

## **E-LEARNING IN BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE – RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY**

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### **Abstract**

The paper reflects the real needs and priorities within foreign language teaching at the Faculty of Economics and Management of the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CULS), which include the reduction of the lecturer's direct teaching load and the use of modern ICT technologies within e-learning courses offered to students of all forms of studies. For the purposes of the research, the e-learning Business English course was developed. The objective of the research was to find out students' opinion on e-learning based on the frequencies of their responses and on their qualitative signs. The research was conducted in accordance with the long-term aim of the CULS Prague, as well as in accordance with the language policy of the European Union, with the national policy of language education and with the long-term aims of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic.

**Key Words:** action research, e-learning, qualitative sign, questionnaire survey

### **1. Introduction**

The topic of the paper reflects the real needs and stipulated priorities within foreign language teaching at the Faculty of Economics and Management of the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, which include the reduction of the number of contact hours connected with the use of modern ICT technologies. For the purposes of the research, the e-learning Business English course was developed. The paper is a follow-up to previous studies by Kučířková, Kučera and Vostrá Vydrová (2014) and Kučera and Kučířková (2015). It contains a review of literature focused on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) e-learning and related linguistic theories, and relevant theories of learning, particularly constructivism and behaviourism. In addition to the questionnaire research, the methodology of questionnaire pre-research is included. Finally, the findings of the actual questionnaire research are presented and discussed.

The study used the methodology of 'action research'. It refers to the classroom investigation initiated by researchers, i.e., teachers, who look critically at their own practice

with the purpose of improving their teaching and the quality of education (Blázquez, 2007). It connects received knowledge based upon practical professional experience with experiential knowledge via a continuous process of reflection. Action research engages practitioners in a critical and reflective attitude toward their work. In this approach, teachers - action researchers - collaborate to produce their own development of knowledge about teaching with technology (Laurillard, 2008) and try to answer questions related to an aspect of their professional practice. This means that they collect and analyse data, reflect on what they discover and then apply it in their practice. Bailey (2001) points out that research which can be called 'action research' denotes a particular approach to collecting and interpreting data that involves a set of reiterated procedures for teachers (researchers) to conduct research in their own settings.

Action research is often categorized as qualitative research, however, the positioning of it is more complex. Researchers such as McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2003) point out that it is a misconception that quantitative procedures are not applicable within it and that researchers cannot use statistics in action research. McKay (2006) and Burns (2010) also argue that data collection instruments from both qualitative and quantitative research can be used in action research. An effective use of a quantitative action research design is also illustrated in the study by O'Gara (2008), in which the author evaluated the impact of drama methods on children's learning of verb tenses. The results provided statistically reliable evidence for the effectiveness of teaching tenses through drama. The viability of using either or both quantitative and qualitative research methods to conduct action research was suggested.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 ESP e-learning and related linguistics theories**

The present ESP language course derives its linguistic input particularly from the theory of language register analysis and functional description of language with the input of philosophy and speech acts. They are not exclusive but complementary and each has its place in the course. The researchers' aim was to produce the syllabus which would place high priority on the lexical features students may encounter in their ESP (business and economic) studies and in future jobs, as well as on the language functions applicable in particular business situations.

The concept of special (specific) language register analysis was one of the phases in the development of ESP in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was based on the principle that one

kind of ESP constitutes a specific register different from that of another kind of ESP – e.g. English of Electrical Engineering vs. English of Biology (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Bell (1981) determines register as “a kind of sub-language or limited language described by correlating the linguistic forms in appropriate texts with situational variables”. The whole language is then made up of a collection of registers (Bell, 1981). Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 30) define register as “the kind of language associated with a specific context, such as an area of knowledge (legal English; social English; medical English; business English; scientific English etc.), or an area of use (technical manuals, academic texts, business meetings, advertisements, doctor - patient communication etc.)” The aim of register analysis is to identify the grammatical and lexical features of registers.

