

# Overcome Disadvantages of E-Learning for Training English as Foreign Language

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## Abstract

*The report presents the advantages of e-learning forms and the use of multimedia programs and products in the "English as foreign language" education, when compared to the traditional education. An already established and running virtual learning environment – namely eDuTK (<http://tk.uni-sz.bg/edutk/>), based on the MOODLE software, is being used in Technical College – Yambol. There is description of implementation of MOODLE for foreign language training. Analyze of advantages and disadvantages of multimedia product in e-learning education are developed. General disadvantages of e-learning on the base of other author publications are explored. The possibilities to overcoming of e-learning disadvantages by MOODLE activities, Hot Potatoes and other multimedia resources in the practices of Technical College – Yambol in the paper have been presented.*

**Keywords:** e-learning, English language training, digital technologies, advantages and disadvantages of e-learning

## 1. Introduction

In foreign language learning there are many specific features to which experts that develop educational content and e-learning modalities must adhere. E-learning is facilitated by the use of digital tools and content. Typically, it involves some form of interactivity, which may include online interaction between the learners and their teacher or peers. The selection of proper multimedia technologies in foreign language learning is very important issue. It should be possible to achieve the necessary quality of teaching materials for mastering reading skills, listening comprehension, writing and communication skills.

Learning Management Systems (LMS) or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as it popularly known is basically a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, and reporting of training programs, classroom and online events, e-learning programs, and training content. It is even known as a web-based technology used to plan, implement and assess a specific learning process. The system not only manages the training or educational records but also distributes them. The benefits of LMS range from, managing training and maintaining educational records, to distributing courses over the Internet with features for online collaboration. It is widely used in corporate world to automate record-keeping and employee registration (Gaya, J. 2010).

The MOODLE is designed and developed by particular philosophy, namely "social constructionist pedagogy". Knowledge is strengthened if the student can use it successfully in his wider environment. Students are not just a memory bank passively absorbing information, nor can knowledge be "transmitted" to them just by reading something or listening to someone (Branzburg, J., 2005). Moodle can be used to integrate college courses for students, with online activities that help them to increase their foreign language proficiency.

The goal of our investigation is to present the possibilities to overcoming of e-learning disadvantages by MOODLE activities, Hot Potatoes and other multimedia resources in the practices of Technical College in the discipline English as foreign language.

## 2. Material and Methods

The sources of information for our investigation are based on publications and practical results from the application of e-learning. Greater attention is given to the sources that relate to teaching language skills. The main directions of searching are:

1. Analysis of literature, both advantages and disadvantages of the e-learning and the possible ways to overcoming them.
2. The modern digital technologies and their role in overcoming the shortcomings of the e-learning in foreign language training.
3. Analysis of practical results for the activity of students in the VLE of TC - Yambol.
4. Requirements of the European Language Framework.

Investigations for conducted e-learning training in Technical College (TC) - Yambol are performed by data-base from the participation of about 60 students that are included in experiment with the prepared learning materials for training in English as foreign language. There are used as the traditional methods of analysis and synthesis of information as well as recent report of eDuTk students' results.

## 3. Results and Discussion

English language is the main subject for the student education in TC – Yambol. Creating the digital content for teaching English in TC - Yambol is performed by different stages of the experiment, first with one or two groups of students are involved, next stage is making analysis and then after the amendment, where necessary, the course is introduced for application in other groups. Furthermore, in the creation of educational materials are actively incorporated students. Their personal involvement is taken into account in the final assessment by the teacher.

### *Advantages of e-learning*

Some of the advantages of the use of VLE are indisputable and obvious. They stem from the opportunities offered by this type of systems. The report examines only the benefits for students, not for the teachers and for the training organizations.

The advantages of e-learning for foreign language training can be considered in several aspects: general advantages of e-learning, opportunities for collective work and development of communication skills. As the first group can be assigned the following (Definitions of e-learning, 2004):

- Student can study anywhere as long as there is access to a computer with internet connection;
- They can work at own pace;
- User can accommodate different learning styles through different activities;
- Flexibility to join discussions any hour of the day;
- E-learning is cost effective.

