Can the teacher be taken out of the teaching?
A pilot project on intensifying a course in English and its implications for results, motivation and workload

Abstract

The increasing number of master's degree courses taught in English has created a rising demand for English language courses at our university. These courses last one semester, which presents problems for exchange students, who sometimes arrive when the semester has already started, but also for regular students, who experience clashes in their schedules in the second quarter of the semester as most other courses are organized in a period of seven weeks. To cope with these problems we decided to change a 14 week-course into an intensive 7-week course with a prominent role for ICT.

In the new course we decided to use the standard digital learning environment at our university (Blackboard) for instruction and a wiki for interaction and collaboration, with both tools taking over part of the teacher's role. We ran two pilot projects with a total of 19 students. The course was also offered in its regular form to a group of 15 students. After the course, all the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire in which we asked their opinion about the use of ICT and the general usefulness of the course. The questionnaire showed that the students liked using the wiki and Blackboard but some indicated that they would have liked more time to practise their oral skills. Students from the pilot group on average reported to have spent less time on the course than students from the regular course, although they still thought of the course as having a heavy workload. When it comes to teaching hours, contact time in the classroom was decreased to 14 hours, but outside the classroom teachers put in just as many hours marking work and communicating with students as they did in the regular course.

Key words: English, wiki, e-learning, intensive course

1. Why this project?

In The Netherlands many master's degree programmes are taught in English, and as universities anticipate or already experience problems in students' knowledge of English, most of them offer English courses to prepare their students for English-medium education.

At Delft University of Technology (from now on: TU Delft) we offer several English courses to students. These courses last one semester (14 sessions), but most other courses are organized in a period of seven weeks, which presents problems for students, who experience clashes in their schedules in the second quarter of the semester. Exchange students experience another problem: they often find that they cannot join a course anymore because they arrive when our semester has already started, because of obligations at their home university. This results in students either leaving the course after one quarter, or not joining at all. For a number of reasons, among which are organisational and financial reasons, this is not a desirable situation.

A project initiated by the SURF-foundation gave us the opportunity to see if we could change this situation. Our goal in the project was to see if we could take one of our existing courses and adapt it in such a way that the course would last seven weeks. This would give us the opportunity to offer the course twice a semester. At the same time we had to keep in mind the aim of our regular courses which is to prepare students for
English-medium instruction and we therefore also wanted to see if intensifying a course affected students' results.

In this article the project will be described so that teachers considering developing similar courses may benefit from our experiences. We will focus on how we adapted the course; i.e. what changes were made, what were its implications and what students thought about the course. We will also compare results between students from the new and the existing course.

2. What did we do?

We ran a pilot project from September 2007 until January 2008. An intensive course meant that we decreased teacher-student contact time from 28 to 14 hours, so from 14 to seven weeks, with one session of two hours per week, while the study load remained the same: 84 hours, credited with 3 ECTS. The objectives and contents of the two courses were the same to be able to compare if there were any differences between the two courses. Our approach was to see what we would normally discuss in class, and then decide if other media would be able to take over those parts of the course. We used two systems for this: Blackboard for instruction and a wiki for cooperation between students.

We used Blackboard because this is the system that is used at TU Delft so students were already familiar with it for finding information. We wanted it to represent the more formal aspect of the course, the place of instruction. The reason for also choosing a wiki was that we wanted to create an atmosphere of informal cooperation, to better reflect circumstances that occur in a classroom. We opted for a wiki, rather than scheduling unsupervised sessions at the university, as we thought that students of the 21st century are used to this form of communication and prefer this way of working over classroom attendance. There were also two practical reasons for choosing a wiki: with a shortage of classrooms at the university we did not want to claim four hours a week for our classes and we feared that fewer students would sign up for the course if it consisted of two sessions as they may have found it hard to fit these hours into their schedules.

In the next section we will elaborate on the use of Blackboard and the wiki by showing practical examples of how the different skills were offered in the course.

2.1 How did we use Blackboard?

The Blackboard environment was used for instruction: all documents with information related to the topics discussed in the course were stored here and became available to students on a weekly basis. Besides that, we stored mp3 files in Blackboard and made a Toolbox available to guide students to useful links. This toolbox was one of the outcomes of the national project mentioned in the introductory paragraphs; i.e. all the participating institutes contributed to forming a database with links to useful websites. The list was compiled in a file that could be exported and imported in the Blackboard environment, which all the institutes used. Exchanging information like this meant that we were able to benefit from each other's work and did not need to find out everything by ourselves.

