



Standardized Model / SLEST Model

General hints for Distance Learning

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1. Introduction

In the description of the SLEST project it has been indicated, amongst other things, the creation of a presentation of how the material produced for the project can be used in the framework of a distance learning proposal. This was done in the planning phase when the extent of the information produced was not then clear and which final form the material produced would take.

Already during the discussions in the first period, and even more when the topic „distance learning“ was examined more closely, it became clear to all partners that it would turn out to be difficult to implement a distance learning module with the *SLEST Model*. The reasons for this regard both the contents and the organisation:

a) As it has been explained precisely in the accompanying materials to the SLEST Model, we can speak for nearly all professions in the field of tourism (with few exceptions) about the paramount importance of oral skills. Oral communication, nevertheless, requires direct contact with others; although it is possible, nowadays, to use the help of modern technical means like video conferencing, it is not likely that direct exchange with other people in the frame of a language course can be limited to these activities.

b) In order to organise a distance learning course you need an internet platform because it is unlikely that this kind of learning activity can be achieved without the use of computers and the www. To create a platform in the frame of the present project is, however, out of the question, not to mention the related preparation work and the costs¹.

c) Intense research amongst experts in the tourism sector has had, as a result, that oral communication is the most important skill for nearly all professions in this field. This fact has been obviously considered for the tasks for the SLEST examination, and the same is applicable to the language courses which prepare for this exam. Even though it is possible to use modern means of communication like video conferencing, webcams etc., the authors of the most recent online language courses do not think it is possible to learn a language effectively without face to face teaching².

¹ The online program „www.uni-deutsch.de“ could be an example. Arranged in years of preparation work, a group of universities with the help of important institutions like the German Ministry for Education and Research along with private research institutions has established an immensely costly, professional internet platform. The overall costs in this case have been more than one million euros!

² Opinion expressed by the co-author of “uni-deutsch” during a seminar in Florence on 16-17/03/06

These are the reasons why we will now limit our observations to general reflections, but nevertheless we hope that they will add useful information to the discussion.

2. E-Learning

2.1 Definition

E-Learning is a form of learning which centres around the use of the computer and therefore it depends strongly on technical equipment. Furthermore it has the following characteristics:

- didactical system and materials have to be digitalised;
- teachers, tutors, and learners are connected continuously online amongst each other;
- the teaching material is always at the disposal of the learners;
- the learner can decide almost autonomously on the contents and the speed of learning, independent of time and place.

2.2 The development of e-learning

At least since the meeting of European Ministers in Lisbon in 2001 the word “e-learning” is on everybody’s lips. On that occasion it was decided to make the implementation of the new media and technologies a primary target in the field of first and secondary (vocational) training in Europe. On the one hand, this decision has initiated a real boom, and e-learning became somewhat trendy; almost no training programmes could do without this. At universities, too, which are well-known for sometimes being behind the progress of the private sector, have been initiating activities in this direction.

But already in the private training division we can observe a development in the opposite direction due to partial disillusionment. After the optimistic expectations in the beginning that this method could have avoided the drawbacks of the classical teaching methods (all participants have to gather at the same time, in the same place; they acquired nearly the

same knowledge; they have to proceed at the same speed when learning; they can be supported only partially in an individual way etc.), very soon the experts observed that

a) the costs to create and maintain the necessary internet applications very often bore not relationship to the benefits;

b) the related learning and teaching methods were not appropriate enough;

c) often the learner was not prepared well enough psychologically regarding the possible problems which can arise with this kind of learning (when learning alone, one needs a good share of self discipline; only rarely there is a direct contact with other students; the teacher can not interfere directly in the learning process, which can cause misinterpretations etc.;

d) even today a large part of the population uses the internet quite rarely, and if yes it's mainly to send or receive e-mails.¹

2.3 The advantages of e-learning ...

This form of studying has had, at the end of the last century, its rapid expansion – at least in some areas - not only because it seemed new and modern, but it also offers a series of advantages to the impartial observer:

- teachers and students work independently from places and times;
- students can decide the pace of learning generally by themselves;
- the most diverse media can be used in a very flexible way;
- the use of multi-media can increase motivation;
- when instructed well, it is possible for the tutor to dedicate himself individually to the different kinds of learner types;
- the courseware can be up-dated constantly and it is authentic;
- access to a nearly endless amount of information;
- teachers, tutors, and students can nearly always get into contact;
- the same is applicable for the students amongst each other;
- international contacts are possible all the time;
- in a general way you can speak of an individualisation of the learning process.

