PROMOTING E-LEARNING AND TAKING PROGRESS E-TESTS WITHIN SELF-STUDY

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Abstract

The paper deals with using technology in English language teaching in order to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning process at two universities, promoting e-learning, and offering students a possibility for testing the acquired knowledge of English by means of regular progress e-tests within self-study.

Key words: e-learning, e-learning support, e-test, self-assessment

INTRODUCTION

The Faculty of Materials Science and Technology in Trnava (hereinafter MTF) of the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava follows the requirement for diversification of all forms of study and graduate profiles. It consists of these institutes: The Institute of Materials Science, The Institute of Production Technologies, The Institute of Production Systems and Applied Mechanics, The Institute of Applied Informatics, Automation and Mathematics, The Institute of Industrial Engineering, Management and Quality and The Institute of Safety and Environmental Engineering. The institutes offer several bachelor's degree programmes, master's degree programmes as well as doctoral degree programmes. Students of all bachelor's degree programmes have to study the English language as the only foreign language for four semesters and doctoral students for one semester. Some of them are fluent in English, some have a solid knowledge of English, but some are false beginners or true beginners and it is very difficult for them to master a new foreign language within a short period of time. In general, from our professional experience, technical students are not as good at English as Economics students. On the other hand, lecture theatres, language laboratories and seminar rooms at the MTF are better equipped with technologies, so teachers have many more opportunities to integrate them into teaching to make the process of learning a new foreign language easier, more effective and efficient.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE SEMINARS WITH TECHNOLOGY

All Slovak university teachers are required to have a working knowledge of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) terminology, practical skills and a range of applications suitable to their subjects, as well as to take opportunities to use ICT with their students when and where appropriate in different learning situations [4].

The MTF has seminar rooms of different size, lecture theatres, online multimedia computer laboratories, language laboratories and computer pools. The Faculty puts great emphasis on quality. It has modernized most of the seminar rooms and equipped them with ICT in order to change the traditional functions of lectures and seminars. Lecturing staff regularly uses overhead projectors, cassette recorders, computers, laptops, in-built data projectors, portable projectors and interactive white boards. English language teachers can also teach in an online laboratory which has a PC workstation with pre-installed software in English per student, a teaching workstation and an in-built data projector.

The MTF has better teaching facilities and the seminar rooms and lecture theatres are better equipped with technology than the new Faculty of Applied Languages (FAL) of the University of Economics in Bratislava, where all seminar rooms are equipped with overhead projectors and television sets. Last year, the FAL modernized some of its seminar rooms and equipped them with ceiling-mounted projectors. Portable units (PC and projector) which can be taken into any lecture theatre or seminar room are also used by the FAL lecturers. Some innovative teachers concentrate on those technologies which improve the quality of the teaching and learning process and make it more interesting and memorable. Teachers who have information into the computer, they find ways of presenting this material. If it is in the form of a computer learning package or computer-based presentation, the computer is the presentation medium. Most teachers also produce notes or overhead projector (OHP) acetate slides for a presentation. The most usual methods of using material stored on a computer which we want to present to a group of students are: an OHP with acetates, an OHP with a display panel, a data projector and a large television screen. Each of them requires some form of presentation software such as Microsoft PowerPoint, WordPerfect Presentations, and so forth. Presentation systems make it easy for us to produce multimedia presentations of 'slides' incorporating text, audio

and video clips [6]. OHPs are largely used by the teachers of the University of Economics. They enable them to project acetate foils onto a wall. Foils or 'transparencies' are produced from word-processed documents, graphics, spreadsheet or presentation software. In fact, anything that can be printed onto paper from the computer can be printed onto acetates for OHPs.

In our opinion, for some older teachers using ICT may seem a daunting prospect at first but they should try to become confident in using ICT wherever it is appropriate in their teaching. With inadequate equipment, the strain on the teacher can be immense, diverting his/her energies from the central task of teaching to fiddling around with machinery which he/she does not really understand [2]. If possible, they should prepare and teach at least one lesson (and preferably a sequence of lessons) in which teacher and student's use of ICT is fully integrated into the learning.

