



REAP Completion Report French 1A, Department of Modern Languages

Project Sign-off

1. Project achievements

Background:

Following a reduction in staff number in the French division and an increase in student numbers in first year, we had to decide whether to teach much larger tutorial groups or to adopt a different approach to our teaching and assessment.

Given the interactive and communicative nature of language learning, students would prefer to learn a language in small groups, with a tutor, over several sessions per week, as was the case at schools. A survey of 155 students in October 2006 showed that, in their last year at school, 68% had been taught French in groups of not more than 15.

Tutorials of 40 or more might have allowed us to maintain 2 tutorials a week as was previously the case. Quality would have suffered as interaction and communication would have been reduced to a meaningless level, accommodation would have been difficult to find.

We decided, within the REAP project, to maintain one tutorial a week – around 20 to 24 students – and replace the other tutorial by a large interactive-lecture (electronic voting system) and by a package of support exercises and self-evaluation tasks in order to blend taught sessions with individual autonomous work.

The main objectives were:

- to be able to run the course with fewer staff while maintaining or even improving quality
- to embed all forms of assessment into the learning process in order to concentrate students' effort on learning in depth rather than 'learning for examination'.
- to maximise the use of new technologies in particular for electronic marking.
- to give students more flexibility with regard to the quantity, timing and place of their studies and assessments.
- to give students more control about their progress through immediate feed-back.

Organisation of the new assessment system

A range of formative and summative assessments lead to an exemption system based on continuous assessment.

Formative assessment:

- An on-line diagnostic test and a general survey at the beginning of the year give tutors a better view of the new intake's level of previous knowledge and of other factors which can affect their learning (e.g. part-time employment). These can be done from home or on campus.
- On-line support exercises for each learning module: students can retake them as often as they want, from home or campus. Feedback is provided. These cover grammar points as well as vocabulary.

Interactive PRS grammar lectures: class hour, on campus. Then put on-line for permanent access.

**Summative assessment based on:**

- On-line fortnightly, electronically marked self-evaluation tests on each module, based on the support exercises, grammar lectures and tutorial work. Flexible dead-line. Once started, each evaluation is time-limited. Can be done from home or on campus.
- On-line fortnightly guided listening task (video + questions). Summative in so far as the final mark counts but mostly formative as students get help with the vocabulary and can retake the questions until they are satisfied with their level of achievement. The number of potential retakes is limited to 2 in the second semester in order to encourage progression. Can be done from home or on campus.
- On-line electronically marked class tests done under examination conditions, from campus only:
 - 2 short grammar tests
 - 2 listening tests
- Two traditional written tests marked by tutors.
- Oral work

We include most but not all self-evaluations and listening tasks so that students are not penalised for a one-off absence or one poorer performance. The exemption scheme (pass mark 50%) is now based on a much greater range of tasks than when tests were marked entirely by tutors and gives a more accurate overall view of their performance.

- We have succeeded in limiting the amount of traditionally marked assessments while giving students more flexibility and greater control over their work.
- We have established clearer links between course content and all forms of assessment
- We have increased our range assessments while lightening the amount of traditionally marked tasks.

Adjustments and changes to be done

With a much clearer view now of the kind of feedback which is both desirable and feasible using LearnOnline, we are now working to in-build more thorough feedback in a greater range of support exercises available to students, in particular in areas of greater weakness.

Some of the material has to be changed to make sure we respect all copyright limitations. This is a delicate area as the guidelines are so unclear.

Some of the assessments will need to be removed as they did not work well in an electronic format.

We open a forum to link 1st year students and 3rd year students which had not been planned originally. Although it is not strictly part of the assessment system, it is another step towards peer-cooperation.

Conclusion: In spite of a difficult start due to technical problems with LearnOnline (WebCT), the project activities have all been delivered.

2. Impact on students

What has the impact of the project been on students? Have marks, attendance, retention, progression or other key indicators changed or improved (please give details)? Do students demonstrate differences in their satisfaction with the class or course? What evidence can you draw on (please give details)?

- The project actually started 3 years ago in the French division and has evolved into its present form under the REAP umbrella.



- The use of on-line self-assessment probably played a role in the progression rate from 1st year to 2nd year which has gone up from 71.7% in 2004-5 to 78% in 2006-7.
- Attendance, which was becoming a worrying problem in the course of the 1st year, has markedly improved this year. Once students have engaged with the course they remain engaged.
- The frequent self-assessment format makes it easier to keep track of students' progress from the beginning of the session, it allows staff to spot students who seem to be in difficulty in order to contact them and offer support, warn them of the consequences of any lack of involvement with the course and, finally, to NQ them if necessary.

We ran a thorough survey at the end of the year which showed students' satisfaction with our main objectives as underlined by their comments:

'Having almost immediate feedback on marks was also very useful, as I was aware at every point as to how well I was coping.'

'doing the self-evaluations as they helped me understand where I was at with my French and pin-pointed the areas which I needed to work more on.'

