ENGLISH ONLINE COURSES FOR MILITARY PERSONNEL – ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

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Abstract: The present paper deals with some aspects of English online courses. In particular it looks into how this form of online learning brings a new approach in teaching English in the military system. The paper is based on a personal feedback as a result of three such courses conducted recently and rivets its attention on the advantages and disadvantages of teaching and learning in an online environment. The advantages range from the possibility of working at one's own pace to the challenges posed by the platform exercises, while the disadvantages comprise the lack of a real monitoring on behalf of the tutors and the face-to-face communication among others. The final part of the paper brings forward some suggestions for heightening the awareness about the importance of attending such a course.

1. INTRODUCTION

Online course, online learning, computer based training, e-learning, distance learning, self-paced learning, asynchronous training, etc., no matter what you call it, there is a lack of clarity with regard to a clear definition. One thing is sure, though. Online learning has become more and more popular lately as people want to learn when and where they like. In the broadest sense, online learning, also known as e-learning, is a learning experience delivered via a computer and the internet. Course work is conducted through electronic forums, discussion groups, external resources, quizzes, social rooms, and online submitted assignments. Learning activities also include pairwork, small group work and project work and throughout the course you have the guidance of a professional online tutor.

2. ONLINE LEARNING IN THE MILITARY SYSTEM

Fortunately, the above mentioned type of courses represent the newest way of mantaining a permanent contact with "this new passport to the world" in the military system. They are called online modules and are attended by military personnel who are part of a training program. Thus, starting with the academic year 2012/2013, there have been introduced four types of online modules.

This form of training is mandatory and addresses to language courses graduates who need to maintain/develop their language skills through individual study under teacher guidance.

The first module is between beginners and pre intermediate levels. It is a module that consists of seven units and covers a period of fourteen weeks. At this level, students can make simple sentences and reply to questions on a range of personal and common subjects (likes and dislikes, family, and routines). They can also order a meal in a restaurant or go shopping in English.

The second module is between pre intermediate and intermediate levels. It is devided into four units and covers a period of eight weeks. At this level students try to maintain their good basic ability to communicate. At this level they can use with confidence the present, past and future simple tenses. They can also perform tasks such as shopping, booking a hotel room, travel, and making conversation in English. Their grammar includes an understanding of adjectives, adverbs, comparatives, articles, possessives, and basic prepositions.

The third module is between intermediate and upper intermediate levels and consists of four units and covers a period of eight weeks. At this level students have the grammar and the vocabulary to talk, read and write about a broad number of topics. They also have some understanding of tone and style and can confidently make sentences, question forms and clauses related to all the topics.

The last module is between upper intermediate and advanced levels. This last module is made up of seven units and covers a period of fourteen weeks. At this level they can talk almost fluently and almost completely accurately. Everyday situations in an English-language environment do not constitute a problem for them. They can take part in extended conversations or discussions and their vocabulary covers almost every circumstance. If they do not know a word they can almost always find a way of describing it. They have knowledge of some idiomatic English, phrasal verbs, and colloquial expressions and they have studied all main areas of English grammar.

3. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

The advantages of these online courses range from the possibility of working at one's own pace to the challenges posed by the platform exercises, while the disadvantages comprise the lack of a real monitoring on behalf of the tutors and the face-to-face communication among others.

Since all the participants to these online modules work full time, their time is extremely valuable. Therefore, undeniably, one of the best advantages of online classes is flexibility, because students can take the course any time during the day or week. Students are able to take the class based on their schedules and as far as we have noticed, many students work on their course during the night or early in the morning.

Moreover, online learning allows all the students to revisit the course content, documents, discussion forums as often as they like during the two weeks alloted to each unit or during the last week of the course, when all the units are reopened. They do not miss a thing in the online course.

Another great advantage that is worth mentioning is that shy students are able to ask questions because they can ask them online without facing the instructor. The internet makes it possible for the students to ask questions and receive the answer back almost immediately or in a few hours.

While online courses offer many advantages for students, there are clearly some disadvantages, as well. In terms of disadvantages, we would start by mentioning one of the biggest challenges of online learning: time management. We consider it a challenge because even though students can work around their schedules, they must make time to do their assignments, since they are given deadlines to get them done. This challenge can facilely turn into a disadvantage. We could say that online courses give students more freedom than they can handle and this can be dangerous, because it can easily lead to procrastination, and cause the undisciplined student to fall behind in his assignments. Once behind, it can be difficult to catch up. In our case, there were several students who could have dealt successfully with the amount of work, but unfortunately, they adjourned too many assignments and could not catch up, therefore they failed the course. When it comes to online courses, students have to complete writing assignments on a regular basis and along with it the concern about cheating and the quality of the learning experience occurs. The fact that you never know if the students do the assignments themselves constitute

another relevant disadvantage. In some cases, due to a lack of motivation, without realising that they "cook their

In such situations, tutors have no other choice but asking them to redo the homework, without being sure though that the second time they will do it conscientiously.

Due to the fact that course work is in an electronic format, students have little opportunity to improve oral communication skills. This is a big minus, because in most cases students need to improve their speaking skill.

Another disadvantage is represented by the lack of face-to-face communication. Owing to this, feedback can come across as negative when important non-verbal communication tools like body language and facial expressions are lost in online communication.

Despite the fact that we are in the 21st century, there are still people who have never used a computer and attending such a course requires some technical

own goose", they appeal to somebody else to complete their homework.

knowledge of computers and the internet. Unfortunately, we have encountered situations where, although the registration and login instructions were very clear, some students failed to access the platform on time. On the other hand, we have to look on the bright side of this matter: this a good chance for them to improve their computer knowledge.

Finally, it is worthwhile to mention that while submitting homework electronically is fast and convenient, technology tends to fail sometimes, making it difficult for students to turn their assignments in on time. However, as far as the mentioned courses are concerned, if this happens, students are given the opportunity for a second chance during the last week of the course, when they can submit their outstanding homework.

4. CONCLUSION

We may conclude that, if we put the advantages and disadvantages in balance, we realize that the disadvantages of these courses outweigh the advantages. Nevertheless, students should be aware of the importance of attending such courses, since they provide an e-learning solution that certainly fits their busy lifestyle and facilitates the acquisition of reading, listening and writing skills without making students feel pressured or surpassed by more talkative students.

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