E-LEARNING AT THE FACULTY

Kirschner and Paas define e-learning as learning where the Internet plays an important role in the delivery, support, administration and assessment of learning. This type of learning can take a number of forms, including the use of the Internet for research purposes or to find usable data. In whatever way it is used, we need to consider how the learning of the students will be structured.

E-learning at the MTF is embedded as a significant element of teaching and learning. The Faculty is committed to empowering the students as learners in an e-learning environment, helping them to learn effectively with technology and develop their e-skills enabling them to work and participate in a technology-rich society. E-learning facilitated and supported through the use of ICT largely occurs as blended learning, where e-learning is integrated with traditional media and methods depending on the course content, language and students. It supports learning through provision of resources and also online learning where the student is engaged in interactive learning activities, and it also enables online communication between students and staff and facilitates discussion forums.

Opportunities for the use of ICT and e-learning are increasingly embedded within subject schemes of work and whole-university policies. When used with care, ICT resources of all kinds can aid the development of students' speaking and listening and personal skills and enable them to work in pairs or small groups with considerable independence [4].

English language teachers realize that e-learning has the potential to enhance the learning and teaching and transform the learning experience. By supporting active and interactive learning it means that learning can become more student-centred. The students should be active learners, so this places a greater emphasis on staff facilitating learning through participative and interactive e-learning methods.

PROMOTING E-LEARNING VIA THE AIS

The Academic Information System (AIS) of the MTF is restricted to the academic community and provides it with a wide range of information. The Personal administration section of the AIS consists of twelve parts; three of them are connected with teaching – My teaching (My lectures), E-learning (e-Learning projects, Tests and examinations) and Personal management (Mail box, Document server, Discussion platforms) and therefore these parts are the most frequently used by the teacher. English language teachers log in the AIS every day to hold consultations with their students, to communicate with them by electronic mail (the exchange of messages), and as well as they enter e-Learning projects applications to register and produce materials for e-learning courses. In the corresponding English language subjects students can find necessary and useful material they have to study, process and consequently do written assignments as homework and send them back to the teachers.

A group of objects merged under the common name of e-Learning, namely e-Learning projects, Private library of e-objects, Tests and examinations found in the AIS is one of the parts the teachers work with when producing new study and test materials. E-learning projects consist of e-learning supports, test bases (tests and test questions) and other parts. In the field of e-learning, *e-learning study support* represents interactive training material which is available for students of a given course. It is fully interactive material that may contain not only texts but also images, video or audio recordings, as well as tests to verify the range of understanding of a subject matter [5]. The content or subject matter of a course is a very important consideration. What do the dialogues contain? What do the reading passages actually tell the students? What does the practice material actually relate to in the real world? If we are to get away from the claustrophobic situation of using language for its own sake, we need to see that the materials which we offer make use of language in order to convey information, express opinions, and so on which are of genuine intrinsic interest to the students. If through a reading passage the students not only get exposure to English but also become interested in the subject matter, their motivation will be increased and they will see more purpose in learning the language and regular testing of knowledge. In this way the whole e-learning process will be enriched [2].

As we have already mentioned, the AIS enables students to enter the discussions, chats and other interactive activities. The discussion forum enables teachers and students to participate in the discussions between students and teachers or between students themselves at a convenient place and time. The discussion is recorded as a series of messages that can later be viewed, reviewed, summarized, quoted and archived. Some selected messages may be a basis for further discussion in class or for 'frequently asked questions'.

All teachers realize that producing e-learning materials and making them available for students without feedback is only half the job. To verify the quality of the material, the level of understanding and the range of acquired knowledge constitute the second half. Therefore, an e-learning module comprises a section devoted to creating tests and their use.

