mode of study students have one lesson per week with a Czech teacher and the other with a native speaker. In the part-time mode there is only one teacher, either a Czech teacher or a native speaker. The main goal of the modules is to equip students with the language skills needed to work in an international business environment, and the modules are structured around the text book BEC Vantage Masterclass.

The university was founded in 2000, and since this time there has been a continual growth in student population. At first, almost all students were Czech, however due to the creation of international relations around the world the student intake is diversifying, mainly from European countries within the frame of the Erasmus programme, and countries in the former Soviet bloc. Furthermore, the university has recently gained accreditation for the same bachelor degree programme in English, and therefore all students have the possibility to study some academic courses in English.

1 Outline of Project

The development of the modules has been enhanced by the continual application of action research. Initially the project's main aim was for the standardisation of module testing. This is due to the fact that as the department grew the number of teachers increased, especially in terms of the number of external teachers who have a low number of lessons per week. Previously all teaching and student evaluation, even though the same course book was used, was the individual teacher's responsibility. To resolve this issue all teachers were provided with standardised paper based tests and guidelines for the assessment of production skills.

Upon evaluation of the testing process it became clear that there were other issues to resolve. Firstly, due to the large number of teachers there were substantial differences in the grading of tests, i.e. some graders giving half points for partially correct answers while others giving nothing. Secondly, even though there were multiple variations of each test it was difficult to prevent students from informing their classmates of the test content which provided an unfair advantage. Next the preparation of new tests every semester, test grading, and the inputting results into the information system was extremely time consuming. And finally, teachers of the combined mode of study found it difficult to cover all the course content required for assessment.

To resolve some of the issues relating to assessment, e-testing was implemented for non-production elements (writing and oral skills are assessed separately). The e-test was built on a platform in the university's academic information system (AIS) and initially a large amount of time was allocated to the input of material for the question bank. For testing, the AIS randomly generates questions from the question bank, and therefore can be used with some mild modifications every semester. In addition, this makes it almost impossible for students to share content, and therefore results in a much fairer system of evaluation, and the AIS also automatically marks and inputs grades. This has resulted in teachers being able to use the saved time to further enhance their lessons and has reduced the possibility of human error when grading and inputting grades. E-testing also has a cost-cutting advantage as it reduces the costs associated with providing paper based tests.

The other main issue is course content, especially for the part-time mode of study. However, they usually have the same teacher for all 5 modules. In the full-time mode students select their own timetables, and therefore in order to get classes at the times they find most suitable they could have different teachers each semester. In order to provide a more individual approach to class teaching, teachers would provide students with extra study materials for their own classes. However, this still did not fully resolve the issues and now the main focus is to provide e-support to students, mainly to aid part-time students. However the full-time mode of study will also be given access.

2 E-learning

Even though the main outcome of the modules is for students to pass the test, it is not the only significant factor. E-learning should also include a more individual approach to students, and therefore other aims include the following; (i) to equip students with the language skills that they will need in professional settings for example emails, CV's and cover letters, presentation skills etc., by providing the target language in situational contexts. (ii) to promote deep and meaningful learning (iii) to foster learner autonomy (iv) to produce materials that will appeal to different learner types, for example auditory, visual and kinaesthetic. (v) to provide weaker and stronger students with extra materials in order to catch up with the target level or to provide more difficult stimulation, (vi) to provide students with a wider range of pedagogical approaches. And finally, (vii) to enable teachers to have more classroom time for production activities.

3 Needs Analysis

Before this phase of the research began a needs analysis questionnaire was undertaken by 22 students in the part-time form of study and by 143 students in the full-time mode. A large amount of data was collected and analysed, however, for the purpose of this report only the key findings are presented.

4 Student Profiles

Student profiles were compiled using data from students who enrolled into the bachelor degree programme for the academic year 2012/2013. Due to the distinct differences in the student profiles of the full-time and part time modes of study, the profile of each mode was undertaken separately. In the full-time mode of study the mean entrance age for students is 19-20 years old and approximately 50% of students previously studied at gymnasium or obchodní akademie schools.

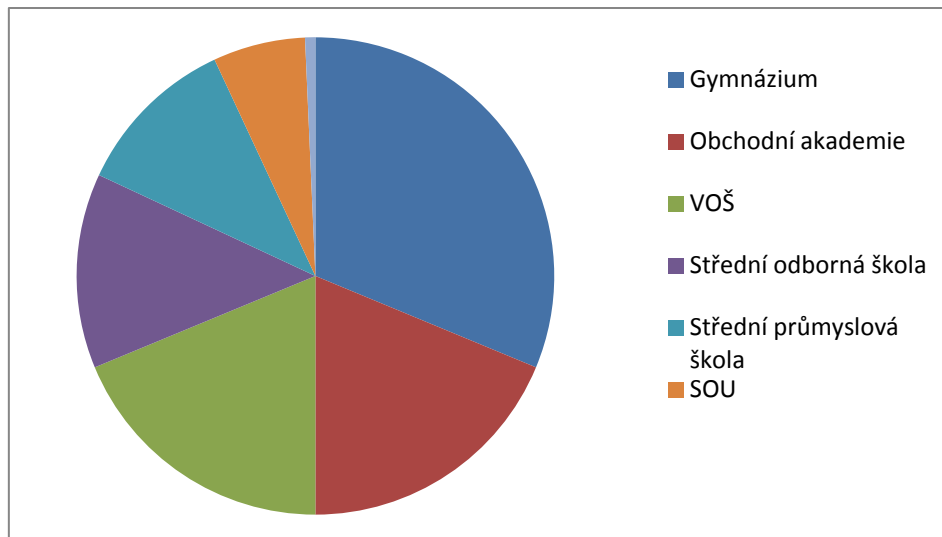


Fig. 1: Student secondary school education profile of the full-time mode of study

In comparison to the full-time mode, for the part-time mode the mean enrolment age is significantly higher at 26. Furthermore, there are also substantial differences in the secondary school education they have received, as approximately 30% of students graduated from gymnasium or obchodní akademie schools.

