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Developing an English course for in-service librarians : the advantages of blended learning

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Abstract

This paper describes the way a workplace language learning experience could be made most effective by being delivered in a blended mode; the experience it is based upon is a course[1] which took place in Italy at the Library of the University of Padua in the first months of 2007 and it aimed at teaching work-related English to the librarians of the university library system.

National context and previous experiences

First of all, it would be useful to understand the general situation in which this project was brought about. In Italy in recent years there has been a steady demand for English courses on the librarians' side, as proved by many surveys led by various AIB (Italian Library Association) regional chapters (Associazione Italiana Biblioteche, Sicily, 2001, 2004). A large part of Italian in-service librarians did actually study English as a foreign language at high school or at the University; unfortunately, since then most of them have had few opportunities to practise English at work, therefore they feel inexperienced when it comes to giving non-Italian speakers the same qualified assistance they give those who speak their language.

Furthermore, librarians wish to be more confident when communicating with foreign libraries and vendors, and to be able to take advantage of the information circulating on the internet and through e-resources, which is mostly in English.

The growth of foreign residents in the country, whose number grew from 1,356,590 in 2001 to 2,670,514 in 2006 (ISTAT, 2007), along with the spread of EU (European Union) mobility programmes for students and teaching staff (e.g. Erasmus, Socrates, Tempus), have greatly increased the rate of foreign readers using both academic and public libraries.

Besides, the internet and the development of e-resources offer a huge amount of information mostly available in English. For all these reasons, during the past years the AIB (Italian Library Association) has often organised courses focused on English for librarians.

This kind of activity should be included in English for Special Purposes (ESP), a widely studied branch of English teaching, yet not much attention has been dedicated to this particular field. ESP courses focus on business, legal or travel English, but at the time there was not any literature in English for librarians, therefore the success of the course depended much upon the teacher's background and planning.

During the teacher's previous experiences the courses had always been organised as two-day seminars: generally AIB courses follow this schedule, therefore it had been decided to continue with this time organisation, which anyway allowed to create a collaborative environment and to stimulate the participants to put in practice what they were learning. Their response had been enthusiastic, but one of the main concerns was that little would remain of those two days once the librarians got back to their daily work, unless they were immediately faced with a problem requiring that kind of expertise.

Therefore, from the third edition on, the course had been integrated with a follow-up, generally via e-mail, where the participants were asked to prepare a description of their library services using the language they had learned during the seminar.

This solution gave better results, but still there was to struggle between the limited time that could be reserved for in-service training and the long time and practice required for effective language learning. Furthermore, even if e-mail learning proved to be effective, still it is "one-dimensional", whereas learning is mostly enhanced when the mind is engaged with multimedia materials (Dale, 1951), and the benefits of the use of multimedia in language learning have long been proved beyond any doubt.

Course organisation

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Answering the same need that was felt at a national level, the University of Padua CAB (University Library Centre) decided to organise a course with similar aims for a group of their in-service librarians; since the teacher had been working on similar courses during the previous six years, she was asked to prepare a lesson plan.

The solution proposed to solve the problem of coping learning needs with working time was to plan a blended learning experience. The course would be stretched over a longer period of time and broken up into three two-day workshops followed each by about four weeks' distant learning, and a final day to draw the conclusions. This schedule offered the double advantage of reducing the impact of the course on the participants' working time and to stretch the delivery of the contents over a longer period, thus leaving people the time to consolidate the materials presented.

As the participants were all employed at the same University, though in different libraries, the schedule was very carefully planned in order to avoid the absence of a great number of librarians on the busiest days of the week, and the calendar was known well in advance.

Another point to overcome was that the participants had been chosen on the basis of their roles and needs, and had not taken any language test. Consequently, there were different levels of understanding and speaking: the levels ranged from lower intermediate to advanced.

It was decided to start with a face-to-face workshop: previous experiences had demonstrated that this is a good way to create a collaborative environment, where the teacher has the responsibility to present stimulating materials and to keep the discussion lively. He/she acts as the catalyst of the learning process, which is centred on the student and is based on collaboration among students.

