Enhancing Blended Language Learning: Development of a New eLearning Template

Abstract

Improvements in dedicated e-learning tools and the new insights provided by CALL research are at the core of a new course for Business Language. The course incorporates an innovative eLearning template as the key element of its main mode of delivery. A number of authoring tools have been integrated in order to provide a user-friendly, flexible and effective online learning medium for both teachers and learners. This paper describes the background for the design of the course and discusses the needs it aims to meet. The study also outlines the objectives informing the development of the eLearning template and examines the main features and parameters of the pilot module developed in order to test this template within a blended learning setting. Finally, the paper addresses the issues encountered during the pilot trial and the main findings from the student feedback.

Keywords: blended e-learning, business languages, learning technologies, students' experience.

1. Introduction

The 1990s witnessed the development of e-learning for a range of educational purposes, from online materials as additions to face-to-face teaching, to virtual universities offering stand-alone courses and degrees entirely via the Internet.

Despite all the interest and discussions generated, various studies have indicated that a substantial number of learners do not feel completely fulfilled by courses taught entirely online (Everhart, 1999; Felix, 2001 & 2003). One of the major drawbacks was that users had to deal with multiple systems, each with their own passwords, interfaces, and navigation, leading to some frustration (e-Learning Framework, 2003). Equally, the need for Web-development specialists and the time needed for developing e-learning materials together with time-management issues were significant concerns that appeared regularly in the research and reports (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000).

Commercial e-learning training projects also appear to have moved on from simple distance learning models to more complex blended solutions (audio/video/web-based conferencing) and an increasing number of courses in HE are designed using a combination of face-to-face and online methods (blended learning). However, there is still little understanding regarding how these methodologies and activities integrate with each other in addition to the degree of success in achieving the desired outcomes that correspond to each of them (Neumeier, 2005).

2. Background to the course design

In an attempt to solve some of the drawbacks mentioned in the introduction and taking advantage of improvements in authoring tools as well as new insights provided by research on independent learning (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000; Hurd, 2003), an innovative Blended eLearning Business Language Course was designed and piloted at Coventry University in 2006-2007.
The aims and target audience for this course were based on a study of new trends in student mobility facilitated by Leonardo's funded work experience and on a fact-finding exercise, regarding language skills and intercultural awareness in the UK (the latter conducted in 2005). Several regional and national surveys coincided in pointing out that trade was being lost due to language and cultural barriers (LNTO, 2001-2003; Sector Language Skills Analysis Report, CILT, 2003). Consequently, the course aims were defined as providing targeted language training and business cultural awareness to learners who were planning to gain work experience in a European country and, consequently, needed some competence in the country's language and/or were already working in companies that have encountered language and cultural barriers while dealing with international business clients.

Considerable thought was given to the course design and structure in order to accommodate learner's needs, preferences and styles. In the author's experience, travelling and variable working patterns in the case of business students or the increasing engagement in paid-work because of financial pressures upon undergraduate students are examples of needs which are often mentioned as the main reasons for not being able to complete more traditional language courses.

Learners engaged in courses delivered completely or partially online have expressed their preference for some personal contact with the tutor and fellow students (Felix, 2001; Ayles, 2002; Matheos, Daniel, McCalla, 2005). Style is also an important factor in course development as the use of technology and/or working in a distance setting may lead to students' anxiety (Skehan, 2003). Accordingly, the following design principles were adopted:

The design should include a flexible mode of delivery including face-to-face, web-based conferencing and online distance learning. Such a blended approach would contribute to making the studying of a language more compatible with busy and variable professional schedules or study/paid-work choices. This would also support learning needs and preferences including those of learners who prefer some personal contact with the teacher (to be achieved through web-based conferencing in the case of students unable to attend some or all face-to-face sessions because of distance or work commitments).

In order to provide an attractive and enjoyable learning environment, the online courseware should consist of well designed interactive materials based on the selection of the e-learning applications appropriate for the medium and the pedagogical approach or approaches selected in order to produce effective learning outcomes (Salaberry, 2001). This could be achieved by the use of different types of interactive tasks and quizzes which should promote learning in a more engaging and pleasant manner.

