



WebLingu@: blended English language learning

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Abstract

For the acquisition of a second language the World Wide Web offers an abundance of learning resources that can provide opportunities for meaningful, realistic, contextualized language activities. This paper presents the WebLingu@ project of blended English language courses, which have been designed and developed by the University of Siena Language Centre (CLA) on the FaD (Formazione a Distanza) platform. To exploit the potential of Internet resources, WebLingu@ consists of a multi-level English language resource constructed through the process of evaluation, organization and effective application of web activities. The basis for the blended course design is a wrap-around syllabus model (Mason, 1998), using the core of existing Internet resources wrapped or complemented with printed materials, online tutor support and limited face-to-face lessons. The integration of a collaboration workspace is a key factor for the development of a virtual learning community, which increases group cohesion and second language discourse production (Kasper, 1999). Overall, this paper aims to present a case study of online educational methods that support second language acquisition, as applied to online English courses at the University of Siena.

1. Introduction

For the past three years the University of Siena Language Center (CLA) has been developing WebLingu@, a flexible English language resource constructed on the university platform FaD (Formazione a Distanza). Several key factors contributed to the adoption of the platform, such as progress monitoring, automated testing, feedback facilities, as well as a Study Planner for student self-evaluation.

For successful language development in the areas of speaking and listening comprehension, some face-to-face lesson time is useful; therefore, WebLingu@ courses are based on principles of blended learning. The online materials are integrated with asynchronous collaboration activities and discussion, as well as several face-to-face lessons.

The tutor also plays an important role by scaffolding the various course elements based on a learner-centered approach, in which the student is guided and given the opportunity to take responsibility for step-by-step learning outcomes. *Technologies that connect individuals in a collaborative community can facilitate ongoing discussion that supports students' sense of group cohesion to bring about expected outcomes and facilitate second language acquisition.*

Experienced online tutors are essential for guiding students in this process. For this reason an online training course for tutors, Online Language Education, has also been developed and offered for the first time by the Language Center in May-June 2004. The course not only presents sound pedagogical principles, but also gives the tutor a first-hand experience of the advantages and disadvantages of being an online student.

2. Objectives

The University Language Center conducts a computerized English test for all students entering the university. From the results of this test, students are grouped into one, two or three semester English courses, depending on their language level, intermediate, pre-intermediate, or beginner, respectively. As international certification at Threshold level is obligatory, learners must develop language skills in the four areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Threshold Level is described as follows:

At this level a learner should be able to cope linguistically in a range of everyday situations which require a largely predictable use of language¹ (UCLES, 2001).

While most English courses for full-time students are conducted traditionally on a face-to-face (f2f) basis, various pressures are being felt by the university,

¹ See the ALTE Framework description at: http://www.alte.org/can_do/framework/index.cfm

such as the lack of classrooms, student timetable overload, a growing number of part-time or lifelong learners, as well as the special needs of disabled students. As a result, the Language Center has been conducting experimentation with blended English language courses for several years.

3. Structure of the course

As stated above, the primary aim of CLA English language courses is that learners acquire and develop Threshold Level language skills. The blended course for part-time students also incorporates tutor-moderated weekly online discussions in small groups of approximately ten to fifteen students. The WebLingu@ Internet activities compose the core materials for the course, which are integrated with printed materials and audio CDs for the lower-ability levels. Mason's (1998) «Wrap Around» course model is a clear example of this type of organization, where tailor made materials are wrapped around existing materials. This model favors a resource-based approach to learning and students are given more freedom and responsibility to interpret the course for themselves, allowing for the needs of a variety of learning styles (Watkins et al., 2002).

