

No: FE36
Title: Evaluating the use of ICT to support delivery of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) tutorials and to encourage independent learning
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Aims

To use ICT to facilitate delivery of tutorials by allowing tutors to assign work to their class that meets their individual needs while having the time and space to deliver individual tutorials. Additionally to allow learners to have access to materials that enable them to meet their individual learning aims during self-study, as identified during individual tutorials.

Intended Outcomes

Learners will have a much wider scope of materials to meet their individual needs and tutors can be more confident in their ability to deliver tutorials effectively and identify ways that learners can meet their needs.

Background

I am the Curriculum Team Leader for Skills for Life. I manage the ESOL provision at Barking College, which consists of about 350 learners studying on full and part-time courses. We have ten full-time classes at Entry Levels and Level 1 in the day, and eight classes at all levels in the evening. I have been at Barking College for the last five years in which time we have been involved with the national Test Bed project.

In ESOL we have dedicated tutorial sessions and have always had problems in delivering tutorials while giving learners individual work to get on with, as it involves lots of photocopying. Learners also often want to do all the work available, rather than just the work we feel is appropriate for them. They also want feedback from the tutor on all the work they have done, which takes up more time than is available.

Implementation

Test Bed provided funds for a dedicated ESOL ICT suite with 18 classroom PCs. I also decided to have a self-study area with 10 PCs and a separate room for tutorials. We have bought a number of programs designed for use by EFL and ESOL learners and have created materials hosted on the college VLE. My plan was for the students to work on the programs and VLE-hosted materials while one member of the class was having a one-to-one tutorial with their personal tutor.

Research

This focused on asking five ESOL tutors questions (Clare McLaughlin, Rosemary Wright, Andrew Fisher, Nick Heath and Therese Reggio) - what they felt were the advantages and disadvantages of using a dedicated ICT suite to deliver tutorials, using their four years of experience with this system of delivery, and add some comments of my own.

Findings

Classroom experience:

- C McL & TR: Moodle, our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), is a great platform for materials as everything is ready for the learners to use. Moodle keeps the learners focused to help them learn individually.
- C McL & TR: Use of the programs allows learners to improve all four skills.
- C McL: At the beginning of the year tutorials take longer as the tutor needs to take time to help learners without many computer skills get used to the programs and Moodle. In one class learners often have different questions and so need individual help.
- C McL & TR: Some form of monitoring software is needed as learners may just listen to music and check their emails.
- NH & TR: Learners can work at their own pace.
- TR: Helping learners can distract from tutorials and actually reduce tutorial time so not enough time is spent giving individual tutorials.
- NH: The programs and the VLE allow for personalised learning.
- NH: Learners can be given group tasks for the PCs and for the interactive whiteboard.
- RW: The programs allow for lots of extension and revision activities that support skills development and allow for exam preparation.
- KB: Good habits can be acquired by learners; if they are used to using a platform such as a VLE regularly in lessons, when a lecturer is not available they will reliably work on VLE-hosted exercises.
- TR: The ICT room is not timetabled evenly for all classes – some have more hours than others.
- NH: In ESOL classes learners are not graded according to ability with IT, therefore there is even more discrepancy between the ability of different learners than is usual in an ESOL classroom. This means that learners are working at very different speeds, with different requirements in terms of what IT support they need.

Targeted areas for further exploration:

- TR: A classroom assistant would help to support learners as they worked on the programs.
- NH: Learners need to write notes to keep a record of their learning, so a tracking system would be helpful to show learners their progress and give them feedback.
- AF: ESOL learners at all levels need support in using ICT. It is very important to track learners' work or they often just look at music videos,

send emails, join chatrooms or play games. Also learners could have many attempts for one particular exercise, for example a drag & drop exercise and learn very little. Tracking their number of attempts and success is essential.

- KB: It can be difficult to match exercises to learners to ensure they know they are learning and not wasting their time on exercises not useful for them. Learners can go through an entire program in a 1 hour session, but without tracking it is very difficult to say what they have learnt from that experience.
- KB: From learner feedback it is clear that different programs appeal to learners in different ways. Some respond positively to programs that look like games while others will be put off. In this case the benefit to their language skills has to be readily apparent or clearly demonstrated by the lecturer for the learner to engage effectively with the program. Ease of use is also vital, so that the technology does not prove to be a barrier to learning. This requires careful evaluation of the program and the individual learner's learning styles and ICT expertise.
- KB: Learners seem to be happier with VLE materials that their teachers have prepared for them than materials created for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or ESOL learners as they can navigate the VLE easily given a small amount of practice and they have materials that fit in with their learning in other lessons.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- If tight controls are put in place at the beginning of a course, such as restricted Internet access, and a system is in place e.g. a VLE with a significant amount of materials available, then ESOL learners can work independently at all levels. A basic level of familiarity with the programs/VLE is needed and this is best given via blended learning. This is best put into practice when the programs/activities are used as a small part of a lesson that uses other delivery methods than ICT to support learning for one topic or skills area. This gives a context for use of the ICT. A tracking system needs to be in place to follow progress. Monitoring software is valuable.
- Learners must be shown how to use the programs and have a thorough grasp of how they are used before they will sit down and work on them independently. Programs used for self-study need to be easy to use.
- Tracking of learners enables the tutor to see the learner's number of attempts and success on activities. It also allows the learners to gain feedback and see their progress over time, rather than each session being stand-alone.

Our newest group of Entry Level 1 learners have been introduced to blended learning and they report that they are very comfortable using Moodle and that it helps them learn in different ways. They work independently and help each other to navigate around the VLE and to use the programs. They stay within the VLE and use all their time working with ESOL materials. The blended learning approach gives greater variety and does not overload the learners with ICT, which can give a negative response.