

Multimedia resources in blended language learning

Who?	Birgit Griese, teacher, and 12 students
Where?	Polytechnic Sydväst, Finland
When?	Spring semester 2006
What?	Business and Financial English course, 6 credits

Background

In early 2006, 12 students had to find a way quickly to complete an English course they had missed when they transferred from the Turku University of Applied Sciences to Sydvest Polytechnic. Their timetable was tight so that the students would be able to graduate that same spring as earlier planned. An intense, independent course using multimedia combined with classroom contact hours seemed to be the best solution to the problem.

In addition, a multimedia-based course would be a suitable pilot project as well. In this way, it was possible to test a future model for both regular and distance-education courses.

The Sydvest Polytechnic acquired Lingonet's *English Pro* and *Business Territory 1* multimedia programs in February, 2006, as material for their Business and Financial English course. The program content was complemented with books about business and finance in English, as well as current business articles and Internet material. The course content and structure was built around *English Pro* and *Business Territory 1*. It was worth six credits, i.e., about 120 hours. *English Pro* and *Business Territory 1* were installed on the polytechnic's intranet before the course began. Each student also got a single-user CD-ROM of both programs so that he/she was able to work on the programs at home, either independently or with a partner or group. The students got three contact hours per week for two months.

The idea was to combine multimedia-based, independent and classroom-based work in the most effective way possible to improve the students' English.

Depending on the licence agreement students can access Lingonet's multimedia programs via single user CD-ROMs, the Internet or intranet.

What were the students told at the beginning of the course?

The students received the course material at the first lesson. Only then did they hear that they would also be working with multimedia material. Each student got his/her own CD-ROMs to take home. After the students had looked at the content of the programs at home, they received a written course outline which indicated when various parts of the program would be discussed, and when they were to hand in written assignments.

How did the students do their work?

Students worked with the *English Pro* and *Business Territory 1* programs and with the print material. They worked with the multimedia part exclusively outside the classroom – either at home or in small groups. They had to write essays and summaries, and give oral presentations. The students were allowed to choose the topic for their big oral presentation and the material needed for it; it was not based directly on the computer programs. All the task sheets and group sheets from *Business Territory 1* were used. They were assigned as individual or group tasks, and were returned to the teacher by a specified time. The central mode of study was independent study, pair work or group work. Using and transferring the content and vocabulary from the programs to different subject areas and semantic fields was very important. The programs offered many possibilities for situational oral practice.

The content of the programs was analysed orally, both in discussions and in presentations. The content of *Business Territory 1* was also discussed in the context of the students' own work experience or aspirations. For example, when discussing the topic "Benefits" in class, the conversation centred around what type of benefits the students expected from their future place of employment. The topics that arose from the computer programs were always discussed in the context of the students' own lives and career aspirations, so that the material would actually seem beneficial.

The class went through the different sections of *English Pro* in small groups, but each student didn't need to go through the entire program. Afterwards, each small group wrote up a summary of its own section for the rest of the class to study.

The work was intense and demanding during the course, but after a small initial warm-up period, the students were focused and worked well both independently and in small groups. Developing independent study strategies was one of the goals of the course – and one achievement.

How did the students react to the course?

The students' first reaction was to underestimate the difficulty of the course material. They thought they would now get off easy. They might have been influenced by their school experiences: multimedia was often used at school only on special occasions – when they were going to do "something different, something fun." For this reason, a lot of students haven't got used to demanding and critical work when using multimedia programs.

The students quickly noticed, however, that the course and the programs *English Pro* and *Business Territory 1* that were being used demanded time and effort. When they got the written course outline, they panicked. However, the outline showed them clearly what they had to complete and what the timetable was. At that point, working independently and in groups began to go more smoothly, and the students put more effort into their coursework than what they had expected to at the beginning. They learned fairly well to complete assignments according to a set timetable.

The students' attitude toward the course and multimedia course material was on the whole positive from the start. They especially liked the authenticity of *Business Territory 1*, and the possibility it offered to peek into the daily lives of ordinary people at work.

The students had difficulty at the beginning to accept the fact that the teacher wouldn't hold their hand and lead them from one topic to the next, and with the fact that the number of contact hours was less than what they were used to. The course was more like a project, which the students had to navigate through independently without the constant supervision of a teacher.

What was the outcome for the students?

Twelve students participated in the course, of which one didn't pass the final exam. The rest of the students got grades ranging from two to four (five is the highest possible grade). The grade was based on the exam and written assignments done throughout the course. Assignments that were not completed or were handed in late affected their grade. The students were generally pleased with their grades, as they felt they had worked hard for them.

The exam covered all the course material: *English Pro*, *Business Territory 1*, the books and the current articles. In order to pass the exam, the students had to absorb all parts of the course material equally.

Where did the students study?

Working on *English Pro* and *Business Territory 1* took place exclusively outside the classroom contact hours – at home or on the polytechnic's computers. What they learned was discussed and analysed in class. This was agreed upon at the beginning of the course. The teacher and the students discussed how they would proceed at the start of the course, and everyone agreed working on the computers during the contact hours would be a waste of time. Listening to the interviews on the CD-ROMs and doing both programs' ready-made language auditing tasks as many times as needed could be done outside the classroom. In this way, each student could regulate his/her own use of time and speed while working on the material.

The contact hours were primarily used for discussion, and for handing in written work.

Did the course demand a lot of preparation time from the teacher?

Yes, it did, but not any more than other courses which are being given for the first time. The teacher needed to be familiar with the material, of which there was a lot in both computer programs. However, the exercises and the teacher's room in *Business Territory 1* offered a lot of useful, ready-to-use material.

Working with *English Pro* and preparing lessons is easy because the teacher is using the program's text files in PDF format.

How did the teacher's role change?

The teacher's role changed into a guide, coordinator and advisor. The teacher was able to give the students a lot more responsibility and offer more independence than in a traditional classroom-based course.

The teacher had to give up his/her omniscient role and let the students work independently and look for knowledge themselves. In this context, the teacher was able to realize that he/she doesn't know everything; the information from the programs and the students' own work experience added significantly to discussions.

The use of multimedia also showed how students work naturally with digital material. They don't need any guidance with the programs; rather they knew how to use them independently without the teacher needing to worry about awkward technical questions and unsure situations.

As a teacher, will you use the same model again?

Of course! We intend to hold a similar course in the future within the regular curriculum. We also plan to include *English Pro* in other general English courses, as the program has a lot to offer even to students who aren't studying business.

As a teacher, what would you do differently?

I don't have enough perspective on the course at this time. Ideas for modification will probably come later. Some definite changes have to be made at least to the exam. Coming up with good questions was very difficult, and this time there were too many questions which could have been misinterpreted. For example, the students could answer questions about the *English Pro* program using general information and not the content and vocabulary from the program.

The questions were meant to test whether the student had truly understood what he/she had learned and heard, but the way the questions were asked didn't always lead the student to the answer the teacher wanted and was aiming for.