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Blended learning in a foreign language teaching

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Abstract

Blended learning enables to use many different forms and methods in foreign language teaching. On-line courses leave room for any inclusion of many listening texts and video files. In order to facilitate the language study to our students we have prepared on-line courses of professional English, courses of area studies of English speaking countries, courses of professional German, a course for translators, written business English course and others. These courses are based on tutors' and students' needs, students' knowledge, on teachers' long term experience, and of course on the positive attitude of ICT students (and not only of them) to modern technologies.

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1. Introduction

We have been trying to use the most modern methods of teaching at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove for many years already. E-learning undoubtedly counts among such methodological ways. The faculty teachers have been producing their own on-line courses since 1998. At the very beginning, there were first of all the ICT teachers, who promoted this form of teaching, others followed later, finally also the language tutors joined in. To use e-learning methods is sometimes quite complicated for them, because foreign language teaching without a face-to-face contact and the possibility of oral communication with a tutor is hardly imaginable. In every case, a foreign language teaching requires some conversation, authentic listening, team work, group work etc.

In spite of that also we, the foreign language teachers, decided to make use of the e-learning method and started to create our own on-line courses, which we frequently use in a form of blended learning. A great many of on-line language courses supporting both full-time and combined form of studies were created at the Department of Applied Linguistics.

We perceive blended learning as a combined teaching – as a combination of standard face-to-face teaching with e-learning. Current theories see two basic types of teaching which can be combined in blended learning – a synchronous and asynchronous teaching. The synchronous teaching proceeds in a real time, in which all participants accept the presented experience simultaneously and they can react mutually. The asynchronous teaching is usually

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applied in different times to different students. They can choose the pace and the way of accepting experience, but they cannot react mutually in a real time.

2. Blended learning in a foreign language teaching

All students of our Faculty study one foreign language compulsory for the whole time of their studies. In most cases they have the possibility of a choice between English and German languages. The students of tourism can optionally study one more foreign language (Italian, Russian, Spanish). It is obvious that special attention is paid to foreign language teaching.

In order to facilitate the language study to our students we have prepared on-line courses of professional English, courses of area studies of English speaking countries, courses of professional German, a course for translators, written business English course and others. These courses are based on tutors' and students' needs, students' knowledge, on teachers' long term experience, and of course on the positive attitude of ICT students (and not only of them) to modern technologies.

2.1. Use of e-learning courses for tourism management students in the teaching of translation

The introduction to translation work in German is outlined for the bachelor study programme for tourism management students. Here we can see how much attention is paid to practically applicable skills and proceedings with regard to professional requirements.

The courses "Translation in German" and "Chapters on Culture and Literature of German Speaking Countries" use the support of virtual study environment, in which the authoress has collected namely text sources and tasks. These e-learning courses are meant first of all as courses supplementing the full-time teaching. They leave space to a high proportion of independent students' work and have respect for individually different needs, interests, abilities and skills of students. The work in virtual environment motivates the students, because they get immediately the evaluating feed-back or further instructions, or some explanations and suggestions for the optimal elaboration of the given task.

The theoretical starting points express the basic features of language. We focus on a ground and function of a language act, we make clear the common and different moments of translation and interpreting, we word requirements on a translator and interpreter. We accentuate the significance of competencies in mother tongue. We bring solutions of a task, due to which the students can improve their competencies. The first task the students do, demands their responsiveness to the stylistic mistakes and their ability to correct such mistakes in a common newspaper or magazine article. The next task is to read a foreign language text and to express its content or its summary in Czech freely in reader's own words. By completing such tasks students start to understand how to use structurally functional analysis of a text. The development of competencies in German is guaranteed by increasing demands of understanding articles in professional journals.

The students' tasks are formulated as follows:

To read a German text and say its content and summary in one's own words;

To read a German text and say its content and summary in one's own words in German;

To read a Czech text and say its content and summary in one's own words in German;

To translate a German text into Czech, then to translate this Czech version into German again, not to use deliberately its original German version, and compare the differences in the German translation and its original German text.