The most difficult part of the teacher's job was to stimulate the participation and interaction of the less advanced students, while at the same time keeping to the syllabus and restraining those who were more skilled and more communicative from dominating the conversation.

It was easy to decide to deliver part of the content in a conventional classroom: the question was how to make the intervening periods as collaborative and fruitful as the classroom activity, also considering the fact that the teacher computer skills included using the most common software programs, but no programming ability and very little html.

The learning management system (LMS)

The tool which made this project feasible was the Moodle platform which at the time the University of Padua e-learning unit had already developed, and was already being used for many other courses.

Moodle is an open source learning management system (LMS), based on sound pedagogical principles, which was mostly developed in academic context. A LMS could also be described as a learning environment used mainly for e-learning and blended learning.

It is open to registered users and offers many different functions, ranging from course management to monitoring students' activities; it can be used as a repository for course material, but it also offers the possibility to develop forums, wikis, quizzes, surveys and other interactive in-built activities, without any need for particular computer skills.

The main advantage of such an environment is that it is self-contained and all the above described functions are seamlessly integrated on the same platform, thus creating the feeling of being in a classroom – though a virtual one.

Moodle is not the only LMS available nowadays; many others could have been used, both open source (such as ETutor, Claroline, eFront and so on) and commercially developed (such as Blackboard, eCollege, Learn.com etc.); in this specific situation no evaluation survey was led prior to the adoption of Moodle. Basically, it was used because it was already available, it presented the needed features, and it was offered along with technical support. Yet the tool proved along the course to be well designed to meet the requirements of such a learning experience, and the fact that it has its roots in an academic context and that it is supported by a dynamic community made it easier to use.

Nevertheless, many of its activities are designed for academic teaching and were not used in this context, as it was decided not to take final tests or to mark the participants' work; the focus of the evaluation was elsewhere, as it will be explained further on.

Some technical problems actually did arise during the course, but the e-learning unit was there to solve them:

> One of the challenges was to develop a seamless mode to propose audio narration that could be integrated into a forum post, exercise text or other places in the platform. In Moodle it is possible to replace every link to an mp3 file by a small mp3 player realized in flash. This seemed to be the best choice; unfortunately, some mp3 files processed this way sounded too fast. The problem was in the frequency rate of the mp3 codification, which the flash mp3 player is unable to recognize. Therefore, the E-learning Staff used a tool to transcode the audio into a supported frequency rate. At the same time, the size of the audio files was reduced by encoding them with a lower bit rate, yet maintaining the same sound quality.
>
> Another problem was that some of the participants started to experience various problems with wikis and other tools that did not seem to work properly; it turned out that the reason was they had inadvertently changed a few parameters in their personal profile. Once the cause of the problems was discovered, it was easy to find a solution, yet it took some time to analyse the situation (Fontanin and Švab, 2007).

The solution of these problems required expertise and competence that the teacher did not have. Notwithstanding the technical support, one of the activities the learners felt less at ease with was the wiki, which is supported by a very basic html editor; as the learners were all very familiar with advanced word processing, they were not easily satisfied with the text rendition and used advanced formatting modes which caused visualization problems; in a future experience it would be advisable to devote more time to wiki instruction.

Course aims

The aims of the course were not only the above mentioned – that is to teach librarians to help foreign visitors find their way in the library – the CAB also wished to enable librarians to improve their speaking and writing skills in view of their participation in international conferences, their contributions to international journals and the preparation of EU project proposals. Putting forward these requests, the customer asked the teacher to elaborate a lesson plan.

Each one of the different issues could easily have been the subject for a separate course: it was not easy to organise the contents so as to provide meaningful lessons; on the other hand it was also necessary to integrate each issue with the other ones.

The content could be divided in three main modules, which corresponded to the learning goals:

1. "The library web site", where the terminology used to describe the library and its services to foreign users was introduced and the most effective ways to communicate to on the internet were debated.
2. "Participating to international conferences/events", where simulations of conference presentations were introduced as well as an analysis of how to answer a call for papers and how to write an abstract.
3. "Preparing EU projects and writing academic papers/articles", where the stress was on academic English writing and on the reading and understanding of EU project guidelines.

