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Web-based teaching as a performance enhancer in foreign language teaching in Sri Lanka

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Key words: *web-based teaching, foreign language teaching, language skills, computer literacy*

Abstract:

This paper discusses the results of a pilot study conducted at University of Kelaniya in integrating web-based teaching into the study programmes of German as a Foreign Language. Since German is not a language popular at secondary school level, student offering to read the language at the university commence language learning as beginners. Albeit the courses are designed to impart language knowledge to all students equally, the performance of the majority of students at examinations indicated their difficulty in achieving the set benchmarks. Thus this study was conducted to enhance language skills and knowledge of culture and lifestyle of German speaking countries through web-based teaching in addition to traditional methods used earlier. The results at the examinations indicated a significant improvement of student performance.

1 Introduction

Several steps have been taken in Sri Lankan universities during the past five years to increase computer literacy of all undergraduates. Results of studies conducted indicate a computer literacy level[1] of over 90% of students who offer a foreign language as a main subject at the Department of Modern Languages, University of Kelaniya [2]. However, it has been observed that this competency is hardly used to teach the subjects offered by students or to improve their subject knowledge. Thus the competency acquired by students in ICT continues to be regarded as an additional skill which need not be integrated into or utilised by the study programmes [1, 2]. With a view to address this issue, several new course units at undergraduate level were designed by the Department of Modern Languages integrating ICT in language learning. This paper reviews results of a pilot study conducted in integrating web-based teaching into selected course units of the study programme in German as a Foreign Language.

The undergraduate programmes offered at Universities in Sri Lanka are of three or four years' duration. While the Bachelor Degree Programmes of three years duration called the General Degree Programme consist of two to three main subjects, the Special Degree Programme of four years duration consists of one specialised subject. A number of elective course units offered by any faculty can be selected by the students in addition to the main subjects they opt

[1] This includes word processing, use of internet and emailing

for. One core course unit each from the first and third years of German for the General Degree Programme was selected for the pilot project.

2 Background

University of Kelaniya is the only university in Sri Lanka offering a number of foreign languages for the Bachelor Degree Programmes. While Chinese, Japanese, Korean, French, German, Russian and Spanish are offered by the Department of Modern Languages, Hindi has its own Department of Study[2]. Due to lack of qualified teachers at national level, facilities for foreign language teaching in secondary schools is limited. However, national examinations held at Year 11 (G.C.E. Ordinary Level) and Year 13 (G.C.E. Advanced Level) include several foreign languages as subjects for the limited number of students who have facilities in schools to learn the languages. Thus, French and Japanese study programmes at University of Kelaniya require a minimum of a pass at the G.C.E. Advanced Level whereas Chinese, Hindi, Korean, German, Russian and Spanish commence at beginners' level in the first year at university. The curriculum in the first year consists of an intensive course in imparting four skills of language competency. Literature is introduced from the second year along with intensive training in advanced skills of the relevant language. In respect of students following the German study programme, their language knowledge is expected to achieve a minimum level of B2 of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) within a period of three academic years. The assessment criteria for the course units include continuous assessments, presentations, and written assignments amounting to 30% of marks and an end of course examination awarding 70% of marks.

2.1 Constraints

The limited number of hours allocated for each course unit is insufficient to impart knowledge to students to achieve the set benchmarks in foreign languages. This becomes more evident in languages where the characters have to be learnt by the students initially as in the case of Chinese, Korean, Russian or Hindi. An academic year comprises of two semesters of 15 weeks each. A total of 9 credits are awarded to students of a foreign language offered by the Department of Modern Languages at the end of an academic year. This is divided into four core course units, and one credit consists of 15 teaching hours. Thus the lecturers are left with only 135 hours of teaching per year to guide the students to reach the set goals. Leaving aside holidays falling during the week and other activities organised by students, it has been observed that not more than 120 hours of lecture sessions[3] are covered during an academic year. However, due to the tutorial hours allocated in addition to the lecture hours amounting to a minimum of 1 hr per week per course unit, the scheduled work is generally completed at the end of an academic year. Due to lack of lecture halls and laboratory facilities conducive to language learning and limited number of hours available per week, many a student fall short of achieving the set benchmarks at the completion of each course unit. Furthermore, none of the foreign languages offered by the Department of Modern Languages is used in Sri Lanka in everyday life, thus making the task of the language student even more difficult. The learning traditions in Sri Lanka also contribute to underperformance of students due to over reliance on lecturers and passive learning and reluctance to engage in self learning, [2]. As observed by Barr [1, p.20] this is a common phenomenon in many countries of the world.

[2] English enjoys the status of a second language in Sri Lanka and has its own Department of Study in the university. Thus English is not included here.

[3] Lecture sessions are to be understood as practical sessions since it is language teaching one deal with and not traditional lectures delivered by the lecturer with no student participation.

