

E-Learning in Small Language Schools

Birgit Wittenberg

Bildungswerk Ver.di
Uelzen/Germany
bwittenberg@t-online.de

Abstract

Even though the advantages of using new media in language courses have been thoroughly described in many papers and publications there are still many small language school who have not integrated e-learning in their course program yet. This paper will give a short overview on the advantages of e-learning given the specific requirements of language schools. It also describes the reasons why many small language schools are so reluctant to using new media. The following chapter focuses on different methods of integrating e-learning into language courses. A case study will follow in the last chapter, giving a short overview on an ongoing e-learning project of a Chinese language school in Germany

1. Introduction

The introduction of e-learning offers several advantages for companies and other institutions. Many large companies have used e-learning for several years now and in this sector e-learning has become a standard tool for training purposes. The history of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) started already in the 60s and the advantages of using new media in language courses are thoroughly described. In the view of many consultants the use of e-learning leads to quality improvement, image improvement, more flexibility and most important cost reduction. However, there are still many small and medium enterprises that have not integrated e-learning elements into their courses yet. This paper will examine if the advantages of using e-learning in language courses will justify the investments of time and money given the specific needs and prerequisites of small commercial language schools.

2. Verification of general e-learning advantages

2.1 Quality improvement

The main goal of learning foreign languages is to be able to communicate. Today most of the global communication takes place using new technologies. E-mails, chat-rooms and weblogs are among the most often used communication media and can easily be used in language courses. Furthermore, the internet is of course used to search for information. Reading and listening comprehension can be improved by reading online newspapers, listening to podcasts or watching videos. If these media are used in language courses the students are able to experience an authentic environment when learning the language. And authenticity definitely improves the quality.

The same applies to the use of e-learning content such as exercises, quizzes and other interactive elements. Self-studying and exercising enables the student to focus on the issue he needs training on. It leads to increased retention and a stronger grasp on the subject.

2.2 Flexibility improvement

Flexibility usually refers to the independency of learning time and location. If learning takes place on the internet, neither the students nor the trainers need to travel to the training centre. Thus, people who are not able to travel (for example because they need to be available at work or at home) still get the chance to attend a course. Teaching on the internet also enables the invitation of guests, for

example to introduce native speakers of different accents (for example Scottish, Welsh, “BBC” or American accents).

2.3 Image improvement

A company with e-learning offerings is a modern and state-of-the-art company. This is recognized by external customers as well as internal employees. The improved course quality and the resulting increase of customer satisfaction also add to image improvement.

2.4 Cost reduction

Costs are the most important issues regarding the introduction of e-learning. The most often cited cost reductions are “reduced travel and hotel costs”, “no classrooms needed” and “more students per teacher”. Unfortunately hardly any of these cost reductions apply to a small language school. The trainers usually do not travel that much and if so, it is usually paid by the customer. As most of the e-learning courses are blended courses, classrooms will still be needed. More students per teacher is often not feasible as high-quality online tutoring is time consuming because it is much more individual than classroom training.

2.5 Impact of the advantages

If cost reduction cannot be achieved, the other advantages must be even more valuable for the school to justify the investment in e-learning. Such effects can for example be a larger scope of courses, a higher number of students and/or new potential customer groups.

3. E-learning obstacles

Small language schools are in the same boat as any other small and medium enterprise: They have limited resources in terms of employees and budgets. New investments are thoroughly discussed and need to lead to a fast ROI. As the e-learning market is confusing and not transparent it is difficult to get an idea on the necessary investments and the applicable strategy, concept and technology that fit the needs and the requirements of the individual language school.

Many trainers fear that the introduction of e-learning reduces the number of necessary trainers and try to prevent its introduction. These trainers must know that e-learning will definitely be one of the standard learning methods in the future, but that it will never be able to fully replace a human trainer. Today the bookstores offer various self-studying material for English or other languages, but only a small number of people is motivated enough to work through the whole material without trainer guidance. Most of the learners prefer to be part of a group.

Traditionally language learning is not a field where technology plays an important role. Despite the long history and findings of CALL, technology has not succeeded to penetrate the language learning field. Thus most of the language learning classrooms are not provided with computers and the typical language teacher is not the one who is fond of technology.

If people think of e-learning they mostly think of interactive training material that was especially designed for learning purposes. And this is of course one of the most often e-learning components used. So if instructors are interested in using such content they either search for databases in the internet or they want to produce it themselves. The easier way to find content is searching the net because content production is a demanding and time-consuming task “where the devil is in the detail”.

Introducing e-Learning always requires at least one dedicated subject matter expert who is fond of technology, who is not getting nervous in case of technological breakdowns and who likes playing around with e-learning tools. Without such a person who is fully supported by the school management the project cannot be successful.