E-learning also offers individualized instruction, which print media, cannot provide, and instructor-led courses allow clumsily and at great cost. In conjunction with assessing needs, e-learning can target specific needs. And by using learning style tests, e-learning can locate and target individual learning preferences. Additionally, synchronous e-learning is self-paced. Advanced learners are allowed to speed through or bypass instruction that is redundant while novices slow their own progress through content, eliminating frustration with themselves, their fellow learners, and the course.

### *Disadvantages of e-learning*

The disadvantages of e-learning training are represented from different aspects by the authors (Definitions of e-learning, 2004; Burbles, N. C., 2004; Lehmann, K.J., 2004; Disadvantages of

e-Learning, 2010; Challenges and Disadvantages of E-learning and Distance Learning, 2009). Some of them concern strategies for distance e-learning without the use of traditional forms of lectures and practical exercises. In this aspect can be mentioned the following shortcomings (Challenges and Disadvantages of E-learning and Distance Learning, 2009):

- Lack of personal community and connection (not for blended learning);
- Its a banking model of education (which is partially inevitable);
- Not necessary based on the best science regarding How People Learn;
- Tech, toys, and teaching over learning;
- Focus on memorization over learning core competencies;
- Better aligning of incentives of teachers and learners;
- Downtime plus mobile as well as “play” are issues to consider as well;
- Underutilized talents and facilities;
- No way to ground social networking and web 2.0 tools;

It could be argued that most of them can be overcome if the orientation is to blended e-learning, which is the route of administration in TC - Yambol.

For the student, several disadvantages exist in the virtual classroom. According to Burbules (2004) “hidden barriers to access” of a virtual classroom to students; there are limitations of making an online course accessible to all. Some communication tools may not suit some students; for example, the streaming of audio cannot be heard by a hearing impaired student and thus this tool is not accessible to all.

Another disadvantage of the virtual classroom is that it can only be successful if the communication tools used in the classroom are “in the student’s possession...accessible to the student... (and) operable by the student” (Lehmann, 2004). Although synchronous communication tools are usually perceived as an advantage because of their similarity to communication in the traditional classroom, they can also be a disadvantage. This is because they consist of real-time, text-based communication in which responses are often “out of sequence” as a consequence of varying typing abilities among students (Fetterman, D., 1998). Students must have adequate typing skills and communication skills as the majority of learning is text-based and self-paced, and if they are used to being in a structured, scheduled environment they will be disadvantaged and most likely get confused and fall behind (IOWA State University, 2001). Teachers are not as readily available in the virtual classroom as they are in the traditional classroom, therefore students who usually continual support of the teacher need may feel isolated, according to the IOWA State University (2001).

The fact that there are technological requirements to enable full participation in the virtual classroom is also another disadvantage to students. For example, if the student does not have a high bandwidth and adequate computer memory needed to access the Internet and hence the virtual classroom as well as download course material, they will be disadvantaged. Also, the technological dependence of the virtual classroom can be a disadvantage if there is an Internet connection failure or a similar technological problem that prevents students to complete a task. If there is no “back up plan” in the case of a technological hindrance, students will miss out on the learning activity that was scheduled (Colorado State University, 2005).

*Difficulties with software.* The disadvantage of e-learning is the managing of computer files, software compatibility and learning new software, including e-Learning (Disadvantages of e-Learning, 2010). For learners with beginner-level computer skills it can sometimes seem complex to keep their computer files organized. The lesson points you to download a file which the learner does and later cannot find the file. The file is downloaded to the folder the computer automatically opens to rather than a folder chosen by the learner. This file may be lost or misplaced to the learner without good computer organizational skills. In our college the students have the requisite level of

working with the computers and the software platform, which they acquire in a first course in the discipline of Informatics. In addition to that the lectures in eDuTK are divided into disciplines, a very good navigation menu is available and that doesn't create difficulties of this type.

