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E-performance observation in teaching foreign languages

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Abstract
Teachers constantly try to increase students´ interest and their motivation to learn effectively to fulfil high requirements of national as well as international labour market. They look for innovative ways and possibilities of how to use the findings of technological progress in their teaching process to achieve educational goals. One of the latest methods is observation of students´ learning performance carried out in electronic courses (so called e-performance observation) which significantly differs from a traditional observation realized in face-to-face contact teaching. We applied it in teaching English to higher education students. The results obtained from conducted action research confirm our assumption that the use of e-performance observation provides teachers with a faster collecting and storing of relevant data and accurate recording of learning outcomes.

Key words: *action research, e-performance observation, teachers, the Internet*

JEL classification: *123*

1. Introduction

New technologies provide lots of opportunities and tools to improve teaching and learning processes. This enables people to become better prepared for current conditions of national as well as international labour market. To follow the way of modernization of education means to follow the trends and requirements of the 21st century. It is also a challenge for foreign language teachers to effectively use new technologies in their teaching process. In this respect the implementation of technologies concerns all levels and all forms of education (primary and secondary schools, as well as higher education institutions).

In this paper we focus on using an English e-course (presented via an online programme) and the method of e-performance observation.

2. Online programmes

"*More and more people are getting involved in computer assisted language learning research and the teachers are beginning to realize that computers are not just electronic gadgets but may well enhance the effectiveness of their teaching if properly used and programmed.*" (Malá, 2011, p. 113).

The importance of online education is that it can bring changes in educational practice and in educational institutions. Teachers experience these changes especially. A teacher has a certain number of fixed hours during the week when he/she has a classroom setting. At universities they have to have "office hours" during which they are available to students. The learning network environment, on the other hand, is available to students and teachers 24 hours a day. Students expect regular and ongoing interaction with their teacher. Networking technology not only affects the communication between students and their teacher but it also expands opportunities for students to communicate among themselves. It allows the students to collaborate with one another as a part of the learning process. In a classroom students can be quiet, but in a learning network they are forced into participation. The attributes of anytime and

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anyplace communication make group of interaction and collaboration in online media distinctive. Students can interact with one another in seminars, group projects or role plays, take part in e-lectures or contact their teachers and tutors online. They can communicate with one another at different time and from different locations. (Harrison & Stephen, 1996).

As Clark and Kwinn (2007) claim, online programmes offer powerful instructional environments while saving travel time and costs associated with traditional face-to-face classroom training. Effective use of visualization, audio- and interactive features are the main parts to effective instruction in an online programme. The key to success requires more than mastering the mechanics of these features. The potential of the online programme can fully be exploited only by correct using of visuals, audio-visuals and interactions. The benefits of online programmes include reduced travel time and costs, less time away from the job, faster deployment of time-urgent knowledge and skills, and higher completion rates compared to self-study e-learning. From a learning perspective, there are opportunities for immediate interaction and feedback from the teacher.

A tutor is the person involved in online teaching. It is the person who oversees the successful mastery of the course and appropriate support in the study of students. He is ready to give some advice to students, to manage student sessions – tutorials, or discussions on student web, as well as to correct written tests and provide a feedback to students. The role of tutors differs from the traditional form of education mainly in the fact that their job is not to give lectures only, but to support their students in their learning process by using various modern ways and methods and available electronic means. (Zlámalová, 2004).

Zikuška and Škyřík (2008) define the following pedagogical competences of the tutor:

- **a)** *didactic competences* – oriented in teaching and learning styles. The tutors evaluate independent students´ work, give them adequate feedback, motivate and encourage them in their further study,
- **b)** *communicative competences* – focused on the discussion and its appropriate evaluation. The tutors ask questions that create a potential source of learning. To be able to communicate not only in the written way, but also in other forms of communication is most important here.
- **c)** *organizational competences* – familiarizing students with study requirements. The tutors introduce the methods and ways of evaluation in a suitable and understandable form,
- **d)** *technical competences* – means mastering not only work in the learning management system environment, but the ability to provide students with sufficient technical support.

2.1. The online programme MyLanguageLeaderLab

MyLanguageLeaderLab is an online Learning Management System (LMS) programme. It provides interactive exercises with automatic marking and offering immediate feedback to students thus saving teacher´s time. The scores are automatically transferred to a gradebook. It avoids the necessity of spending valuable class time going through homework at the beginning of lessons. Students have greater motivation to complete homework assignments if they are available online. It is easy not only to monitor students´ activity and progress but also to quickly identify and remedy any weaknesses or strengths of individuals or the whole class. Communication tools allow students and teachers to interact with each other and extend learning opportunities beyond the classroom. (Pearson Education Limited, 2009).

MyLanguageLeaderLab was designed to provide an easy-to-use entry to online learning with reliable materials for teachers. The system allows to set assignments via the Internet and students can access it from any computer. The LMS uses a tested content of the Language

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Leader Language series in a more interactive way, with some added extras, to take full advantage of the exciting opportunities presented by online learning. The online programme saves time, improves results and expands English language learning.
(Pearson Education Limited, 2009).

3. E-performance observation

The English e-course was implemented through the online programme MyLanguageLeaderLab at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra. The action research was carried out with a group of fourteen second-year students of the study programme Business Management at the Faculty of Economics and Management who attended English classes.

The action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the „actor" in improving and/or refining his/her actions. It is always relevant to the participants. The relevance is guaranteed because the focus of each research project is determined by the researchers who are also primary consumers of the findings. Even more important is the fact that it helps educators be more effective at what they care most about – their teaching and the development of students´ knowledge. (Sagor, 2000).