New ideas emerged in the study of language at the same time as the demand for English for Specific Purposes was growing. Traditionally, the aim of linguistics was to describe grammar, and the new studies focused on the ways in which language is actually used in real communication. However, language does not exist for its own sake and it can be looked at from the point of view of function, that is, what people do with it. Functions are concerned with social behaviour and represent the intention of a speaker or writer, for example, promising, threatening, classifying, identifying, reporting etc. (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

At the beginning of the 20th century structuralism was replaced by functionalism. Linguists were interested in the functional style, they examined the development of language as the development of the system and abandoned the study of isolated language features development (Mathesius, 1961). The functional view of language began to have its influence on language teaching in the 1970s with a move from language syllabi organised on structural grounds to those organised on functional criteria. It was connected with the Council of Europe’s efforts to establish some kind of equivalence in the syllabi for learning various languages and with the establishment of analytical philosophy that became a dominant tendency with the so called “turn to the language“. John L. Austin (1911-1960) became a key personality among Oxford philosophers who founded school of “philosophy of ordinary language” (Peregrin, 2005). Philosophy became involved in the nature of language and philosophers turned their attention towards the analysis of language, a process that had a substantial impact on linguistics in the 1960s with Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and Searle’s *Speech Acts* (1969). The functional approach provides students not only with the linguistic knowledge which permits them to create grammatical sentences (linguistic competence), but also the social knowledge and skill which permit them to produce and

understand socially appropriate utterances (communicative competence – Bell, 1981). Philosophers provided insights which have proved to be of value to linguists. For instance, Sager, Dungworth and McDonald (1980: 87) define a special text unit as “the product of a special speech act characterised by a certain kind of unity of topic, reference and syntactic cohesion and by a conventional form which organises the content of the message according to the particular intentions pursued.” They state that intentions with which we use the language arise from the voluntary nature of language and that these intentions are part of human behaviour and are determined by the circumstances which surround speech acts. They define a speech act as “the result of the convergence of a speaker (or writer), a listener (or reader) and a topic (an area of reference), at a particular time and place in a specific situation” (Sager, Dungworth and McDonald, 1980: 22).

Every ESP course should be relevant to learners’ needs, which is why the theory of language based on registers and functions creates the basis of the course of Business English in this study. The researchers’ aim was to produce the syllabus which would give high priority to lexical features students are supposed to meet in their ESP (business and economic) studies and in future jobs, as well as to the language functions in particular business situations.

## **2.2 Relevant theory of learning**

Theories of learning provide the theoretical basis for language teaching methodology. E-learning methodology can be considered an innovation in the teaching of ESP in higher education. Nowadays, ESP instruction is very often implemented through e-learning and ESP e-learning methodology should reflect the underlying concepts and activities of the disciplines and professions it serves. The online course of Business English proves that ESP e-learning methodology is specific and a more traditional language methodology and content methodology in isolation are not sufficient for effective ESP e-learning. In our ESP e-learning methodology we consider language and content learning equally important. The lessons are based on thematic economic units with the use of content (subject-matter: economics, accountancy, management etc.) for language practice. Language is taught through subject-matter texts and through various activities for mastering the specific language as well. Students have to master the language items and also gain the basic knowledge of subject-matter in the unit. In ESP e-learning subject-matter is a means for learning specialist language and at the same time the basic notions of students’ disciplines and professions.

The relevant theory of learning implied by the activities in the present course and providing the bases for ESP e-learning methodology is behaviourism supplemented by the

researchers' own teaching experience. The psychology of the Behaviourist School – Pavlov, Thorndike, Hull and Skinner (in Bell, 1981) – provided the model of learning based on behaviourism. Since language is a human activity, it was believed that learning a language was achieved on the basis of a stimulus – response chains (Bell, 1981). Behaviourism as the theory of learning posits that learning is a mechanical process of habit formation and proceeds by means of the frequent reinforcement of a stimulus – response sequence (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). The basic exercise technique widely used in ESP is pattern practice, particularly in the form of language drills. Frequent repetition is essential to effective learning and all errors must be immediately corrected. Thus, behaviourism can provide the theoretical underpinning of ESP e-learning. The computer provides the stimulus, the learner has to do as directed, i.e., provides the response, and finally, the computer gives feedback and reinforces the response. Providing feedback is connected with e-learning activities and it can be executed by both agents, the computer and the teacher. Timely provision of feedback is a key to success in Computer-Mediated Communication. “Online learning activities accompanied by the provision of feedback represent tools for structuring the process of e-learning” (Černá, 2005: 61).

