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SOME ISSUES OF RUNNING EFFECTIVE ONLINE COURSES

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Abstract

This article discusses the experience of running a MOOC on teaching B1-level Business English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) through the American Corners in Armenia and highlights several mechanisms needed to ensure effective online teaching and learning so as not to have high dropout rate and keep the learners of the MOOC interested and motivated throughout the entire three-month-long course.

Keywords and phrases

Online education, online learning and teaching, MOOC, effective online learning, effective feedback, personalization and individualization of learning and teaching.

**ԱՌՑԱՆՑ ԴԱՍԸՆԹԱՑՆԵՐԻ ԱՐԴՅՈՒՆԱՎԵՏ ՎԱՐՄԱՆ
ՈՐՈՇ ՀԻՄՆԱՀԱՐՑԵՐ**

ԱՐՍՅԱԿ ՀԱՐՄՈՒՆՅԱՆ

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ գիտակրթական միջազգային կենտրոն

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Համառոտագիր

Սույն հոդվածում քննարկվում է Ամերիկյան անկյունների միջոցով կազմակերպվող լեզունների իմացության համաեվրոպական համակարգի B1 մակարդակի «Գործարար անգլերեն» բաց հասանելիության առցանց դասընթացի վարման փորձը Հայաստանում: Առանձնացվել են որոշ կառուցակարգեր, որոնք անհրաժեշտ են արդյունավետ առցանց դասավանդման և ուսումնառության համար, սահմանվել են չափանիշներ՝ կապված դասընթացներին մասնակցելու ցուցանիշի, ինչպես նաև դասընթացի եռամսյա տևողության ընթացքում բաց հասանելիության առցանց դասընթացի մասնակիցներին մոտիվացնելու վերաբերյալ:

Բանալի բառեր և բառակապակցություններ

Հեռավար կրթություն, հեռավար ուսուցում և դասավանդում, հեռավար կրթության արդյունավետություն, արդյունավետ հեռադարձ կապ, ուսուցման և դասավանդման անհատականացում:

НЕКОТОРЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ ЭФФЕКТИВНОГО ПРОВЕДЕНИЯ ОНЛАЙН-КУРСОВ

АРУСЯК АРУТЮНЯН

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Аннотация

В статье обсуждается опыт проведения языкового онлайн-курса «Деловой английский» уровня B1 в соответствии с общеевропейской системой уровня владения иностранным языком с использованием массовых открытых онлайн-курсов (МООК) в «Американских уголках» Армении. Основная задача - выделить и обосновать механизмы, необходимые для обеспечения эффективного онлайн-обучения с целью избежания высокого процента отсева и поддержания мотивации студентов МООК на протяжении всего трехмесячного курса.

Ключевые слова и фразы

Онлайн обучение, онлайн обучение и преподавание, эффективное онлайн обучение, эффективная обратная связь, персонализация и индивидуализация обучения и преподавания.

Context

With over 650 Spaces in 150 countries worldwide, American Spaces provide welcoming environments where visitors can connect and learn about the United States through programs and lectures, as well as through books, movies, and magazines. Hosted in embassies, schools, libraries, and other partner institutions worldwide, American Spaces are platforms for providing information and engagement through activities, such as;

- Educational advising for those who want to study in the U.S.,
- Workshops on a range of topics from career skills to English language learning,
- Classes and clubs introducing new technologies, 21st century digital skills, and academic resources,
- Films, discussions, and lectures on entrepreneurship, leadership, current events, international affairs, and much more.

The first American Space in Armenia opened in April 2005 with the inauguration of the Yerevan American Corner in partnership with the Yerevan City Central Library. There are now five American Corners located in Yerevan, Gyumri, Vanadzor, Kapan, and Charentsavan¹⁰.

¹⁰ <https://am.usembassy.gov/education-culture/american-corners/>

Introduction

With the US Embassy Yerevan funding, a 12-week Business English massive open online course was developed and delivered through American Corners Yerevan, Gyumri, Kapan and Vanadzor on the Moodle of the US Embassy in Yerevan.

After face-to-face interviews with over 200 applicants in Yerevan and online interviews through regional American Corners (AC), eventually around 150 applicants were selected with the threshold knowledge of B1 according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Out of these 150 applicants, only 95 took part in the IT training sessions and were enrolled in the online course.

