An Information and Communication Technology Solution for Teaching Business English to University Students

GRAEME DAVIS  KARL BERNHARDT

University of Northumbria, UK  University of Buckingham, UK

ABSTRACT
Information and Communication Technology offers the potential for improving teaching and learning of English and other languages. All too often the potential is as yet unrealised.

ICT need not be difficult to set up and to run. Pedagogically it can be seen as a method which is very strong at teaching some language areas, and ICT should be applied to the areas of strength. The expertise needed to design the web materials is a level of skill which can be mastered by an amateur. The technical requirements to run the materials need to be no greater than minimal server space and access to a networked PC.

ICT offers many benefits. It provides an effective tool for learning some language areas. Many students find the on-line learning experience to be motivating. It permits mistakes to be made in privacy, and interaction to take place in new and exciting ways. For teachers, ICT represents one useful tool among the many available for language teaching. For Schools and Universities, it is a cost-effective way of delivering parts of a programme. The flexibility of ICT means that it can be used in new and imaginative ways - for distance learning, for part-time students who work irregular hours, for students who start academic programmes at irregular times.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is beginning to play a part in university-level language teaching in the UK. While many theoretical and pilot studies have been conducted in this area, the following article is based on a practical application within the University of Northumbria, UK. The paper seeks to explain impetus for the development and implementation of the materials and to discuss the major outcomes.

This paper is based on the experience of teaching Business English through ICTs at the University of Northumbria, UK.

Since January 2000 ICT-based Business English materials and assessments (henceforth in this paper ICTs) have been used by 300 students for two to three hours work per week. The experience of moving beyond both the theoretical and pilot study stages of using ICTs in language teaching has been a sharp learning curve for all involved - students, teachers, those developing the materials, technical support, and even the executive of the University. On balance, the project has been a success, and providers of
language education are encouraged to take heart from the experience of Northumbria and utilise the new technology.

The British resource reality poses special challenges. In Britain, universities are facing rapid increases in student numbers without a corresponding increase in funding. This has been the trend for over a decade, and government targets on increased recruitment indicate that it is a trend that is set to continue. Language teaching in Britain has faced particular difficulties in a funding system that does not recognise a need for small-group teaching or classroom contact hours in excess of the British undergraduate norm of nine to twelve hours per week. The traditional language teaching framework of small-group teaching and teaching for more than a dozen contact hours a week is now practical only on special fee-paying courses, or where a decision has been taken to subsidise the language courses. The adjustment is painful, and in Britain the reality is the closure on economic grounds of many University foreign languages departments.

Language teaching is under strain. The most obvious symptom is the steady expansion of class sizes. What once language teachers would have thought of as large groups - groups of over fifteen students - are now commonplace. With this reality, communicative approaches to teaching and learning are particularly under pressure. While communicative teaching is certainly possible with large groups, it tends to require more teacher preparation and perhaps a higher level of teacher skill, and many course coordinators have formed the view that it often does not take place when the group size is large. There is enormous pressure to find solutions, and many possible solutions are being examined. For example, lectures are becoming more common as a part of the language teaching programme, while concepts of learner autonomy have a new impetus. British Universities are becoming particularly adept at exporting the language learning process, with much of the learning of European languages taking place on exchange years in the target language countries. ICT's offer another way of squaring the circle of catering for more students with fewer teachers and fewer classrooms.

Cutting-edge technology is very expensive. The costs are at every level: the provision of the best hardware, development of software that exploits the hardware, and support for students and teachers. There is an understandable tendency for ICT solutions to try to use the best available technology, yet arguably this approach is not workable. Universities tend not to have funds at the levels needed. However, it is possible to step back from the cutting edge and provide low-cost materials - ICT solutions that are not cutting-edge, but nonetheless address student needs.

The experience of the University of Northumbria has been to see ICT's as a response to a problem. Student numbers grew rapidly, leading to excessive class sizes, lack of rooms in which to teach, and a shortage of teachers. Most dramatically, in autumn 2000 the Business School recruited
just over 450 students for courses which included Business English against a target of 150. The logistics of coping with this issue were challenging. Class sizes certainly grew, rooms were found (mainly in the early evening, unpopular for staff and students alike), and teachers were recruited when they could be found. The experience gave enormous impetus to the production of ICT-based teaching materials, with materials produced at very short notice. Internal funding structures that base resources on the student recruitment of the previous year required that materials should be produced on a tiny budget - in effect one classroom-hour equivalent of ICT-based materials has cost about £100 to produce (55,000GDR, 162 €), and as the materials are used by multiple groups the savings on teacher-time are substantial.

Northumbria is in effect using non-cutting edge technology, which runs on unremarkable hardware and can be produced cheaply. Elements of CALL are used, though much is interactive. This is not a state-of-the-art venture into the world of ICTs; rather it is a basic technology venture that works.

Teacher responses to the English language ICTs were frequently negative. In many respects, the negative reaction is understandable, as shortcomings in the materials are easy to find. There is no doubt that small-group teaching with qualified staff in conventional classrooms would have been preferable. This option was, however, closed as a result of lack of resources: both a shortage of full-time teachers, and a lack of classrooms. A realistic comparison would have been between using the ICT materials and teaching very large groups (50+) in evening slots with teachers who may have been under-qualified and under-supported. A more worrying teacher response was to see the production of ICTs as a threat to jobs. The view was put forward that ICTs are acceptable as long as an hour of ICT material costs more than a teaching hour.

Learner responses were varied. When the materials were first introduced students petitioned that they were over-worked. While the University took the complaint seriously, the conclusion reached was that a way had been found of making students do their homework, and that it was this that was the root of the issue raised. In effect, the complaint demonstrated the success of the materials.

There were also positive student responses. Students like the flexibility offered by ICTs, often working at home on internet connected computers, and working at unexpected hours - it is surprisingly common see work submitted between 2am and 4am. Students like to make their mistakes in private, and this is a clear advantage of the computer. There is a perception that students are learning computing skills as well as English, particularly relevant for many overseas learners whose familiarity with IT is not at the level that would be expected from a British student.
After 18 months of operation student feedback has settled to the sorts of levels received for classroom teaching, though there are more extreme examples - effectively students who love or hate ICT learning - than are found in feedback on conventional language classes.

Management responses could be described as ecstatic. There is a clear awareness that the use of ICTs has avoided the need to turn away very large numbers of overseas students. The teaching method has broadly worked. Feedback from students is acceptable. There have been savings in teacher time and in use of classrooms. There has been an additional benefit in terms of staff development - staff have gained ICT skills needed to develop use of the new technology.

The ICT materials used at Northumbria are a first step. But Northumbria can offer a rare example of a University that has made ICTs work, with large numbers of students. This is not a pilot, a small-scale activity, an example of additional work for students, or a project which may (but probably will not) come to be used a year or more in the future, but rather a project which has worked as a solution to existing, real problems. ‘Warts and all’ the materials are running, and a basis upon which improvements may be made.

NOTE
Those wishing to view the materials should surf to:
http://193.63.38.91/elan/index.htm

REFERENCES

