WEB-BASED VOCATIONAL ENGLISH: DEVELOPMENT, PRACTICE AND PROBLEMS

Chan Kim Hung Martina, Lee Chi Ming
Language Centre
Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education

Index: Web-based learning, Vocational English, On-line learning

Abstract: In response to the IT in education initiative by Hong Kong's Vocational Training Council, a project on web-based vocational English course was carried out at the Language Centre of Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (Tsing Yi) in September 1999. This project aimed to find out how to enhance language learning through integrating web-based and classroom-based activities. A survey was administered to investigate students' response to this type of learning experience. In this paper, the development of the web-based activities and the integration process would be described and the survey results would be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (HKIVE) is the largest institution in Hong Kong to provide vocational training and education under the Vocational Training Council (VTC) of Hong Kong. It is composed of nine campuses in various locations in the territory. Language modules, offered by the Language Centre of each campus, form part of the formal curriculum in all the courses that HKIVE offers.

The Council is committed to using information technology as one of the modes of course delivery. The plan is that over a 5-year period up to 2004, 75% of the curriculum for HKIVE's courses are to be web-based (45% for presentation and 35% interactive). Currently most language modules are classroom-based, supplemented with computer-assisted learning activities. In response to the commitment, the authors in the Language Centre, HKIVE (Tsing Yi), initiated a project to explore the possibilities of integrating web-based materials into a vocational English module.

DEVELOPMENT AND INTEGRATION

The project started in September 1999. A block of four lessons on job application were chosen in the Technical English module for the second year students in the Department of Electrical and Telecommunications Engineering at HKIVE (Tsing Yi). The block consists of four units, namely, Job Advertisement, Resume, Job Application Letter and Job Interview. Web-based learning materials were developed and a website was set up.

There are a few assumptions underpinning the design of the project.

1. ***Involvement***: As cited in Nunan (1991, pp.171), Rubin and Thompson characterise efficient language learners as those who 'make their own opportunities, and find strategies for getting practice in using language inside and outside the classroom; use mnemonics; are creative and experiment with language'. The web-based tasks would provide opportunities to engage the students with language activities outside the classroom. Despite different learners and learning

styles (Cotton, 1995; Tennant, 1988), the depth of participant involvement appears to be essential. The web-based tasks were designed in such a way that the students should become involved in and committed to their own learning.

2. ***Motivation:*** Bork (1992) points out that many studies for years have shown that the amount of quality time spent at a learning task is one of the most important factors in determining how much and how well students learn. People will spend more time learning if they like what they are doing. Apart from the topic being of interest to the students, some kind of incentive could be built into the activities to encourage students to learn.
3. ***Independence:*** To be independent in learning means that the students should be able to manage and monitor their own learning, and decide their pace of learning. Many students find it difficult to cope with tasks in English requiring an independent approach. As a result, they are often confused and passive in the face of the new demands placed upon them and many are unable to achieve the maximum academic performance (Watkins and Biggs, 1996). The delivery of the web-based tasks should enable the students to work independently.
4. ***Integration:*** Since human interaction is essential for language learning, an integration of web-based and classroom-based activities would enhance learning.

The approach adopted in the design of the block was to integrate the web-based tasks with classroom teaching. It is believed that they would complement one another. The arrangement was that students were required to complete the web-based tasks before the lessons. Students were given guidelines on how to use the web-based materials and worksheets to complete in addition to the tasks presented in the website. In order to encourage involvement of students, the materials were made as interesting and challenging as possible. Each unit would require about an hour to finish. A quiz, as an incentive to encourage the students to complete the web-based tasks, was given at the beginning of each lesson. Follow-ups on what students had learnt and extended activities were then done in class. This integrated approach takes advantage of what modern technology can offer and more importantly recognizes the specific nature of language learning, that is, human interaction as an essential part of the learning process. The block was delivered in February 2000 over a period of four weeks.