4. Course Materials and Strategies

One of the major advantages of WebLingu@ materials is their organization into a structured and guided resource, which allows for the development of flexible course design. The Internet materials have been structured into three separate courses based on language ability levels: beginner, pre-intermediate and intermediate, which correspond to the syllabus and language functions necessary for attaining the Council of Europe Threshold Level.² Certification at Threshold level (currently the Cambridge Preliminary English Test, PET) is obligatory for the majority of students at the University of Siena. Each level is divided according to the linguistic abilities of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as well as grammar and vocabulary. This organization aids the straightforward navigation of the course modules and gives the tutor major flexibility in lesson design for various types of courses, including specialized fields such as business and medicine.

WebLingu@ provides an extensive resource to both the tutor for organizing online activities, and the student for guided learning. The links in each skill area direct the student to the specific web page activities. The units of WebLingu@ also contain self-study suggestions for each language level. Figure 1, below, shows a beginner-level reading unit, which includes instructions in Italian. The tutor

² For the Council of Europe, see: http://www.culture2.coe.int/portfolio/documents_intro/common_framework.html or for information regarding the European Framework for Languages, see: <http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/cef.htm>

selects weekly activities from the WebLingu@ modules and coordinates them with small group interactive discussion tasks in English, as well as written homework in individual online journals. The participants are encouraged to consult with and help each other in the correction of written tasks, before the final drafts are corrected by the tutor, with appropriate feedback. It is also essential that the tutor plays the part of a facilitator who sets attainable objectives and structures clear weekly tasks that tie the materials in WebLingu@ together with asynchronous online discussion and f2f lessons.



Figure 1 WebLingu@ Beginner level reading unit.

WebLingu@ offers a self-evaluation tool, the Study Planner, which is used by students to reflect upon the work they have completed for each unit, and to record a self-evaluation number, ☹ 1-2-3-4-5 ☺. Students are also encouraged to write short comments or questions to their tutor, often establishing a continuing dialogue. This provides a very simple, yet effective, feedback and can be used to quickly resolve specific problems at their source. Other features of WebLingu@ include interactive slide presentations, multiple choice quizzes, an online multi-lingual dictionary and an electronic notebook.

Taking into consideration the level of self-motivation and time organization necessary for part-time students to successfully complete online lessons, regularly scheduled f2f workshops are an essential element of the blended courses. Due to the technologies involved, there is a steep learning curve during the first few weeks on the course (Berge, 1997). Therefore, an initial f2f orientation session is scheduled for all students in a computer lab, in which the tutors explain and demonstrate course organization, demonstrate WebLingu@ and resolve technical problems. This meeting also provides a moment for the students to get to know each other - a key starting point for the creation of an effective learning community, as suggested by Palloff and Pratt (2003).

5. Blended learning based on constructivist theory

Flexible or blended learning is based on the key concept of learner choice within the different aspects of the learning experience. Collis and Moonen describe it in this way:

Flexible learning is a movement away from a situation in which key decisions about learning dimensions are made in advance by the instructor or institution, towards a situation where the learner has a range of options from which to choose with respect to these key dimensions (Collis & Moonen, 2002).

The constructivist theory represents a basis for aspects of flexible, collaborative learning. The principle concept is that learning is an active process where learners construct new ideas or concepts based on their current and past knowledge. Constructivist theory emphasizes learner differences in approaching and solving problems. Each participant in the learning activity adopts her own schemes and methods for the completion of the project, according to individual creativity, competence and preferred learning methods, which can consequently produce different solutions. Not only are learners given more choices, but they also have new responsibilities. When the learner is given more choices, the instructor is required to respond and individualize rather than plan and deliver. An increased flexibility in learning alternatives, with a wider range of approaches, of material, and of learning settings will be required to meet the needs of different learners (Schrum, 2002).

Furthermore, Felix (2003) argues that «there are persuasive reasons for using online technologies both as valuable extensions to what can be done in the classroom and for improving the quality of traditional distance education, especially if we believe in constructivist approaches». The resources in WebLingu@ allow for flexibility in adapting lesson content to a variety of individual learner needs. As the course progresses, tutors can suggest alternative pathways in response to student feedback.