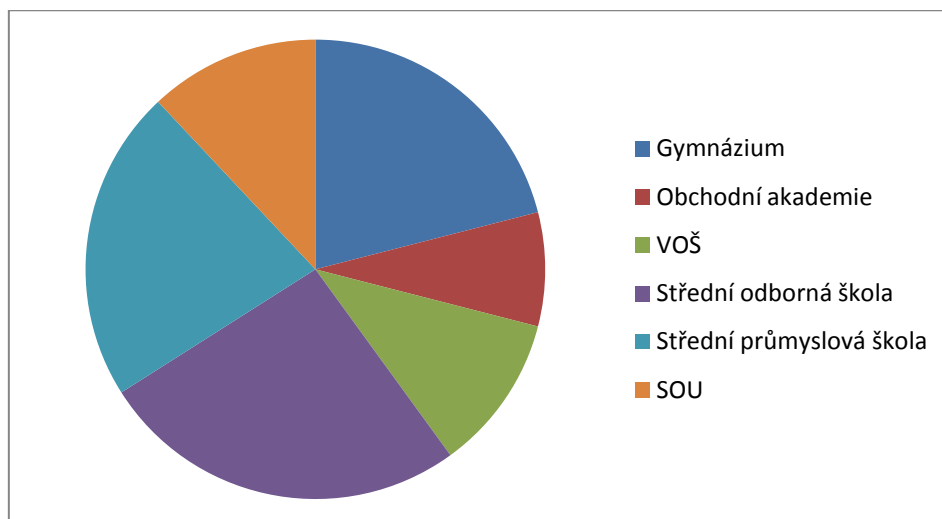


Fig. 2: Student secondary school education profile of the part-time mode of study

Therefore, it can be deduced that students are at differing levels of proficiency, have differing language schemata to draw from and have varying experience of using the target language in professional contexts.

Other key findings from the research are that on the whole students find the course requirements equally difficult for all sections and skills (which are grammar, vocabulary, translation, reading, writing, listening and speaking). In relation to finding materials to use for self-study, the results show that it was difficult to find external sources for writing and listening. Therefore, these elements should be incorporated into the study.

5 Blended learning

Existing teaching and learning assumptions in higher education are changing due to the increasing popularity of information technology. In addition, due to internationalisation, institutes of higher education have to provide for a larger and more diverse range of students,

and in order to meet these demands there is an increase in technology based practices (Hick et al., 2001:143). The majority of research into blended learning emerges from face-to-face learning environments where additional technology supported exercises have been included into the curriculum (Bliuc et al. 2007). This research is primarily practitioner led as teachers are keen to enhance their lessons and provide more support to learners (Bliuc et al. 2007).

At the moment there is substantial debate on the definition of blended learning and Oliver and Trigwell (2005) suggest that the term is ill-defined as it can mean blended teaching pedagogic approaches, or the blending of education which includes a combination of face-to-face and on-line delivery.

Therefore in this research blended learning is defined as the interaction between students and teachers via a combination of both face-to-face learning and technologically-mediated resources (Bliuc et al., 2007) as it accurately describes the context of our environment as the target learner is the part-time mode of study.

6 Pilot Phase

The platform that is used is Moodle due to the fact it is financially viable and the relative ease of use. The pilot phase is due to commence in the winter semester of the academic year 2013/2014. For this phase of the project a wide range of support materials has been incorporated onto the site, including explanations of language and grammar rules, model answers for writing assignments, guidelines for presentations, study skill advice and language in context explanations, and includes listening, videos and interactive quizzes.

At the end of this period students, teaching staff and independent assessors will provide their feedback on the site in order to improve and develop it further.

Conclusion

These are the keys points that we recommend to take into consideration when undertaking similar projects.

- Identify your target learner by undertaking a need analysis.
- All team members have to understand the main aims and parameters of the project from the outset.
- Set the main course content at the beginning.
- Even though each person has their own responsibilities ensure that all team members know what each other is doing, to ensure content consistency.
- Meet regularly to set goals and discuss related issues. We meet every 1-2 weeks and this allowed us to share ideas and brainstorm, provided deadlines and motivation to complete tasks and enhanced team spirit.
- Moodle looks complicated but after a little training and a lot of trial and error it is worth it. At first we recommend that you see how a course is set out as this enabled us to see the overall structure and therefore have a better understanding of the big picture, as well as examples of activities and which quizzes work best for different types of questions. Next we would suggest that if possible attend formal training by external specialists.
- Decide on the colour scheme and format at the beginning.

- Regularly review all team members work as this may help to see other ways in which an activity can be developed to provide inspiration.
- In moodle it is difficult to incorporate theory and exercises together as they have to be separate.
- The layout of the page content for books and files does not have the same formatting properties as word documents.
- Even though some teachers prefer to use hot potatoes over moodle quizzes, we recommend to use moodle quizzes as then you do not have to upload them onto the system and it is easier to make changes.
- Peer critique input on a regular basis as it is useful and insightful.
- Experiment, at first it can take a while to get used to all the quizzes but you learn by doing. Also it is wise to make notes or use print screens to show how you did something as you may forget.

Literature

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