The face-to-face sessions should provide students with the opportunity to meet their trainer, to be introduced to the course and on-line course resources and to start networking with fellow students. Group skills practice and role-playing should reinforce the learning acquired on online sessions of study by simulating real life interactions before transferring this new knowledge into their own working environments.

The decision was taken that the course should be structured as a cluster of short self-contained modules which could be studied as 'stand alone' or as part of a programme of study depending on the needs of companies and/or sectors or, individual learners.

Another key issue informing the design of the course described in this paper was the application of the concept of active learning within a constructivist pedagogy (Felix, 2005) and the role that cross-cultural awareness has in underpinning language competence in achieving successful business practices in an international business environment (Hagen, 1999).
3. Development of an innovative eLearning template

An important aspect of the design for this course was the selection and integration in an e-learning template of the most appropriate technological tools for the purpose of online language learning. This development was pursued with several objectives in mind. These were:

- to provide teaching staff having a standard knowledge of computing at user level with a highly sophisticated and innovative eLearning solution which they could master in very little time and without the need for a specialist in Web-design and development.
- to improve learners interface by facilitating access to online resources and providing easy to use navigational controls.
- to offer students, a more intuitive, fulfilling and enjoyable learning environment by providing and engaging subject content in an attractive seamless format that would motivate and encourage learning.

The design phase of the eLearning template took place in 2006 which, in addition to matching the objectives described above and the pedagogical approach selected, included a thorough analysis of the e-learning resources available at Coventry University in order to keep technology costs to a minimum. This analysis culminated in the selection of two authoring tools for materials' development: Course Genie (v. 1.6 – Campus Edition) from Horizon Wimba and StudyMate (v.1.5) from Respondus. They offered an attractive layout via automatic formatting, several ready-made templates which offered a high degree of flexibility and a good range of question types into which video footage, flash items and audio files could be easily inserted. Both authoring tools provided publishing wizards that dealt with the process of exporting the materials produced to course management systems such as Blackboard (WebCT) in a simple and straightforward manner.

From the perspective of materials' development, Course Genie represented an improvement in relation to previous authoring tools because it dealt directly with course materials written in ‘Word’ format. Features such as navigation controls, table of contents, hyperlinks, pop-ups, flashcards, movies, streaming audio and video, self-test questions and IMS metadata could be easily added using the special styles and dialogue boxes inserted by the Course Genie's software into the Word settings. Furthermore, the process of transforming the Word format into HTML pages was performed by the programme quickly and without the need for laborious processes and the mastery of other specialist tools like Dreamweaver to make them more accessible.

StudyMate is an authoring tool that facilitates the creation of up to 10 Flash-based activities and games using three simple templates. As in the case of Course Genie, existing materials in Word format can be easily imported in order to transform them into interactive activities.

Immediate feedback in web-based learning courseware is now a common feature and generally considered to assist language learning (Ayles, 2002; Felix, 2003). Both Course Genie and StudyMate produce automatic computer-generated feedback. In the case of Course Genie, the feedback can be customised with comments and/or explanations by the lecturer.

The possibility of adding hyperlinks to Course Genie pages was subsequently explored in detail in order to ascertain whether narrated and animated Power Point presentations could be easily integrated and so provide a more effective presentation tool. Power Point as a learning tool is commonly used in language teaching because it facilitates the acquisition of key sentences by sequencing the presentation of each sentence and/or their translation and by utilizing colour to highlight key features regarding gender, number and/or verbal endings (Fig. 1). The result was that integration was easily obtained by first compressing the PP file and thus optimising it for streaming by the
Course Genie application. The software used for this purpose was Impatica for PowerPoint, BlackBerryEdition.

A pilot module was subsequently developed in 2006-07 in order to test this template within an e-blended learning setting incorporating collaborative learning facilities in order to respond to new learning trends “to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration.” (EU eLearning Action Plan-2001) and, also, provide a flexible mode of delivery to support students learning needs and institutional requirements. This module focused on Business Spanish at beginner level and its design was informed by principles of active learning within a constructivist pedagogical approach.