6. Collaboration – The importance of group discussion

Jenlink and Carr have identified three broad purposes of conversation:

- transacting: the purpose is the negotiation or exchange within an existing problem setting;
- transforming: conducted when individuals suspend their own personal opinions or assumptions, and their judgment of others' viewpoints;
- transcendent: where the purpose is that of moving beyond or «leaping out» of existing mindsets (Jenlink & Carr, 1996).

In the first point, transactions do not involve tangible objects. Students in electronic discussion exchange mutually valued information in order to complete tasks, answer questions amongst themselves, and in the process of conducting research for projects.

However, transforming conversations often consist of progressive discourse. In other words, this type of conversation is made up of innumerable discourses that consist of clarifications and resolutions of doubts, that generate ideas that are new to the participants, and that the participants realize as being superior to their previous understanding (Bereiter, 1994).

Furthermore, transcendent conversation attempts to produce coordinated action among participants and to bring about social change. Besides being a potentially powerful means of inquiry and collective learning, it gives a balance to more structured problem-solving approaches, through the exploration of traditional ideas and habits, with the potential to change or transform ways of thinking.

Asynchronous online communication is a useful way to extend class discussions beyond the time and place of class meetings. A library of resources, printed on paper and available on the Internet, can be available to students as a foundation of ongoing discussions. Collaboration workspaces can serve as a place for students to post their work-in-progress, and a place where instructors, peers and experts can provide feedback to help students refine their products and performances.

6.1 What are the goals of online discussion?

Chism (1998) presents several purposes for electronic discussion:

- Building group coherence among students. The main goal is social: students are encouraged to get to know one another so that other tasks can be accomplished.
- Sharing information. Using a collaborative learning strategy [...] different students in a learning group become experts in specific aspects of a project. They then have the responsibility to share what they have learned with the entire class. This is particularly effective in group-based project work (Collis et al., 1997).
- Refine communication skills. «Process» skills such as communication, critical thinking, and creative thinking cut across all content areas and can be enhanced

through electronic communication. Students can be asked to frame arguments, lead electronic discussions, and develop their written communication skills.

- Provide feedback to students. Students can share their papers, products, compositions, or drafts of their work for their peers and the instructor to critique. This feedback (on produced final work and discussions prior to the final product) can be used to further refine and improve student-generated products.
- *Provide feedforward. Provide reactions and reflections that stimulate students to further action in problem-solving, continuing debate and deeper knowledge building (italics by the authors).*

For blended courses, a collaboration workspace, Synergei,³ was integrated as part of the blended courses in order to promote a more interactive learning community, which was not available on the FaD platform. Figure 2 illustrates a collaboration workspace used for the WebLingu@ blended English courses, intermediate level.

The tutor organizes the workspace for each student group and controls the day-to-day operations of the course, according to the needs of each language level. A listing of weekly WebLingu@ Internet lesson materials and collaborative discussion tasks are posted in Synergeia forums by the tutor to provide the necessary scaffolding for the course. Special collaborative group tasks are integrated into each blended course and adapted to the ability level, including webquests, writing short texts with peer revision and guided discussions based on topics suggested by the participants. At the conclusion of each weekly lesson, the tutor provides a summary and review of key points and language objectives that were reached or that may need further revision. This weekly scaffolding provides step-by-step objectives which help the learners progress through the course. The social element of group online collaboration and peer problem-solving in the second language (L2) aids the negotiation of meaning between group members, which is an essential element in language acquisition. Warschauer (1996) observes that asynchronous discussion online has been found to be more carefully considered, more varied and often more complete than in f2f lessons where there are often large numbers of students and the classroom time is limited.

