

Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue

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Abstract. Teaching a foreign language – what can be new in it? Most methods are as old as civilisation itself, some have appeared with the development of information technology. Teachers attend seminars and conferences, where they learn from each other, borrow some ideas which we implement and test in our specific environment. It is well-known that there is not a single perfect method, not a single perfect book which suits our needs and the needs of our students. There is a hot discussion about on-line courses, which are not a substitute for in-person classes. Moodle, which seemed to be a clue in the solution of many students' problems, is nowadays often criticised both by teachers and students. Interviews, discussions, monitoring and case study are used to find out the opinion of students and teachers. Viewing the process of teaching as a provision of guided opportunities for students, teachers should not refuse the traditional view, using a combination of both. The authors of the article are interested in finding an answer to the question how to find the most suitable methods and material for a particular students' group in foreign language teaching (FLT) for specific purposes, paying special attention to the role of the teacher. Combining old and new, sharing/borrowing the ideas and resources, using old methods in a new context and environment would help a lot.

Key words: methods of FLT for specific purposes, blended learning, Moodle, teachers' role, higher education.

Introduction

The Berlin Declaration calls upon universities to provide students, regardless of their field of specialization, with opportunities for improving their knowledge in languages (Language Studies..., 2001).

An experienced teacher knows that there is not a single perfect method of language teaching, good for everyone. Teachers of the university have a range of teaching methods as well as a variety of classes, such as Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) – sometimes also called as Professional Language, Language for Academic Purposes (LAP), Translation for Specific Purposes (TSP), or Language for General Purposes (LGP).

Even in one group students vary according to their abilities. They learn in different ways and at a different pace. The task of the teacher is to get the best out of every student so that they are able to show what they know, understand and can do. Teachers use not only “classical” methods, but modern, nowadays and comparatively new language acquisition methods like e-learning, blended learning and autonomous learning. This is a good combination of independent on-line learning with human instruction and communication. J. Gerdes (2006) sees blended learning as a “chance for both students and linguists or language teachers. Language and testing programs still have to be designed and actualized, autonomous learning processes have to be supervised and accompanying lessons have to be taught (Gerdes, 2006).

At the same time learning content-area subjects through the medium of a foreign language (CLIL) has become increasingly popular in many countries. In some cases, a foreign language is used as the medium of instruction in non-language subjects, frequently at the secondary school level when students have acquired sufficient proficiency in the foreign language (Pufahl, Rhodes, 2001).

Blended learning, which includes both traditional and non-traditional methods and means of learning a foreign language, has proved to be successful in reaching the main goals: business and life communication, work with different sources of information and its presentation, cross-cultural communication.

As the authors have written in previous publications, the use of foreign languages is a link and tool for successful study subjects' acquisition, development of different competences. Limited foreign

languages skills impose restrictions in the work of business people; prevent Latvia from getting involved into international projects and activities, in the result of which the European and world markets have partly been missed out. However, the knowledge of foreign languages is not a guarantee for a high level of communicative competence, as *communicative competence* consists not only of *communication skills* (speaking, listening, reading, writing, non-verbal and foreign languages skills), but also *the skills to accept and present information* (ICT use, presenting (oral and written) skills, performing), which supplement informative competence, and vice versa (Civzele, Turusheva, 2011).

Aim: to find the most suitable methods and material for a particular students' group in foreign language teaching (FLT) for specific purposes.

Methodology

Methods of the research:

1. Theoretical: analysis of scientific literature on philosophy, psychology, education and international experience;
2. Empirical: quaziexperiment, which includes: participants' pedagogical observation (monitoring); interviews, discussions, monitoring and case study discussions; reflection within the framework of portfolio method on the students' competence assessment.

At the Latvia University of Agriculture ESP or EAP is a subject in all study programmes, including bachelor' degree, master's degree and PhD programmes. All first-year students participated in the test (in 2013), which helps understand the students' level of practical use of the English language for study purposes. The level of first-year students in FL1 is not very high (Figure 1), at the same time not many study hours are devoted to the foreign language – for most programmes 6 ECTS, for some – 3 ECTS, and only for several – 12 ECTS.