The three modules were not treated separately, but continuously integrated so as to repeat and practise what had already been presented, therefore a large amount of material had been prepared beforehand and uploaded on the platform; it was used to focus on particular aspects according to the participants' response.

The teacher prepared a path to follow and the timing in the material presentation depended upon the way the participants responded; this flexibility also made it possible to tailor the course to the learners' language level. Whenever those with a lower language competence showed that they had difficulty in following the debates, a guided activity – such as a multiple choice or a fill in the gaps exercise – was introduced to help them familiarize with new vocabulary; since the platform functioned as a course repository, the material was always at hand.

No final examination was held: the course did not intend to assess the improvement of the participants; on the other hand their language level had not even been tested beforehand. Being an in-service learning experience, its aim was to teach new terminology and to make practice in order to make learners more confident; measuring their performance according to absolute values was beyond the scope.

Course description

The Learning Management System was, first of all, used as a repository to download the printed material the students needed for the workshop. Before the first meeting students had been enrolled and were asked to download and print out the handouts they would have needed during the lessons, so they had time to read them and think about what was going to be discussed.

On the very first morning a proper introduction of the platform and its utilities was given by a member of the University e-learning staff.

From that moment on, the LMS built up the environment in which the participants could follow their course, both during the face-to-face workshops, supported by the facilitator's encouragement, and during the distance-learning break. It seamlessly integrated the materials presented – word, pdf, videos and audio files – and the activities – exercises, wikis, forums.

The workshops were held in a room with an internet-connected PC, and some of the hours were spent in a fully-equipped computer lab, where each of the participants could work on a PC and do listening and comprehension activities. This way the materials uploaded on the platform were always available for discussion also during face-to-face workshops.

The teacher chose what materials/language to present and how, and the first workshop was mostly spent introducing the vocabulary to speak about library and library services which is functional to the construction of a web site.

Much time was spent doing structured exercises together, so as to try and stimulate the participants to talk about their work experience, and to make comparisons with other libraries – which were introduced by reading their web sites and listening to real podcasts, as those produced by the Leeds University Library, whose use had been authorised both by the University Librarian and by the firm responsible for their production (Leeds University Library, 2007).

An effective way to present audio material was to include it into a fill-in-the-gaps test, and thus create a comprehension activity; these, by the way, turned out in the final survey to be among the activities learners mostly appreciated and during which they felt most involved.

The participants were asked to describe their own libraries, their services and facilities, and the librarian's job, therefore they could activate their previous English skills by means of their workplace experience. During the following distance-learning period students were asked to analyse a series of library web sites according to criteria given by the teacher, and to share their views in a forum. This activity led to an interesting discussion; by analyzing other libraries' sites, they were able to critically think about the usability of their own and to discuss about the most effective ways to communicate library services.

It was crucial to apply the new skills to real situations, therefore the participants were asked -in group or one at a time- to answer questions made by hypothetical users, to prepare basic maps to their libraries and so on.

Another activity used to enhance online participation was the glossary module: this tool was very useful to stimulate the learners to give short definitions of words and concepts related to the library world. They were continuously encouraged to write without worrying about grammar and syntax; yet, as the glossary entries could be validated by the teacher before being made visible for everybody, they actually obtained relevant feedback and could learn from their mistakes.

The skills to be learned were demonstrated directly during the face-to-face lessons by the teacher speaking, by reading printed and online material, by listening to library podcasts and other audio and video material, as for example Youtube videos about library and librarians.

In addition, the teacher asked the learners to work in groups and prepare a visual map where they were to try and organise a series of concepts regarding electronic resources that had emerged during the face-to-face debates. Each group was later asked to present the reasons why they had made certain choices to the others.

As the ideas they had expressed were directly linked to their professional experience, their motivation in supporting their point of view was high; therefore the debate ensuing from the presentations was very lively.

The class experience built up the basis to continue to work collaboratively online: the issue was to find the right tools.

For this reason, in addition to writing for the above-mentioned forums, participants were asked to start writing collaboratively in a wiki, whose aim was to become a template for a very basic web page for all university libraries.