Figure 1. Integration of a narrated and animated Power Point presentation of key sentences and their translations.
4. Development of a Pilot module

The Pilot module was intended for learners who wanted to learn Spanish in a professional context for two main reasons: a) they were planning to gain work experience in Spain and, consequently, needed some competence in the language and, b) they were already working in companies that have encountered language and cultural barriers while dealing with Spanish-speaking business clients. The aims were to provide the language skills and basic cultural awareness necessary to deal with everyday business situations common to all business environments, e.g. introductions, telephoning, etc.

The next step was to define clear objectives in order for students to gain confidence in engaging with foreign language speakers in every day working exchanges with callers, colleagues and visitors. Three objectives were established:

- Development of language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking) for international markets by means of a variety of learning tools and realistic work-based activities and exercises.
- Introduction to relevant intercultural business contexts.
- Development of personal language learning strategies for further independent learning.

The pedagogical approach applied was mainly grounded in constructivist theories of knowledge acquisition (McLaughlin, 1987; McGroarty, 1998; Mayes & de Freitas, 2004). The teaching methodology followed was underpinned by the principals of active learning which in an online setting requires that the tutor takes the role of facilitator in the learning process both at personal and group level by organising the learning, moderating the interactions and promoting reflection and creativity in support of learners' motivation and progressive autonomy.

The Pilot module was designed as a 7 week-long module (50 learning hours), which integrated online learning with three, 2-hour, face-to-face sessions in weeks 1 (induction session), 4 and 7 (review sessions).

The e-learning phase consisted of directed independent study by means of reusable learning objects (LOs) accessible through the University's VLE (WebCT Vista/Blackboard) and complemented by folders containing further study links and selected learning items from the LOs in order to facilitate revision work. Online language-learning support was provided in the form of a discussion room and bookable tutorials – both via the VLE's. The former was introduced to foster collaborative learning and, the latter, was targeted at solving individual student's difficulties; 30 minutes online contact on average per student (Fig 2.). Additionally, a work-based learning portfolio was also envisaged for those learners studying from their work places.

Furthermore, collaborative learning facilities were integrated (blogs and discussion rooms, e-mail, and online voice -mail) so that the interactive nature of the tasks offered opportunities to negotiate meaning, a central process of language acquisition (Salmon, 2000).

Horizon-Wimba voice e-mail was introduced into the mix in order to test whether this tool could help in overcoming one of the more important limitations of online technology in the past, the lack of interpersonal oral communication between learner and teacher and between learners. Web-based conferencing was also piloted for a few students who were unable to attend the introductory session in week 1.
4.1 Pilot content

The module content was organised into five topics identified through a needs analysis as important and realistic business environments. Each of the five topics was structured according to the following organizational scheme:

- Topic's learning outcomes and learning strategies guide.
- Four units, each of which contained a presentation of the functional and linguistic components by means of listening and reading activities, language learning tips, relevant key sentences and vocabulary and, practice exercises set in professional contexts (interactive tasks designed to promote reflection on what had been learnt and application of the knowledge acquired).
- Quizzes (interactive games designed to promote acquisition of the topic key sentences and vocabulary).
- Cultural briefing (presentation and quizzes of cross-cultural items related to each topic).
- Topic Progress Test.
The Topic Progress Tests were designed to ensure a good understanding of the online language content (learners had to achieve 75% of correct answers) before moving on to the next topic. This was considered an important design strategy in order to guarantee that students would have achieved by the end of each topic the necessary knowledge, understanding and language skill development that would facilitate a more productive engagement with the communicative activities to be performed in the Review sessions. These Progress tests were delivered using the assessment tool provided by the University’s VLE (see example in figure 4).
4.2 Language learning materials

The online language learning materials were designed applying principles of active learning within a constructivist approach and developed as learning objects (LOs) by using the e-learning template referred to previously.

In order to support learners’ confidence and motivation in an online learning environment, clear explanations regarding the learning objectives were given for all the topics in addition to each language learning unit within each topic (Fig. 5). Short organisers were also introduced in order to facilitate the understanding of activities and exercises.

