



## ELECTRONIC LEARNING OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** *This paper deals with one approach to organising electronic learning of a Business English language course. The paper will explain the basic structure of electronic learning, explore its principles and focus on the effects of this type of learning, trying to make English language teachers aware of the possibilities that this system has to offer to its users.*

**Key words:** *business English, electronic learning, e-material, feedback information, teaching principles*

### 1. Introduction

E-learning is a term used to signify the application of Web and other internet technologies which offer the possibility of distance learning. Its origin dates to the appearance of cheap personal computers in the late 80s and the spread of the internet. In its more than thirty-year-long history, e-learning has gone through a series of different stages: from computer based trainings, to learning progress-monitoring systems and comprehensive systems for managing different courses. Nowadays e-learning encompasses a wide range of applications and activities.

However, even after more than thirty years of use, in certain parts of the world e-learning is still not fully recognized as a means of learning. For instance, in Serbian educational system, which I as a teacher of English am part of, there are just several institutions, both public and private, which offer the possibility of e-learning in the form of on-line courses. On-line learning has not yet achieved its popularity, even though hybrid learning, which is the combination of regular teaching methods and the use of internet resources is nowadays quite common in Serbia.

The reason for the lack of interest in e-learning lies in the fact that the public is not well informed about the opportunities of e-learning as an educational tool and all the advantages it has to offer. Unawareness of the concept of on-line, e-learning and the lack of adequate IT skills are the greatest obstacles that need to be overcome before e-learning becomes a fully recognised learning method in Serbia.

So far e-learning has proved to have many advantages which have been acknowledged by scientists. The theory of e-learning, formulated by Skinner and Crauder, for example, has emphasised that e-learning is the only means to adopt information received during the learning process in a more qualitative and quantitative way. The first researches of computer use in teaching have also shown that students are more motivated to learn and more ready to take a positive attitude to e-learning than towards regular tuition. This can be contributed to the fact that the computer, more than any other machine for learning so far, is capable of having a *dialogue* with the student. The material can be studied even three times faster, knowledge is

permanent and the student is trained for individual work, which are just some of the advantages of e-learning.

Undoubtedly, e-learning has brought many benefits to students and other users of this system. Potential users can start on-line courses, take on-line exams, receive feedback information from teachers and instructors and send their projects and seminar papers to be marked. Peer interaction is also encouraged in e-learning through different tools for communication and collaboration (by means of Wiki or special chat rooms). The system can be adjusted to the multi-user needs and provide additional services, or it can reduce the number of its activities if demand for them decreases.

Not only students but also teachers can have benefits from this system of learning. They can prepare and exchange on-line tests, create new material resources for students, have access to students' homework assignments and their projects, post notices for students, view students' statistics, send feedback information and communicate with students through on-line forums.

A progress in Serbia has been made since 2010 by introducing a Moodle network within the academic network AMRES, which is a good way to make e-learning popular across the country. There is a dozen faculties in Serbia which provide on-line courses over Moodle software package for distance learning but most of them are situated in the capital city.

Moodle is currently one of the best system packets used for creating on-line learning sites, which is downloadable free of charge, installable on a web server and quite easy to use after a short training (even in the do-it-yourself variant), which makes it an ideal tool for English teachers who would like to start broadcasting their teaching materials on-line.

Although traditionalists do not speak in favour of e-learning, their attempt to discard e-learning as an additional opportunity for learning has not been quite successful. Masud and Huang (Masud and Huang 2012:75) are just a pair of scientists who speak in favour of e-learning, trying to point out that it should not be seen as a replacement for traditional education institutions and educators, but as a "new approach to learning which can open new perspectives since e-learning uses internet technology to design, implement, select, manage, support and extend learning." If understood this way, e-learning is not considered a threat to traditional methods and the profession of teachers.

On-line BE courses have been just a thing of a recent past in Serbia. This paper is trying to achieve the goal of spreading information on e-learning among the English educators who are facing the same problem of distrust in promoting e-learning and need help in starting and organising their own site for learning, of, for instance, a business English course.