Along with the rest, some work on grammar and syntax and more common mistakes, both in spoken and written English, was carried out along with an introduction to the principles of Academic English writing.

As soon as certain requirements seemed to have been met, and the participants demonstrated to be aware of certain issues about written English, they were asked to collaboratively write a paper on given subjects, one for each group. The introduction to this task was given during a face-to-face class, so that the teacher was able to answer their questions and clearly define the task. For the preparation of the paper, the students were asked to read up some literature, and they were supposed to work on wikis and use forums for any kind of discussion.

The teacher used the forums to break the writing task with specific deadlines, asking the participants to complete a certain part of the paper by a certain date, thus helping them to find the time to write notwithstanding their daily tasks.

The aim of this activity was not that of preparing perfect articles, but rather that of stimulating the production of written language at a higher standard than they were used to, thus improving both vocabulary use and thought organisation in another language.

Students' feedback contributed to evaluating the course performance and to shaping its syllabus. A questionnaire was proposed after the first workshop, and two surveys after the third. The former aimed at a more in-depth understanding of the librarians' experience and to check the correspondence of the course with their expectations, the latter were focused on evaluating particular aspects of their learning experience.

The results of the first one were used to tailor the schedule to the participants' needs and expectations. The amount of material uploaded on the learning management system made it easy for the teacher to follow a flexible schedule in response to the feedback the participants were giving to each activity, meant not as a structured feedback, but as the interest they showed during the face-to-face activities and the response monitored through the learning platform, which makes it easy to check the number of logs for each activity, the number of forum posts and comments about it and thus evaluate what they find more involving.

One of the concrete results of this course was a template which could be used by all of the University of Padua libraries to prepare an essential web page; it was written collaboratively on the wiki, following the analysis of other library web sites and class discussions.

Furthermore, all the participants prepared a wiki guide for their own libraries: in some cases these were just drafts to be meant as English practice, but some guides were actually printed, and a few existing English guides were improved.

The project also led to group presentations of papers on different subjects and the simulation of a conference in an international setting.

Teaching approach and feedback

In order to plan a workplace course it is necessary to keep in mind the aims – that is the content which is to be delivered – and the participants' characteristics. An in-service learner chooses to attend a course if she/he feels involved, and if this is not the case dropouts will ensue after the beginning of the course.

For the learner to feel involved, the content presented in this course was based on everyday reality and on a problem-based approach:

> Many current instructional models suggest that the most effective learning environments are those that are problem-based and involve the student in four distinct phases of learning: (1) activation of prior experience, (2) demonstration of skills, (3) application of skills, and (4) integration of these skills into real world activities. [...] Much instructional practice concentrates primarily on phase 2 and ignores the other phases in this cycle of learning (Merrill, 2002).

Merrill applied these principles to the analysis of various e-learning instructional programs, all of which proved to have put into practice some of these principles. Notwithstanding their differences, the models he analyses share the stress they lay on the role of evaluation in planning. An instructional program cannot be simply planned on a blank page and delivered; evaluation and tests need to be carried out continuously, so as to facilitate a constant revision process. This way it can be possible to tailor the planned instruction to the participants' needs.

In the course described here there was a continuous effort to do so, hence to collect feedback from the learners, which was easy to gather thanks to the LMS tools. First, the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire prepared by the teacher whose aims were to get to know their background, their professional interests and to collect their first impressions on the workshop.

It turned out that they were quite satisfied with the course, which had succeeded in meeting their expectations and answering their needs.

Towards the end of the course two surveys were selected among Moodle in-built series, which basically belong to three cathegories: COLLES (Constructivist On-Line Learning Environment Survey), ATTLS (Attitudes to Thinking and Learning Survey) and Critical Incidents (investigating relevant episodes). In this course the first and the third kind were given. The COLLES is:

> [...] a set of 24 statements that asks students about the relevance of the course, provides opportunities for reflection and interactivity, provides peer and tutor support, and facilitates interpretation. These factors are based on social constructivist theory [...] the actual COLLES survey asks them how they are interacting currently [...].
>
> The Critical Incidents survey asks students to consider recent events and answer questions about their relationship to those events (Cole, 2005, p. 188).