Figure 5. Interactive table of contents and learning objectives.
Learning strategy guides were added to each topic and prior to skill-based tasks in order to support independent learning development. Careful sequencing of item presentation, activities and language learning tips was also pursued with the aim of facilitating confidence in what is for many students a novel way of learning. The language learning tips were closely linked to the presentation materials in order to help the development of linguistic competence. Finally, formative and immediate feedback was the main method used in order to promote learning (scaffolding). Figures 7 and 8 provide examples of language learning tips and interactive materials used in the Pilot module.
Figure 7. Example of a language-learning tip.

Figure 8. Example of interactive activities and feedback.
5. Students' feedback

a) Methodology

A small case trial was conducted in the summer term of 2007 in order to investigate the feasibility of using the e-learning template for language learning of non-linguist students within a blended learning setting.

The Pilot module described in the previous sections was run with a group of 20 full-time university students; three post-graduate and 17 undergraduate, who had passed the selection process for a work placement in Spanish companies starting in September/October 2007. These students were invited to participate in the study by completing two short questionnaires in the first and last week of the trial via e-mail. No incentive was given to complete these surveys.

The initial questionnaire was intended to ascertain the students' level of confidence in using computers and also their pattern of general use of technology and the University's VLE. Questions regarding student's subject disciplines and their knowledge of further languages in addition to their native language were also included.

A five-point Likert scale was utilized for the questions on students' confidence in using computers. Open-ended questions were also used to elicit reasons for the usefulness or otherwise of online learning and students positive as well as negative past experiences.

At the end of the trial, participants were also asked to complete and send via e-mail a survey that sought information about the students' views of the online materials developed using the e-learning template referred to in this paper.

A categorical scale was employed for the questions about the point reached in their online study and the time needed to complete each topic studied and whether they attended the face-to-face sessions. A five-point Likert scale was utilized for the questions related to their perceptions regarding the skills learnt and about the activities, revision tasks and links forming part of the online courseware. Each of the questions using the Likert scale was followed by the opportunity to explain in a free format the reasons if the answer was neutral, disagree or strongly disagree.

b) Results

Of the 13 students who returned the initial questionnaire, three were female (33%) and 10 were male (77%). The gender distribution of the whole group of 20 students was 12 male (60%) and 8 female (40%). The data also showed that 8 students were native speakers of Polish, and the reminder spoke Bulgarian, English, Greek, Slovak and Yoruba, respectively. All of them were beginners in Spanish and had knowledge of, at least, one other language in addition to their native language to varying levels from A1 to C2, mainly English, German and French. There were no mature students in the trial group.

In terms of the subject discipline, the three postgraduates (23% of respondents) were studying Automotive Engineering (n=2) and Strategic Marketing Management (n=1). The range of degrees studied by the undergraduate respondents was categorized as follows: 46% were studying Engineering, 14% Business and Technology, respectively and, 7% Computing studies. The sample should therefore be seen as skewed towards students with a strong engineering background. This was an unavoidable consequence of the type of companies interested in participating in the Leonardo Programme at the time.

Regarding their computer literacy, 85% of the respondents strongly agreed and 7% agreed that they felt confident about using computers and only 7% reported themselves
as neutral. When asked about their use of technology (computers, laptops, iPods, MP3), all students actively engaged in study, entertainment and social networking via one or more of these devises and access the University network both on and off campus. One student reported using technology for paid work and another for his research.

The University’s virtual course management system (VLE) was regularly visited by all students both on campus and off campus, the highest activity being to access lecture notes (100%) followed by undertaking practical exercises (69%), using internet links (46%) and online discussion (46%).

The end of trial questionnaire was completed and returned via e-mail by 6 students. Most students finished the five topics forming part of the trial and the time needed to complete each topic varied from 5 to 8 hours. Some students found it easier than others to adapt to an online learning format.

Because of the small number of respondents, the information indicating that the 3 students with knowledge of 1 or more languages in addition to their native tongue and English needed less time to completed the topics can only be considered as anecdotal. Additionally, all three were of Polish origin and, in informal feedback, they pointed out that Spanish was for them an easy language to learn because of the phonetic similarities with Polish.