A section dealing with *tests* and *test questions* is also located in the e-learning module, but its use is much broader and is not restricted only to e-learning materials. If we form a basis of test questions within this module, we can consequently create a test as a single object from it and attach it to either a particular e-learning project, or use it to test knowledge and skills of students in a taught subject. A quality test consists of high-quality test questions. To ensure the quality of questions, it is necessary to follow some principles and if we accept these principles before creating a new test, we will avoid later modification or cancellation of the questions.

DIFFERENT TESTS AND APPROACHES TO TESTING

In the context of a general English language course we expect to find materials for *entry tests, progress tests,* and *achievement tests*. The purpose of entry tests is to determine whether the student's English is of a high enough standard for him/her to begin using the textbook. An entry test also has a diagnostic function in that it shows the teacher where a particular student's strengths and weaknesses lie and provides the teacher with a profile of the student's abilities. Progress tests are given periodically during a course and are related directly to what has been taught in the preceding units, allowing the student to gauge his/her progress and the teacher to monitor the student's performance. Achievement tests also relate to the content of the course and typically come at the end of each textbook, corresponding, to say, a year's or a semester's work [2].

In general, we may ask two main things of tests which form part of a general course: they should relate well to the course itself and test what is taught in the course material, and they should reflect closely the students' communicative needs by testing the sorts of abilities that the students will need to use [2].

Passing exams successfully is not possible without grammar and vocabulary. Frequent evaluation and testing gives students a sense of achievement and prepares them for difficult exams in the future. The two main approaches to testing used by English language teachers are, firstly, *discrete point testing* and, secondly, *communicative testing*. Discrete point testing concentrates on testing separately different language items and language skills (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, sound discrimination, listening with comprehension, writing etc.) and by combining the results of a number of separate tests or test items builds up a picture of the student's level of English.

Discrete point testing gives a good idea of a student's performance in individual skills but it tends to neglect the fact that in communication we combine skills in a variety of ways, often with a severe constraint in real time.

Communicative testing attempts to take account of this by testing a student's ability to perform in a communicative situation, using whatever combination of skills and abilities is necessary. The scoring will tend to be more subjective, as a global assessment is arrived at by making qualitative judgements according to a number of criteria such as accuracy, flexibility and speed.

Rather than breaking up the ability to use language into a large number of sub-skills, assessing them individually and adding up the scores, communicative testing assesses larger and more complex chunks of language, using global tests such as cloze and dictation, and relying on the subjective judgement of the tester added by checklists of performance descriptions.

Lecturers wishing to test the students' performance electronically have to make their own tests. Regular progress e-tests aid learning in a number of ways: they encourage students' self-evaluation of their progress in such areas as vocabulary, spelling and grammar, they give them the chance to self-evaluate what they have learnt and work on those areas they are weaker in, they promote student autonomy as they confirm areas of strength and areas needing further work and so forth. They are valuable in that they tend to increase student's motivation by providing a short-term goal and means of checking one's own progress. They also provide teachers with useful and immediate feedback which help them to become more aware of the learning difficulties faced by the students. In this way teachers can improve their own teaching performance. After they give the test to the students, they have some information about how easy or difficult it was, about the time limits, and about their students' affective reaction to it and

their general performance [1]. E-tests also aid in evaluating teaching effectiveness and are a source of information for teachers as to whether remedial teaching is necessary.

TAKING REGULAR PROGRESS E-TESTS

The E-learning projects application in the AIS is used for producing materials for e-learning courses. We participated in several E-learning projects so as to provide students with supporting materials and e-tests. When preparing e-tests we need to know as specifically as possible what it is we want to test. We carefully list everything we think the students should know or be able to do. By means of our e-tests we test language, especially grammar, vocabulary and spelling to find out what they have learnt. It is very easy to test elementary and pre-intermediate grammar as there are definite answers and marking is easy.

