

E-packs and Independent Learning

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Background

The Open Language Programme (OLP) offered in the Department of Humanities, Arts and Languages at London Metropolitan University allows students to combine language learning with other subjects, and means that those specialising in languages work with non-specialist students, members of staff, as well as members of the general public. About 70% of our language learners are mature students from non-traditional backgrounds and have different needs from younger, campus-based students.

The programme is based on a combination of taught classes and self-study. The students are expected to attend a 3-hour class every week, as well as completing 3 hours of self-study. In order to provide students with independent learning opportunities, the OLP initially developed a series of self-study packs for each language and each stage. Although they were used successfully for a number of years, it became clear that there were some disadvantages to these paper-based study packs; in particular, students had to come to the Language Centre to use the materials, and, moreover, locating the wide range of materials was time-consuming and impractical. We therefore started developing online language learning materials that were more accessible to our students. This is the context in which the LondonMet e-pack was born.

How the e-pack works

The e-pack was created with Macromedia Flash X, which enabled the developers to produce visually attractive, interactive exercises that combine sound, image and text in a single activity as well as providing instant feedback to the user.

Each e-pack contains 12 topic-based units that take 3-4 hours to complete. Each unit includes 9 or 10 original design, user-friendly exercises that cover the main language learning skills of listening, reading, writing and grammar, and involve participation in a variety of fun but challenging activities, such as matching, reordering and games all

with words and phrases. There is also an Extension Work section containing references to other sources, links to other language learning sites and a written task. Reading, vocabulary, listening and writing exercises are all integrated within the e-pack, thus reducing the need for extra materials. Users are able to click on help buttons when they need additional learning or cultural tips and grammatical explanations. (See <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/epacks/>.)

The e-pack follows a communicative syllabus. Our aim was to fully exploit the opportunities presented by online media, putting into practice such key pedagogical concepts as active learning in a multi-media environment; use of language and grammar in context, and varied and progressive presentation of language.

On Learner Autonomy

The e-pack is intended to promote learner autonomy in three main ways. First, it facilitates access to self-study: learners can use it at any time and from any place, allowing them to plan and manage their own learning. Second, they can develop their own learning strategies to suit their individual learning styles and needs (for example, they can repeat the exercises as many times as they wish). Third, the feedback has been designed in such a way that it reinforces the learning process, as opposed to just providing answers to the questions, thus encouraging students to reflect on their learning and to monitor their own progress.

Theoretical debates in this area are often based on a highly idealistic conception of autonomy that may be of little use to practitioners implementing language learning programmes in the real world (see e.g. Benson and Voller, 1997). We take a more pragmatic view of learner/teacher autonomy, proposing the following working definition: “the ability to take responsibility for developing skills, knowledge and attitudes, in interaction with others, and apply them in a variety of learning (or teaching) situations” (adapted from Smith, 2003). Students and teachers share a goal: both parties work towards improving students’ language skills and, more instrumentally, towards achieving good examination results. Within these institutional and curricular constraints, learners (and teachers to a lesser extent) can find spaces where they are able to exercise a degree of autonomy. Moreover, exercising autonomy does not preclude seeking help and advice from others.

We also wish to take a more positive view of learner autonomy than many researchers seem to do. Following authors such as David Little, we assume that exercising autonomy is a fundamental and universal human need, and that everyone is more or less capable of it, regardless of their background, gender or culture. (Little, 1999; Little and Dam, 1998).

Integration of E-packs into the Language Programme

We believe that e-packs combine the best of both worlds by keeping the guidance and motivation of the teacher and blending this with the flexibility of e-learning. It is essential that our teachers integrate the online materials into their classroom work. Each week they are expected to spend some time answering questions about e-packs, collect students' written tasks, hand back corrected work and to incorporate e-pack exercises into the lesson plan.

Both students and staff are invited to attend an e-pack training session at the beginning of each semester. Our students can, additionally, attend a one-to-one session with a language advisor if they need specific or general language learning tips. There are also workshops that introduce them to a range of language learning techniques and those wishing to improve their oral skills can take advantage of conversation groups run by student native speakers of a language.

The staff handbook contains information about the e-pack, including tips on how to integrate e-pack materials into classroom instruction. The University also provides training opportunities in e-learning for the staff. Moreover, our language tutors can make an appointment for a one-to-one session with the E-learning Manager if they need more support or advice on e-packs or e-learning.