We observed students´ performance in the electronic course and that is why we call it e-performance observation. We watched those indicators which appear during the study in the online programme *MyLanguageLeaderLab* that was presented within an English e-course and, at the same time, we recorded the findings with a perfect accuracy. This kind of observation differs from a traditional (live) gathering data in its naturally occurring situations. No mediated methods or second-hand information need to be used in the e-observation. Most of researches conducted in the area of e-learning or blended learning were mainly focused on learners and their behaviour and activities during working in the electronic environment. In the last years, however, there started to be published papers taking into account "the other side" of the problem concentrating on the indicators, or properties which electronic programmes contain and provide. To determine these indicators and to specify their functions in teaching English we decided to use e-performance observation in our research.

The observation performed in our research considered five dimensions suggested by Flick (in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p. 398):

- structured, systematic and quantitative observation (generating numerical data, comparing frequencies)
- non-participant observation
- covert indirect observation (the presence of the observer was unknown, the data were recorded via computer system)
- observation in unnatural, artificial setting (at the computer out of the classroom)
- observation of others (not a self-observation).

To gather the data observed of the observed online programme indicators we used a sign system to be able to subsequently compare the results of our e-observation. A structured observation sheet was created for this purpose. Though the preparation of such an observation sheet takes much time, the analysis of the data is rather rapid. As the observer is not under a time pressure, he/she can complete the observation sheet precisely thus achieving the reliability of results.

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The indicators of the online programme which were noted down by the e-performance observation included:

- the day when the respondent started to use the online programme
- the hour when the respondent started to use the online programme
- the period of time the respondent spent working in the online programme.

We followed several stages in our e-performance observation:

- choosing the participants, i.e. the respondents of the action research group
- setting the activities to be observed, i.e. the indicators of the online programme
- preparing a structured and focused observation sheet
- providing to each entry (each indicator) its symbol.

For taking notes in our observation sheet we decided to use these abbreviations as symbols for each entry:

The abbreviation "S" means student; in this case it was the respondent in the action research group. As there were fourteen respondents in the group, they were labeled from S1 to S14 in our observation sheets.

The abbreviation "D" means day; the following abbreviations for each day of a week were stated: Su = Sunday, Mo = Monday, Tu = Tuesday, We = Wednesday, Th = Thursday, Fr = Friday, Sa = Saturday.

Within the "hour" the exact time differentiating morning (= a.m.) and afternoon or evening (= p.m.) was registered in the observation sheets.

For the purpose of our research, we intentionally chose six weeks in equal time intervals to be observed, namely the 4th week, the 8th week, and the 12th week of both the winter and summer terms. We did not follow any predetermined plan, we used the possibilities offered by the online programme *MyLanguageLeaderLab*, and we observed the weeks approximately representing the beginning, the middle and the end of the term which obviously includes thirteen weeks in total. From the e-performance observation we found out when the respondents prepared their assignments and did their homework, whether it was immediately in the first day after the contact lessons or just before the classes.

The online programme *MyLanguageLeaderLab* provides a number of variable exercises, from the simple to the complex ones, such as fill-in exercises, matching, multiple choices, scrambled letters, dropdown exercises, true-false tasks and gap-fill tasks with drag-drop (students drag the correct words or phrases into empty spaces).

As an example we present a possible record following the e-observation. For the purpose of the description, we chose S5 who was the respondent in the group of action research. In Table 1 we give the data concerning completing five exercises by S5 in the 8th week of the winter term, where "F" stands for the frequency (the number of respondents´ attempts, i.e. how often the student entered the exercise to complete the task successfully). "Time" means the period in minutes during which the respondent worked with the given exercise in the online programme.

Table 1: E-observation of S5 in the 8th week (winter term)

	Exercise 1	Exercise 2	Exercise 3	Exercise 4	Exercise 5

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Student 5 8th week	F	Time	F	Time	F	Time	F	Time	F	Time
	1	2	2	6	1	2	2	5	1	2

Source: own processing

By this particular example of one respondent´s activities in the online programme *MyLanguageLeaderLab* we showed the importance and effective usability of indicators which function within this online programme. We also wanted to bring a closer look at the English language study in e-learning environment with the possibilities it offers.

4. Conclusion

E-performance observation was conducted to give an image of the respondents´ participation in the e-course, to set the intervals and time periods during which they completed their homework. The purpose of the e-performance observation was not to give the statistical data of the frequency of attempts of the respondents, the time spent working in the online programme, nor to show some correlation between the number of the attempts and the success in the tests achievements of the respondents because it would require a much broader research. The aim was to present how the e-course elements may be useful for the teacher in order to get familiar with the students´ activities while performing their tasks and homework exercises electronically. By this way, the teacher can get useful information about a student separately, or about the whole group of students, about their approach to study, learning intervals, and other relevant data. The main indicators which are extremely important in this respect, and can be of great help for the teacher in teaching English (resp. any other subject performed in electronic learning environment) are: indicator of the day, indicator of the hour, indicator of the time spent and indicator of frequency. The function of the indicators is to give the teacher a general overview about the students´ activities performed within the e-course and their increasing interest in the field studied.

By a regular e-performance observation (about which the observed students do not know, so they act and do their homework as they usually do), the teacher may modify his/her own teaching, follow the students´ learning progress and even predict their improvement and success in learning. By having such pieces of information, the teacher can also influence the students´ learning achievements by including those language areas which seem to be difficult for students.

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