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Designing English Language Courses in Class Server

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This article is aimed to report on the experience with designing electronic English learning/teaching materials in Microsoft's learning management system – Class Server. The online course created currently contains vocabulary quizzes, tests, grammar chapters, including material presentation and self-evaluated exercises, listening exercises, and a glossary of professional vocabulary.

Each element in each course section can be used either separately, or in combination with conventional printed aids, as appropriate in a specific learning/teaching situation. The course is being further developed while experimentally testing its completed components in both compulsory and elective university courses.

1 Introduction

Foreign language instruction at universities of technology traditionally suffers from a conflict between an unsatisfactory level of English communication competences among engineering students on the one hand and a lack of class time available for training and practising foreign language skills on the other. It is alarming that approximately a third of incoming students, tested upon entry to their mandatory foreign language course at the Faculty of Civil Engineering, Czech Technical University in Prague (CTU), do not achieve an intermediate level. Viewing that the emphasis of compulsory language courses is on learning/teaching foreign languages for professional purposes, a lot of students face serious study difficulties.

The offer of electives cannot solve this problem entirely due to their limited capacity and overlaps and clashes in the school time schedule.

2 Role of Technology

The Czech Technical University is relatively well equipped with computer laboratories, computerized self-study rooms and halls, and libraries linked to the Internet. The Department of Languages, Faculty of Civil Engineering, CTU runs its own computerized language lab and self-access centre. The deployment of the installed technology in language learning is not sufficient, though.

The current rapid development of technology has led to the introduction of the latest technological achievements in the learning/teaching process. Language instruction is particularly favourable to the innovative learning/teaching aids adoption, learning management systems (LMS) being no exception to this rule. An LMS is “software that automates the administration of training events. The LMS registers users, tracks courses in a catalogue, and records data from learners; it also provides reports to management.” (Microsoft – Class Server)

It allows its users to design and run entire courses electronically, in a friendly, web-based environment and convert them partly or completely to distant-learning units or complexes. The capabilities of this powerful instrument comprise student management, teaching materials presentation in a multimedia format, language practice, testing, communication among students and teachers, and collection of data on student performance (Květoň 2003).

Schools considering LMS exploitation can make their choice from commercially distributed platforms, like Blackboard, produced by Blackboard, Inc. (www.blackboard.com), WebCT, which is produced and distributed by WebCT, Inc. a WebCT Canada (www.webct.com), Oracle (www.oracle.com) and/or Microsoft’s Class Server, or try downloading open source software from the Internet, such as Moodle. Moodle is a free, open source course management system for online learning/teaching designed to help educators create quality online courses. As it is an open source package, you are free to download it, use it, modify it and even distribute it (under the terms of the GNU General Public License).

3 Goals

The decision to exploit a learning management system to improve the situation (disproportion) mentioned above was facilitated by the objective conditions. The university experimentally purchased WebCT, and later, Microsoft’s Class Server.

The LMS exploitation in English course design was aimed to build a mix of instructional media which would meet the needs of the learner in a manner that is instructionally effective and economically prudent. It was expected to save rare class time, individualize learning, make learners responsible for the learning process, and activate them by providing them with autonomous learning support. It sought to make learning easier, less teacher-dependent, and better adjusted to students’ usual work/study habits (Tait and Mills 1999).

The English programme was reconstructed based on the principles of constructivist pedagogy by integrating traditional classroom techniques and aids with electronic learning/teaching components in order to increase quality of instruction and make it more effective.

4 Class Server

Microsoft's LMS, Class Server, the licence of which CTU has recently purchased, became the vehicle deployed in this process. The project team has generated an online course of English targeted at a wide range of engineering students and/or professionals, comprising vocabulary quizzes and tests, theoretical presentation of selected structures and sets of self-evaluated exercises for practising the presented structures, as well as a glossary of professional vocabulary. The effort won support from the *Development Fund of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 2004-80*.

The course core had been designed as part of a preceding project of the Department, received from the *Higher Education Development Fund FRVŠ C2058/2002*. A change in CTU's licensing policy, though, brought about the necessity to convert the original electronic component to Class Server. So far, the conversion has not been completed fully due to technical faults of the new software. The conversion will be finalized as soon as the new learning management platform is fully functioning.

Class Server's producer claims that it is designed for use at primary (elementary) and secondary (high) schools, as well as universities. It is aimed to assist educational institutions in improving the learning/teaching process and making its results compatible with the curricula. To help achieve this goal, this integrated learning management system offers a complex of electronic learning/teaching tools which are web-based.

5 Outcomes

The reconstructed English programme consists of traditional, as well as electronic modules which can be used either in combinations, or separately.