Evaluation

The e-pack project has developed as a form of action research: we deal with practical issues in the real world, constantly attempting to gain a better understanding of our practices and to revise them accordingly. Our overall plan is to improve our language learning materials, our students' learning experience and our teaching practices.

Quantitative Surveys (2003 and 2004)

Our main concern was that our students were satisfied with the online materials, and we therefore conducted two separate quantitative surveys about learners' use and appreciation of e-packs. We were pleased to find that the vast majority enjoyed working with the e-pack, and two thirds believed that it had made a significant contribution to the learning of the module. About half of the students accessed the e-pack from home, which seems to confirm our belief that it is important to offer learners more flexibility in planning their study schedules (see Table 1).

We were, however, disappointed that only about half of the students claimed that they did the Extension Work section, including the written task. This section is meant to allow learners to extend their classroom learning and take more initiative in the learning process. It also provides a link between self-study and taught classes,

allowing students to get feedback from teachers and for teachers to assess their students' progress.

TABLE I: Some results of 2003 Survey (142 respondents) and 2004 Survey (56 respondents)

Overall, how would you rate the experience of using the e-pack?	
Good/excellent	73%
Average	25%
Poor	2%
Overall, how does it contribute to the learning of the module?	
Quite a lot/a great deal	66%
Some	33%
Not at all	1%
Where do you use the e-packs?	
At university	53%
At home	40%
Other (work)	7%
Do you do the Extension Work section?	
Never/rarely	52%
Sometimes	23%
Always/usually	25%
Do you hand in the written task?	
Never/rarely	57%
Sometimes	25%
Always/usually	18%

Qualitative Survey (2005)

Having analysed the results of the two surveys, we decided that it would be useful to talk to some of our students in more detail; hence, we conducted one-to-one interviews with 10 OLP students.

The interview data suggests that most students benefit from working in an interactive multi-media environment. For example, one student said that it was helpful to “have listening and reading in one exercise”, while another remarked that it was easier for her to “learn with pictures”. In fact, the main reason why many students chose not to do the Extension Work was that they preferred interactive exercises to the more traditional learning activities. Some students also claimed that they didn’t know about the written task because the teacher hadn’t mentioned it. This is a problem because writing is one of the four main language learning skills and also a significant element in the examination, so for this reason alone it is important for students to practise it.

Most of our learners seem to possess adequate IT and metacognitive skills, although some may be unfamiliar with e-learning and therefore need extra encouragement. It is clear that autonomous learning is not something we impose on our students; on the contrary, they expect it and exercise it in their different ways, to varying degrees.

On the negative side, it seems that some students fail to make the most of the online learning opportunities, partly because of their tutors’ indifferent attitude to e-packs. However, we feel that students could take more initiative in communicating with their tutors and finding out about the advisory and other services.

Teacher Feedback (2005)

Until this spring, we had focused almost exclusively on our learners’ experience. We realised, however, that most of our problems arose from the lack of co-ordination between self-study and taught classes. We therefore asked our language teachers to fill in a short questionnaire about their familiarity with e-packs and how they integrated them into the lesson plan, and how they encouraged students to do them.

We were very disappointed when only a handful of teachers chose to return the questionnaire. The poor response to the survey is in itself an interesting finding, possibly revealing a lack of enthusiasm for, and awareness of, e-learning. In an ideal world all teachers should take some responsibility for their professional development; the reality is, however, that most of our language teachers are hourly-paid lecturers who may find it difficult to fit staff development into their schedule, especially since they are not always paid for attending training sessions.

Further Action

According to a recent survey carried out by London Metropolitan Students’ Union, 65% of students thought that their feedback was not acted upon (MetSU, 2004). Although we cannot please every single student, we do try to take their suggestions into consideration when developing and modifying our materials. For instance, we

have added an online dictionary to the e-packs in direct response to the feedback from students. Furthermore, in an attempt to encourage students to do the written task, we are planning to make it more prominent and more visually attractive.

We will also continue to work on staff development in order to increase our language tutors' awareness of learner autonomy and e-learning. One possibility is to hold a workshop on fostering independent learning; alternatively, we may improve our brochure giving practical tips about integration. Finally, we will continue to impress on our students that being autonomous doesn't mean learning on your own, and that there is nothing wrong with asking for help and advice when you need it.

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