THE SURVEY

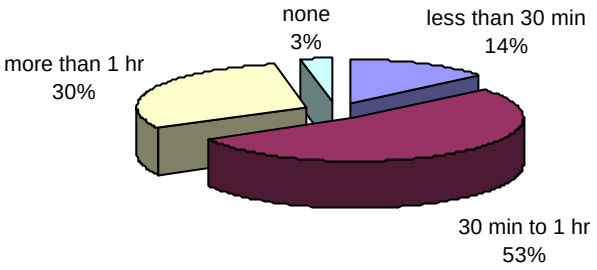
A survey was carried out at the end of the block with a sample of 173 students. They were all year two students studying higher diploma in the Department of Electrical and Telecommunications Engineering at HKIVE (Tsing Yi). The purpose of this study was to investigate the students' response with regard to the assumptions underlying the design of the project as discussed above. A questionnaire was administered to collect data for analysis.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Involvement: The tasks in each unit would require about 1 hour to finish. As shown in figure 3, 53% of the students spent 30 minutes to 1 hour on each unit. Quite many (30%) spent more than 1 hour. This reflects that the majority (83%) of the students did spend sufficient time in doing the web-based activities. It shows how much they were involved in the tasks.

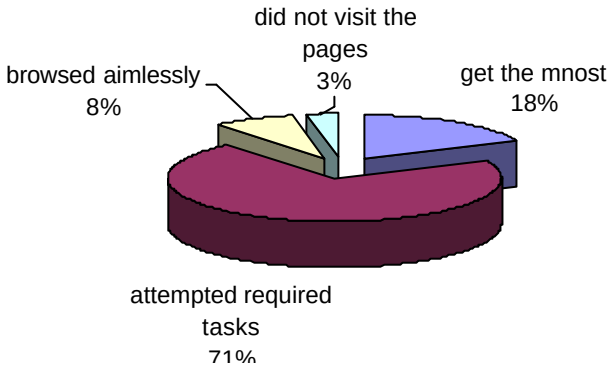
The findings also reveal that some students (17%) spent none or less than 30 minutes on the tasks. Apparently these students were not very much involved in the learning tasks. This may be related to whether these students were willing to take up responsibility and what kind of motivation they may have as discussed next.

Figure 3. How much time did you spend on the web-based activities?



When asked how much effort they paid in doing the tasks, the majority (71%) of the students expressed that they just attempted the required tasks as told (figure 4). This reflects that these students took up only minimal responsibility for their learning, that is, just enough to finish the tasks as assigned.

Figure 4. How much effort have you paid in doing the web-based exercises?



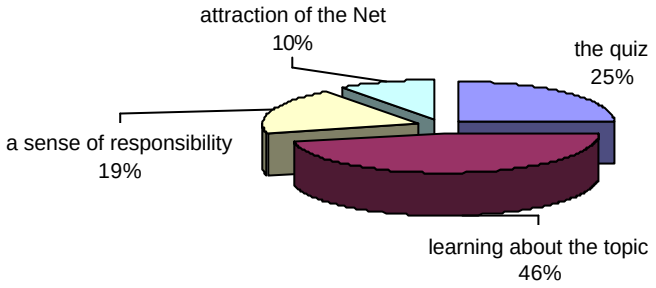
A small number of students (around 10%) indicated that they either browsed through the pages aimlessly or did not visit the website at all. This is consistent with the results in the question discussed above. These students did not take up as much responsibility as necessary to finish the web-based activities. However, almost one fifth of the students attempted the tasks because they tried to get the most out of the activities.

On the whole, the results show that basically most students (89%) have a positive attitude towards taking up responsibility for their own learning. The web-based activities hand over the responsibility of learning to the students. It is believed that to be more effective and efficient in learning, students should take up more responsibility in their own learning.

Motivation: When the teaching block was first designed, it was felt that job application would be of interest to the students. Also, it was believed that a quiz after each unit can motivate the students to complete the tasks. However, the survey shows that the number of students who did the web-based activities because of the quiz amounts to only a quarter of the total. This did not coincide with the hypothesis that follow-up quiz would be a strong motivation for the students. Rather, "the

desire to learn about the topic" was an even more important reason as 46% expressed that that was the most important reason (figure 5). This confirms that the choice of the topic was right. 19% of students completed the tasks out of a sense of responsibility. This matches with the findings from another question on how much effort they have paid in doing the web-based tasks, as discussed above. This may lead to the conclusion that intrinsic motivation (e.g. interest in the topic) would be a stronger drive than extrinsic motivation (i.e. quiz) for students to learn.