On the basis of a created database of questions, e-tests are generated automatically for every student. The teacher sets up a database of questions and possible answers. Then, they can offer the students an e-test consisting of questions from pre-defined areas (Fig. 1), and of diverse difficulty. When creating the database of questions the teacher determines which possibility is right in each question (Fig. 2), so after completing the e-test the student can immediately see the outcome [5].

After logging in the AIS, students register to be tested. The correct answers to the questions are displayed and the final results appear automatically. Registered students can only take the e-test once to guarantee the required validity and objectivity, while respecting user-friendliness, time effectiveness and learner autonomy.

The main reason for giving students e-tests is the need to give them confidence to continue learning. Therefore, our e-tests appear periodically, that is, after every unit and test only the material that has been presented in that unit. What is more, we test it in such a way that the students should be able to know the correct answers if they have studied the material adequately. The purpose is not to show them how much there is still to learn but to demonstrate that systematic work brings benefits.

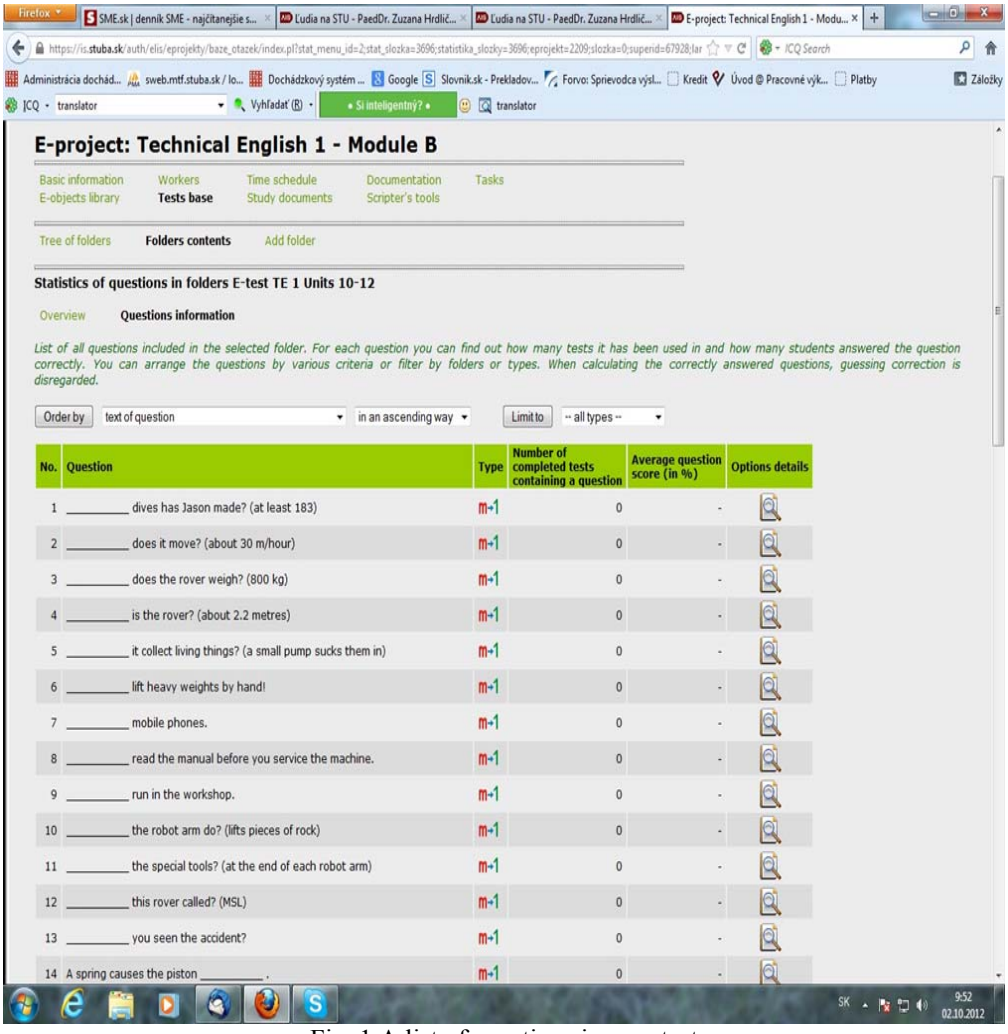