Table 1. Students feedback on skills learnt.

- Q2. The topics studied have increased my knowledge of vocabulary regarding Business Spanish.
- Q3. The topics studied have increased my ability to understand spoken Business Spanish.
- Q4. The topics studied have increased my ability to understand written Business Spanish.
- Q5. The topics studied have increased my ability to write in Spanish (Business) at a basic level.
- Q6. The topics studied have increased my ability to speak in Spanish (Business) at a basic level.

Table 1 shows that all respondents found the module effective in increasing their vocabulary knowledge and reading skills. The majority of students expressed strong to moderate agreement with the statements regarding increased ability to write in Spanish (Business) at a basic level (84%). Whilst two-thirds noted a strong to moderate agreement about an increased ability to understand spoken Business Spanish (67%). However, when increased ability to speak in Spanish (Business) at a basic level was concerned, the results were more mixed with 50% who strongly agree/agree, 17% were neutral, and 33% disagree with the relevant statement.

Table 1. Students feedback on skills learnt.
Table 2. Students feedback on instructions, revision tool and useful links.

- Q7. The activities instructions were easy to follow.
- Q9. I have found the 'At your finger tips' folder a useful revision tool.
- Q10. I have found the links in the 'Further Learning' folder useful.

The section on perceptions on instructions, revision tools and links revealed that all students agreed or strongly agreed that the activities instructions were easy to follow, and 84% did the same regarding the usefulness of the revision tools, with only one student (17%) disagreeing. The majority of students (84%) found the courseware links useful.

Half of the respondents attended the first revision session (face-to-face) and all stated that this session was very useful because of the focus on interaction through group practice and role plays had helped them improve their speaking skills. The online surgery session bookable during the first revision week was requested by 6 out of the 20 students engaged in the pilot. Of the former 6 students, only one completed the end of session questionnaire and he found this session very helpful.

When asked if they would like to take another blended learning module/course based on their experience with the module under study, 33% strongly agreed, 50% agreed and one student (17%) disagreed.

The last section of the questionnaire gave students the opportunity to make comments or suggestions. Two of them reported persistent technical problems with their PC's browser regarding the opening of courseware audio files. Another respondent would have preferred "traditional essays to memorize vocabulary and basic grammar". Finally, the student who disagreed about taking another blended learning module gave as a reason that “it is difficult to learn something without frequent contact with the teacher and the other participants of the module”. He also requested a greater emphasis on grammar.

6. Discussion

The most important aim in designing and developing a course is "creating a learning environment that works as a whole" (Kerres, 2001 cited in Neumeier, 2005). The latter author points out that the dispositions, aptitudes and attitudes of learners and teachers have to be taken into account in order to make blended learning work appropriately.

The course described in this paper represents an attempt to create such a learning environment by providing teachers with clear and explicit rational regarding the choice of a blended learning approach in order to equip learners with an effective learning process. A key element of this course is the integration of dedicated authoring tools into an e-Learning template in an attempt to facilitate a trouble free interface for students and teachers as well as offering attractive and effective online learning materials.

The two software systems described in section 3 were found to be very user-friendly by this author and, subsequently, by those colleagues interested in using the e-Learning template described. Immediate benefits reported were that specialist programming skills were not required in order to achieve a HTML format for the materials developed and these could be quickly and painlessly exported to the University’s VLE by the publishing wizards in both systems. Other welcome features were the clear, step-by-step, guides and hands-on tutorials, the ready-made templates and the easy-to-develop questions and quizzes which could be enhanced by a large variety of media. Furthermore, the time needed for materials' development was greatly reduced through teachers being able to recycle existing materials written in Word and the innovative incorporation of PowerPoint presentations into the Course Genie generated materials.
This synergy of tools was very well received by students who found the integration of these set of materials within a single interface setting easy to navigate and provided a better understanding of key language features. The reason for the latter was the greater conceptual clarity afforded through the use of colour, audio narration and sequencing animation encapsulated in the Power Point presentations and the seamless progression to the practice materials within the coursework. The students expressed in informal exchanges that the module e-template had facilitated their learning because of the attractive presentation, ease of use, clear instructions (motivation) and the organization of tasks and sequencing of key learning points (scaffolding of learning). These findings are in agreement with Felix (2003:124) recommendations regarding the provision of user friendly sites, clear guidelines and objectives.