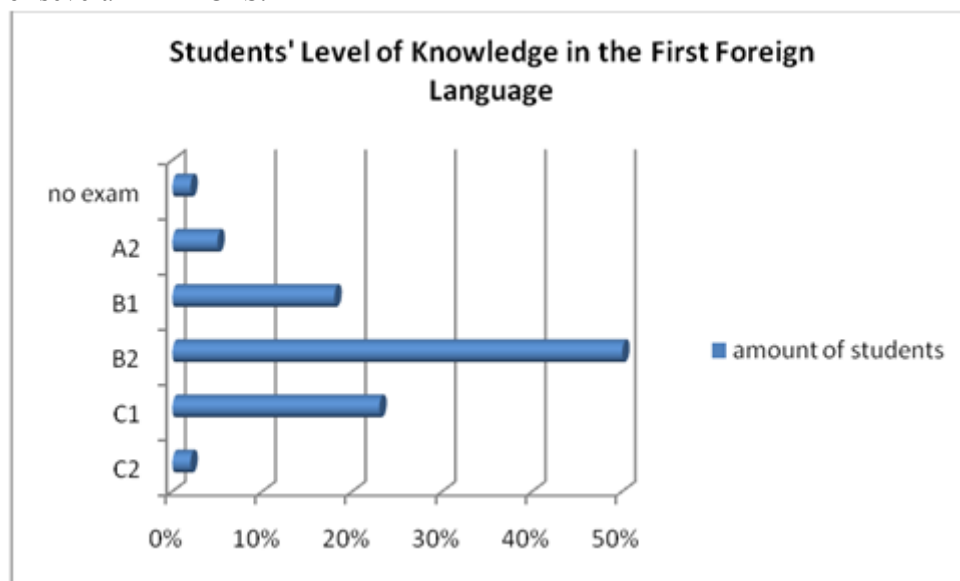


Figure 1. Students' Level of Knowledge in FL1 at the Latvia University of Agriculture.

In this situation Moodle can become a wonderful help both for teachers and students, giving them an opportunity to use different methods, to choose what is more suitable for each student, for his/her language development.

Results

As at our university we have just started to use Moodle for foreign languages teaching/learning, it was interesting to find out the students' opinion on the necessity of the use of this virtual source. 123 second-year students participated in the questionnaire (Studiju kvalitāte..., 2013); the results of their opinion are shown in Figure 2.

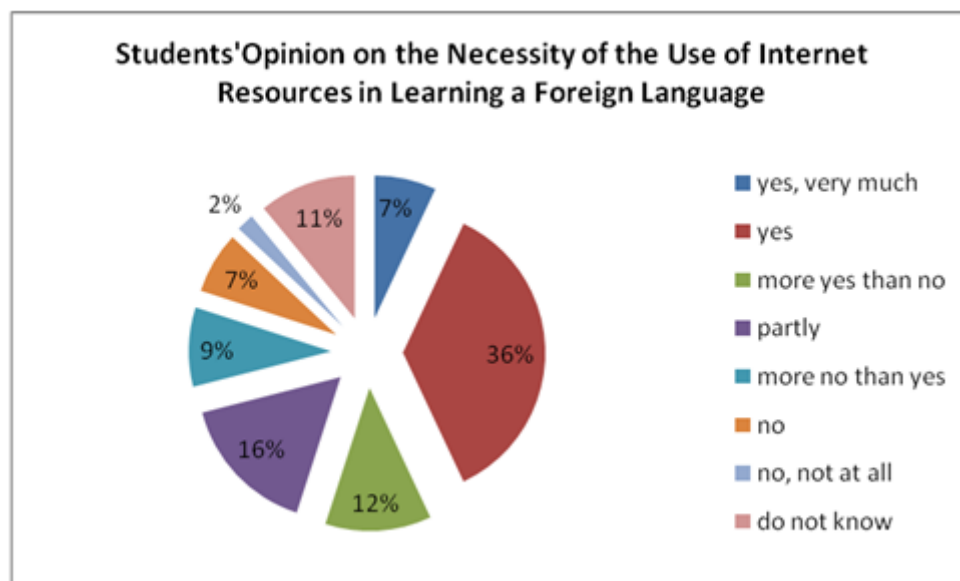


Figure 2. The Results of Students' Opinion on the Use of Moodle.

The students' opinion has divided into positive and negative. Those who find Moodle a useful source for language learning/development expressed such important views (though not deep understanding of Moodle) as:

- it will help differentiate language acquisition;
- it will give an opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in the language;
- it will be an additional training.