At the same time, constructivist learning theories can also underpin technology-enhanced learning (TEL). The constructivist view of teaching and learning is associated with the work of John Dewey (in Garrison and Anderson, 2003), who identified two principles that have become implemented in contemporary e-learning. One is interaction through which ideas are communicated and knowledge is constructed and confirmed. The second principle is continuity which goes to the importance of creating the foundation for future learning. It means that e-learning must provide experience that ensures continuity for new learning experience (Garrison and Anderson, 2003). The same reference to constructivism as to the learning theory that underpins the methodology of learning online is found in the book *Language Learning Online: towards best practice*. Constructivist ideas underpinning TEL have been broadly embraced by Laurillard (e.g. 1978, 1982, 1995). According to Laurillard et al. (2011), teachers need to optimise the use of digital technologies in order to achieve effective learning. The constructivist approach requires learners to take responsibility for their own learning, either individually or collaboratively. Knowledge is seen as something that must be constructed (Nesi, 2011).

The newly developed e-learning Business English course embraces both of the abovementioned principles. Through its interactive tasks it communicates ideas and firms and constructs knowledge, allowing for immediate feedback upon one's achievement and multiple

attempts at answers while practising one's skills. By addressing key language issues, developing major language skills and concentrating on topics that transcend to other fields of study as well as real-life experience, the course provides continuity and foundation for further learning.

### **2.3. E-learning course description**

The innovative course has a topical syllabus that reflects the students' main fields of studies and their departments. At the same time, the syllabus is also functional as far as writing and business context is concerned (personnel management, marketing etc.). The course is focused on the development of business and economic terminology, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, writing and the work with up-to-date authentic audio-visual materials. Online study support for Business English is in the form of a 14-module course in the Moodle LMS with the following module structure:

- a) lead-in;
- b) keywords and definitions;
- c) specialist material – reading/audio-visual;
- d) various activities;
- e) resources.

The content of the course is the following:

- a) a specialist text intended for reading comprehension practice;
- b) interactive HotPotatoes exercises intended for students' vocabulary practice such as fill-in-the-gaps, multiple-choice, true/false, matching;
- c) online submission of written assignments (translations, letters) in some modules;
- d) other additional activities – listening, videos;
- e) tests for training purposes with limited or unlimited number of possibilities, or a credit test with just one try and a time limit.

The course focuses on the issues of business and economics as well as on the English language used in business. It should provide students with a useful guide or tool on how to communicate about business in English.

The course focuses on the development of listening, reading and writing skills, translation as the fifth skill and vocabulary development, because these skills are important for the studies and professions (listening to lectures, note taking, writing business letters, reports, reading specialist texts etc.). The development of the knowledge of grammar was not in the foreground of the course, as the students had already acquired a sufficient command of

English grammar appropriate for B1 level within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The development of vocabulary that can be applied in business and economics was of primary importance. By learning and practising specialist vocabulary the students receive guidance as a key to performing other activities like speaking, reading, writing and listening.

### **3. The study**

#### **3.1 The aim of the questionnaire study**

The aim of the questionnaire was to discover the opinions of students on the effectiveness of e-learning as far as language skills and vocabulary are concerned in comparison with face-to-face instruction, and on the implementation of the e-learning course for distance students based on the frequencies of their responses and on the qualitative signs (year of study, field of study). Questionnaire is used as a research instrument to collect data on phenomena which cannot be observed, such as attitudes, self-concepts etc. and to obtain information about the research subjects (Seliger and Shohamy, 1990: 172).

#### **3.2 Participants**

The population is represented by students of the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague within the bachelor studies who went through placement tests and were characterised by the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The research sample of 107 students was represented by those full-time B1 students who enrolled into the subject of Business English.

#### **3.3 Research instrument - questionnaire**

Questionnaires are used to collect data on phenomena which cannot be observed, such as attitudes, motivation etc. and to obtain information about the research subjects, such as age, years of studying the language etc. (Seliger and Shohamy, 1990).