## **2. Principles of e-learning**

The main principle of e-learning applied to any kind of curriculum or course implies that a teacher in mass teaching conditions, transmits one part of his/her functions to special devices for learning, which enables fulfillment of all the important conditions which are otherwise possible just in individual work. The following processes, which cannot be simultaneous under normal conditions, become simultaneous in the area of e-learning:

1. reception of pieces of information from each student, their analysis and comprehension;
2. student tutorship by using the methods which are optimal for each individual student;
3. tuition which is suitable for each individual student;
4. decision-making process based on optimal ways for teaching different profiles of students;

5. student supervision and notification on accuracy of responses, creating positive motivation for each student to explore the study material;
6. repetition of information after which each individual student has given a wrong answer, as many times as it is necessary for each student to understand the problem (information) and respond to the given questions correctly;
7. checking the progress of individual students and
8. avoidance of subjective teacher's factors which have influenced examination and evaluation of students' knowledge.

When preparing on-line material for studying it is necessary to solve two basic problems: to create a programmed coursebook and create a program which will operate the on-line course. The first task is the task for the teacher, the second one for the programmer.

The teacher has to devote a lot of time and energy to prepare such a teaching aid. For a teacher to make a high quality study material, it takes competence, creativity and ambition to achieve good outcomes of learning. However, the result of such work is a long-lasting material which is reusable with certain adaptations after a period of time when some parts of the material become outdated.

Although a regular business English coursebook is sometimes difficult to grasp due to the way in which the material is presented, a programmed study material will not become easier or more understandable just by being programmed. The teacher has a task to create a better study material which will be suitable for programming. Of course, there must be a progressive feedback between the teacher and the programmer.

In order to satisfy the needs of a Business English on-line course users, teachers have to be careful with organising, planning and presenting the teaching material in order to find the right measure of knowledge in the world of business, language competences and the functional register of common business situations.

Simon Clarke, the editor, gives a good tip in the introduction to the second edition of *In company series* for treating Business English learners when saying: "It is English, not business, they they have come...for help with. They want to be able to actually do business with their English rather than just talk about it." (Clarke 2010:2-3)

In creating a Business English e-learning material, the emphasis should be placed on increasing the lexical range, building up competences for handling both professional and social situations and using the language in the context. The vocabulary should focus on communication skills used in the workplace, and the language and skills needed for typical business communication such as presentations, negotiations, meetings, small talk, correspondence, report writing, human resources, curriculum vitae or accounting, sales and marketing, project management, interviews, information technology (IT), import/export issues, insurance, etc. All the topics which are covered by regular Business English books can be more effectively presented in the area of e-learning, more interactively practiced and perhaps even more easily learned in the multi-media environment which can have an impact on several of our senses at once, making the material easier to memorise.

Through such an e-coursebook it is possible to put emphasis on the material which has real importance, eliminate the redundant material, point out crucial language units and focus on concrete language problems. Only then can such an e-book truly satisfy the needs for employment-related teaching.

The teacher should be fully aware that a programmed coursebook becomes a half-automatic device for learning, which can adjust the material to the student's needs. Students on their part should know that they can receive feedback information on their learning progress in the e-learning environment, which can be a good signalling to them which material requires additional work and effort and which material has been successfully mastered.

When preparing on-line study material it is also very important to keep in mind the basic pedagogical and behavioural principles. For example, learners should be aware of the learning outcomes so that they could control their own learning process and make periodic self-evaluations. Then, organisation of the study material within the unit or units within a coursebook should be logical and gradual in order to guide students from less to more difficult material. Tests of students' knowledge after each unit are essential for checking whether the learning outcomes have been achieved, and the last but not the least, feedback to the student is needed so that he/she can plan his/her further studying activities. A great advantage of e-learning is that it actually allows a student to determine his/her own pace of learning in the interactive approach to the study material.

Cognitive capacities of students should be taken into consideration as well. Information should be presented in such a way that it can be properly perceived and then stored in memory. For instance, the text should be placed in the center of the screen, the size of letters should be appropriate, the colour of the text can be used to mark pieces of information that are important, etc. Moreover, units should be carefully designed with respect to the student's precognition. The material should stimulate students to activate the knowledge they already possess in order to acquire new information more easily.