The course has the following format: one online session with the involvement of all learners from all ACs and one interactive webinar with smaller groups. The online sessions were designed to activate the background schemata of the learners to have the learner recreate an experience to have new information associated with what is already known.

Unlike the online sessions, the interactive webinars gave more room for personalization of learning and teaching, as well as differentiation and individualization of instruction. Here the course instructors were able to cater to their learners' individual needs and learning styles thus keeping the learners motivated throughout the whole course.

The slides designed by the course instructors always had a lead-in activity, which included visuals, discussion-generating questions, and personalization activities to set up the mental context for the content area. The lead-in activities were followed by an introduction to a new language item. The target language was later practiced through different activities, completion exercises and activities that not only encouraged the learners to use the target language but also developed their critical thinking skills. During live sessions, not all the participants afforded the opportunity to speak due to a high number of participants, time limitations and technical constraints.

When working on their receptive skills, the learners developed their top-down and bottom-up processing skills in reading and listening with the help of short texts, messages and exchanges addressing business topics.

Besides the online session, the learners had a set of activities to complete on the Moodle each week such as quizzes, assignments and forums for better acquisition of the material presented. Research has identified Moodle as a complete and adequate platform for implementation in higher education (Aydin & Tirkes, 2010; Williams van Rooij, 2012). It is viewed as a best-practice instructional mode and that students who do not engage with blended learning are academically disadvantaged (Francis & Shannon, 2013). Moodle was ranked among the top 20 best LMSs based on user experiences in 2018 and 2019 (Andre, 2019; eLearning Industry, 2018)

Recent studies highlight the benefits of online quizzes and students' positive attitude towards them (Cohen & Sasson, 2016; Wallihan et al., 2018). Such benefits include improving student motivation, enhancing understanding and active learning, and deterring cheating, as long as the quiz questions are not too easy (Cook & Babon, 2017). Carefully designed online quizzes can be one of various solutions to prevent

student plagiarism by randomising questions, shuffling responses, providing timestamps and logs of multiple quiz attempts with systematic evaluation processes (Sullivan, 2016).

Method

The evaluation of the project was approached from qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The main evaluation tools included an end-of-course survey completed by 51 participants and e-mail communication with the participants who had withdrawn from the project. During the communication, the learners cited the main reasons for their withdrawal and during the survey they reported what they had found useful about the course and their learning experience overall and which aspects they would like to see improved if a similar project was hosted. The data collected from the survey aimed to help the teams of instructors and course designers to recognize the problems the participants experienced throughout the project and tackle them in their practice. At the same time, throughout the project, methods of statistical data analysis and Moodle statistics were used to keep track.

Research Findings

A key to successful online course and retention of students is the personalized feedback. Giving effective online feedback is a crucial skill for educators to develop because it guides the learners' development. Since feedback is important to the learning process, the art of giving effective online feedback is a critical skill for an educator.

Graham and colleagues (Graham, C., Cagıtay, K., Craner, J., Lim, B., & Duffy, T., (2000)), in an evaluation of online courses, considered two types of feedback: acknowledgment (providing recognition) and informational (providing factual information). A study by Oehikers and Gibson (Oehikers, R., & Gibson, C. (2001)) showed that students in online courses appreciated emotional support from faculty as well as help with problem solving. Social interaction literature specific to online distance education supports affective approaches, such as using students' names, building a sense of community, and providing encouragement (Muirhead, B. (2000)). Diekelmann and Mendias (Diekelmann, N., & Mendias, E. P. (2005)) emphasize that in order to create a safe, fair, and respectful place for learning in online courses, teachers need to reflect on the meanings and significance of their responses to students.

In this project, the course instructors responded in a timely manner to individual questions or issues that had been raised in discussion groups, gave students regular feedback on their assignments and their forum posts, and were flexible enough to make changes to the course mid-stream based on student feedback.