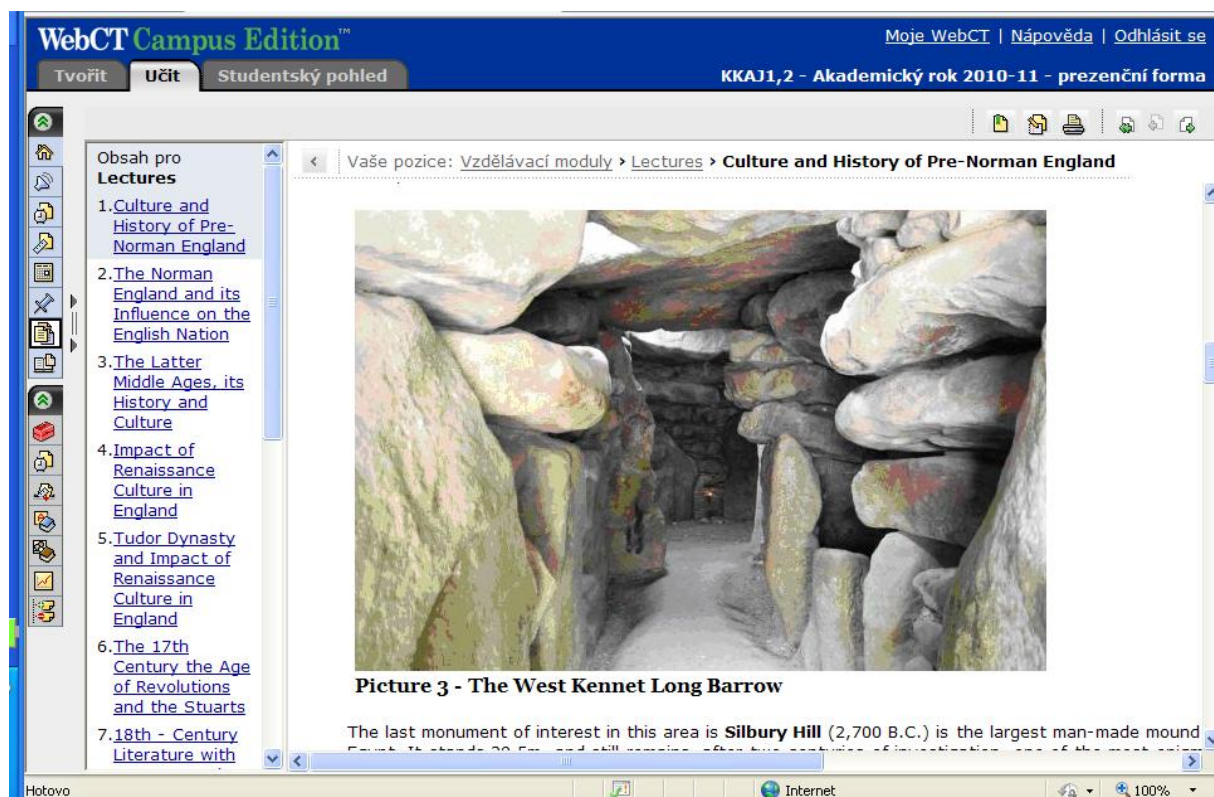


Fig.1 A lesson from the Course on Culture and History of Great Britain

2.2 On-line course Teaching Written Business English (TWBE)

This course focuses on the teaching written business English, because written English is one of the main communicative tools in the EU (e.g. by writing contracts, decrees, reports or by e-communication) and many students lack this competence. Therefore the main aim of this course is to improve student's knowledge of written business English, to motivate the student for individual study of language at his own pace and to give him an immediate feed-back at the same time. The course is used in teaching professional English at the Faculty of Informatics and Management. It means of course that students are to be at the advanced level. According to the Common European Register, this level fits in well in the grade B2. The TWBE course is a supporting component of the course of professional English, or a compulsory component of the optional subject Business English. The one-term TWBE course is ideally suitable to be used as a self-study course. During the classes themselves the teacher may concentrate at developing other skills, for example at speaking or listening. The produced on-line course is a full substitution of teaching the written English language and it represents a self-contained didactical material, which in a similar electronic form does not at the moment exist at the market.

2.3 Business English courses

Business English courses are optional courses and in our university syllabus are known under the abbreviation OBAJ. They are two-semester courses. After each semester students can obtain two credits. These courses are aimed specifically at Management and Tourism students at the faculty whose level of English is already very high in comparison with other students (i.e. students of informatics or financial management). On average, it corresponds to B2 according to the Common European Reference Framework for languages, which corresponds to TOEIC score 541-700 or IELTS score 5-6. Students usually choose this two-credit course in their final year of their studies, which

means in the third bachelor year. In the last academic year (2006/07) 25 students successfully completed such two courses.

As these courses are aimed at students who are pre-experienced, they have no work experience, no needs analysis has to be carried out. However, I have experience both in teaching the pre-experienced and the experienced students. I use this knowledge of what experienced students know and need to know to predict what skills and knowledge my pre-experienced students might require in their future jobs and thus what I need to include in my courses. The courses are taught interactively and no particular textbook is used, which has also been appreciated by students. Instead, students are given worksheets elaborated by me. The main topics and skills to be discussed and trained in the courses are as follows: Company Structure, Telephoning, Banking, Business Correspondence, Interviewing, Writing C.V./ Resumé, Meetings, Negotiating, Socializing, Diplomatic Language, Annual Reports, Managerial Styles, Marketing and Cross-Cultural Issues.