Fig. 1 A list of questions in an e-test

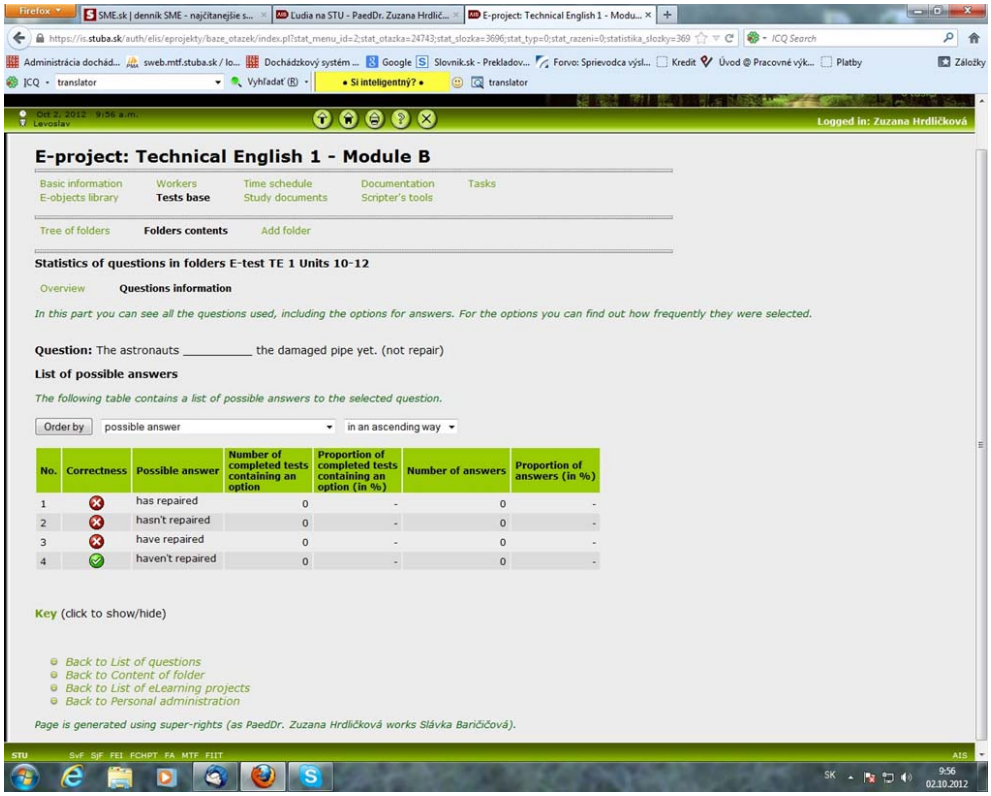

Fig. 2 A List of possible answers

CONCLUSION

E-tests in the e-learning module have a different character. On the one hand, it is possible to use them as an electronic form of testing students – teachers administer them to verify the range of acquired knowledge, or, on the other hand, students take them for self-testing to verify the knowledge they have acquired when studying a subject matter of a given unit. Periodical progress e-tests within self-study focus on accuracy of linguistic detail and students are grateful for having such an opportunity to take them as they know language learning is followed by language use. They increase students' motivation as they serve as milestones of their progress, spur students to set goals for themselves, both before and after the test, they can aid the retention of information through the feedback they give on students' competence and the like [1]. In order to be able to speak English fluently and accurately students need a lot of practice. If they work systematically, and their skills are tested at English language seminars, and grammar and vocabulary is practised at home, they are better prepared to take achievement tests at the end of each course and gain better results in examinations.

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