The materials that were offered to the students were a mix of teaching materials found on the web and those we developed ourselves. Taking part in the SURF-project gave us extra time to develop these materials.
2.2 How did we use the wiki?

First we created a wiki through pbwiki.com, a site that apart from hosting wikis for a fee, also hosts free wikis. We made pages for separate topics discussed in the seven weeks. At the beginning of the course we asked students to create their own page in which they put recordings and exercises. The teacher also had her own page and there were pages where students could contact each other to ask questions (figure 3). One of the features of the wiki is that a chat plug-in can be inserted. We asked students to use this option to talk with each other outside the class room.

A disadvantage, however, of this free wiki is that there is limited storage capacity so that the students had to delete the files from previous weeks to make room for new assignments.
2.3 What did we do in the sessions?

2.3.1 Presentations

In the regular course students do a warming up exercise on good and bad presentations and on why giving a presentation is usually such a nerve-wrecking event. In the following session they give a short presentation to a small group, after which they get feedback, especially on the overall structure, the use of PowerPoint or other visual aids and whether they used signposts or not.

In the intensive course the wiki takes over most of this: students add their ideas on good or bad presentations to a page within the wiki (see figure 4) and cooperate on making a list of useful signposts. In the session they give a short presentation, with group mates giving feedback on the aspects mentioned above. For the next session, they work in pairs and write signposts for each other’s presentation, using the PowerPoint slides that they posted on the wiki.
2.3.2 Pronunciation

In the regular course pronunciation is a recurring aspect in the first quarter; each week a certain sound or phonetic phenomenon is discussed and briefly practised. After that time, pronunciation problems are discussed when and if relevant. In the intensive course pronunciation comes back each week in the preparation stage by using Audacity, or another digital recording program; students record themselves reading a short text and do exercises from www.shipsheep.com. This site offers a large number of minimal pairs and tongue twisters. Students hear the minimal pairs and tongue twisters and record themselves repeating these. They then put their recording on the wiki where the teacher can access them so she can feedback during the session. Apart from that, students listen to downloads from the BBC on linking and weak forms and do an exercise on this. Again, the completed exercise is posted on the wiki so that the students can look at each other's answers.

Giving feedback on pronunciation takes quite some time and although students appreciate the feedback and the fact that the topic is part of the course, it would take up too much time in either course if we practised pronunciation more.

2.3.3 Writing skills

In the regular course the theory of topic sentences, sentence constructions and overall structure is introduced in class. Practising this usually takes place during the session with students writing a number of assignments during the course. Doing exercises on formal writing, collocations and word families is also part of the course. This is brought to the students in a rather traditional way: after an introduction students do exercises, either in class or at home, and receive feedback on these in the session.

In the intensive course the theory is presented in the documents that are put on Blackboard. Students are then asked to write a short paragraph which they talk about in class with a partner. After that they also write a number of longer writing assignments. Collocations are introduced in a document in Blackboard and students read websites about how to make their language more formal. As this is a new topic for most students a class discussion usually follows. Just as in the regular course, an exercise on word families is discussed in class.

2.4 How did we assess them?

Students from both courses are assessed in the same way. They do a number of writing assignments, deliver a presentation and sit an exam. The exam consists of two parts; a text with comprehension and vocabulary questions, and cloze test, based on texts that students have to study on their own.

3. Did it work?

3.1 Did they work?

At the end of the courses we asked students to fill in a questionnaire to see how they had liked the course. Fifteen students started in the regular course, but only nine of them finished it, with six of them filling in a questionnaire. Divided over the two pilots, 19 students started the intensive course, but only eleven finished it and ten of them filled in the questionnaire.

We asked students about the number of hours they had spent on the course. Their answer was based on their own estimations; we did not ask them to keep a log in which they kept track of the number of hours they spent each week. On average, students from the intensive course indicated they spent 7.7 hours per week preparing for the session, while students from the regular course spent 5 hours on this. When adding the
hours for the sessions (14 and 28 respectively), it turns out that students from the intensive course spent a total of 67.9 hours on the course and students from the regular course spent 98 hours in total on average. The estimated workload for the course was 84 hours, 3 ECTS.

Students in the intensive course wrote in the survey that they felt that the course was indeed intensive, but that they also knew they had not spent as much time on the course as they should have. This had to do with obligations for other courses. As one student wrote: "the preparations, texts, grammar and assignments are almost too much for 1 week; other lessons still ask attention too".