*High motivation.* E-Learning also requires time to complete especially those with assignments and interactive collaborations. This means that students have to be highly motivated and responsible because all the work they do is on their own. Learners with low motivation may not complete modules. In TC – Yambol, as in many universities study English language is a main subject for first year students. Students are actively involved in creating the learning material and improvement the data-base, that keep them high motivated.

*Isolation.* Another disadvantage of e-learning is that students may feel isolated and unsupported while learning. Instructions are not always available to help the learner so learners need to have discipline to work independently without assistance. E-Learners may also become bored with no interaction. It needs to be stressed that blended learning is not just a mixture of strategies and technologies, but a holistic didactical method that combines “the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment, rather than ratio of delivery modalities” (Dziuban, Hartman, Moskal, 2004). Applying blended learning we overcome some proven disadvantages for both form of education - distance e-learning and traditional class room learning.

All collaborative learning theory contends that human interaction is a vital ingredient to learning. Consideration of this is particularly crucial when designing e-learning, realizing the potential for the medium to isolate learners. With well-delivered synchronous distance education, and technology like message boards, chats, e-mail, and tele-conferencing, this potential drawback is reduced. However, e-learning detractors still argue that the magical classroom bond between teacher and student, and among the students themselves, can not be replicated through communications technology. The ways in which e-learning may not excel over other training include (Kruse K., 2004):

- Technology issues of the learners are most commonly technophobia and unavailability of required technologies.
- Portability of training has become strength of e-learning with the proliferation of network linking points, notebook computers, PDAs, and mobile phones, but still does not rival that of printed workbooks or reference material.
- Reduced social and cultural interaction can be a drawback. The impersonality, suppression of communication mechanisms such as body language, and elimination of peer-to-peer learning that are part of this potential disadvantage are lessening with advances in communications technologies.

Overcoming the disadvantages of e-learning:

- *Lack of customization to student's interest (also length instead of modules).* Overcoming this deficiency is achieved through analysis of student results by analysis and report, which provides eDuTK. In addition to periodic surveys, this is in particular consideration of the interests of students to improve the quality of teaching materials in electronic format.
- *Lack of student motivation.* According to a series of studies, observations of the authors and their experience lack of motivation is not related to the implementation of blended learning. Opposite its implementation and opportunities encourage students. It speaks for the fact that motivation is lower when these students in less benefited from electronic versions of educational materials available in the VLE eDuTK.
- *Not experientially based—its simulation based at best.* In TC Yambol after the creation of electronic materials they are experimenting with one or two school groups, and then make adjustments if necessary and then offered in VLE eDuTK.

- *Lack of quality assessment and feedback, which hinders learning.* Students can complete the feedback form to express an opinion on the material in each subject. After completing the given lesson from all students, the teacher analyzes the results obtained through in-system tools - Item analyzes. It shows which the most common mistakes are; what percentage of students answered the questions after each lesson; and etc. There is a pre-developed system of criteria for assessing the knowledge, consistent with the requirements for achieving quality education and European Framework to cover the level A1 - A2.
- *Some self-directed learners are sometimes too random and have no process.* The learner has to self-analyze content without requisite knowledge or criteria (its authority 2.0). Students are grouped in main units based on their knowledge and English proficiency. During their study they follow the instructions of their teacher and plan-schedule.
- *Time resources at a minimum.* The duration of each lesson or the test after it is not unlimited, it is determined by the teacher depending on the complexity and volume of material included in it. Also there can be limit on the number of repetitions of each activity.

Overcome disadvantages of e-learning for English language training is reached by specialized technologies. Hot Potatoes (<http://hotpot.uvic.ca/>, 08.05.2010) are not part of MOODLE but VLE possesses the necessary instruments to allow for exercises created in it to be imported and integrated in. Hot Potatoes for Windows is an instrumental work environment which includes six applied programs. There could be used in creating interactive exercises. They are especially suitable for foreign language learning (multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering and gap-fill exercises), for example Figure1.