One advantage of Moodle quizzes is that feedback can be automatic and timely, providing students with immediate feedback on their learning with opportunities to improve their understanding. Such immediate feedback is useful for students who could be struggling to understand the subject matter. Moodle quizzes with their

facility to use numerous multimedia options such as audio and video can support this interaction and provide the immediate feedback which positively facilitates the students' level of understanding. Overall, there were 37 quizzes and 3 assignments built on the Moodle LSM in the entire duration of the MOOC, which had, on average, 70% of completion rate.

In order to decrease the expected dropout rate, the course instructors reached a decision to have two intense weeks (two online sessions and interactive webinars each week instead of one online session and one interactive webinar each week) to have the course completed by New Year and allotting the learners more time to do online quizzes in the Moodle after New Year. This decision proved to be effective, as in this way no dropout took place in this period of the course.

By the end of the course, the learners had learned the language for business communication required at B1 level, they practiced the target language through the quizzes on the Moodle and other activities conducted during live sessions and interactive webinars.

The course promoted building language skills and empowered the following groups: 1) English teachers and teachers of other languages, 2) researchers, 3) students, 4) NGOs and business sector representatives.

The MOOC had 51 graduates out of 91 initially enrolled participants - out of who 34 participants were from Yerevan AC, 11 - Gyumri AC, 3 - Vanadzor AC and 3 - Kapan AC.

These numbers are indicative of the real success for a MOOC, especially if we take into consideration the fact that the average completion rate for a MOOC is 15%, while this course proves to be an absolute success with 53% of completion and graduation rate. Though some researchers might associate a high dropout rate with a failure in online education, others (Diaz, D. P. (2002)) argue that the factors affecting the dropout decision are not subject to any control and a high dropout rate is not necessarily indicative of academic nonsuccess.

The reasons for drop-outs that were identified during communication with course participants are as follows:

- Lack of time (e.g. tight schedule at work, university lessons/exams)
- Lack of motivation
- Technical problems, e.g. problems with their personal laptops/PCs, low-quality internet connection

There was also a pool of learners who didn't answer the course instructors' e-mails, so their reasons for dropout remain unclear. To engage the cohort of "ghost" learners, the course instructors sent regular e-mails to all course participants both via Moodle messaging board and personal e-mails when monitoring the course progress, Moodle statistics or observing any demonstration of disengagement by certain course participants. The same methods were used to advise the course participants on any changes in the course schedule.

A post-course survey was administered to identify the satisfaction level of the participants with the course and the course instructors in general. There were 51

responses submitted. Overall, the course received on average 9.4 satisfaction rate out of 10, while the course instructors' satisfaction rate is around 10 out of 10. Here are some quotes from the learners' responses: "I can say that they were all very effective, attentive to details. They all tried to pay attention and time to all the students." "Learning is the key to success. Joining this awesome course and learning was a success story itself for me".

Another interesting research finding was identified in the post-course survey: the learners were asked rate the overall effectiveness of individual instructor's teaching (the MOOC had three Business English instructors who interchanged each other to run online sessions with the involvement of all learners, but permanently ran interactive webinars with the same group in smaller numbers), the respondents highly valued the effectiveness of the each instructor, nevertheless, most respondents had the highest score, 10 out of 10, for the instructors of their interactive webinars, which agains comes to prove that personalization and individualization of the teaching and learning, as well as effective feedback is the most crucial key to participants' motivated learning in the MOOCs and their subsequent completion.

Conclusions

Not all courses are created equally good for feedback, but a purposeful approach to feedback in MOOC design can lead to new learning opportunities. Explicit thinking about each assignment specific to course outcomes sets the stage for student learning.

The customised and automated feedback embedded in the Moodle quizzes was another factor to count into the success of the MOOC. The relevant immediate automated feedback for each question explained common mistakes made by students and significant time was saved by not providing repetitive feedback for common mistakes. The staged online activities significantly reduced the time that instructors spent on explaining the topics.

Having smaller groups for live sessions and interactive webinars to be able to address both the individual needs and learning styles of the learners when elaborating tasks and appropriate content for an online course to allow diversification is highly recommended. As we can see, personalization of learning and appropriate feedback are the key to the success especially in case of MOOCs.

The success stories shared by the MOOC participants helped indetify how the course facilitated to achieve their goals: starting from boosting employability skills, increased participation in international conferences to aiding local English teachers in shaping their online teaching skills and feel more competitive in the local and foreign markets.

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