With such a small group it is very difficult to draw conclusions from the results. For these 20 students the following can be drawn. Students from the intensive course scored higher on the comprehension part of the test; on average 18.8 out of a possible 32, whereas the students from the regular course scored 10.7 on average. In the other three parts students from the regular course scored better; from the 25 points they could get for their gap-filling exam, they scored 13.6 on average, whereas the students from the intensive course scored 12.4. On average, students from the intensive course scored 6.4 out of a possible 10 for the presentation, with the students from the regular course doing slightly better: 6.7. The differences in the averages for the writing assignments were bigger: 5.9 out of 10 for the intensive course and 6.7 for the regular course.

It is interesting to see that from the four parts of the assessment, students in the regular course scored higher on three of them, but because the group was so small, it would be unwise to draw any conclusions from that, or to try to offer any explanations for this.

3.2 Did they like it?

We also asked students about the use of Blackboard and the wiki. Students in the intensive course gave higher marks to the statement "the information in Blackboard was sufficient". This seems logical, as they were more dependent on the use of Blackboard. As we did not use a wiki in the regular course, students in that course did not answer questions about this. Students from the intensive course thought the wiki was easy to use but most of them also felt that the wiki was not a good replacement for time spent with their teacher.

Only one student did not like working with the wiki, but did not mention why not. Some students indicated that they would have preferred the use of MSN over the use of the Wiki plug-in to talk to each other. When developing this course, we had considered using this program, but decided against using a third means of communication so as not to make things too complicated.

Students felt that the information offered to them in Blackboard and the wiki was enough to prepare them for the sessions. Before the project started, we were apprehensive that, just like in an ordinary classroom, some students would be more active in the wiki than others, but students did not experience it like that; in responding to the statement "Other participants had already added so much information that I couldn't add anything else", 8 out of nine (totally) disagreed with this statement with one of them writing: "you can always add something more".

When looking at the responses students gave in the exercises on good and bad presentations it seems that the wiki as a discussion board was a good replacement. Students mentioned the same aspects as students from the regular course and seemed at ease with working on each other’s presentation outside the classroom. Naturally students from the regular course had more time to practise their presentation skills, but the students from the intensive course did not mind about this. They knew that an
intensive course meant less time for practice in the classroom. Both groups scored more or less the same on how useful they thought this part of the course was. There does not seem, therefore, to be a major difference in the way students react to the teaching methods of the writing skills. Both groups thought the topics discussed for this skill were useful.

Students from both groups were given the opportunity to supply other comments on the course. Most of the students from the intensive course mentioned that they had chosen the right course for them. The reasons for this were for example not having much time in the other half of the semester or not needing a longer course as they thought their English was already quite good. Some also mentioned that this was the only course left, as they were too late to register for the regular course, or that this course was a good way to receive 3 ECTS in 7 weeks. Comments they wrote in this part of the questionnaire were for example "I like the intensive course, it is more efficient" and "Right choice!" Regarding the contents of the course, some of the students in the intensive course mentioned that they would have liked to spend more time in class: "Next time I would choose the longer course, because there is more time for discussion with the teacher".

It is interesting to see what the students liked best about the course: "presentations", "oral presentations", "discussions" and "small groups", with two mentioning "Blackboard" and "self-study". When asked what they had missed some responded: "I missed more discussion and a teacher correcting my mistakes in speech" and "more discussions on topics in class; more discussions in class".

Students in the regular course were also asked to give additional comments. Most of them felt that they had chosen the correct course, even when they knew there was an intensive course as well, as they felt that an intensive course would have been too much work for them. As one student wrote: "Considering the schedule of the other courses, I think a longer English course it better".

What the survey did not measure, was the long-term effect of the two courses. It will be interesting to see how much retention there is and if there is a difference between what students from the regular course and students from the intensive course remember after a longer period of time. However, this will be very difficult to look into, as after the course our students move on to many different directions. This means that some of them may continue English-medium instruction, whereas others may not, which makes it very difficult to compare long-term effects.

3.3 Did we work?

Teachers are given a number of hours to teach the course, prepare the sessions and assess students' work. For the regular course this was 80 hours, for the intensive course this was 60 hours. The hours for developing the course were part of the SURF-project and are not taken into account here.

The teacher who taught the courses kept a journal in which she recorded the number of hours she spent on teaching and preparing the course. She also kept track of the number of hours she put into administration, e-mail contact with students and how much time she spent on the wiki. The number of hours was 78 for the regular course and 62 for the intensive course. This is fairly consistent with the number of hours that were anticipated, 80 and 60 respectively.