Questionnaires were distributed in Czech to ensure that the questions would be properly understood by students and answered correctly. The validity of the findings was supposed to be strengthened in this way. Anonymity was assured when filling in the questionnaires, so the students tended to share information with the teacher more easily. They are supposed to bring true and accurate responses. Anonymity and high response rate also heightened the validity of findings. Before the study proper research started, pre-research had been conducted. It served the purpose of verifying whether the questions in the questionnaire

were clear and whether the students understood everything and could answer without problems.

We used a non-standardised structured questionnaire that was composed of 11 Likert scale questions with a high degree of explicitness (Gavora, 2000; Rory O'Brien, 1998) requiring the subjects to select among a number of alternatives, and one open question.

The questionnaire asked about the information connected with:

1. Gender
2. Field of Study
3. Year of Study
4. Participation in the e-learning course

Then the questions that offered a choice from several possibilities a) "yes", b) "rather yes", c) "rather not", d) "no", e) "I do not know" followed:

5. Do you think that the inclusion of the ESP e-learning course is proper?
6. Do you think that the lessons of ESP within the e-learning course can be of the same effectiveness as the face-to-face lessons?
7. Do you think that the reading skill development within the e-learning course can be of the same effectiveness as the face-to-face lessons?
8. Do you think that the listening skill development within the e-learning course can be of the same effectiveness as the face-to-face lessons?
9. Do you think that the writing skill development within the e-learning course can be of the same effectiveness as the face-to-face lessons?
10. Do you think that the translation skill development within the e-learning course can be of the same effectiveness as the face-to-face lessons?
11. Do you think that the vocabulary skill development within the e-learning course can be of the same effectiveness as the face-to-face lessons?
12. Comment.

The questionnaire was concluded with the open question (12) that was intended for the respondents to evaluate the course, write their comments and also recommendations for future implications as the course in the Moodle LMS can be freely updated. This type of open question was not used any more as its interpretation requires more complex analysis.

In order to check the appropriateness and a proper structure of questionnaires for the actual questionnaire research within the study proper, questionnaires in the paper form were also distributed among the students during the last lesson in the year preceding the actual research. The students were given questionnaires in which they could express their views on



the appropriateness of the inclusion of e-learning into the lessons of English for Specific Purposes (Business English) within distance studies and the effectiveness of e-learning as far as language skills (with the exclusion of speaking) and vocabulary were concerned. 40 questionnaires in the pre-research and 94 in the final research were distributed. Such a significant difference in number was caused by a lower number of students taking part in the pre-research, which was performed one year prior to the research. Fewer students enrolled in the course in the year preceding the actual research.

Based on the pre-research, some activities that were required by students in questionnaires were added into the e-course in Moodle, particularly several listening and writing activities. The structure of the questionnaire for the final research was also slightly modified (Kučírková, Kučera and Vostrá Vydrová, 2012).

Questionnaires in the paper form were distributed among the students during the last lesson in the winter term 2012/2013. No problems with low response rate appeared as all questionnaires were collected personally and the return rate was 93%. In seven questionnaires, the students did not respond to some questions and, therefore, these questionnaires were excluded from the analysis. The data collected in the questionnaires were quantified into the table and then processed quantitatively by means of statistics.

Anonymous questionnaires, in accordance with ethical considerations in collecting research data ensured that confidentiality of the research data would be maintained (Seliger and Shohamy, 1990).

### **3.4 Findings**

The findings of the first five questionnaire items were as follows: there were 51 males (58.6%) and 36 females (41.4%) among the respondents. As far as fields of study are concerned, the most highly-represented specified field was that of Business and Administration with 23 students (26.4%), followed by Economics and Management field of study with 19 students (21.8%). Trade and Business with Machinery was represented by 17 students (19.6%). "Others" (not specified field of study) was selected by 28 students (32.2%). 68 respondents (78.2%) were students in their first year of studies, only 7 respondents (8%) were in their second year of studies and 12 respondents (13.8%) were in their third year of studies. 47 respondents took part in the e-learning course, while 40 did not. The responses were equally required from all respondents-participants of the research, irrespective of the fact whether they belonged to the experimental group (participating in e-learning) or the control group.