¹ In December 2005 the Italian research institute „Indire“ published a study in which it is stated that 32,7% of those questioned use the internet at least once a week, 20,8 % less than once a week and 14,4 % never – altogether at least 67,9%!

2.4 ... and its disadvantages

As already mentioned above, after a strong period of growth, quite soon a certain number of weaknesses caught the eye of the interested observer; the more experience that was collected, the more it became clear that

- the development of special courseware was much more expensive than expected in the beginning; as a consequence
- the reduction of personnel was not balanced;
- very often the eyes of the students became tired after a longer period in front of the monitor, and scrolling backwards and forwards requires a lot of time;
- the existing didactical concepts did not correspond with the requirements of this special form of instruction, and often the advantages of the e-learning method was neutralized by the use of already existing teaching material which was prepared previously and not for the use with the internet;
- tailoring the materials individually to the needs of the student was possible only in a limited way;
- independent learning requires a conscientious student: a student who is able to work on his/her own;
- it was often the teachers/tutors who lacked the necessary competence regarding the work with the computer¹;
- it is true that the social component, that is the direct contact with another person which is so very important especially in language teaching (= communicative competence) is possible when working with the web, but all the same the use of the technical tools at the disposal of the student can sometimes be very reduced, and some decisive parts are impossible to realize (i.e. personal contact like in role-plays);
- it is sometimes difficult to judge unmonitored and individually produced results.
- And finally there is another very important aspect: Often and quite soon you can observe a lack of motivation and self-discipline on the side of the students which is absolutely necessary when you study on your own, because the student has to motivate him/herself again and again. Furthermore the computer does not always give concrete and precise answers to probable questions – you cannot converse with a machine. So it happens frequently that the results of persons who participated in a distance learning course are less satisfactory than those of students who participated in a traditional course (with the exception of certain subjects like Information Technology).²

¹ Diekmann (2005), p. 570

² Erwin Ihm stated that the number of traditional courses has clearly increased recently (at least in the US) (Computerwoche 4/2002)

2.5 The experiences of Greta (Aix-en-Provence)

After the conclusion of a pilot project of more than one year, GRETA du Pays d'Aix can today affirm that the reception of their e-learning offers is so favourable that the registrations have doubled in the second year (these are not language courses, though). The approval is even bigger in cases where it is possible to create real „virtual communities“; the courses are seen as more attractive than traditional classes and participation is encouraging; one of the consequences are better results and a more efficient working process. Furthermore we would like to stress that quite a number of people who already work decided to accept these offers in order to get further qualifications or they see it as a possibility to improve in their professional career.

If we assume that the authors demand high standards to meet as far as possible the real demands in professional life with the SLEST-language diploma, one of the most important challenges will be to give access to this examination to a group of students and professionals as widely as possible. The SLEST-Model could prove its validity if it successfully creates a way of studying which is as individual as possible, in order to generate a system of intense tutoring which will be supported by an internet platform which should work like a virtual classroom.

Of course this proposal has its pros and cons. On the one hand e-learning is nowadays an interesting and more applied form of studying, especially for those who don't have the possibility for various reasons to attend a traditional class. Furthermore the candidate in this case has the possibility to prepare him/herself independently from time and place for an examination. It might seem to be a paradox, but it is exactly this independence which is regarded by many people as unfavourable: without the permanent and direct control of a teacher and the continuous and direct contact with other course members, there is a risk that the student's motivation will diminish, and his/her activities might become less systematic. But we would like to stress above all the advantages which are connected with this method, as experienced with the pilot project:

- **The training time is shorter** because this method allows studying in a flexible way thanks to the fact that all course details are continuously present on the internet.

- **Individual Learning Plans** because all the learning material is constantly at the disposal of the student in order to permit him/her to create his own learning rhythm and to choose the areas he/she wants to study at any time; additionally he/she has the possibility to ask for the assistance of the tutor at any time, in order to obtain help immediately in case of doubt or necessity.