Figure 5. The most important reason that has made you do the web-based exercises?

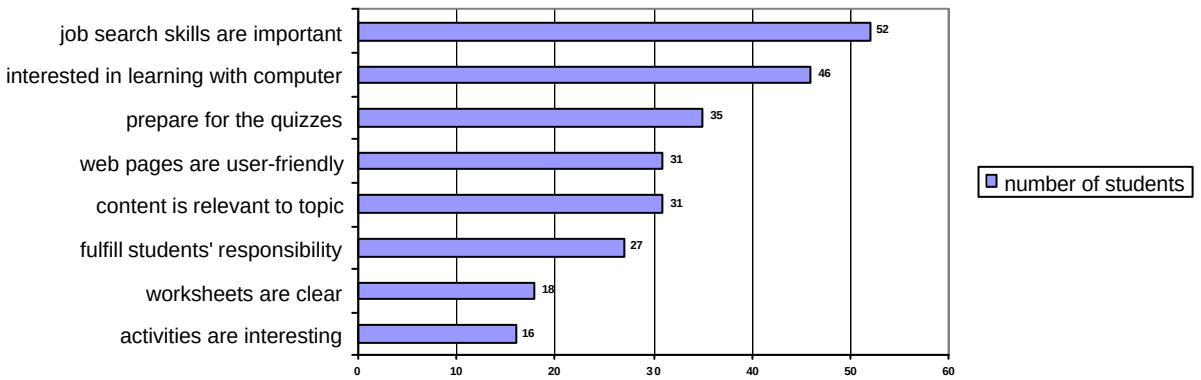


It is not surprising that only 10% responded that they did the tasks because of the attraction of the Net. Having done a survey of available multimedia learning materials, Clark and Craig (1992) concluded that multimedia is not the factor that influences learning. This again confirms that the topic rather than the medium is a more significant motivating factor.

Students were asked the reasons that had made them do well in the tasks and more than one option was allowed from a list. As revealed in figure 6, the reason with the most ticks is that job searching skills are important to them. This further confirms that motivation coming from within the students would have much more influence on students' motivation to learn.

The reason with the second most ticks is their interest in learning through the computer. This seems to be in conflict with the previous question about reason for making them do the web-based activities. This could be explained by the different formats of the two questions. Only one option is available in the former question while in the latter one students can choose more than one. Since

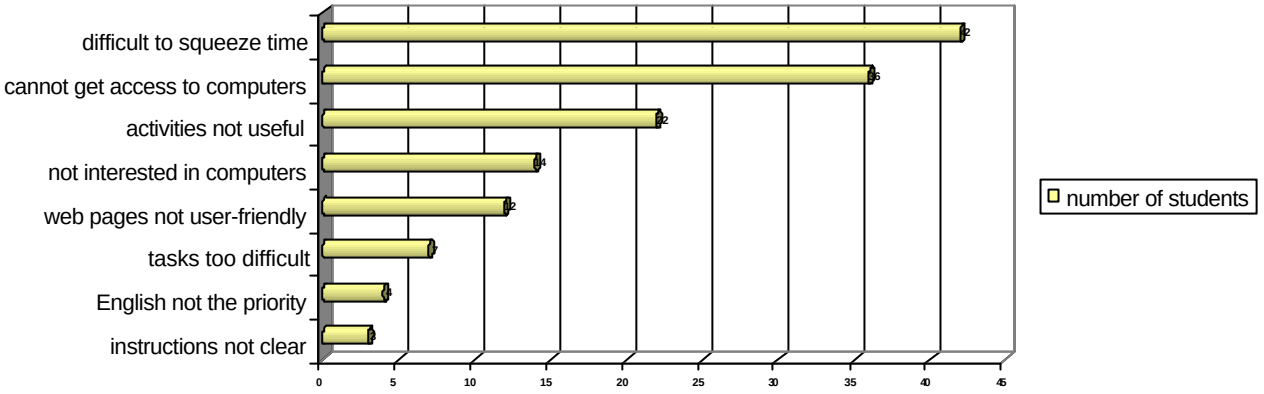
Figure 6. Reasons for doing the exercises well



the most important reason is related to the significance of the topic itself, only a small percentage goes to the attraction of the Net. Therefore, the results are not contradictory.