It is seen from these comments that students (and perhaps their teachers) have not understood yet all the possibilities of Moodle use. At the same time there are critical thoughts on the use of this powerful source:

- I would like more face-to-face lessons with a teacher and group work to develop speech, discussion, interview skills;
- teacher's role is very important in the teaching/learning process;
- one should learn a language in the process of speaking, not doing exercises;
- IT is harmful for health, eyes;
- I do not know what Moodle is.

From these answers it becomes clear that these students whether use Moodle in the same way as a students' book (not the best one!), or perhaps they have never tried this source by themselves.

If Moodle sources are just a substitution of books, the use of Moodle does not make any change/difference in the use of methods. Current students are representatives of Generation Y, who are technology savvy (Millennials: A Portrait..., 2007), prefer to work with superiors who are approachable, supportive, good communicators, and good motivators (Epstein, Howe, 2006). Flexibility and adaptability are required to successfully work with Generation Y (Eckleberry-Hunt, Tucciarone, 2011). Taking into account the characteristics of modern students, English teachers need to do two things: "pursue an understanding of the nature of Gen Y and adopt teaching strategies that respond to their academic needs" (Reilly, 2012, 10).

Discussions

We can learn a great deal by studying other countries' successes and using the information to implement practices that will support the development of better foreign language proficiency among our students (Pufahl, Rhodes, 2001). Quoting Judith, a beginning language teacher from courses forum (Foreign Language..., 2015), "people have so many different creative ideas you can draw from and use for your own class."

Many English language teachers highlight the importance of the Internet and specialized databases for information retrieval. Different studies have shown the use of technological tools to increase motivation and *Computer Assisted Learning (CAL)* has been encouraged and developed in every field. The use of *Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)* helps to support rather than substitute the conventional class activities.

Innovative technologies and media are frequently cited as a way to increase access to information and entertainment in a foreign language, provide interaction with speakers of other languages, and improve foreign language teaching in the classroom (Pufahl, Rhodes, 2001). Teachers use ICT intuitively, often waiting for immediate results. But the change with ICT is distinctive and complex mainly because ICT resource innovations are continuously and rapidly changing (Orlando, 2009). Bärenfänger's (2005) study includes portals, synchronous web-based learning, electronic performance support systems, simulations, knowledge management, self-paced CD-ROM based content, communities of practice, video broadcasts, virtual labs and chat rooms. These new tools satisfy the needs of learners, improve the quality of the learning experience, decrease the time a learner needs to achieve a learning goal, improve quality of the learning content and materials, re-usability of the learning content and materials (Bärenfänger, 2005).

The authors of this article cannot but agree with S. Bax (2003), who makes a conclusion that teachers' aim should be to attain a state of "normalisation" in which the technology is invisible and truly integrated. Dr. G. Lozanov has expressed the idea which should be remembered by all teachers: "Any given method is only as effective as its implementation" (Methodologies in Foreign..., 1999).

Why Moodle?

Moodle, or Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, is designed to facilitate collaboration. It offers flexibility as well as the possibility of incorporating multimedia (Customizing Moodle..., 2011). As J. Stanford explains it, the idea is to take the advantage of Moodle e-learning environment to enrich the learning process, through a more complete exploitation of the teaching resources, contents and other aids connected with the textbook chosen (Stanford, 2009).

Teachers are often not satisfied with the fact that our students are doing at the university activities that could be easily done at home. As K. Brandl (2005) puts it, Moodle has great potential for supporting conventional classroom instruction, for example, to do additional work outside of class, to become the delivery system for blended (or hybrid) course formats, or even to be used as a standalone e-learning platform (Brandl, 2005). In M. Prensky's (2001, 1) words, "Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach." Moodle is a great way of tying things together – grades, learners' work, individual learning plans, useful links, etc.

Ph. Bird (2010) suggests adding a link to a forum, to different information websites to give students an opportunity to get and provide real information, in a real communication online. He is sure that forums appear to be best for fluency practice, but as they leave a written record, they work very well for identifying individual students' error patterns as well. The author also proves that, as both, teacher and learner, have equal access, constructive feedback can be as simple as changing the colour of text where there is an issue, or inserting smiley faces to show missing words. The whole history of the text's development can be seen and retrieved, and can be used by learners to reflect on their writing process. Public wikis can be set up to get students to collaborate on a project, or for peer correction; learners are often keen to share content that they have created.

Teachers can then easily create a feedback exercise, asking students to reflect on their language use, grammar and vocabulary choices, pronunciation etc. If you do this regularly throughout a course it allows students to build up a portfolio, allowing them to literally see (and hear) the improvement in their language skills (Bird, 2010).

