Virtual Blended Learning: a UK school teaches an online pronunciation course to students in China

Context

We are a small group of English language teachers based in the UK, providing predominantly online face-to-face lessons and pronunciation courses for individuals and groups, as well as providing teaching services for other language schools around the world.

Drivers

We set up a BL course for a group of general English learners in China after being asked to create and deliver a pronunciation course specific to the needs of Chinese speakers.

What we blended

The main challenge was creating an effective blended learning course knowing the entire course would be delivered via WeChat. We chose to provide input via short videos which could be uploaded to WeChat and worksheets to guide practice activities. We then gave recording tasks, individual feedback on the tasks and real-time sessions. WeChat is a well-known instant messaging app. While it does not have all the features and benefits of a full-blown learning management system, we were encouraged to use this particular tool by the client due to restrictions on communications between China and other countries.

Challenges and how we overcame them

The main challenge was providing visual input. All the student-generated and feedback content would be sound recordings so it was vital that the students had very clear models to work from. We delivered the input via short videos which focused on specific pronunciation elements and gave clear visuals of the face/mouth of the speaker. We used the popular Camtasia video software to combine these video clips of the teacher with simple animations of annotated words and sentences. This was followed by a worksheet which gave specific tasks which the students completed and uploaded. We provided individual, recorded feedback on the tasks which were uploaded for the students to listen to. This was repeated with a second worksheet task. Finally, there was a live chat session where students could ask a teacher questions and get further feedback.

Benefits

One of the main benefits of adopting a Blended Learning approach was being able to deliver a distance learning pronunciation course to people who wouldn't normally have access to this expertise. Moreover, we also found that the structure of the course was particularly suited to the students because of some of the typical learning techniques used in China (e.g. repeating lessons aloud by rote). There was a noticeable improvement in the clarity and quality of sounds produced as well as in word stress and intonation. For teachers and students, the fact that the main activities were done off-line (asynchronously) meant that recordings could be made at a convenient time, so the time difference between the UK and China was of little importance.

What we learnt and considerations for the future

We sometimes found that students recorded all the sentences from the worksheets, rather than just those in the recording task. This sometimes resulted in difficulties in providing the concise, focused feedback the course was designed to deliver. Clearer instructions should solve this problem. We also found that some of the sentences we created were more challenging than others because of the combination of words. We have become better at editing our work and more realistic about what is possible given factors such as the medium of the visual element to the course, the limited opportunities for real-time interaction with learners and the inevitable, occasional glitches with the technology.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Louise Raven (Stratford Teachers) for this contribution.
https://stratfordteachers.com/

This additional resource builds on the wealth of practical teaching ideas and shared experience available in *Best Practices for Blended Learning.*

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