

**Finestra I**

**Douglas MacKevett**
Luzern

# Business Students learning English: VLEs, learner autonomy and advanced-level learning

**Business students at the HSW Lucerne in Switzerland see only a limited benefit in VLEs for language learning, as a non-representative study shows.**

*In einer Untersuchung an der Luzerner HSW wurde gefragt, was Studenten dazu motivieren könnte, eine Virtuelle Lernumgebung für den Business English Kurs zu besuchen. Es hat sich herausgestellt, dass die Studenten mit eher niedrigen Kompetenzen weniger von virtuellen Lernumgebungen profitieren, dass jedoch bei einer höheren Kompetenzstufe eine virtuelle Lernumgebung von Nutzen sein kann. Virtuelle Lernumgebungen können den Unterricht in Gruppen/Klassen höchstens ergänzen, jedoch nicht völlig ersetzen. (Red.)*

## E-Learning means various things to various people

E-learning, as a pedagogical term, is slippery: some see it as task-based learning online, such as with web-quests; others as resources placed online, such as sites with an abundance of grammar and vocabulary exercises; still others include CD-ROM courses and web-based technologies, such as chats. Recently, "blended learning" has gained a strong foothold in the educational landscape: in its common form, print material is made accessible online to be prepared by the student (alone? in a group? printed out on paper? on-screen?) and discussed during the next lesson. Clearly, to call this "e-learning" stretches the imagination; at best, we could call this "e-delivery". In order to avoid such confusion, I will use the expression that has gained recognition in the net: Virtual Learning Environments, or VLEs. In this paper, I will look at what non-mandatory VLEs can do for advanced level Business English students at our school in Central Switzerland, as well as what it can't do.

## VLEs and Bologna

The current effort on the part of our school in VLEs has been to switch from a file-sharing platform (BSCW) to a more comprehensive module and object-oriented open-source learning management system (ILIAS). During the systematic modularization of our curriculum under the Bologna reform, it became clear that English would not be endowed with enough ECTS points (credits) to include an e-learning platform as an integral part of the course. Therefore, any VLE application our department chooses would rest on a purely "nice-to-have" basis. In order to determine the best use of our resources, a third-year student of Business IT has therefore taken up the task of defining potential needs for future Business English students at our school as the subject of her diploma dissertation.

## Respondents' Profile

The student conducting her sample questioned 42 respondents from varying ability levels (from intermediate B1 to advanced C2) and subject areas (Business IT, Business Communication, Business Administration, and Tourism + Mobility). The study group included 18 women and 24 men attending mandatory English courses taught by different Business English lecturers. The number of taught lessons per week varies, but in general, students receive 2 lessons per week across 3 years. The exam regime consists of 1) a 3-hour written exam at the end of year 1; 2) an oral presentation and defense at the end of year 2; and 3) a longer project paper as a take-home assignment, together with a 15' text discussion at the end of the 3rd year.

**ILIAS, a Learning Management System (LMS)**

In the new school year 2005/2006, our school is fully implementing a new LMS, ILIAS (see www.iliasuisse.net for more information). The platform includes file-sharing and authoring functions, survey and test evaluation, course administration, forums and chats. The immediate advantages for language learning are not clear: the exercise and test-creation functions include mainly standard multiple-choice and multiple-matching activities. As Mark Powell says, such applications in today's multimedia world seem almost antiquated[1]. On the plus side, however, these can be instantaneously evaluated by the system, providing instant feedback to the student and tutor. On the whole, however, current online activities present little real added value over paper-based ones. In addition, inputting the material to make gaps is, not surprisingly, time-consuming and odious. Thus, any research undertaken to analyze our situation had to establish a clear connection between students' needs and our capabilities.

**English plays a secondary, instrumental role**

While not providing conclusive evidence, the survey does tentatively confirm some nagging suspicions and raise interesting questions. Some of these have already been discussed by my colleagues Victor Boutellier and Gordon Millar in a previous article on business vocabulary acquisition at our school[2]; for example, that students are unlikely to spend time on activities that are not directly exam or degree-relevant. Motivation and learner independence are directly related to incentives for successfully obtaining a degree. For business students at our school, the amount of material to be learnt and the distribution of ECTS (credit) points quickly sets learning priorities. English is a minor player in comparison to business administration, economics and other subjects vital to aspiring managers. Nevertheless, most students enjoy language studies as a welcome change and do the assigned work voluntarily, in addition to regularly attending lessons. When push comes to shove, however, Business English students take a minimalist approach to their English studies. As previous experience has shown, platforms made available for language exercises and writing workshops in other languages are rarely used. As our surveys continuously show, students see no incentive in learning material not directly linked to exam success.

**Pipe dreams or webucation?**

So the question remains: what could possibly motivate my students to voluntarily use a VLE? According to the survey, just over half (22 of 42) would favour some kind of online platform – primarily for checking and testing grammar and vocabulary (9 of 22). Still others (4 of 22) see the addition of VLEs as a welcome complement to the classroom; still others who are in favour of an online platform in theory are sceptical of its added value in practice ("wait and see"; "depends on what it can do"!) Of the detractors, roughly 1/3 (8 of 20) cited a lack of time as a major impediment; if I add the 7 of 20 who said that English isn't their first priority (i.e. they are not willing to invest time studying English), we can safely say that 75% of respondents find e-language learning cumbersome and ineffective.