6.2 Advantages of online discussion for language development

One of the reasons that second language conversation in traditional classrooms is claimed to be beneficial to language development is that it fosters the negotiation of meaning (Sherry, 2000). In textual online conversations as well, participants

³ See the Synergeia website and description at: <http://bscl.fit.fraunhofer.de/>

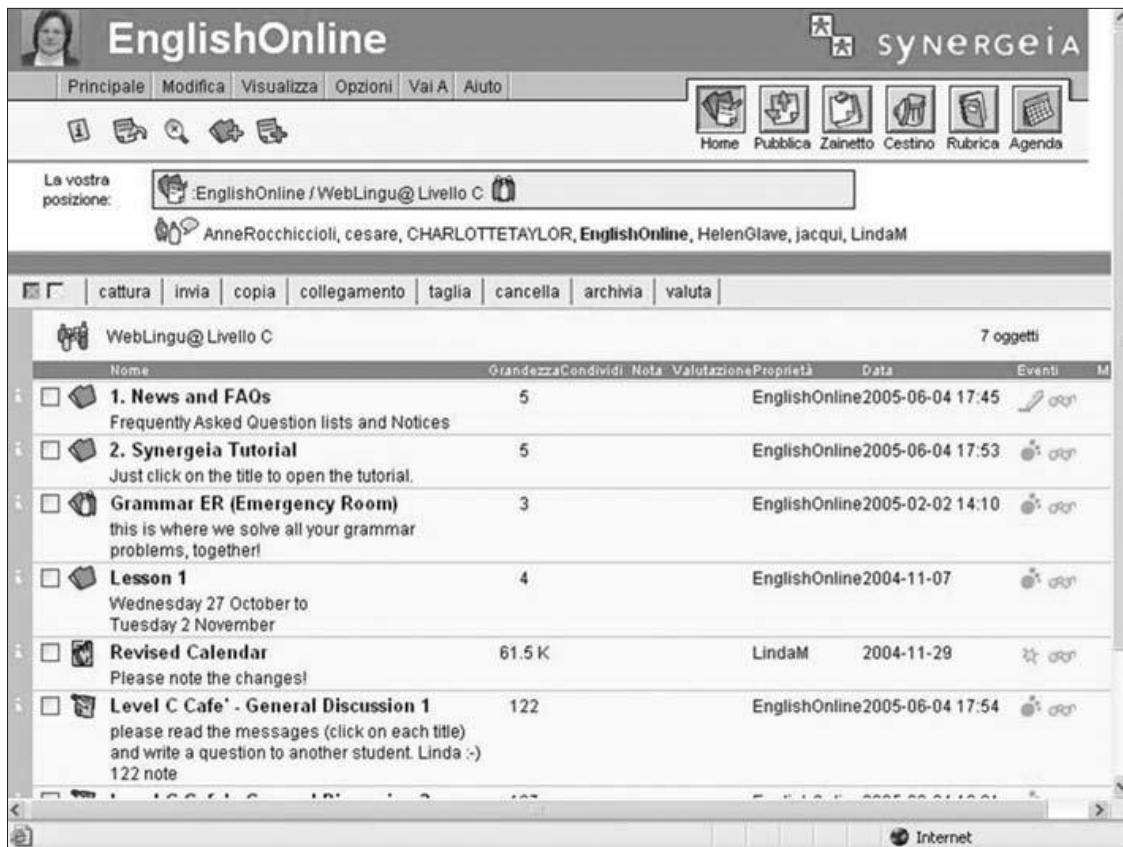


Figure 2 Synergeia collaboration workspace - intermediate level English course.

work cooperatively through negotiation to clarify and resolve problem spots in the discourse in order to successfully convey meaning. From the discourse objective of maintaining the flow of conversation come dual benefits for the development of grammatical competence. «Negotiation provides enhanced target-language input, as messages become more comprehensible, and perhaps equally as important, negotiation fosters modified target-language output, as learners push their L2 abilities to their linguistic limits in trying to more precisely convey their messages.» (Pellettieri in Warschauer et al., 2000).

Various studies have found that students involved in electronic discussions took an active role in online discourse management and used a wide variety of discourse structures. This variety was demonstrated to be greater in electronic discussions than in f2f discussions (Chun 1994; Kern 1995; Warschauer 1996). Furthermore, current research suggests that negotiation will have a stronger effect on grammatical accuracy when the task demands rest crucially on the correct interpretation or usage of the target language (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993).