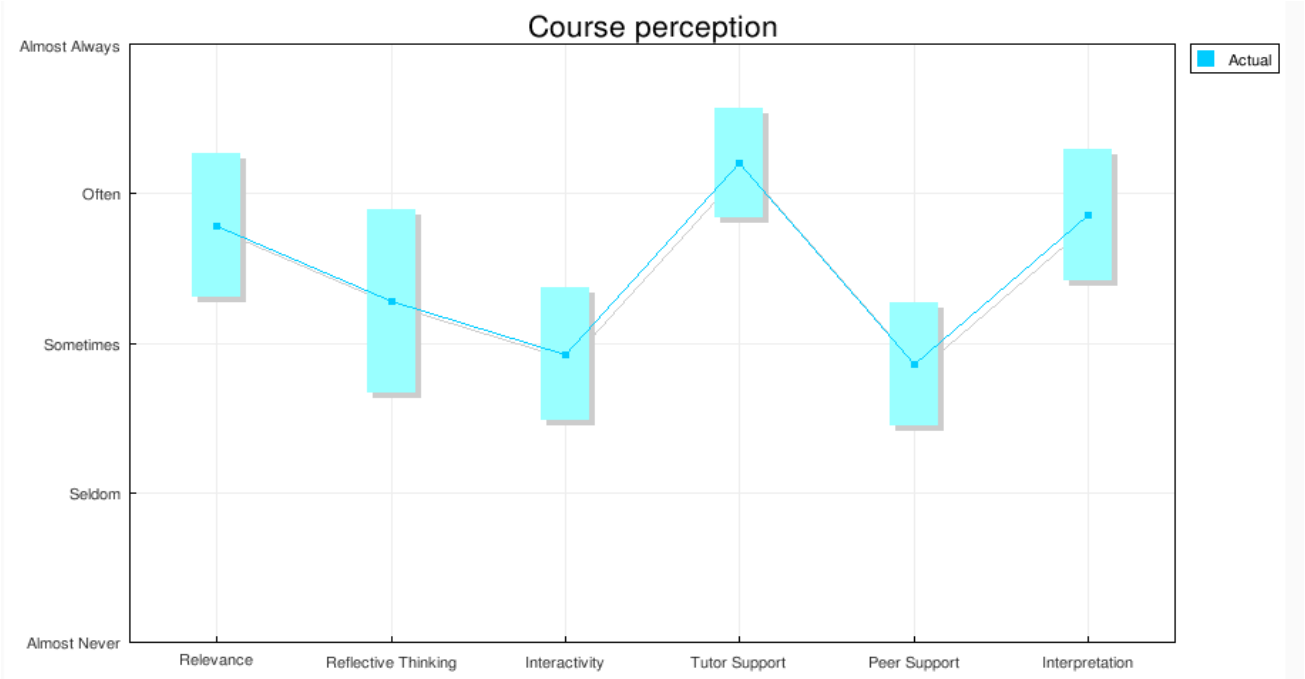
The results of the COLLES survey demonstrate that the participants were satisfied with the course (Figure 1). However, through careful examination of the answers, it appears clear that the model can be improved.

The highest ratings are given to relevance, yet looking in detail at the answers it seems that the content delivered is more relevant to professional and personal interests than to professional practice, though a good number declared that they were actually learning how to improve their professional practice.

If less relevance to professional practice has been perceived at some point, this could be because not all participants had the same working tasks and experience, therefore some of them were bound to be less involved at some time, depending upon the specific issue.

Tutor support obtained the highest rate, and also interpretation - that is, understanding and being understood - is rated quite high.

On the other hand, peer support and interactivity touch the lower points – though the lower values still reached the "sometimes" level. This could mean that people like to listen and to be exposed to language more than they like to express themselves, but also that they should be more stimulated to do so. The course could be improved by breaking it up into smaller activities and making it more necessary to communicate among peers.



Interactivity could also be enhanced by preparing more activities which imply planning and evaluation, as these proved to stimulate critical thinking and discussion among peers.

The critical incidents survey revealed that people greatly appreciated the activities seamlessly uploaded on the platform, as they felt most involved as learners when doing them. This is especially true for the listening comprehension exercises, which were rated as the most involving activity by 50 per cent of the respondents.