Also, it is important that in the process of e-learning, attention of the students is kept at the high level all the time. That is why the students must be motivated to work on various interesting and attention-occupying activities which will keep them focused and alert. One of the main principles of e-learning actually is that learning is an interesting and active process which places the student in the center of the learning process. And if the material can be related to the personal experience and real-life situations which will help learners use their newly acquired knowledge in context, the material can be learned even better.

When a teacher has taken all these principles into consideration, he/she can start making an e-learning material, which solves the first problem in the e-learning environment.

## **2.1. Programming solutions**

The second problem is how to create the operational program and achieve its algorithmic and logical accuracy.

The misconception is that creating an e-learning material is reserved just for experienced programmers. Teachers, who use Power point presentations in classes can easily convert them to the HTML format which is supported by all the platforms for e-learning. Power Point has the option for saving the material in HTML, which makes it ideal for presenting e-learning materials. Once the material is prepared, it can easily be placed, for example, on the school's web site and become material for e-learning. The more computer-literate teachers can even add multi-media contents, which can be a very good starting point for preparation of e-learning material.

However, in order to make much more complex learning courses, it is necessary to know how to deal with the architecture of e-learning. Of course, to implement such an idea it is necessary to have adequate knowledge of programming to obtain the system functionality. The task of a programmer thus is very important since it implies creation of a logical matrix as a framework in which the student will move on his/her way of gaining knowledge.

Luckily, to a great exhilaration of teachers, a powerful tool has been already made. Moodle is a ready-made application designed by professionals which can be used by teachers and students with no difficulty. Moodle, as a virtual learning environment, makes it possible for teachers to put their e-learning study materials into practice and make them available to all interested students who would like to take courses on-line like a business English on-line course.

On the Moodle course page it is possible to add, delete, hide, move and edit activities like lessons, assignments, quizzes and questions. Each of these activities can be accompanied by audio-video material created within the Moodle or elsewhere and inserted as a resource which will be operated by HTML editor.

The teacher should just be aware that the teaching material must be divided in a series of small logical units ( units of information) for easier approach to learning. After each unit of information, the student must have a chance to give response either in the form of a multiple-choice type of exercise or by writing down his/her own textual answers in the given textual boxes. In Moodle, it is possible to organise true/false questions, matching questions, descriptions and random questions as well. The Moodle package is also valuable since it enables work with the already existing data bases and the learning materials, which is beneficial both for students and teachers who need additional teaching materials in their teaching process.

Having in mind that the comprehension and acquisition of the study material depends largely on the precognition of each individual student, the way in which the units of information are presented, their length, the length of the steps ( intervals) between them, must also be taken into consideration carefully, which the following algorithm with the multi-level structure as an explanation of the Moodle system is trying to show.

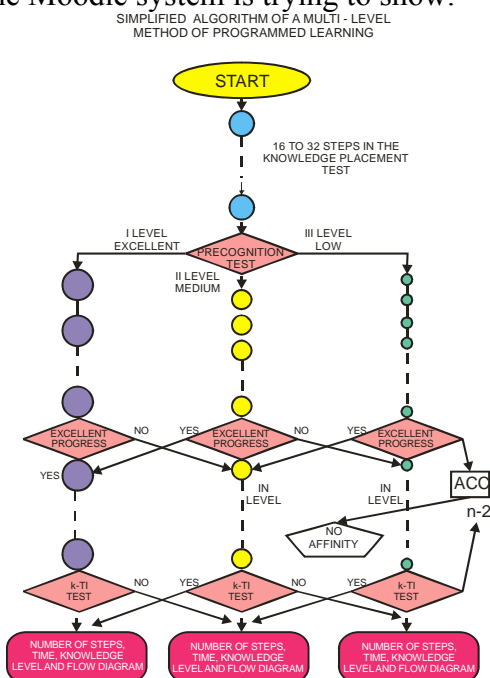


Fig. 1. Algorithm

In the first and the most difficult level, the study material is divided into a small number of difficult units of information with the great interval, by the principle of a branchy programmed book. For the second level suitable for an average student, a special program containing the information of normal difficulty and interval is created. The third level offers the material by using a great number of units of information of little difficulty and small interval, which suits a student of weaker potentials. This way it is possible to monitor the work of individual students, while they have the possibility of making progress at individual pace.