The electronic modules currently contain a glossary of professional vocabulary, as well as expressions connected with university study, listing over 1,700 lexical items.

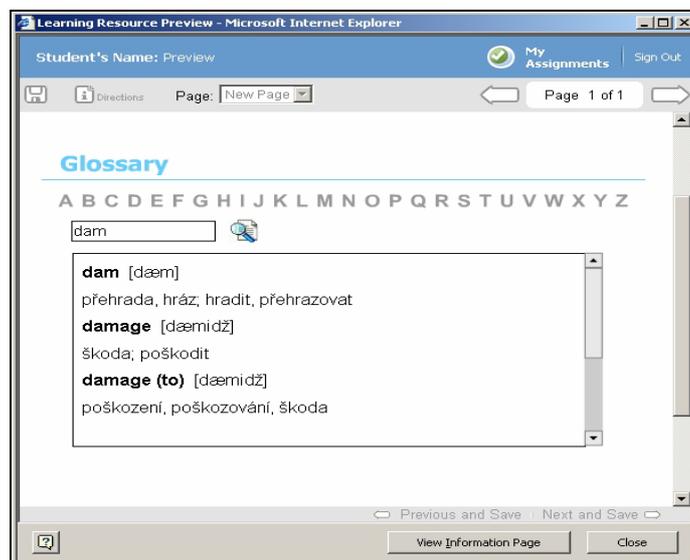


Fig. 1 A cut-out showing the electronic glossary.

Secondly, they contain self-evaluated quizzes and tests for practising and testing the students' command of new vocabulary. Besides, the online component includes Placement Tests used at the start of each academic year to place students in appropriate study groups depending on

their actual performance. The conversion of these materials to Class Server will be completed soon.

Another part, theoretical presentations of language structures, consists of clearly structured, visually attractive html pages which are designed to deliver the study materials to students in an easy format, understandable to learners who find physical laws much more comprehensible than grammar structures. Class Server enables materials designers to produce colour, graphically rich web presentations which far exceed the presentation level and capabilities of black and white university textbooks. Didactically speaking, rich, meaningfully applied graphics substantially enhances the effectiveness of theory explanations and beats the didactic power of theory put on black and white paper in an unparalleled manner.

TRPNÝ ROD PASSIVE

Trpný rod užíváme, když zdůrazňujeme děj nebo proces sám. Není pro nás důležitá, kdo děj provedl.

Věta s trpným rodem
Popisujeme proces / určitý postup.
*Charles Bridge **was built** in the 14 century.*
Karibv most byl postaven ve 14. století.

Věta s činným rodem
Popis se netýká procesu či postupu.
(Některá slovesa trpný rod vůbec netvoří.)
*The university **consists** of four faculties.*
Tato vysoká škola se sestává ze čtyř fakult.

Tvoření: be + minulé přičestí (+ fráze s by/with)

Minulé přičestí pravidelných sloves je tvar na -fold - worked
U nepravidelných sloves je to poslední tvar - written, begun, apod.

Přehled nejužšívanějších tvarů:

Our house	built /now	Náš dům
is	is built /now	je nyní postaven
*is being	↓ just now.	se právě staví.
will be	↑ next year.	bude postaven příští rok.
is going to be	soon.	bude postaven brzy.
was	two years ago.	byl postaven před 2 lety.
*was being	while we were living in a caravan.	se stavěl, zatímco jsme žili v přívěsu.
has been	already.	už je postaven.
had been	before the contract term expired.	byl postaven, než vypršela doba platnosti smlouvy (tj. předtím, než min. dějem).
must be		se musí postavit.
can be		se může postavit.
should be		by se měl postavit.

* průběhové tvary; naznačují neukončenost procesu

Fig. 2 A screen showing a grammar presentation.

Title	Course	Unit	Subject/Topic	Type	Last Modified
Glossary of Professional Vocabulary	Dictionary		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Listening: Bridges	Listening		English / Language structure		1/11/2005
Listening: Earth-sheltered Housing	Listening		English / Language structure		1/11/2005
Listening: Engineers	Listening		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Articles	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Clauses of Cause and Effect	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/10/2005
Structure: Clauses of Comparison	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Clauses of Purpose	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Concessive Clauses	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/10/2005
Structure: Conditional Clauses	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Do/Make/Work	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Expressions of Quantity	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Future	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Gerund I	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Gerund II	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Have/get something done	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Modal Verbs	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Participles	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Passive	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Past Perfect Tense	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Past Tense	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Phrasal Verbs 1	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Phrasal Verbs 2	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Present Perfect Tense	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Present Tense	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Relative Clauses	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005
Structure: Reported Speech	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/10/2005
Structure: Temporal Clauses	ElGrammar		English / Language structure		1/14/2005

Fig. 3 Part of the main menu offering electronic chapters to be studied.