'I think that the self evaluation tests are a great idea, as knowing that i had to do one every so often encouraged me to keep continuously studying my grammar.' (2006)

'Really good, as it allows you to sit tests at your own time.'

'It makes learning independent and I like that.'

'doing the self-evaluations as they helped me understand where I was at with my French and pin-pointed the areas which I needed to work more on.'

'The constant assessment is good - not a build up all at once!'

'I think the listening videos and self-evaluations were very helpful as they motivated me to do more work.'

(PRS)' Lectures- fun and interactive.'

'I think the online support was great and some other departments do not use it as fully as French do. Without WebCT there's a good chance I wouldn't have gotten through the year!'

Although students stated, and sometimes complained, that they had 'more work' in French than in other topics

-I had..... in French than in any other subjects. (92 answers)

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| - more work | = 76% |
| - about the same amount of work | = 17.3% |
| - less work | = 5.43% |

They also stated that it was beneficial

- Having to work regularly (quizzes, self-evaluations, tests, etc,) helped me to learn more.

- | | |
|---------------------|---------|
| - strongly agree | = 41.3% |
| - agree | = 50% |
| - disagree | = 6.5% |
| - strongly disagree | = 1% |

We certainly found that the system of regular on-line self-assessment helped maintain students



results above the 50% necessary for an exemption throughout the year. The class average for on-line assignments was 66%

Students who did not gain an exemption under the new system were better prepared for the end of year examination: the failure rate fell from 24% in 2005-6 to 4% in 2006-7

3. Impact on staff

What impact has the project had on staff? Has workload changed significantly? Do staff members involved in the project feel differently about the class or course now that changes have been made? How?

Some staff comments:

'A great addition to our teaching armoury... Given the pressures we are under, it is helpful to move a lot of the marking on to LearnOnline – a practical help for staff. Has other useful applications too e.g questionnaires and feedback.'

'LearnOnline allows students to get more practice in an independent way since they can get the correction for the extra exercises they do online. Therefore, not having to correct these extra grammar exercises frees time for staff. The combination of classic tutorials and technology works well since they both complement one another.'

As mentioned before the French division had to adjust to staff cuts while 1st year students numbers actually increased from 145 (figure at end of year 2004-5) to 187 (end of year 2006-7). Our main objective was to maintain quality and improve learners' experience, which we feel we have achieved. The existing system of exemption, could not have been maintained or could have become unreliable as we could not have based it on a wide enough variety of traditionally marked tests and assignments.

Members of staff who taught in 1st year have no desire to revert to our previous assessment system. However, more personal contact through tutorials is still deemed to be the best way to teach a language.

4. Impact on costs

How do you think that the changes you have made will affect the efficiency of class or course delivery in the future? Have costs been reduced? Or has quality improved significantly with no additional long-term costs?

Course delivery:

The 1A French course will not revert to traditional marking and teaching. On line-access for both course content and assessment will continue. Contact hours have been limited to the maximum possible.

Quality:

Changes were made primarily to ensure that, in their first year, students acquire the basic factual knowledge and develop the learning skills relevant to the acquisition of a language through regular assessments

Our pedagogical approach has improved and is much more in line with the requirements of a foreign language as it allows us to assess students in 'small doses' but much more frequently.

Costs:

In our case costs had been reduced before the project started and we had to be reactive rather than proactive. Replacing tutorials by large group lectures and by work on line enabled us to reduce tutorial staff-time from a potential of 480 staff hours per year to 288, This impressive reduction of 192 hours is difficult to cost as tutorials are led by a variety of staff, from promoted ordinance 16 staff to hourly paid



language tutors and the balance might change from year to year depending on the staff general commitments.

On-line listening work reduces the need for native-language speaker classes from around 360 hours/year to 160.

One of the four linguistic skills, listening, could not have been maintained in a meaningful way without on-line assignments.

The project allowed us to reduce significantly the amount of staff-time necessary to teach our 1st year cohort.

5. Sustainability

Explain how current project activities will continue in the department. What measures are in place to ensure that activities are embedded? Who is responsible for ensuring sustainability?

The project is firmly embedded in the first year course which could not be delivered differently. It is almost complete in second year with a range of on-line self-evaluation and we will be developing certain aspects of it in 3rd year next year.

The Head of Department supports the project and has assigned funding to technical support to develop on-line materials and assessment.

6. Plans for further development

Are other courses or classes in the department planning to change their assessment practices as a result of your work (please give details)? What do you think would need to change in your department if your REAP-supported ideas were fully adopted across all courses and years?

- 2nd year French classes have adopted many features of the REAP project,
- 3rd year French will have a measure of on-line self evaluation counted in as from next year.
- Italian: as in French, continuous evaluation is now done largely on line.
- Further development implies a change of mentality, not only for the staff who might perceive the change as a threat but also for students who are used to more traditional learning approaches:

(the course) 'Could be a bit less reliant on webct and have more paper based work.'

'I find that there are too many WebCt assessments and not enough written and oral assessments.'

'The workload of the continuous Web CT assessments was a lot different to the way it was taught at school and I was not quick enough to adapt.'