**No laptops, please!**

One interesting finding of the study was the students' insistence that laptops be banned from lessons, and not only from the English lessons. The laptop was repeatedly cited as a disruptive factor (19 of 42) and was favored for use at all by only 16 students. Possible uses for laptops included presentations, online research, and note-taking. On the other hand, almost half (17 of 42) students called for increased speaking time, and presumably saw the use of laptops as an obstacle to this. Still others reported that they already spend enough time in front of their PC and enjoy face-to-face contact in language lessons.

**VLE is a resource, not a means unto itself**

That does not mean that e-learning has no place here: the primary advantages of a VLE are its ubiquity, immediacy and accessibility. This does mean, however, that a VLE is "simply" another technological resource in student hands, albeit a powerful one. Learning languages is still hard work that can be facilitated by online resources; all-too-often, however, "e-learning" is presented as a panacea to learning: blended learning promises a revolutionary new way of learning; students are expected to eagerly complete assignments they previously balked at; the newly independent and ubiquitous learner studies everywhere, all the time. At times, expectations outstrip reality: for example, video streaming presents a temporarily insurmountable problem. On the supply side, video data require huge allotments of storage space on a server; in addition, many video data formats are incompatible with many LMSs or other learning platforms. On the demand side, learners may not have broadband or thruput capabilities necessary to stream video easily. For the time being, DVDs present the safest solution.

**More guidance for lower levels, more autonomy for higher levels**

But after the thrill of technological magic dies down, learners realize once again that learning is 'hard fun'. Technology cannot lift that burden; it makes

no difference if learning takes place online or in the classroom. But allowances do need to be made for the level and needs of learners. The current use of blended-learning is most effective for advanced learners who are already competent and experienced in their fields: e-materials allow them the chance to put a theoretical framework around their working knowledge through independent study. For novices, though, a guided tour through the basic concepts cannot be replaced by autonomous learning[4]. In other words, the lower the level of the learner, the more he/she is dependent on experts; with increasing proficiency, autonomous learning becomes more feasible and fruitful. In our survey, 51 of 52 respondents reported that they use English outside the classroom (!). This does not mean, however, that they are studying grammar and lexis; on the contrary, they reported using English mainly for entertainment, travel and foreign correspondence. For our Business English students, who may balk at investing large amounts of time outside the classroom in autonomous self-study, this implies that they would derive the most benefit from guided classroom contact time.

**Different strategies for different levels**

Classroom teaching can be a killer too, however. In our survey, "group work and presentation of results" came out the clear losers (over 75% of respondents wished to get rid of both forms). The problem with both methods, according to students, is that inexperienced learners get together and muddle over a problem that most can't solve, and then present their findings to an equally befuddled class. The reason is simple: guided education brings experts together with learners in an "expert / non-expert tandem". With higher level learners in some subject areas (IT, or post-graduate courses, for example), it may very well be that the learners are expert in their field, or even more expert than the expert – so group work is rewarding for all. But the basic gambit of organized education is always the same: non-experts learn from experts, regardless of form or method. Returning to our BE students, VLEs can offer students access to the language resources they need most. Language learning strategies vary not only from individual to individual, but also from level to level: a beginner has different needs from an upper-intermediate learner. While a PPP approach can be highly effective for the A1 learner, a cyclical syllabus presented with "increasingly difficult" grammar and vocabulary up to level C1 is surely misguided.

**The lowdown**

According to our survey, a non-mandatory VLE would serve our students best if it met the following criteria:

1. VLE as a bazaar: instead of offering online courses, a VLE should be a gathering place for materials and, to a limited extent, discussion. Grammar work should focus on diagnosing and correcting mistakes for all levels, from B1 to C2, not prescribing further, obscure areas of "advanced" grammar. Students should be able to address those areas that cause them problems anywhere, anytime.
2. Classroom teaching as an expert / non-expert tandem: only little classroom time should be spent on reviewing items learnt in a VLE; precious contact time should be spent on guided discussions and skills practice with immediate correction, not on fluency practice in groups with ensuing presentations of results.
3. Lexcial competence, not linguistic knowledge, as the main priority*:* for language learning to be most effective for BE students learning at an advanced level, teaching emphasis should be placed on training lexis and skills in context-specific areas for business. Ample time should be spent on expanding students' lexical range in the most useful business words. The *OALD Business 250*[4] could be useful here as a basis

As previously mentioned, these results are based on a small-scale study within the particular circumstances of our school. But the basic premise that advanced learning should cater to students' needs as individually as possible makes sense. A VLE provides – with limitations – an ideal way to do this. But this by no means replaces the essential role that classroom teaching time plays in language training. VLEs are a supplement to learning and cannot replace trainers or classrooms – all predictions of 'webucation' and promises of e-learning to the contrary.

**Endnotes**

[1] *An Interview with Mark Powell*, "English Teaching Matters", winter 2003, by Karen Richardson, p 4.

[2] BOUTELLIER,V. / MILLAR, G. (2002): *Acquiring business vocabulary at 'Fachhochschule' level: learner independence and the role of L1*", in: Babylonia 1/2002, pp. 52 – 55.

[3] DUBS, R. (2003): *Selbstgesteuertes und lebenslanges Lernen: Versuch einer unterrichtspraktischen Begriffsordnung,* previously unpublished manuscript.

[4] OALD, 7th edition. The "Business 250" is a sub-group of the "English 3000" OALD project, whereby a list of essential words has been created. Criteria include not only word frequency, but also its scope (i.e. use in a wide range of business contexts); these words have also been checked by more than 70 experts as to their validity for inclusion.

**Douglas MacKevett**

I teach Business English at the School of Business in Lucerne, Switzerland. My professional interest is learning languages.