Making platforms useful and sticky

Shaun Crowley argues that the content on learning platforms should have the same appeal and draw as popular mainstream websites and apps.

English training providers are increasingly being expected to offer more flexible and affordable solutions, fuelling the growing trend of blended learning and distance learning. For those needing to evolve, the challenge for curriculum coordinators is in finding an e-learning platform that can complement their class-based teaching, provide the necessary ‘bling-factor’ to facilitate marketing efforts, and also – crucially – to provide students with a rich independent learning experience.

The traditional option is to use an online workbook available with a coursebook. But new gamified platforms, like Duolingo and English Town, are starting to make the Learning Management Systems provided by educational publishers look outdated and clunky. There are also practicalities to consider: unless educational institutions commit to using just one coursebook for several years, publisher LMS’s bring with them numerous administration and training challenges, particularly for large programmes with a high annual teacher turnover.

The affordable alternatives are the new kids on the block intent on disrupting the world of ELT, such as Busuu, Babbel and Livemocha, but they have been largely criticized by ELT educators as being pedagogically unsound (Dudeney, 2014). Pedagogical flaws are inevitable, say ELT commentators, who point out that the leaders in this space are Web 2.0 entrepreneurs and not certified EFL teachers. However, the scholarly criticism comes from those who question whether a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) approach that follows a ‘computer-as-tutor’ model can ever work, as opposed to more approved ‘computer-as-tool’ uses of technology, such as IWBs, YouTube and PowerPoint.

My personal view is that tutor-based e-learning platforms can be effective independent study aids, but there are two challenges facing product developers that must be overcome. The first is in how to engage and maintain sufficient learner motivation levels, and the second is in how to help learners to effectively internalize language as opposed to ‘drill and kill’.

**Motivation**

For most students, the prospect of going online in the evening to do extra study requires an immense amount of discipline, so it’s no wonder that curriculum coordinators tasked with implementing e-learning platforms are wary of low participation levels. This is more acute now than 10 years ago because today’s digital native students (and even digital immigrants) have much higher expectations of what a computer-based experience should be. The online world our students are living in is a gamified world offering immediate gratification, so it follows that e-learning platforms should also look to integrate gamification if they are to help students resist the urge to open up Facebook instead.

When I refer to gamification I’m not just talking about the need to make exercises fun and interactive, or even in adopting a points and badge system for rewarding achievement. These are all important traits of any engaging user experience, but simply bolting on these elements to a platform makes for a shallow and superficial improvement. A truly gamified system succeeds in stimulating users at an archetypal level (i.e. appealing to universal desires to be a hero, to be subversive, to nurture, guide, explore), therefore provoking natural desires to participate and perform.

The challenge for educational apps is in how to do this and teach at the same time. For ELT platforms, the experience is all about learning and practising language. The objective is to get all your grammar exercises correct, understand a text, remember the vocabulary you learn, and then produce some speaking or writing. But unless students are intrinsically motivated by understanding the rules and patterns of language, they will be participating on the basis of extrinsic motivational factors alone: ‘my teacher told me to do it’, or ‘I’m going to be assessed on my performance’, or I need to do this if I want to keep my job’.

We must not forget, a vast proportion of students are learning English because
they have to, not because they want to. This has a major impact on motivation. Dörnyei proposes that ‘pushing’ forces borne from social pressures to participate in learning English are not as motivationally potent as having both pushing and pulling forces working together in harmony – ‘pulling’ forces defined as 1) an engagement in the learning process and 2) an internal desire to participate (Dörnyei, 2009: 218). Surely these two ‘pulling’ attractor basins are best activated through a gamified learning experience.

So what kind of gamified experience can intrinsically motivate intrinsically unmotivated students to complete their weekly quota of independent study, without the direct encouragement of a teacher, classroom peers or a classroom environment?

One answer lies in the concept of status. De Botton (2004) proposes that our lives are intrinsically influenced by our pursuit to feel influential in relation to others and our longing for people to take an interest in our lives and our opinions.

There are parallels to game theory here. For many people, money is the point system used to measure status in relation to others. The badges people strive for are expensive cars, designer clothes and luxury goods. For others, status is measured in the rewards of altruism or sacrifice.

I would suggest that the internet is an important tool for pursuing status. It drove the success of blogging in the early noughties, then of microblogging platforms like Twitter. It is at the heart of the social networking experience: we are secretly satisfied when people ‘like’ the photos we post on Facebook, or when someone endorses us on LinkedIn. These actions form feedback loops by rewarding users who engage in the system with the commodity of community status.

I believe that ELT programmes can also benefit from this approach, by incorporating the same principles in their e-learning platforms. One way to do this is to encourage self-expression and allow students to trade status with each other, using functionality similar to the ‘likes’ button on most social networks. The ‘aim of the game’ is for students to achieve recognition from the platform’s community by expressing opinions and projecting their personalities in English. The outcome of this approach is that students engage in the learning process, they participate in the activities and therefore internalize language more effectively.