Language learning objects (LOs) are a recent addition to the repertoire of e-learning tools. LOs are gaining popularity, in spite of requiring a time-consuming development process as reported in a number of studies. The popularity of LOs is due to their self-contained nature, discrete and concise content and the possibility of sequencing learning according to a well established pattern in language teaching, namely, presentation, practice and guided production by using interactive materials. These multimedia based-objects could be easily reused in other learning settings or be modified in order to adapt them to changing objectives. The integration of dedicated authoring tools into an e-template has been found to contribute greatly to reducing the time needed to produce well presented and organised materials including immediate and customised feedback.

Students were invited to exchange learning experiences and tips through the VLE's discussion forum but after an initial interest in exchanging personal information including the details of their work placements in Spain and their expectations regarding the achievement of some basic knowledge of Spanish, the frequency of exchanges diminished after the second face-to-face session. Informal comments made by students during the trial pointed to the lack of problems navigating the online coursework, the clear topics and activities' goals and also the effective feedback provided. One reason for this as suggested by Ausburn (2004 – cited in Sharpe, R., et al. 2006:64) may be that the students in a blended-learning context have more opportunities to meet face-to-face on campus, thus, reducing the need for online contact.

The results of the initial (pre-module) questionnaire which was designed to obtain a better understanding of the students general use of technology and their earlier experiences of online learning, indicated that the majority of the students were confident computer users and that they used technological tools for a range of non-study activities such us social networking and entertainment. These findings seem to indicate an increasing level of technical competence among students as compared with previous studies (Ayres, 2002).

However, regarding the experience of using technology in their studies, this appears to be mainly focused on accessing lecture notes followed at a distance by performing practical exercises. Use of the internet and participating in online discussions seems to be less widespread.

Although students reported that they regularly accessed the University network both on and off campus, two of the six students who returned the second questionnaire, reported frequent problems accessing the audio online materials because of technical difficulties experienced with their personal PC/lap-top settings and their reluctance to download the required Java programme.

Exposure to online learning prior to this trial was not extensive and mainly involved accessing lecture notes with only two students having participated in more substantial online learning; one within a blended provision an the other through a distance course. Despite minimal involvement in the last two modes of learning for most of the students, all asserted that online learning was useful with the main reason for this judgement
being that information and/or resources were available all the time, including grades and announcements. A further key feature shared by most was the importance of learning at their own speed and time.

The preponderance of students with online learning limited to accessing lecture notes and module information reflects the findings of previous research studies (see Sharpe, R., et al., 2006:24). Only the two students who had experienced a blended and a full online course respectively indicated the convenience of easy access from anywhere. As the only student having participated in a fully online course stated, 'It is very comfortable, you can undertake your course at any free time, without necessity to leave your home'.

The gender distribution seems to indicate that there is still a greater number of male than female students attracted to courses involving e-learning even though the three female respondents were engaged in engineering related studies at undergraduate level. Their input indicates that only one felt very confident using computers while the other two were confident and neutral respectively. All three used technology for their studies, entertainment, social networking and accessing the University network. Regarding the latter, two of the 3 female respondents had used this facility to access lecture notes and practical exercises, while only one of them used internet links and the online discussions available. She had also experienced online learning within a blended setting, the only one of the 13 respondents and stated that she liked the ‘easily available learning resources’, but disliked the fact that, ‘sometimes [it was] difficult to get the necessary support one would normally get from the classroom’.

On the whole, students liked the benefits usually associated with online learning, namely, own speed/time, range of available resources, anywhere access and convenience. They expressed their perception that this was a good resource very often underutilised by teachers.

Regarding the e-learning materials, students were very positive about the benefits on their vocabulary and reading skills and, generally agreed that their listening and writing in Spanish had improved. Speaking was the least successful with only 50% in agreement or strong agreement about their role in increasing their ability to speak the language. A higher percentage might have been achieved if the integration of the voice-mail tool had been more extensive.