Traveller's guide									
Fill in all the gaps, then press "Check" to check your answers. Use the "Hint" button to get a free letter if an answer is giving you trouble. You can also click on the "[?]" button to get a clue. Note that you will lose points if you ask for hints or clues!									
accommodation	bank card	cash dispensers	charter	companies	exposed	facilities	fares	mandatory	operate
passengers	prepaid	provide	rail	restrictions	self-catering	signposted	surcharge	volume	wear
<b>Tips for travellers to Northern Ireland</b> (excerpt)									
<p><b>Arriving:</b> Major airlines <input type="text"/> services from the USA and Canada to Belfast International Airport via London. There are also direct <input type="text"/> flights to Belfast from New York and Toronto. A free bus from the airport drops <input type="text"/> off at the <input type="text"/> station and the International Youth Hostel. There are also regular overnight crossings and sailings, and car ferries from Wales.</p> <p><b>Getting around:</b> The <input type="text"/> of traffic is low. Roads are well-surfaced and <input type="text"/>. Seat belts are <input type="text"/> for drivers and all passengers. Motorcyclist must <input type="text"/> crash helmets. Always lock your car and do not leave tempting articles <input type="text"/> to view. If you rent a car, check with the car rental <input type="text"/> the <input type="text"/> and mileage. Public transport services are reduced on public holidays and at weekends.</p> <p><b>Money:</b> You can get money from "hole in the wall" <input type="text"/>. It is good to carry little cash for bus and other <input type="text"/>. Cheques backed by a <input type="text"/> are widely accepted as well as major credit cards.</p>									

**Figure 1. Screenshot of JCloze – filling in a missing word or phrase.**

The Hot Potatoes exercises could be saved in a web format and used in a web browser, printed out, integrated and/or imported in the MOODLE using SCORM. The Hot Potatoes Set allows creating exercises, which contain subtitles and instructions; prompts and feedback; buttons; different appearances of the exercise texts – multiple fonts, colors, highlights of text and etc.; timer, to limit duration of the exercises.

To develop the listening with comprehension and communication the lecturer can use Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/about/>, 08.05.2010). It is a free, easy to use and multilingual audio editor and recorder for Windows, Mac OS X, GNU/Linux and other operating systems. Both the student and the teacher can use Audacity to:

- Record live audio under Windows, Mac OS X, GNU/Linux operating systems;
- Convert tapes and records into digital recordings or CDs.
- Edit Ogg Vorbis, MP3, WAV or AIFF sound files (Ogg Vorbis is a completely open, patent-free, professional audio encoding and streaming technology with all the benefits of Open Source.).
- Cut, copy, splice or mix sounds together.
- Change the speed or pitch of a recording.

To extend the possibilities of Audacity, both lecturers and students can use the set provided directly at <http://www.voxopop.com/>. The students can create assignments and exercises in team groups for conversation, and also create dialogs and text for self-study without any additional software on their computers. New and already learned words can be associated with a hyperlink to the glossary of this course. In order to strengthen the consequence of application of the lessons audio files may be include with the text of the lesson to master the skill of listening comprehension. After hearing text, questions are followed under the form of test, on which students must respond in order to verify their knowledge. Test can be done to check the grammar studied material.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Documents in the context of the Bologna Process (European Union, 2000) recommend, among other things, that European university students acquire at least two foreign languages up to a certain level of proficiency. Technology broadens the definition of face-to-face as there can be the use of two way video, and two way audio. Introducing these elements of participation creates a blended e-learning experience. Blended e-learning includes elements of web interaction and in-person interaction; it overcomes most of shortcoming of e-learning. The used technologies are the tool for achieving the main goals of language learning. There is a version of MOODLE for language learning, which have improved ability to integrate audio, video and enhanced interactivity of applied learning.

Applying blended learning in the discipline English as foreign language we gain good experience overcoming of e-learning disadvantages by MOODLE activities, Hot Potatoes and other multimedia resources and reached good results of acquired knowledge.

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