The positive side of virtual learning environment ( VLE) like Moodle is that students receive feedback information on response accuracy immediately after a task has been completed. This is followed by a new unit of information from the logical series providing the answer is correct, or the information on the nature of mistake after which the student goes back to study the same information. This allows the student to stay on the same page to

complete the task or jump to another page, next in the series, in forward and backward movements.

The Moodle program is easy to use since it is made in one of the open interactive languages and presumes work on the display and the keyboard, as input-output devices.

Output data, which are available after each studied body of material or at the end of the program, contain as well, apart from the report on mistakes, number of passes through the programmed material and the time spent studying (to determine the progress level in e-learning). These are the diagnostic data which serve to determine the shortcomings of the program by analysing students' answers. On the basis of these data, the computer can make a diagram of the student's progress through the programmed material, fig.2:

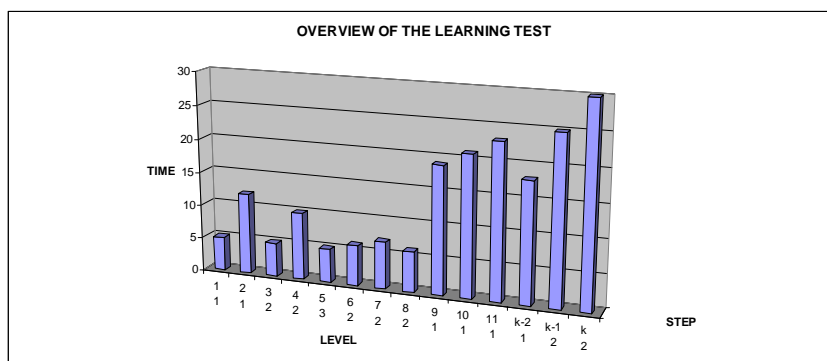


Fig.2. Overview of the learning test

By comparing several such diagrams, the teacher can see where the learning program must be changed. The teacher can decide where to increase or decrease the difficulty of information and the length of the steps. Thus more optimal programs can be made for students to memorise the programmed material with the maximum efficiency and the minimum time.

Once both problems are solved, students can get on to work. E-learning can be carried out in computer equipped classrooms where each student will have access to his/her personal computer and handle the study material on his/her own. In this case, the teacher has the role of a supervisor. Or, another possibility is that a student can study from the comfort of one's home in interactive exchange of information with the computer application. The role of the teacher in this process is still important since he/she is needed to monitor the exchange of opinions among students, to model their discussions, or to ask and answer questions to each individual student, thus still being responsible for guidance in the process of learning. Computers do not know how to make creative decisions in situations which are not covered by the teaching material, how to provide a role-model for students or how to have an insight in the psychological processes which are operating inside the student's mind and thus illuminate the *black box* of thinking processes in each phase of learning. That is why the teacher is still an essential figure in the process of learning.

### 3.Conclusion

Although the program for e-learning has its disadvantages in comparison to the classic teaching method, it can be very useful and significant for particular groups of users. The target groups undoubtedly include business people who cannot attend regular classes, or do not have the opportunity to attend a business English course in their environment. Based on all of the mentioned examples it can be concluded that e-learning can be in different ways adjusted to the needs of students and their predispositions, which makes it an ideal environment for student-oriented learning.

Moreover, e-learning is a proof that “Learning is breaking out of the narrow boxes that it was trapped in during the 20th century;” since “VLEs” ( virtual learning environments) are helping that “learning is not confined to a particular building, or restricted to any single location or moment.” (Johnes and Dudley- Evans 1991:298)

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## Notes on the author

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