

Integrating podcasts and learning objects in an online course for international students

Introduction

The proliferation of e-technologies creates interesting challenges in terms of how the potential each technology offers can be exploited effectively in educational contexts. *eLanguages*¹, a research and development unit in the School of Humanities at the University of Southampton, has been involved in online course design, Reusable Learning Object (RLO) production, and the research and development of a range of associated web-based tools since 2003. One online course that we deliver to international students before they come to the UK combines new technologies such as learning objects and podcasts, with communication tools for e-tutored discussion activities.

With the aim of preparing international students for their future life and study at the University of Southampton, and for the cultural and linguistic challenges that study within a different academic culture can present, we have been delivering *Arrive UK*², a pre-arrival online course, to these students in their home countries for the past two summers.

Arrive UK offers students a choice of technologies to work with (currently learning objects and podcasts) within a Virtual Learning Environment which provides standard synchronous and asynchronous communication tools for tutor-facilitated discussion activities. In this way, the course tries to meet the different preferences and needs of students supported by differing technological standards in their home countries. By offering students access to a range of integrated e-technologies and online tools, which encompass both synchronous and asynchronous, and independent and collaborative use, the course aims to provide flexibility of access as well as help prepare international students for transition to a new academic culture and life in a foreign country.

Learning Objects

One format in which the online learning materials for such courses as *Arrive UK* are developed (by *eLanguages*) is as learning objects. These are self-contained, highly interactive, online learning materials created in the form of a webpage with attached dependent resources. An important design feature is that they are separable from individual contexts of use and so learning objects can be grouped together to serve as the 'building blocks' for online course or resource set creation. Furthermore, this approach allows them to become reusable. Created as content packages they are also interoperable on typical

¹ <http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/>

² <http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/arriveuk/arriveuk.htm>

delivery platforms such as *Moodle*, *Blackboard* and *Web CT* as well as being deliverable via the Web.

*L₂O*³ a JISC-funded Distributed e-learning Pilot Project, led by *eLanguages* at the University of Southampton, has created a Contextualised Learning Activity Repository (CLARe) as part of an investigation into the sharing of such online resources. This prototype repository based on the *ePrints*⁴ repository, has been populated with re-usable learning objects (RLOs) generated from existing online learning material created by *eLanguages* and its project partners in the area of language learning and study skills. As well as the RLOs it also holds a number of their associated 'pedagogic assets' (PAs). These have all been tagged with metadata, allowing storage of, searching by and retrieval of RLO or PA by online course designers, classroom teachers and potentially learners too. Particular attention has been given to creating suitable contextual metadata (relating to the learning and teaching context) for the purpose of sharing resources of this kind and to providing a user-friendly interface to the repository.

A further benefit of designing learning objects as reusable is the versatility it offers for learning and teaching purposes. They can be grouped and delivered for use as resource sets to support different levels and types of students in their independent learning; they can provide single activities for blending with classroom teaching, and they can combine with other technologies in e-tutored online courses delivered across campus or across the world. The consistency of size and style shared by the learning objects means that there is relative ease of repurposing for new contexts of use, and so, as online learning material, they are not limited to being used in any one online course. Twenty or so learning objects form a core component of the online course, *Arrive UK*.

The online course

Arrive UK is delivered on a customised version of the Virtual Learning Environment, *Moodle*. It is an e-tutored online course and delivered over five weeks to international students six weeks prior to their arrival in the UK. The linear structure of the course arranged around five weekly themes also allows students to explore learning materials that lie ahead apart from the podcasts, which are uploaded by the tutor each week, introducing a new item which students can either download to an MP3 player or listen to on their computer.

Each week of the course focuses on a practical aspect of living and studying in the UK; the city of Southampton where the students will be living, or an aspect of academic life at the University itself. Four to five learning objects form the core material for each weekly theme and employ a range of multimedia to provide activity-based material for exploring it.

³ <http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/researchcommunity/projects/l2o.html#chall>

⁴ <http://www.eprints.org/>

The themes and content of the learning objects and podcasts spontaneously stimulate much of the discussion which takes place in the asynchronous Discussion Forum. Some, but by no means all, of the discussion is led by the tutor and there is also a synchronous Chat Room where students can join a scheduled weekly chat session with the tutor or simply meet and chat together online on an *ad hoc* basis.

Podcasts

In 2006, a series of short, three minute podcasts were created in-house by University of Southampton tutors and students and then added to the online course week by week. We based our approach to using podcasts for educational purposes on that developed by Gilly Salmon and colleagues^{5,6} at the University of Leicester and presented at the First Annual Blended Learning Conference, while making some modifications to take into account the use of the podcasts by non native speaker, international students rather than by native speakers. These downloadable MP3 audio files contained unedited 'radio style' talks or interviews delivered by speakers at natural speed. The range of topics are related to the weekly themes and include personal stories about living or travelling abroad; views on commonly encountered acculturation issues and tutors' tips on how to prepare for the academic challenges ahead. The topics and concerns introduced through the podcasts formed the basis of some of the discussion activity between e-tutor and student(s), and student and student(s) in the discussion forum.

Course statistics from 2006 indicate that the level of interest in and downloading of podcasts was high and evaluation feedback from students shows that they appreciated the informality of the style of the podcasts and valued them as a new means of practising listening to informal English spoken by a variety of native speakers with different regional accents and speeds of delivery. They commented on how they provided an opportunity to 'meet' future tutors and gather useful information about various aspects of life and study in the UK in the process. They also liked the fact that the podcasts were delivered in a 'take-away' mode suitable for MP3 players and due to their brevity lent themselves to repeated intensive listening practice.

The future

When *Arrive UK* is next delivered during the summer of 2007, we envisage some extension in the use of podcasts on the course, for example by including recordings made by members of last year's cohort of international students. A series of short vodcasts (downloadable video files) showing typical snapshots from academic life (e.g. seminar interaction) at the University of Southampton and views of key places and life in the city of

⁵ <http://www.impala.ac.uk/outputs/index.html>

⁶ http://perseus.herts.ac.uk/uhinfo/library/v37623_3.pdf

Southampton may also be incorporated into the course and linked to tutor-led discussion activity.

With some adjustment to the package and delivery mechanism, it may be possible to explore the usefulness of the preparation material at an earlier stage of the application process in terms of its potential benefits for international recruitment. Key components of *Arrive UK* such as the learning objects also offer scope for customising the course for other institutions. Guidance on creating tailored podcasts to suit the requirements of the institution could also be added to any customisation package. This is currently under investigation as it would clearly impact positively on the international student experience.

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