- **Suitability:** It is possible to save time and, on occasion, also money because the single student has the possibility to study directly at his work place; a subscription fee plus a entry test are sufficient as entry requirements. In addition to that and by paying a small additional fee the candidate can obtain a European-wide accepted language diploma which will surely increase his/her chances on the labour market.

- **Validity:** The contents of the language examination and the conditions of SLEST-online would be exactly the same as those of a traditional course, like those offered by the universities in the frame of tourism Science. This is a guarantee as much as for the quality of the offer as for the validity of the diploma because it absolutely identical to that which is awarded at the end of a traditional course.

3 The traditional method

In order to have means of comparison, we would like to recall the characteristics of a course which follows the traditional method; in the next chapter we will speak about a new teaching method which has attempted to bring together the advantages of two didactical methods, but avoiding the negative aspects. Normally face to face teaching is characterized by the following details:

- the course members are in constant (social) contact amongst each other and with the teacher; by this they can help each other;
- the teacher can always and immediately intervene in any process which takes place during the lessons, and with this
- he/she is always present when problems occur;
- older participants especially, feel more at ease with more traditional forms of teaching as with “open” methods;
- it is possible to act spontaneously (especially regarding the reactions towards others).

These positive points, nevertheless, are opposed by negative aspects, which have been indirectly mentioned already in chapter 2.3. Additionally we would like to underline the fact that it is nearly always a problem if a group exceeds a number of approximately 12 persons (especially with language courses).

4. Blended Learning

4.1 Definition

In reality, this teaching method is a blend of the two former mentioned methods, where the aim is to combine the advantages of both of them without having to accept their disadvantages: the flexibility of e-learning is linked with the social component of face to face teaching. In the Bibliography there are examples of *Blended Learning* especially for seminars and training courses of limited duration in the field of Professional Education.

Generally a distinction is made between three phases: preparation, face to face teaching, and assignments. According to Volkmer this method is also an answer to “the request for shorter, modular study programmes by maintaining the same quality”¹, but it is necessary to incorporate it in a wider concept of learning.

4.2 The benefit of this method for language learning

Up to now probably only a very small group of language teachers exist who are able to cope with this new method; this is also because the *Blended Learning* method does not form part of current teaching methods and curricula, particularly in the state sector. It is predictable, though, that in the near future things might change (i.e. at universities and for people who work); it would be possible without a doubt to carry out language skills such as *writing, reading* and *listening* by e-learning; oral interaction, however, will be practised during the face to face lessons.

The advantages are as follows:

- Independence from time and place, which also means the
- possibility for flexible and autonomous studying; connected to this is
- direct contact with the other course members for the important communicative aspect;
- diverse levels of knowledge at the beginning of a course can be balanced individually without obstructing the other students;
- the possibility of more balanced work because activities which are so time intensive like writing or grammar exercises can be done separately at home;
- the different speeds of learning of the students does not or only rarely creates difficulties;

¹ Volkmer (2003), p.2

- the students can get into contact amongst themselves as well as with outsiders (and even with people from any country in the world);
- teachers can control the monitor and assess students' progress during the face to face seminars intervene immediately when problems occur;
- in this phase motivation levels could also be refreshed.

5. The possibilities regarding SLEST

5.1 General suggestions

With regard to the German language, a language course *online*¹ already exists under the leadership of the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich, which proves that only with an important financial and organisational effort is it possible to undertake a project of this kind: efforts which are far beyond the possibilities of the SLEST project².

A feasibility study together with an inquiry at the beginning of the SLEST project had, amongst other results, the outcome that in various professions in the field of tourism oral communication is nearly always the most important skill. With current technological possibilities it would not be impossible to reconsider an e-learning method, but a propos what has been said in chapter 2.4 and 4.2, there should be no doubt that with language teaching only a form of *blended learning* can be applied when speaking about distance learning.

And finally we should emphasis once again that language learning is not an individual, but a social form of learning; therefore „die bevorzugte Sozialform (beim E-learning) im Gegensatz zu der Sozialform steht, die der Rechner erzwingt: der Einzelarbeit“³ (with language learning, the main social form is the exact opposite of what happens when learning with the computer: the individual work). In other words: the computer should be utilised only when it is really necessary; a series of exercises such as *reading* can often be done more effectively in a more conventional way.