In the other six questions of the questionnaire, based on the opinions of students, the objective was to determine whether or not the development of single skills and vocabulary by using the e-learning online course could be as effective as the face-to-face instruction. The choice of the responses was “Yes, rather yes, no, rather no, do not know“. The frequency of single responses is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of responses.

	Yes	Rather yes	Do not know	Rather no	No
Overall effectiveness of e-learning course	6 (6.9%)	38 (43.7%)	1 (1.1%)	31 (35.6%)	11 (12.6%)
Reading with comprehension	11 (12.6%)	34 (39.1%)	1 (1.1.0%)	31 (35.6%)	10 (11.5%)
Listening with comprehension	22 (25.3%)	38 (43.7%)	3 (3.4%)	15 (17.2%)	9 (10.3%)
Writing	24 (27.6%)	44 (50.6%)	4 (4.6%)	10 (11.5%)	5 (5.7%)
Translation	28 (32.2%)	33 (37.9%)	2 (2.3%)	17 (19.5%)	7 (8.0%)
Vocabulary	36 (41.4%)	24 (27.6%)	6 (6.9%)	17 (19.5%)	4 (4.6%)

71 respondents (81.6%) thought that the inclusion of e-learning into the ESP lessons for distance students was proper, while only 3 respondents thought that it was improper (3.4%).The remaining 13 respondents (15%) did not know.

Most responses proved that there was no statistically significant difference in the relationship between gender, field of study and year of study, participation in the e-learning course and perceived usefulness of the course as presented by Kučera and Kučírková (2015).

As regards gender, a statistically significant difference was found only in item (question) 11, which asked if the development of vocabulary within the e-learning online course could be as effective as face-to-face instruction. 34 (39.1%) males and 26 (29.9%) females answered “Yes” or “Rather Yes”; 12 (13.8%) males and 9 (10.3%) females responded “No” or “Rather no”; 5 (5.8%) males and 1 (1.2%) females responded “Do not know”. More males than females believed in the efficiency of e-learning in the development of the vocabulary. It may be assumed that this was caused by the nature of males, who are more technically-oriented and prefer Information and Communication Technologies to the face-to-face method. The P-value was 0.03532, i.e., lower than the significance level of 0.05. The analysis revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in responses between

males and females. The contingent coefficient, which determines the dependence strength, is 0.3011162. The value of the coefficient is not high, the dependence strength between variables (response to item 11 and gender) is not high either; it is of a medium strength.

Table 2. Questionnaire item p-values in relation to gender

Questionnaire item	P-value
No. 5	0.65113
No. 6	0.29795
No. 7	0.51013
No. 8	0.09850
No. 9	0.12098
No. 10	0.50343
No. 11	0.03532

In all other items, there were no statistically significant differences between the responses of students and their gender, as evidenced in Table 2. It may be assumed that the variable of gender did not have much influence on the students' perceptions of e-learning.

As for the field of study, statistically significant differences among the responses of students within individual fields of study did not appear at all. The P-values were higher than the significance level of 0.05. It may be concluded on the basis of the questionnaire analysis that the field of study was not a variable that could influence the students' perceptions. Most students of all fields of study had confidence in the inclusion of e-learning into distance studies (71 = 81.6%) and more than half of the students believed in the effectiveness of the development of the skills and vocabulary in all questions (from 44 to 68 in case of single questions). Table 3 shows the p-values of the questionnaire items in relation to the field of study.

Table 3. Questionnaire item p-values in relation to the field of study.

Questionnaire item	P-value
No. 5	0.34400
No. 6	0.99202
No. 7	0.88563
No. 8	0.71492
No. 9	0.93617

No. 10	0.15651
No. 11	0.05180

When the responses of students of different years of study were compared and statistically analysed, there was no statistically significant difference between the year of study of the students and the responses to questions 5-11. All the p-values were higher than the significance level of 0.05. The year of study did not influence the opinions of the students on the effectiveness of e-learning in the skills and the vocabulary in the research. The p-values of the questionnaire items in relation to the year of study are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Questionnaire item p-values in dependence on the year of study.