Immediately before the trial, the University piloted the Horizon-Wymba voice tools within its VLE and as a result of initial technical drawbacks, the voice-mail tool was only implemented in the last three weeks of the study when students were requested to write and record several tasks involving dialogues as collaborative activities and presentations with a more individual learning aim. Students were very appreciative of the effectiveness of voice-mails in supporting their oral language development through online practice and the benefit drawn from the customised tutor oral and written feedback facilitated by this software.

Similarly, the short test of the VLE-based conferencing conducted with two students who could not attend the first face-to-face session revealed this application as an appropriate way to provide effective learning despite the need for some basic students’ training prior to the event.

The student who reported a neutral judgement in the last two categories (in addition to being unwilling to take another blended module/course) mentioned that he would have liked more detailed grammar information than that provided in the pilot. The pilot grammar support consisted of specific grammatical information regarding the language studied for each unit in the form of language learning tips (see section 4.) and a description of the Spanish verbal system which was available from the folder ‘At your finger tips’. Students were advised at relevant points of the online study to expand their grammatical knowledge by visiting this folder and the relevant links housed in the...
Further Learning folder. A possible interpretation of this student’s requirement is that he had come from a country with an educational system less inclined to foster student autonomy and still needed a more traditional teacher led instruction.

As mentioned previously, all the key sentences/vocabulary and language learning tips were housed within the ‘At your finger tips’ folder which was designed as an easily accessible and useful revision tool. All the students but one found this part of the provision useful or very useful. The same opinion was extended to the Further Learning folder.

7. Conclusions and future plans

In this study, a new blended course for language learning is presented which incorporates an innovative eLearning template as the key element of its main mode of delivery. A pilot module was designed for Beginners Spanish and trialled with undergraduate and postgraduate students in order to test the effectiveness of this template. This experience and the initial students’ feedback revealed that the e-learning template was an effective way of harnessing the potential synergies of the authoring tools selected through their integration into a single and user-friendly interface for both students and teachers.

Furthermore, the template helped to reduce the cost and time needed to produce well presented and organised materials including customised feedback. Students also found the courseware easy to navigate and highly intuitive. The online language materials were structured as learning objects and were judged by students as attractive and well designed. The clear objectives and organizational scheme of the learning components, together with careful sequencing of activities and tasks and, the formative and immediate feedback described in this paper was greatly facilitated by the multimedia nature of the authoring tools integrated in the eLearning template. Furthermore, they helped in providing students with a variety of realistic business scenarios which were instrumental in fostering learning and supporting motivation.

The questionnaire-based feedback from students participating in the pilot module revealed that they were computer literate to a higher level to that reported in other studies and also highly experienced in using technological tools for their everyday life. However, this was not the case for study-related use of technology for which their experiences were mainly related to accessing lecture notes and general course information. Despite this lack of extensive contact with online learning, all the respondents asserted that this approach was useful because of benefits such as learning at own speed/time, convenience and greater availability of resources which confirm the findings of previous studies on student's perception of e-learning.

Because of the small number of replies to the end of trial questionnaire, the findings can only be taken as indicative of the experiences and perceptions of the whole group engaged with the pilot. Within this proviso in mind, the analysis of the data shows that students were highly appreciative of the role of the e-learning materials in their progress in the areas of vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension and generally agreed that the courseware had contributed to improving their listening and writing skills. These findings are in agreement with other studies reporting similar results. The general positive attitude regarding the pilot module was further confirmed by the 83% of the respondents stating that they would like to take another blended module/course based on this learning experience.

The potential of this innovative language learning course derives from its clear and well balanced mix of resources and scalability. The course could be adapted to a variety of students’ needs and preferences and/or different languages, levels of competence and business scenarios. As an example of its adaptability and based on the successful trial of the pilot module, the University’s Employability Programme commissioned a blended e-
learning course for Business Languages to be adapted to their specific programme framework for undergraduates in the summer of 2007.

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References


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