¹ www.uni-deutsch.de

² the overall costs of the project have been more than one million Euro

³ Diekmann p. 561

5.2 Demands on the Teachers

Because *blended learning* is still quite unknown in language teaching it demands a particular challenge especially for the teachers. This fact is not yet reflected in Further Education: courses are still almost exclusively based around face to face teaching – the union of classical courseware like books with material especially prepared for the internet (platform, downloads, audio and video material) is becoming available only slowly because until now only very few operational internet platforms exist.

Furthermore there are a series of facts with which most of the teachers never or only rarely have to deal with during „normal“ lessons. For example, the students have to be encouraged and motivated even more in order to apply their newly acquired knowledge; then teacher has to encourage self-study more than usual.

The teacher will only succeed if he/she is able to create with the student a clear, strategic learning competence; it has to be clear for the student that he/she has to accompany the learning process in an active way¹, furthermore they should understand their own learning patterns².

The teaching material is arranged in modules or learning units which are more or less independent from the other; this requires a kind of modularisation of the contents which might appear unusual for some teachers.

What is more, to ensure the quality assurance of a language course which is based on the *blended learning* method, course monitoring procedures plus an intensive assessment at the end are necessary.³

Nowadays, the theoretical knowledge about what is hiding behind key words like *chat*, *internet forum* and *webcam* should be part of everybody's personal vocabulary; but it is doubtful that many teachers are really able to use them in daily life (on the contrary, most younger students will certainly be capable of handling these things much better than their teachers).

¹ see also *Europass* (www.europass.cedefop.eu.int)

² daraus resultierende Kompetenzen: sich selbst Lernziele setzen, Planungskompetenz entwickeln, Lernwegbestimmung

³ regarding a possible control of one's own learning aims see for example Themen Neu 3, p.53

5.3 Steps to be taken by the Learner

In the first phase of a potential language course based on the *blended learning* method the central theme will be that those students who have to recuperate something in respect of the starting point of the course are able to close this gap individually with the help of the teacher/tutor. Afterwards everyone will treat parts of the courseware using the e-learning method, then the whole group will gather at previously established intervals. During these occasions the main object will be to strengthen the social aspect of the course, to receive additional information, to discuss certain problems directly with the teacher/tutor, and to exercise mainly oral skills. This will happen - above all for those who work - at weekends. Other possibilities for direct contact with the other participants, the teacher/tutor, and indeed with people from outside exist during the time between two face to face seminars by means of exchange of e-mails, in urgent cases also by telephone or even by video conference.

From a psychological point of view the students will have to change their attitude towards the traditional course; instead of being guided continuously by a teacher they will have to be active and study autonomously. Furthermore they should possess a certain amount of media competence, in order to be fully able to utilise all the possibilities offered by the work on the internet.

5.4 Possible problems

Sometimes it will not be easy to convince - especially older participants - to study with the e-learning method; this is also proven by the experiences made in recent years where quite a few students abandoned the courses after some time. Possible reasons for this can be deduced by the following comparison:

traditional course	blended learning	characteristic needed
the courses start always at a fixed time	only the face to face lessons have a fixed schedule	Self discipline on the side of the student (S)
breaks are the same for all and decided by all	the S decides autonomously when to take a break	as before
the teacher (T) motivates the S directly	the S motivates him/herself	as before
the T organises the coursework	the S organises the work him/herself	don't always postpone „unpleasant“ things
the T ensures that the S participates actively	the S has to be active him/herself	being active
the contents of the course are scheduled in a fixed framework with a time limit	the S works on the contents at his/her own pace	capability to organise his/her own work
a well trained T is able to encourage the S's sense of achievement	the S must gain his/her sense of achievement by him/herself	a well developed self-confidence
negative contributions can be criticised openly by other S	if there is criticism it will be only by the tutor in a "private" way	as before

As we can easily see from this short overview, the most important attribute for those who study using the *blended learning* method is a good portion of self discipline, furthermore he or she must know the possibilities offered by the new media and should possess the capability to organise his/her work autonomously.