A group of language teachers (Vaca, Domínguez-Noriega, 2010) collected Moodle tools in a table to show how the Moodle tools can be used in order to achieve effective learning, which is very useful for language teachers (Table 1).

Table 1.

Moodle and Its Tools

| Kind of Tools | Tools |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Organizational Moodle | Themes, formats, labels, tabs, etc. Block Course Menu Tag Icons |
| Supporting Moodle | Spelling corrector and Dictionary |
| Language tutoring Moodle | Flashcards Games JClic Presentation, Slideshow Adventure Delivery Videoup |
| Evaluating Moodle | Webquest Nanogong |
| Collaborative language Moodle | Chats, forums, wikis, blogs, etc. Covcell Tools Wimba Module Skype Module Sloodle |

Source: (Vaca, Dominguez-Noriega, 2010).

According to R.Blake and others, “many teachers still harbour deep-seated doubts as to whether or not a hybrid course, much less a completely distance-learning class, could provide L2 learners with a way to reach linguistic proficiency, especially with respect to oral language skills” (Blake, Wilson, 2008,114).

Nowadays one of the problems connected with the use of online is protection of the users and their data. Moodle gives such practical advantages as:

- users (learners and teachers) only need one login and need to get used to only one user interface;
- protection of users and their data;
- access by its users at any time and from anywhere in the world;
- strong support of learner autonomy as well as collaboration between learners.

C. Warth-Sontheimer mentions such features of support as: course editing and course administration, the integration of - authentic or didactically-enriched multimedia learning resources and a variety of communicative and collaborative learning activities (e.g. forums, chats, wikis) tutorial guidance through communicative contact (via e-mail, forum, and chat) as well as learning control (via feedback, evaluation, and tracking statistics) (Warth-Sontheimer, 2011).

Th.N. Robb states that Moodle functions “allow you to make different types of quizzes. Quiz types relevant to language teaching are: Multiple choice, True/False, Numerical, Matching, Description, and Cloze. A wide range of options allows you to randomize the questions and multiple-choice items, specify a time frame for availability, choose whether the students receive feedback or not, decide if they are allowed to view the correct answers, and determine how many times they may take the quiz and how it is to be scored (first attempt, highest attempt, average of all attempts or last attempt)” (Robb, 2004). It is also possible to just insert a link for an online test, which is available online and is offered by many teaching/learning free sources.

As observed by many teachers and researchers, Generation Y inappropriately multitasks with technology. Students are accustomed to using technology when they should be studying or are in class. The authors highlight that the students do not understand how this multitasking may be perceived as

rude or distracting (Pardue, Morga, 2008). Thus, a logical question for teachers about classroom behaviour should be changed from “How can I keep my students from using electronic devices in class?” to “How can I use e-tools to get and keep my students motivated?” (Reilly, 2012).

J. Eckleberry-Hunt and J. Tucciarone note that successful strategies will involve hands-on teaching with simulations and group discussion. Collaborative learning coupled with immediate feedback within a practical context is key (Eckleberry-Hunt, Tucciarone, 2011). Teachers need to maximize an atmosphere of learner-centeredness in their classrooms (Weinberger, McCombs, 2003). One cannot but agree with J. Dunn and K. Dunn that, though technology is going to play a critical role in the future of education, this role will not be as big as that of a teacher, as a computer can give information, but only a teacher can lend a hand, point what is necessary for a student to succeed, and to motivate the student (Dunn, Dunn, 2014). It is clear that no device will substitute a teacher, and "the superior teacher has regularly gotten superior results regardless of the method" (Bull, 1965).

Conclusions

Modern students, Generation Y, differ from the previous ones. They do not see their lives without gadgets, which can be used by teachers as a benefit in teaching.

It is also proved by international experience that Moodle is a good help for both – teachers and learners. Modern technology provides teachers with wonderful video and factual material, lesson plans and many other resources, which are available on YouTube and other websites. Combining old and new, sharing/borrowing the ideas and resources, using old methods in a new context and environment would help a lot.

Teachers' role in a modern classroom is to lend a helping hand to the students in using all possible resources and choosing the best learning styles for themselves, as well as that of a motivator and encourager.

The ideas provided in this article are only the starting point for the acquisition of a deeper competence in the use of Moodle for language learning. It seems important to explore new ways of teaching and keeping students' interest and motivation alive.

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