There is evidence that the nature of peer collaboration and feedback in classrooms, where computers are used to teach writing, differs from that in regular

writing classrooms. Under structured conditions, computers used as writing tools, used in conjunction with online peer revision or assessment, promote a collaborative environment in learning to write in L2 (Herrmann, 1989). The learner is provided with a reading public, which in turn leads to a sense of ownership of text and a greater sense of responsibility for what one writes. Peer assessment then causes learners to realize the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. Students also learn to gain confidence by correcting peers' written work, as well as learning to receive constructive criticism. This cycle aids to increase the student's communicative confidence in the second language.

7. The role of the tutor

As stated previously, the elements of blended learning can be implemented through the adoption of collaborative discussion, in which peer-learning is key. The tutor must also define her/his role and responsibilities to the learners at the outset of the course, so they can clearly understand what to expect and what is expected from them. Weekly tasks are structured so that each participant has a part to play. The collaboration activities relate to the core materials presented each week through WebLingu@, f2f lessons and printed texts, with learner-autonomous choices available through a variety of means online and also in the CLA self-access lab.

The guided tasks created by the tutor for each week, also referred to as e-tivities by Gilly Salmon, should be:

- motivating, engaging and purposeful;
- based on creating a flow of interaction;
- inexpensive and easy to run;
- clear in purpose, not long and complicated (Salmon, 2002).

Sharing tasks that are based on core materials through discussion improves motivation and eliminates the feeling of isolation created by working individually. Course cohesion is pulled together in the online discussion space, Synergieia, through the creation of workspaces for special purposes, such as *News*, *Helpdesk*, *Course information*, *Weekly work*, *Grammar notes*, *Café*, etc. Drop-out rates can be lowered by clear course design with an emphasis on the learning process, and through the combined assistance of online technical help, FAQs, tutorials, and through the resolution of simple problems with peer assistance.

Because skilled online tutors are a key element for the success of this project, the Siena CLA has developed a five-week training course for tutors, Online Language Education (OLE), conducted entirely online. The first course was held from May to June 2004, with the participation of 14 teachers and the second training course concluded in June 2005. Seargeant (2003, p. 245) states that «each

time teachers use a new CALL (computer assisted language learning) activity, it represents a micro-innovation». Rogers suggests that there are five steps in the teacher's decision-making process related to the adoption of an innovation:

1. gaining knowledge about innovation
2. being persuaded of its value
3. making a preliminary decision to adopt the innovation
4. implementing their decision to adopt
5. confirming their decision to continue using the innovation (Rogers, 1983)

Moreover, teacher training in online education must address pedagogical issues and methodologies that are effective for the attainment of learning/teaching objectives. Parallels between classroom teaching and online methods can be found and are useful for teachers to explore together in forum discussion, which can be further developed into a professional community of continued online support for teachers and tutors. Finally, and perhaps most important, a tutor can be more effective if he/she has experienced the challenges of being an online student.

8. Conclusion and further considerations

Continuous evaluation of course design and learning outcomes is necessary in order to determine whether desired objectives have been met. Therefore, the CLA has implemented several practical techniques for the identification of needs, usability goals, and the attainment of overall course objectives. Many case studies have demonstrated that the direct participation of students in self-assessment and frequent opportunities to reflect on learning needs, strategies and objectives are extremely effective in enhancing achievement (Nunan, 1992). The WebLingu@ blended courses include a preliminary questionnaire dealing with individual learning styles, a written mid-course feedback activity and an end-of course evaluation questionnaire. This learner-centered aspect of course evaluation provides constructive feedback from students, generating further improvement for future language courses. Through the continuing development and evaluation of the WebLingu@ project, the CLA Siena will have flexible tools for the formation of online and blended courses that can be adapted to meet the needs of a wide-variety of language learners.

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