Studies about online discussions brought contradictory results: in some cases it was concluded that with small groups the teacher should intervene in the discussion only rarely. Yet other studies underlined the importance of the moderator and his indications as to how to structure the discussion (quality and quantity of the contributions).

5.5 An Alternative

As stated above, it is almost impossible to prepare oneself for an oral examination only (and on one's own!) with the support of a distance learning language course. A possible compromise could be to arrange a limited exam with only a written part. Following the results of the questionnaire at the beginning of the project, this kind of test could answer the needs of certain professions like travel agents, where the direct contact with foreigners or business partners is more an exception.

6 Proposals regarding the SLEST-Model

6.1 The general character of a language course

A language course based on the e-learning method could present the following characteristics:

- It would be divided into modules in order to treat systematically the topics in the Standardized Model like *negotiating*, *marketing* etc.;
- these modules would be presented in tables and introduced with different examples, in addition it would be possible to have access to online tests where “critical incidents” are presented;
- images, films, diagrams, visual aids and interactive activities would be accessible, in order to make the learning process more interesting and easier;
- the whole learning process would be constantly accompanied by a tutor (see 6.2).

We would like to underline, though, that the actual situation does not make work easier for the authors. In agreement with many practitioners we would like to put emphasis on the fact that the possibility for direct interaction, the correction and analysis of mistakes with the help of a computer is still very often only possible in a limited way (and frequently the computer gives wrong answers or does not recognise correct answers as such, and as a consequence they are judged as mistakes). The reason for this is that, despite all the progress made until now the programs cannot give individual attention to the student.

6.2 The Tutoring

Because of the absence of a teacher the possibility to contact a tutor almost constantly by e-Mail, a forum, chat or even a video conference is fundamental for a distance language course. Only in this way can it be guaranteed that doubts can be resolved or questions answered as soon as possible, in order to support the learning process as intensively and profitably as possible; this would be, of course, a decisive difference between an e-learning and a self-study course. The tutor is also of vital importance for ensuring continuous and controlled progress, for keeping up motivation and for the introduction and implementation of correct measures in critical situations.

The tutor can accomplish his/her tasks as constructively as possible only in the presence of an efficient internet platform which offers the possibility to get into contact *online* at any time with the students (and vice versa). There are synchronic and asynchronous means of communication, which converge at a middle point: the so called *chat lines* as a synchronic form of contact, where two or more people get into contact at the same time by the internet (video conferencing also belongs here); on the other hand, there is the asynchronous form - *e-Mail* or the *forum*, where people can contact each other at different times. The tutor can be a partner in both forms of communication: in a unilateral approach, that is in respect to the student, or bi- or multilateral related to a group of students.

6.3 The utilities of the course

In order to reach the above mentioned aims in a most favourable manner we need a series of so called *utilities*:

a. The Course Overview

contains the complete overview of the course, with the addition of the tutor's notes, the latest news from the field of tourism (also in form of a *newsletter*) as well as all relevant linguistic suggestions.

b. FAQs

Under this point, questions of general interest posed by the learner are answered by the organisers. This facility should not be seen as a static instrument and it will constantly be up-dated as necessary with the help of the tutor during the whole period of the course.

c. **Bibliography**

contains the bibliographical suggestions already prepared by the SLEST group and is available *online* to everyone; it is continuously amended and added to.

d. **Important internet addresses**

As with the bibliographies also in this case the project group has already done a good part of the work; the hints, together with short explanations, can be already referred to on the internet; they will be amended constantly.

e. **Didactical help**

In this section the visitor will find exercises, case studies and tasks, together with the corresponding answers or solutions as well as study aids; this is also the place where the tutor can insert study tips or any other materials which support the work of the students.

f. **Agenda**

Here the student will be informed of all important Dates such as examination dates, seminars, conferences etc..

In addition to the suggested issues it would be possible to offer other online services:

- **Assistance for further work:** additional files at the disposal of the students on the platform which can be downloaded from the internet
- **Hypertext connections:** links of different kind which are incorporated in single files or pages (interrelated to the language, to general topics in tourism, intercultural questions etc...)
- **Texts, exercises and possibilities for self assessment,** or to consolidate certain matters or to test individual progress.

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