'I do not feel I performed as well as I could, purely down to not adapting to the continuous assessment.'

More importantly, the nature of language teaching, largely based on communication, has to rely on human contact, both for teaching and assessment. Ideal for 1st year and part of the 2nd and even 3rd year language teaching, there are limits to how far the technology-based project can expand in subsequent years.

The limited number of suitably equipped rooms for interactive lectures and of computer clusters to run class tests will limit the expansion of the REAP approach.

- We are now looking into developing formative tasks for French Studies classes.



7. Lessons learned from the implementation of the REAP project

What changes contributed most to improving the quality of student learning?

As the coordinator responsible for bringing about the changes in 1A French I find that one positive element stands out: the blurring of the differences between formative and summative tasks. Short and frequent support exercises, self-assessment and class tests are now linked in a coherent and manageable progression.

The most difficult exercises (listening) can be resubmitted.

PRS-based interactive lectures allow students to answer anonymously giving them a change to learn from their mistakes in a non-threatening environment and to participate actively, irrespective of numbers.

The exemption system is based on a whole range of exercises regularly spread throughout the year. All of this has helped to shift the emphasis from what has to be done for any specific examined task to what has to be learned about the subject. For the first year ever, no student contacted me to ask 'What should I revise for the examination?'

For us 'blended' teaching has taken the meaning of blending the assessment into the learning process in a much more seamless fashion.

This is shown in the following comments which do not distinguish between teaching and assessment:

'Feedback and support from all the staff on the course was excellent, far better than in any of my other subjects. The continuous work and assessments made the subject easier to grasp, and the additional help and vocabulary building for the tutors and lectrices (classes) was fantastic.'

'Very useful, lots of exercises to back-up and help to understand the topics we were studying in tutorials at that time.'

We have been successful in shifting the emphasis away from assessments onto the learning process

What changes contributed most to reducing costs?

Costs:

Two changes have helped to reduce costs:

- Replacing a weekly tutorial by an interactive PRS lecture (formative assessment). Reducing 240 staff/ hours over the whole year to 48h.
- Electronically marked assessments has reduced traditional staff-marked assessments from a minimum of 6 per year to 2. The savings are considerable albeit difficult to cost precisely.

If you could start again, what would you have done differently? What lessons would you pass on to other departments undertaking similar projects?

Advice to other departments:

1. clearly determine what needs to be achieved and why:

In our case we wanted to inform, support and assess at the same time, so that the course would be seen as a coherent learning experience.

'I liked how everything was on-line meaning work and what you have to do/know about is easily accessible. French is one of the most organised classes and I think WebCT has a big part to play with that. Anything you are unsure of is only a click away and this is such a powerful tool.'

We felt that putting assessment on line without the course information and the learning support would simply increase the negative impact assessment can have on learning by dissociating it further from the learning process.



The REAP project, in our case, is inseparable from all the other aspects of the course.

2. determine how to achieve it:

Maintaining and improving quality means that adopting a sound, research-informed approach is essential. Pedagogical objectives have to drive the use of technology, not the other way round. Technology can too easily enhance bad practice.

In our case, with previous financial support from the Principal, we had already done a lot of work on interactive teaching with PRS, electronically marked exercises and the use of the VLE (WebCT, now LearnOnline). We were therefore well equipped to implement the REAP project in all aspect of our 1A French course whilst avoiding pedagogical and practical pitfalls which could have been detrimental to students.

3. technical support is essential:

Academics are not equipped to deal with technical problems, such as the ones we experienced at the beginning of the year. Specific technical adjustments had to be made to fit our requirements, such as accents. It is the role of the academic staff to define the type of course assessment to be used but not to spent time packaging exercises in an electronic format. Working with a VLE system is not as easy as it is sometimes made to be. The risk of relying entirely on academic staff might lead to learnOnline being used as a simple repository for text-files as opposed to being used for a whole range of assessments.

4. time to plan and implement changes has to be set aside:

Re-engineering assessment procedures means re-engineering the whole learning environment. It is very time-consuming to set it up properly. Time spent on such developments has to be recognise as worthwhile.

5. build a consensus:

At least one - or preferably several - members of staff have to be convinced of the need for changes and the changes have to be seen as worth the effort by those who will have to implement them.

8. Future Research

Have any issues emerged from the project which merit further investigation or future development work by your department, by CAPLE or by other organisations?

Given the nature of the French course which must have a strong oral/aural component, we need to find ways to develop aural comprehension and to assess oral production in line with the REAP project. The productive oral possibilities are, at the moment, very limited on any virtual platform, so developing this aspect would certainly be of interest to other institutions and would not be restricted to the languages departments.

We will look into the use of Voice Tools or similar tools which would support podcasting, voice e-mails, threaded voiceboards and on-line voice recorder software.

This would entail logistical and financial support beyond the department (technical services, VLE provider, etc.,) as well as the cooperation of CAPLE to monitor impact on students' learning.

9. Dissemination

I intend to present a paper about our experience at the following event:

'World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, & Higher Education' in October 15-19, 2007, Quebec City, Canada