Each grammar presentation is supplemented by a set of practical exercises with immediate automated correction of the student's performance. Class Server offers a number of exercise types, all of which are exploited to make learning more interesting. The didactic value of electronic exercises is incomparably higher than that of opportunities for practising published in school textbooks provided with a key. Instead of leafing through the book after each

question, which has proven to be laborious and tiring, web-based exercises provide instantaneous evaluation upon pressing a button. The immediacy and easy accessibility of feedback contribute to the good quality and high speed of learning.

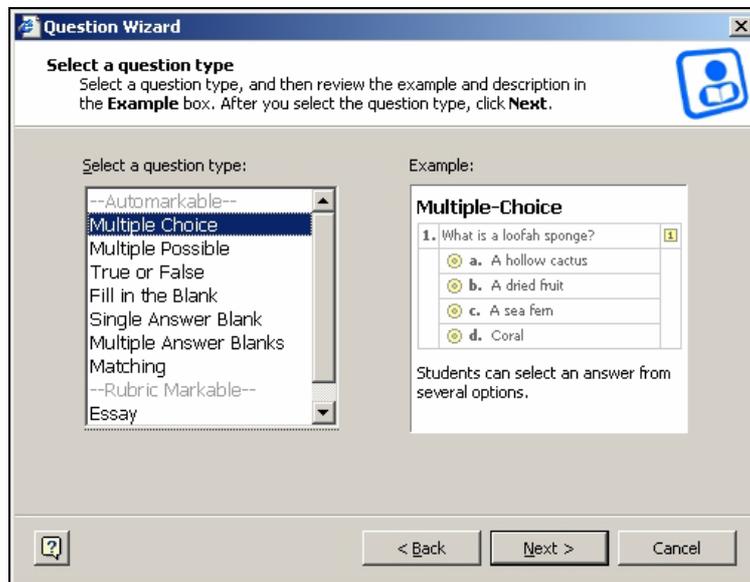


Fig. 4 Class Server menu offering a selection of exercise types.

Besides, the team of designers has created further types of exercises by integrating Macromedia® Flash™ MX into the LMS, Matching combined with Drag&Drop.



Fig. 5 Matching combined with Drag&Drop produced in Flash.

The future development of the electronic programme lies in designing a module for practising listening comprehension, the basis of which has already been built.

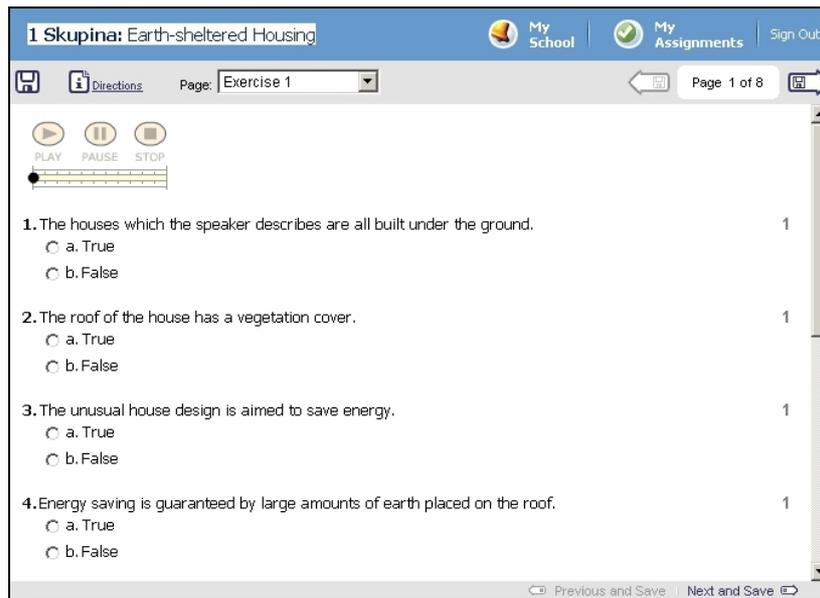


Fig. 6 Beginning of the listening module.

This method of administering study material meets the expectations of university students of civil engineering well. Exploitation of hi tech is inseparably incorporated in their study programmes. The electronic delivery of language study material comes natural to today's engineers in training.

The electronic course of English can be used in both compulsory and elective classes in all stages of the three-level study, including Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral. It will facilitate individualized, autonomous learning, thus raising its efficiency.

Electronic learning management platforms are not the universal remedy for classroom improvement, but they are an effective methodological component which should be incorporated in language instruction wherever the technical infrastructure makes it viable.

References

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