The main implication of this approach is that independent study focuses on fluency and not linguistic accuracy. This isn’t exactly a paradigm shift, but it does challenge the existing online workbook approach, in which practice activities are supported by a vast array of diagnostic tools. But I would argue that a focus on fluency is wholly appropriate for online materials: firstly, it offers the familiarity and appeal of the social networking experience, in which the objective of communication is to get a point across, not necessarily to achieve perfection in how that point is articulated. Secondly, in the absence of valid and reliable automated technologies for feeding back accuracy of free-practice productive tasks, accuracy is still best dealt with by the teacher, and unless we want to risk overwhelming teachers, feedback on speaking and writing is best handled in class.

**Pedagogy**

Apart from the online workbooks offered by ELT publishers to support their printed coursebooks, the majority of e-learning platforms on the market feature methodologies that are based on rote learning, often built around language drills with translations followed by memory tests.

Personally, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with drilling. In fact, a drill-oriented rote learning model is highly appropriate for a tutor-based platform because it allows students to follow a familiar learning journey, it enables learning to be compartmentalized into short convenient activities (ideal for students studying on the go), and it minimizes the effort required to engage in the learning process – important when students are working on a computer screen or small device after a full day working or studying.

The limitation of this approach is that it risks decontextualizing language, drawing unnatural distinctions between explicit and implicit language.
knowledge. This is why apps like Duolingo cause so much resentment in the ELT world (Gordon, 2014).

I’m sure many Duolingo users will say that the addictiveness of the learning experience overcomes its pedagogical inefficiencies. I say that it should be possible to create a similar user experience to Duolingo and also overcome these limitations with some tweaking to the learning journey. Let’s look at the challenges in more detail.

The issue of decontextualization largely stems from a tendency for e-learning apps to present vocabulary and grammar in discreet and unnatural chunks, and by asking students to write about topics in an isolated context without adequate input. I believe e-learning platforms can respond to these issues in three ways: first, by embracing social network style communication (as mentioned above, social networking is fast becoming a normal context for written communication); secondly, by ensuring that vocabulary and grammar is always presented in the context of natural sounding phrases; and thirdly, by personalizing language context as much as possible so that students use the target language in meaningful ways, for example to express an opinion.

One effective way of contextualizing and personalizing language in an e-learning environment is to incorporate polls into the learning process. So for example, if a student is learning ‘jobs’ vocabulary (e.g. doctor, architect, engineer, etc.), as part of their productive exercise they are asked to vote on which job they think is the best, or the hardest, or the most important.

This simple activity turns a potentially mechanical and predictable language learning experience into something much more engaging. At one level, polls are a relatively easy, low-risk way for students to express an opinion in the language they are studying. At another level, the very act of voting triggers the learner’s connection with the target language, resulting in them being able to recall it later on.

Polls also allow for the presentation of opinion results, providing context for discussion and analysis in English, and further opportunities for students to use the target vocabulary in meaningful ways.

The other issue I referred to was the distinction between implicit and explicit language knowledge. Most tutor-based platforms focus on explicit learning, yet scholars generally agree that a combination of explicit and implicit learning is the most effective path towards mastering a second language (Dörnyei, 2009: 175).

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One possible way of combining explicit and implicit memory in the language learning process is by including both intentional and incidental learning strategies within the familiar drill + test sequence. For example, if a student explicitly learns a vocabulary set around jobs (e.g. doctor, architect, engineer), this can be followed by an activity in which the student is tested on the words doctor, architect, engineer, etc., whilst being exposed to additional vocabulary and a semantic structure (e.g. A doctor helps sick people. / An engineer builds machines.). Then, in the following learning module, the student explicitly learns the words that were presented implicitly in the previous test (e.g. design machines, help sick people) before being tested on this vocabulary in the context of a phrase containing a new set of implicit vocabulary (e.g. He builds machines. It’s a rewarding job. / She helps sick people. It’s a difficult job.). This process then culminates in an activity that draws together all the vocabulary the student has learned explicitly and implicitly in the form of a longer phrase, e.g. An engineer builds machines. It’s a rewarding job.

Summary

Very few e-learning platforms that are appropriate for blended learning programmes successfully meet the motivation requirements of learners whilst meeting the pedagogical quality standards expected by ELT educators.

The challenge for today’s ELT product developers is to offer a learning experience that is addictive and intrinsically satisfying, integrated into a learning journey that utilizes technology to help students internalize language efficiently outside of a classroom context.

Sources


Further information


Shaun Crowley is the founder of www.linguavote.com, an ELT e-learning platform for schools, universities and corporate training programmes. Prior to working on Linguavote, Shaun worked for Oxford University Press for 12 years.