Questionnaire item	P-value
No. 5	0.28419
No. 6	0.84221
No. 7	0.97364
No. 8	0.59257
No. 9	0.72488
No.10	0.59926
No.11	0.28449

Statistically significant differences in the responses to question 5 and 6 were found between the students who participated in the e-learning course and those who did not. Out of those who completed the course 42 respondents (89.4%) thought that the inclusion of e-learning into the ESP for distance students was proper, 3 participants (6.4%) felt that it was improper and one student (2.1%) did not know. Out of those who did not take part in the e-learning course 29 participants (72.5%) thought that the inclusion of e-learning into the distance studies was proper, 3 respondents (7.5%) thought that it was improper, and 13 students (32.5%) did not know. P-value was 0.04628, lower than the significance level. It indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in responses to question 5 about the inclusion of e-learning to distance studies between those who participated in the e-learning course and those who did not. It was also discovered that there was a statistically significant difference in responses to question 6 and participation in the e-learning course. P-value was 0.03815. 29 students who participated in the e-learning course (61.7%) and 15 students who did not participate in the course (37.5%) responded “Yes” and “Rather yes”, 17 students who participated (36.2%) and 25 who did not participate in the course (62.5%)

responded “Rather no” and “No”(Kučera and Kučirková, 2015). Table 5 shows p-values of the questionnaire items in relation to the participation in the e-learning course.

Table 5. Questionnaire item p-values in dependence on the participation in the e-learning course.

Questionnaire item	P-value
No. 5	0.04628
No. 6	0.03815
No. 7	0.10966
No. 8	0.33778
No. 9	0.13193
No. 10	0.31291
No. 11	0.88110

#### 4. Discussion

To summarise, these statistically significant differences in responses to questions 5 and 6 are supposed to be caused by the personal experience of the students who took part in the e-learning course and who could better judge this question and, on the other hand, by the lack of experience of those who did not take part in the course. Most students who took part in the course supported the inclusion of the e-learning course in the distance studies and thought that the studies through the e-learning method could be as effective as through the face-to-face method. In the other items (7-11) there were no statistically significant differences in responses between those students who participated in the e-learning course and those who did not as p-values were higher than the significance level. The students who participated in the e-learning course as members of the experimental group were definitely for the inclusion of e-learning into regular classes and considered it as efficient and fruitful as opposed to face-to-face instruction. In contrast, the students who belonged to the control group and lacked direct experience with e-learning suggested that e-learning might be good for practising individual skills but when it came to the inclusion of e-learning into classes or learning, they were much less certain than those with the experience.

Our research was based on the questionnaire analysis of students' opinions on the e-learning method, its effectiveness and its inclusion into the distance studies. Similarly, Pop et al. (2009) conducted their research with the use of a computer-based course assessment questionnaire. The results indicated that even though the students' motivation had increased and they had expressed positive views on the course, they had not been prepared to be fully autonomous and study through the pure online course. Learning ESP within Moodle LMS

was also the main topic of the research paper by Pavlíková and Pekařová (2010), in which they introduced Moodle language courses, various types of e-learning materials for students – Moodle resources and activities - and their experience with the Moodle LMS as well. They point out positive evaluation by the students. Nevertheless, this study did not conduct any questionnaire research related to this field.

## 5. Conclusion

The opinions of the students as to whether or not the effectiveness of the e-learning course and the face-to-face instruction was the same were influenced by the participation in the e-learning course. The results indicate that in most cases negative views on the overall effectiveness of the e-learning course were expressed by those students who did not take part in the e-learning course. On the other hand, as far as the positive attitude to the effectiveness of e-learning is concerned, the number of students who took part in the e-learning online course prevailed. The findings in opinions on the development of single skills show the students' positive attitude towards e-learning.

The findings from the students' questionnaires were also very important as they expressed their views on the effectiveness of the e-learning course and its inclusion into distance studies. Most of the students who participated in the e-learning course assessed it positively and thought that it could be included in the distance studies programmes.

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