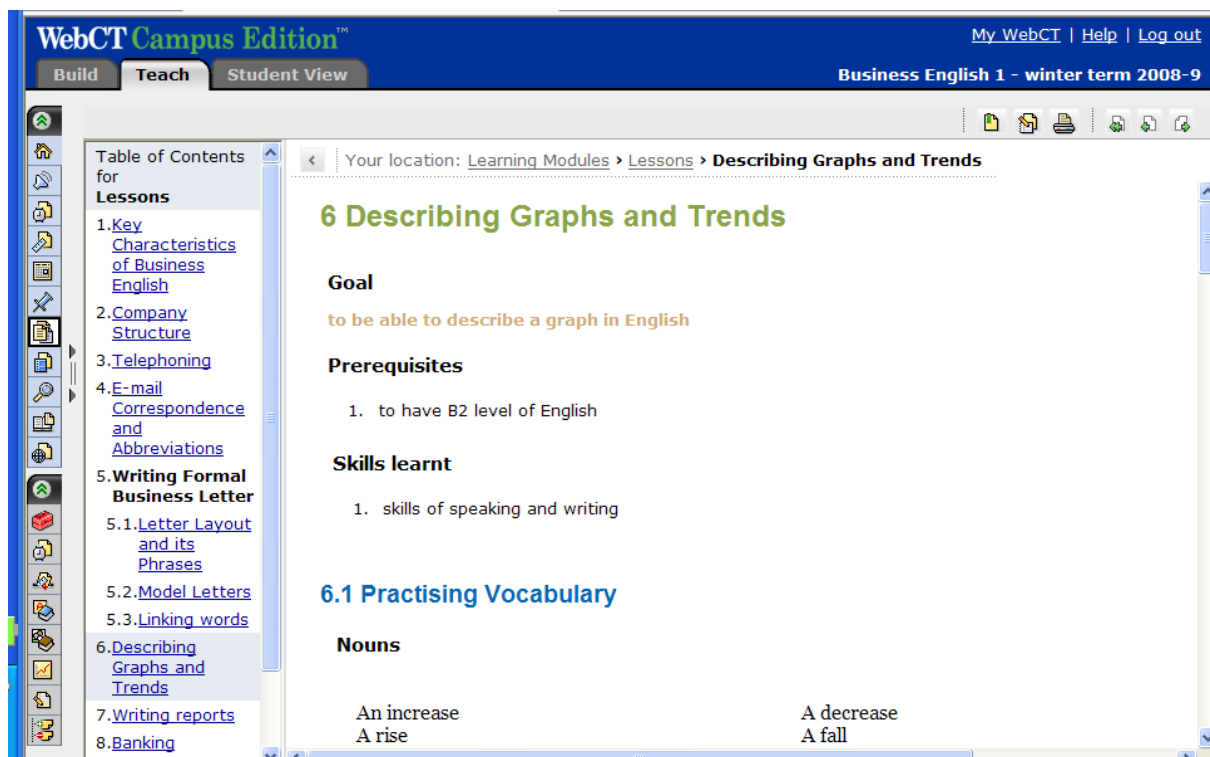


Fig.2 A lesson from the Course on Business English

2.4. Blended learning in teaching professional German

We have prepared some language on-line courses for beginners or advanced students for teaching German at our Faculty, we offer courses of general language, business and banking language. The on-line courses are being used as supplementary courses to the face-to-face teaching. This teaching takes place every other week, on free weeks, time is reserved for work in the on-line course. These courses are to serve as a means for making studies and home preparation for classes more effective and for simplifying and improving the quality of students' preparation for exams and credit tests. We use our courses also within the bounds of interuniversity teaching or as courses within the lifelong education. These are not blended learning courses, but true E-learning. Materials are updated from the foreign websites, and the courses are created in the WebCT virtual learning environment.

2.4.1 Evaluation of testing tools in on-line courses of German

In our courses, we use almost all kinds of testing tools offered by WebCT learning environment. Most frequently we use Short Answer exercises to practise grammatical phenomena. The tests Fill in the Blank proved as very useful when used as an exercise to supply the missing articles of nouns. We often use also the Matching and Multiple Choice exercises to practise and promulgate vocabulary.

The tests are very suitable first of all as exercises with key when you make a repeated access possible for students and make the correct solutions accessible.

The tests Jumbled Sentences can be used when practising correct word order. We use Assignments when we assign the tasks to students. They send for example their translations of original texts by this way. We hold on-line courses in high regard for their possibility to control students' work and their study progress continuously through controlling and testing tools. The teacher can use the tests also for final testing of students, if only he excludes any possibility of cheating..

3. Conclusion

Blended learning enables to use many different forms and methods in foreign language teaching. On-line courses leave room for any inclusion of many listening texts and video files. This makes possible – partially at least – to substitute communication with a native speaker. On-line courses are also an outstanding motivating means supporting every educational process, the foreign language teaching inclusive. Blended learning used in a foreign language teaching is an example of a very progressive and useful way.

Our students like the on-line courses very much. The possibility to choose place and time for study is appreciated very highly. And just the on-line courses give the students such a possibility. They are not bound to a constant lesson, nevertheless, owing the face-to-face teaching, they have a certain opportunity of consulting and communicating with their teacher all the time. We consider the teaching by means of blended learning as very suitable, but we still remember that in any foreign language teaching the teacher is irreplaceable.

We conclude this paper with some student's word. She says: "I would like to express my opinion about the WebCT courses prepared by the FIM UHK. I attend the combined form of studies at the Faculty and I am not often present at the lessons. Therefore I highly appreciate the possibilities of WebCT. In selected courses I usually find complete lectures. And what is more, the communication with teachers is made much simpler. We are informed about the dates of tests and consultations and about what is to be prepared. My favourite is the word list of important terms bound to a course." (Stritezka, 2011)

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