

Name of the project: Improve Your English with PEOPLE

Partner: Valkeakoski-opisto (Valkeakoski Lifelong Learning Centre), Finland

Students: Senior students

Course time: 11 x 3 contact hours and independent study, September 2013 – May 2014

Why the use of a PLE methodology

General adult education in Finland responds to adults' self-development needs, offers learning opportunities catering for mature learners' own interests and preferences, and develops citizenship skills. Voluntary studies at lifelong learning centres are based on each learner's interests and willingness to develop his or her knowledge and skills. One of the main reasons people come to lifelong learning centres is the possibility to interact with others. Lifelong learning centres bring together people of different ages, education and skills, and study groups are often very heterogeneous. This presents many challenges especially to foreign language study groups.

In Valkeakoski Lifelong Learning Centre, *Personal Learning Environments (PLEs)* are seen as a possible answer to these challenges, because they combine both the individual and social aspect of learning in an interesting way. In heterogeneous study groups the learners can study according to their individual learning goals and still participate in social interaction as members of the study group.

In this project, Valkeakoski Lifelong Learning Centre's aim was to find out how the autonomous aspect of lifelong learning on the one hand, and the learner's desire for social interaction could be combined. The purpose was to study the personalization of learning goals and autonomy of the learner by an experiment in which personal learning environments were used as a part of group study.

PLEs were used in the experiment as tools to learn English. This was a natural choice for learning content, because learners of English in particular often differ as to their skills and learning backgrounds, and they have varying learning goals.

The project examined

- how and what kind of learning environments the learners build;
- how the teacher can support the learner in planning the PLE and during the course;
- how the group can support the learner while studying with the PLE;
- how the learners' conceptions of learning English and their PLEs change during the course.

The learners' previous experiences, knowledge and skills were an integral part of the course, because each learner made his or her own learning plan and built a PLE. Even the content of the course was left to the learners and their small groups. Within the course, the learners formed smaller study groups according to their skill levels and interests, thus creating a suitable and meaningful social network for themselves.

Studying a foreign language gave the learners a concrete reason to use social media as a PLE. The increased social media and ICT skills in addition to increased language skills open the learners new doors to the society, to Europe and to the whole world in a new way, and they feel that they are a part of the social, economic, political and cultural system. Learning becomes a meaningful exercise and learning motivation increases as the learners see the concrete benefits of both foreign languages and ICT.

The course was creative in the sense that the learners got to decide the content and ways they preferred for studying. The new methods and tools were acquired in a safe environment because the learners had the support of the teachers, the study group and their own small groups.

Content of the course (framed in the context of Lifelong Learning)

There were 14 participants in the course. The learners built their own personal learning environments and used them to study English. The learners were divided into four smaller groups according to the language skills and interests. Each group established a blog around which the learners built their PLEs. The learners elaborated their learning goals and made a learning plan, and the two teachers (English and ICT) functioned as facilitators.

The content of the course was defined as:

- devising a personal learning plan
- learning to use various social media tools such as blogs, and using them for learning English
- Building a PLE with the help of those tools
- Studyin English according to personal learning plans and with individually selected contents
- reflecting on the learning experience.

Pre-requisites of the course

The course was designed for learners with basic skills in both English (level A2-B2) and ICT.

PLE Tools explored in the class

Search	Google
Storage and archiving	Blog
Editing	Google Drive (learners made presentations) Quizlet.com (learners made vocabulary exercises for themselves and each other) YouTube (video editing) Blog
Publishing	Blog (travelogues etc. with photos, text, videos)
Communication	Skype Email Facebook Personal conversations both during and outside the lessons
Sources of content	Language learning applications(kuten Quizlet.com) and websites (both recommended by teachers and found and shared by the learners) Online audio materials for listening comprehension News sites for gathering information Television Dictionaries (both online and on paper) Books, newspapers

Pedagogical approach in the class

Presential:

The first contact lesson was used to reflect on the learners' previous language learning experiences. The learners made a short self-evaluation and determined their own language skill level. In the discussion, the learners also determined their personal learning goals for the course and listed contents and topics they were interested in.