3.4 Did we like it?

The teacher noticed that more self-study for the students meant more, rather than less work for her. In itself that was not a problem, but the extra work involved checking whether the students had done their work, rather than communicating with them.
The students were not fully aware that they were supposed to have done all the work before coming to class, which made it necessary to repeat some of the information. One session per week was therefore hardly enough to elaborate on and practise the topics and to give feedback to the students. This made the course not as effective as it could have been, which was somewhat frustrating.

The fact that the course took only seven weeks meant that teaching time had to be used as efficiently as possible. This left little room for other aspects, such as talking about cultural differences, which, because there are many different nationalities in our groups, is usually a topic in the regular course.

From a more personal view point the teacher mentioned that she, probably like most teachers, has chosen her profession for the personal contact she has with students and this is exactly what this project has decreased.

4. What are we doing now?

At the moment of writing, September 2008, we are offering the intensive course for the fourth time and in the meantime we have made some changes to both courses. After the first two pilots, the exam for the intensive course was changed so that it now reflects the contents of the course to a larger extent. As this was perceived as a weakness in the regular course too, this change will also be made in the regular course exam.

Another change that was made was that we check more regularly if students actually do all the preparation for the intensive course by asking them to publish most of their work in the wiki. This makes the wiki less of the informal means of communication we intended it to be, but students do not seem to object to this. They take their own page seriously, even adding personal touches.

More time was spent on pronunciation in the preparation for the sessions for the intensive course than in the regular course. Because of the SURF-project, we had extra time to develop a new course, which was partly spent on finding websites that give extra information on pronunciation. To have students from the regular course benefit from this information as well, we have added the BBC programmes to the regular course.

We altered the way texts are used in the courses. Before, they were mainly used in both courses for self-study; students had to look up unknown words and had to sit a gap-filling test based on the texts at the end of the course. The texts are now more closely connected with the writing assignments in class; among other things we ask students to find collocations in the texts, to look for topic sentences and to indicate different kinds of sentence constructions to make them more aware of these. As no assessment has taken place yet, it is too early to see if these changes have improved the students’ writing skills.

In the pilot project one session was scheduled for discussions, but it turned out that the writing and presentation skills took up too much time so that the time left for discussions was not sufficient, which left both the teacher and the students with a dissatisfied feeling. Discussions are no longer a part of the new course, which gives us more time for the other two skills.

In the first pilot the presentations were part of the course itself. The group of students was very small so we were able to listen to all the final presentations in the last session. It made us realise though, that we would never be able to listen to all the discussions if the groups had its regular size of 15. Besides this, we wanted the presentations to be more authentic, so we asked the students to send in a presentation that they had to give for another course at the University. Another reason for taking the final
presentation out of the course was that this gave us more time to practise presentation skills.

At the moment half of the students send in a presentation that they give for other courses. The other students do not give a presentation (in English), so for them we make other arrangements; we make reservations for a room at the University and ask the students to record the presentation without a teacher being present. This puts less time pressure on the students, but it gives the teacher extra work as watching videos and giving feedback afterwards takes more time than giving instantaneous feedback.

5. What still needs to be done...

The small number of students and the fact that only one teacher took part in the project affected the reliability of our findings. This makes it very difficult to draw conclusions from the results and further research is needed to see if the effects that were seen in this study are valid for a larger group of students. Any long term effects were not studied in this project and further research is needed in this respect too.

We used a wiki rather than unsupervised classroom sessions for students to cooperate. It would be interesting to see what the outcome of a project like this would be if we scheduled these sessions at the University and gave students instructions on what to do during these sessions.

With all the changes we made, for example limiting the number of skills in the intensive course, it could be argued that the one is no longer just an intensive version of the other. If we also consider the fact that students indicated that they did not spend the time required on the intensive course, we may need to rethink the credits the students get for the intensive course or make them more aware of the fact that an intensive course means double the work in half the time.

6. So, can the teacher be taken out of the teaching?

We seemed to have solved one of the two problems we were faced with; i.e. students leaving the course because of clashes in their schedules or arriving too late to enrol in our regular courses. The project also suggests that it seems possible to reduce the number of sessions by using Blackboard and a wiki page. Intensifying a course does not reduce the workload, especially not for teachers. Students need to do the same work in a shorter period, which makes them economise on the hours they are supposed to spend on the course and although there is less teaching time for the teachers, more time is spent on checking if students do the preparations, on communicating with the students in the wiki and on assessing the presentations that are sent in after the course.

Responses from the teacher and the students indicate that although they appreciate the effects of an intensive course, they prefer more and more frequent personal contact. So, although up to a certain point it looks as if the teacher can be taken out of the teaching, it remains to be seen if she wants to be taken out of it.

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