Learners also showed a great appreciation for the LMS as a whole, which for some of them was a new experience. They all seemed to be quite satisfied with the forum activity: most of them declared that the others' posts were helpful, interactive, stimulating.

Actions which they found puzzling or confusing were admittedly connected with the scarce habit of working with this kind of tools. This could be improved in future courses by making a longer and more detailed introduction to the LMS before starting. Nevertheless, everybody was able to work satisfactorily with the forums.

On the whole, they felt most distanced when the issues treated – even during face-to-face sessions – were less directly connected to their specific job.

The tools used, along with the teacher's interaction, contributed to building up a learning community, where the learning, though stimulated by the teacher, was student-centred and based on interactivity and collaboration. These librarians had been working for years in the same system, though in different libraries, so basically they knew each other quite well. Yet they had different competences and working experience according to their tasks: in this environment they were able to learn from each other and develop different bonds. To put it in the words of one of the participants:

> I got to know my colleagues differently: you hardly get a glimpse of their "mentality" when you just sit and listen to them during a course, but when you have to write extensively about something (e.g. a paper) … you really get to know one's strengths and limits …

On the whole it could be said that the course succeeded in creating a community: although these people already made up a workplace community, here they met in a different environment and got to know each other in a different way. They developed a set of habits, rules and standards for communicating which were different from those they used in their everyday practice.

During the distance learning phases people had complete freedom of choice in time and space, they had the chance to do and re-do exercises and to check the material discussed in class. They were also able to actively put in practice what they had learnt during the workshops.

This atmosphere greatly increased the course effectiveness compared with traditional language teaching, because the participants learnt from each other as well as from the teacher. What makes e-learning and blended learning different is not the technology used in itself, but rather the fact that the teaching is based upon sharing and collaboration. In a successful e-learning experience, the sum of the knowledge circulating in the course is superior to the sum of the knowledge of the participants.

One year later a different questionnaire was submitted to the learners. The aim of this enquiry was to collect their impressions on their improvements after one year, and to collect data on the use to which they had put the competence acquired during the course.

Less than half of them sent their answers, yet the results collected showed that in their perception their language competence had actually improved after the course. Anyway, when asked to distinguish between library and general English, the difference they notice is small. Probably, this happens because, along with library English, the course improved their fluency and their confidence. On the other hand, they also declare to have increased the use of professional resources in English and that their library vocabulary has widened.

In general, they declared that they managed to apply what they learned: some edited their library guides, others corrected their library webpage, but the majority did not participate more than before in international events, both because their tasks were locally centred and because the funding was low. Anyway, since the course took place there have been changes in the University Library management, and this could have meant a shift in strategy and priorities.

Conclusion

A successful learning experience is carefully planned by keeping in mind what has to be taught, to whom and for what aims. The blended learning experience focuses more on the collaborative aspects of learning than on the unidirectional delivery of information/skills on the teacher's side. In other words, the instructional goals are being achieved in a different way.

The use of an LMS influenced the way the traditional contents were communicated. In fact, after the initial stage where the teacher introduced new language and vocabulary, and pointed out some common problems, the course went on in a collaborative environment, where the participants were asked to solve problems working in wikis or in forums. This way, they were able to activate their existing knowledge and to apply the new knowledge demonstrated by the teacher and favour its integration. The feedback – though not collected in a structured way – allowed the teacher to constantly reshape the course and tailor it to suit the most pressing needs which emerged during the learning process.

Interaction is most important when teaching a foreign language, in fact peer support, as well as tutor support, encourages to practise what is being learned: the collaborative climate contributed to making lessons more lively and more related to work experience. The fact that the learning experience was stretched over a longer period of time made it possible to acquire new competence and to build up on it.

The blended learning model can be most successfully applied to workplace learning, as in this setting it is easier to find people motivated to learn by the proximity of the issues to their working experience; on the other hand in such an environment learners need to be stimulated to critically think at a higher level than daily tasks and chores, and the use of online asynchronous tools can greatly favour the integration of what is being learned with practical improvements of the service.

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