4. Types of e-learning integration

4.1 Use of e-learning during classroom training

Provided that the necessary infrastructure is available in the classroom (at least one computer for the instructor or several computers for the students) this type of e-learning is most easy to realize. Lots of language learning material and network resources can be found on the internet. There has been a growing interest of foreign language teachers all over the world to communicate in peer groups and to exchange learning material. Additionally there is authentic material available such as online newspapers, podcasts or videos. According to the technical infrastructure the instructor can either present the material in front of the class or the students can use it on their own computers.

This type of e-learning relies on the specific skills and motivation of the instructor. The instructor can individually choose which material he will use in his class. The aim of this concept is to improve the quality of the classroom training and thus the image.

4.2 E-learning in addition to classroom training

The goal of this type of e-Learning is to provide additional material for homework or for students who like to repeat the learning content or to deepen the knowledge. As in simple e-learning environment the instructor is not available for help or explanations, the quality of the content becomes more important. Self-studying material needs to be self explanatory and the tasks must be clearly defined. For the distribution of the content either a CD can be used or a server must be available for downloading. Again this concept can be used to improve training quality and image.

4.3 Use of e-learning to reduce classroom time

The e-learning project becomes much more complex if the classroom time is to be reduced. The whole structure of the course must be revised. It must be defined which parts can be covered by e-learning and which parts by classroom training. It is not sufficient anymore to pick some exercises that seem to be suitable.

If not a complete and coordinated content package can be found on the internet or elsewhere, content must be produced in-house. This again increases technological complexity. Content creation requires the use of an authoring tool. Furthermore this is a point where the installation of a Learning Management System offers many advantages. The LMS can be set up according to the course structure so that the learners always know what to do next. The instructor can stay in contact with the group and is able to monitor learning progress.

This form of e-learning increases the flexibility of learning locations. Thus it is possible to attract new potential customers.

4.4 Replacement of classroom training

The complete replacement of classroom training is an ambitious target and requires experiences and skills in online tutoring. The topics for pure online learning must be carefully chosen and the learning content must be of excellent quality. Most often it is recommended to add at least two meetings, one at the beginning of the class (introduction of group members) and one at the end (for feed-back). Organisation of an online course is almost not possible without the use of a Learning Management System. The most important role of the tutor is to motivate the learners during the self-studying period. Virtual classroom sessions have proven to be a very successful motivation tool.

5. Case study Chinese Center, Hannover

5.1 Introduction

The Chinese Center in Hannover is one of the most important Chinese language schools in Germany. However, most of the learners come from the Hannover region. After several successful years of providing Chinese language courses the target group of potential customers started to decrease. Therefore the Chinese Center was looking for a way to address a new group of potential customers. This group included people from outside the Hannover region and people working for small and medium enterprises (SME). The main target was to decrease the time of classroom training to make the course offerings more attractive. Especially employees of SMEs are often not able to leave their work for the amount of time required to attend a language course. E-learning was defined as the valid medium to reach this goal.

5.2. Project procedure

The first step of the project was to evaluate which e-learning products were already available on the German market for teaching Chinese. The result was that there was nothing available that met the quality requirements of the Chinese Center. Thus the Chinese Center had to produce them in-house.

So the first target of the project was to produce adequate e-learning content. Apart from improving the knowledge in writing rough and fine concepts as well as scripts for e-learning exercises, an authoring tool was needed. The big scope of available authoring tools was reduced by the requirement to enter Chinese signs. Further requirements were ease of use and moderate license costs. Ease of use played a very important role because the instructors of the Chinese Center were sent from China and changed every two years.

After the authoring tool was bought the actual content production started. Even though an amazing number of exercises and basic information pages were produced the aim to replace classroom time by e-learning time could not be met. However, the students taking the regular classroom training appreciated the additional possibility to listen to the Chinese language and to do interactive exercises. Thus at least the aim of quality improvement and increased customer satisfaction was met.

Just recently the second stage of the project started. A lesson learned from the first experience was that self producing a comprehensive and complete package of Chinese e-learning material was not realistic. A second analysis of available Chinese self-studying products has shown that since the start of the project some high quality and not very expensive e-learning material has emerged on the market. So the idea was to use this commercial product as the basis and offer online tutoring for 10 weeks. The first two demo sessions were a great success and the first students applied for the newly created complete online course. So the outcome of the project was not only the reduction of classroom time but its full replacement.

5.3 Findings of the project

The most important findings of the project were:

- the project does not work without a language instructor who is fond of technology and not afraid of technological breakdowns
- the school management needs to be aware that the introduction of e-learning is a time consuming project and that it cannot be done in addition to many everyday tasks
- using authoring tools and developing ideas for exercises and other material can be very easy, the production of content with an attractive layout is still a demanding project
- using a commercial product can be an interesting solution for introducing e-learning