

Chapter 34

The Use of VLE for Monitoring Independent Language Learning in Large Cohort Provision: The Case of French Studies at the University of Manchester

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ABSTRACT

The Department of French at the University of Manchester is currently innovating in eLearning in order to enhance both language provision and student performance. Within the context of the core language module Independent Learning Programme, they are exploring ways to enhance new technologies to address following questions: how to encourage our large cohort of French studies students throughout their degree to engage in regular and systematic independent learning; how to equip them with appropriate language specific and transferable skills for lifelong independent learning; and how to enhance intrinsic motivation particularly with extrinsic motivational factors such as feedback and feedforward.

INTRODUCTION

For some years now, language tutors at the University of Manchester have been dissatisfied with the lack of student engagement in the basic building blocks of language learning. It has been clear that many students are simply not spending enough time outside the classroom on grammar

activities, or on phonetics and pronunciation drills. Whilst repetitive, such activities are vital, as the aim of such practice is to “get students to learn structures so thoroughly that they will be able to produce them correctly on their own” (Ur, 1996, p. 83). Moreover, the large number of students studying French means that the teaching staff cannot systematically mark and give personalised

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feedback to all our students for this type of work. The Senior Language tutors in French at the University of Manchester have chosen to address these challenges by using their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) not only to provide material, but also to monitor student's work. In this chapter, we will firstly provide a context for our University within the UK Higher Education setting, then we chart the journey from the growing realisation of our need to address our provision, to our search for effective mechanical and pedagogical tools with which to do so (including some controversial methodology), to the physical creation of our materials having taken research findings on board, and the roll-out of our new Independent Learning Programme (ILP). We will evaluate its effectiveness in relation to student feedback and finally take stock at the end of the project's first year.

BACKGROUND

French remains the most widely studied language in British schools at GCSE and 'A' level. Moreover, "French is the language of which post A level candidates make the highest proportion of university students" (Armstrong, 2011, p. 33; Worton, 2009). In the past 15 years, many language departments in British Universities have closed, this being partially due to government policy on language learning at school level (Holmes, 2011, p. 16). Manchester, however, has retained one of the largest French sections in the UK and our university has been less affected than smaller institutions, possibly absorbing some of the overflow from institutions closing elsewhere in Britain.

The Department of French studies at Manchester University has an average of 500 to 600 students on the 4 year degree (BA) programme (which includes a period of residence abroad), that is 180 students in each year taking the core 20 credit language module. These students arrive having done a minimum of 7 years of French, and having attained a minimum of B1 level on the

European Framework for languages. We employ a team of dedicated language teaching professionals who, in partnership with all colleagues (those specialising in cultural subjects), develop and deliver the language curriculum to a high quality student body.¹

British universities have shown strong evidence of innovation in the delivery of the curriculum with an increasing use of VLE's which allow teachers to provide essential and/or additional information on a course, propose exercises for homework, links to further reading or on-line activities as well as blogs, wikis and discussion forums. Armstrong (2011) argues that this is more widespread in UK universities than in other EU countries (p. 27). At the forefront of innovation in language teaching and learning in recent years², our core language modules evaluate consistently well in both centrally administered module questionnaires and informal evaluations. Our students receive 3 contact hours a week for the core French language module in all three years of study, and from the beginning of their degree are guided in the fourth 'strand' of their programme: independent learning. A wide variety of resources are at their disposal in this endeavour, with an emphasis on self-reflective practice. The structure and guidance given to first year students in compiling their portfolio of activities for presentation at the end of the year diminishes in second and final year, as we expect these skills and practices to be established.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Issues

It has become increasingly clear in recent years, however, that for some students such practices would not seem to be effective. Performance in final year examinations points to the simple truth that some students are not engaging in the nitty gritty of language learning, in particular, grammar and phonetics. Little (2003) defines

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