The students divided themselves into four groups:

- European Cuisine (3 members, English level B1-B2, topics food and traveling, goal to learn content-related vocabulary)
- Mabisi (3 members, English level B1-B2, topics news and culture, goal to increase vocabulary and learn more about English grammar)
- Autumn Group (5 members, English level A2, topics everyday English, simple traveling situations, increasing basic language skills and learning everyday vocabulary and simple grammar)

- Three Ladies' Hobbies and Interests (3 members, English level B1-B2, topics culture, traveling and fashion, goal to learn fluent communication and learn content-related vocabulary)

The teachers introduced suitable social media tools and online resources for learning English. Individual learners and the small groups were free to adopt the tools of their choice. The students experimented with the tools and adopted the ones they felt were most suitable for them. The groups worked independently and the teachers acted as facilitators.

Contact lessons were used for:

- practicing English conversation skills on various topics
- working on technical problems
- introducing and practicing new tools
- refining and updating working plans

Autonomous:

A central blog was established for the course. The purpose of the blog was to store information and materials, and to distribute information. Each group established their own blog which was linked to the course blog. The course blog can be found at:

<http://peoplevalkeakoski.blogspot.fi>.

Between contact lessons each group worked within their learning environments according to their group's work programme. Learning environments and tools were defined broadly, and not limited only to social media tools. Some groups built face-to-face meetings, textbooks, other literature, television, newspapers etc. into their learning environments.

Results

Overall results:

Good practice was collected from the course. This good practice may be relevant to other lifelong learning environments in Finland and elsewhere.

1. Learning environments
 - At the beginning of the course it is a good idea to adopt tools that enable collaborative working and sharing information. These tools should be as easy to use as possible.
 - It is useful to have one joint platform for the course to collect and store materials and links.
 - The learners felt that a joint working platform (blog), collaborative applications for learning and practicing vocabulary, and Google tools were the most useful parts of their learning environments.
2. Teacher's role

- Teacher's support is particularly important in the early stages of the course. As the course progresses, the learners work more and more independently. The teacher is responsible for planning and organising the work in the classroom.
 - The teacher's role is to be an expert of language and ICT-related questions
 - It is important to reflect on the concept of learning environment together with the teacher at the beginning of the course, and that the teacher supports the development of personal learning plans and the group's work programme. Particularly older students are not familiar with these concepts and need support.
 - The teacher's support is also important when the learners learn about various social media tools. However, the learners are responsible for choosing the most suitable tools for themselves.
3. Group's support
- The learners considered their small study group as one of the most important parts of their learning environments.
 - The joint work programmes of the small study groups clearly helped to increase cooperation between lessons.
 - Practical use of English increased in all groups. The learners indicated that they use English much more than before, face to face in person and online, when working independently online and when interacting with their foreign friends and acquaintances.
4. Conceptions of language learning and learning environments
- The learners' conceptions of learning and learning environments widened significantly from the "course and textbook" conception at the beginning of the course to include various social media tools and various "real life" environments such as their small study groups and other study groups.
 - The learners considered their personal learning plans and scheduling work programmes as the most important working concepts for the future.
 - The learners realised that informal learning is learning. This is a revolutionary realisation particularly for older learners and increases their autonomy, as they find suitable environments, situations and contents for learning in their own life environments.

Advantages over traditional course delivery strategies:

Learners became more active both as language learners and members of the information society. They found meaningful uses for computers, tablets and smartphones, when they used them for learning English.

In the PLE methodology, the learner's own experiences and interests can be taken into account more and more. In addition to traditional textbook-based language teaching, methods emphasizing learner autonomy and interests should be utilized in lifelong learning centres. PLE-oriented methods that use tablets and smartphones can also be introduced in "traditional" language courses. In this way, flexible and learner-centred models can be brought into lifelong language learning, which is necessary in the tightening financial situation.

Challenges over traditional course delivery strategies:

The freedom of the students to choose their learning contents as well as the tools can be a challenge both for the learners themselves and the teacher, who must be ready to jump into the unknown and tolerate a certain amount of uncertainty. The teacher must be prepared to provide sufficient support at the beginning of the course, but also to let the learners work independently once they have acquired the necessary skills for that.

The subject teacher must feel comfortable working with social media tools. It is not necessary to know exactly how to use all possible applications at the start, but the teacher must be ready to explore new tools as they arise and to determine whether they are applicable for the students.

Unless specific measures are agreed at the start, it may be difficult to track the learners' work and progress. The learners need to be reminded at regular intervals to update their work programmes and reflect on what they have done already. This can be done in conjunction with contact lessons.