Independence: Students were asked to indicate why they had not done the tasks well. As shown in figure 7, the two most prominent factors are "difficulty to squeeze time" and "cannot get access to computers". Other factors are not as significant. This may reflect the way that the students manage their time, particularly on allocating time for learning. An independent student should be able to take control over his learning. As in this case, the students needed to make arrangement to complete the tasks by themselves, their performance in the tasks would therefore be highly attributed to how they manage their time. If the unit is entirely classroom-based, the time factor is unlikely to be a

Figure 7. Reasons for NOT doing the exercises well



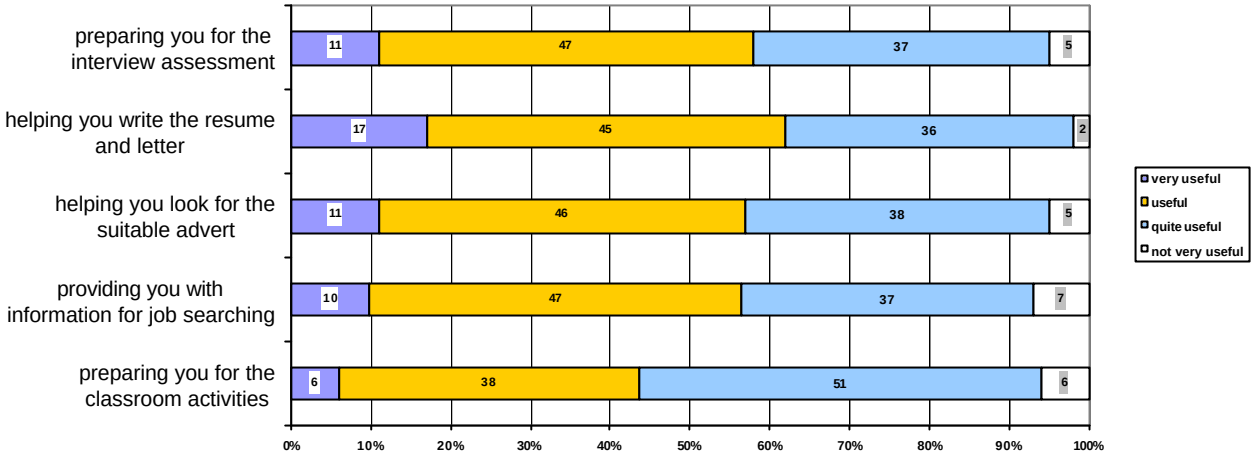
problem.

As for the other reason of "cannot get access to computers", this also demands the students to plan ahead. The computer rooms are open for free access throughout the week at different times in the campus. If the students really want to complete the task, they can by planning and reserving time slots well in advance.

Integration: It is believed that a combination of web-based and classroom-based activities would enhance learning. Figure 8 shows what the students thought about the usefulness of the web-based activities.

On average, around 56% of the students thought that the web-based activities were very useful and useful except for the usefulness in "preparing you for the classroom activities". Only very few students thought that the web-based activities are not useful.

Figure 8. How useful are the web-based activities?



CONCLUSIONS

While it is impossible to reach definitive conclusions, a few things are worth noting:

1. Web-based learning would invite more involvement from students. Having to spend one hour or more on the web-based activities has made students more involved in their own learning. As they already got some information from the web-based activities, they were better prepared for the classroom learning and participated more actively in class.
2. Students are more likely to spend time and effort on what they perceive to be important or interesting to them. Intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in motivating students to learn. If learning is a terrible task, students will keep at it only through the use of external incentives/threats.
3. Multimedia materials presented through the web do not necessarily become motivating for students. Motivation must come from the desire to learn rather than the mode of learning or other external incentives.
4. Web-based learning demands students to be more independent. Unlike classroom-based learning, students need to allocate time to finish the tasks. This was found to be rather difficult for students who have not been trained to learn independently under the current education system. Training should be provided to students to help them develop skills that are required to be independent learners.
5. The integrated approach is perceived to be successful in enhancing learning.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Chan Kim Hung Martina, Lee Chi Ming

Language Centre

Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education
Email: lamshan@vtc.edu.hk & leecm@vtc.edu.hk