3 Aims and Objectives

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or ICT enhanced Foreign Language Teaching is no longer alien to studies on language teaching, e.g. [1, 5, 6]. However, very few studies have been conducted on its effectiveness in foreign/second language teaching in Sri Lanka, [2, 3, 4]. As indicated above, the course units in the study programmes in languages at the Department of Modern Languages are designed to impart language knowledge to all students equally. However, when analysing their results, the performance of around 60% of the students is below 'A' Grade (70% of marks) in the first year. This gradually lowers to around 21% in the second year. Although the results in general have been satisfactory, all the students showed more potential for higher achievement. With the author's initiative blended-learning was introduced to one course unit in the third year (GERM 33023 Analysis and Interpretation of Non-Literary Texts) during the academic year 2004/2005 and the results of the students showed a marked improvement from that of their second year [table 1]. However, more potential was shown by the students to achieve even higher goals. Thus it was decided to integrate web-based teaching to this course unit as well as one course unit from the first year (GERM 13033 Contemporary German Lifestyle) from the academic year 2005/2006 commencing in May 2006 as a pilot project. A significant improvement in student performance at examinations as well as in their overall knowledge of the culture and society of German speaking countries and topics of interest in current affairs was expected.

4 Observations made during the study and results

The German Study Programme has been designed on a communicative approach to language teaching. Although a lot of audio-visual media including films, audio CDs, PowerPoint presentations with visuals have been used during lectures with supplementary material from a number of text books, no significant improvement to the average students' achievements were indicated at the end of an academic year. With the computer literacy of students being high and increased facilities available for laboratory facilities, this pilot study was conducted in the German Study Programme to assess the results of effectiveness of web-based teaching. It was thus aimed at enhancing language skills of students and their knowledge of culture and lifestyle of German speaking countries through web-based teaching. Due to lack of availability of laboratories with internet access, only one hour per week could be allocated for each group of students in the project. Thus only one course unit each from the first and third year study programmes could be accommodated.

A sample of 54 students from the first year and 38 from the third year were the subject of this study. Apart from finding the novelty of teaching involved, which motivated the students to attend lectures regularly and use the web frequently for their assignments outside the classroom, the performance of all the students at the examinations showed a significant improvement from the previous years, [fig.1, fig.2, table 1, table 2]. Over reliance on lecturers and reluctance to work on take home assignments showed a remarkable change. Students showed a significant improvement in their vocabulary, with students submitting completed assignments within a week itself whereas it used to take two whole semesters during previous years. Thus, at the end of the 30 week academic year, the results obtained from 4 course units each in German indicated the contribution of web-based teaching to their enhanced performance in all aspects of language skills in comparison to students of previous years. It also indicated that the majority of the students achieved the set benchmarks in contrast to previous years.

4.1 Web-based activities

The activities conducted during the third year course unit will be discussed in this section. The objectives of the course unit as defined in the syllabus is as follows: "At the completion of this course unit the students are expected to demonstrate advanced skills in analysis and interpretation of authentic non-literary texts and a sound knowledge of current trends in German culture and society"[4]. Thus it was expected that the students gain access to first hand information through web-based activities and enhance their knowledge. The web activities relevant to the lecture session including the non-literary text to be discussed were posted on the home page of the author for students to access. Constant contact with students via email was established and electronic submission of assignments was encouraged. The computer laboratory of the Faculty of Humanities including 45 PCs with internet access was provided to conduct the sessions. According to the schedule for the course unit, the lecture sessions comprised of activities including live chat sessions, email correspondence with native speakers, contribution to virtual forum[5], analysis of news on Deutsche-Welle, listening to and reporting of news, visiting departmental stores, supermarkets, placing of online orders, sports pages, news papers, television and radio stations, websites on public transport including the German Railway, visiting an official website of a selected city from a German speaking country, preparing an itinerary for a ten day stay etc.

Although reading comprehension is the main objective of this course unit, all four areas of language competency were well addressed during these lecture sessions, i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking. Thus the language skills of students showed remarkable improvement. The most significant features were their lack of inhibition to speak in class and the motivation for self-learning.

4.2 Results of the study

Similar improvements were seen among the first year students who were absolute beginners to the language. The course unit on Contemporary German Lifestyle included one hour of web-based activities assigned by the lecturers in charge to familiarise students with aspects of German culture and society. The activities included visiting German cities, finding out and reporting about festivals, food and beverages, modes transportation, shopping, leisure activities etc.
The student evaluations given at the end of both courses units gave highly positive feed back indicating their awareness of the significant improvements in language skills they made during the academic year due to web-based activities.

The following tables and graphs indicate how student performance in German increased during the last academic year according to results obtained at end of course examinations obtained from 3 academic years. The grades are awarded from A+ to E in ascending order. Each grade consists of a Grade Point Value. With high achievements in their core course units, students' Grade Point Average increases, thus providing them an opportunity to obtain Fist or Second Class Honours Pass at the final examination of the Bachelor Degree Programme.

[4] From the syllabus for GERM 33023 Analysis and Interpretation of Non-Literary Texts
[5] www.jilid.com Virtual platform on intercultural communication for exchange of ideas across cultures on a given topic

Table 1 indicates the grades obtained[6] for course units based on German language and culture during first, second and third years of the General Degree Programme in the academic years 2003/2004, 2004/2005 (Blended-learning introduced to one third year course unit) and 2005/2006 (where web-based teaching was introduced in first and third years). Marked in bold are the course units with web-based teaching.

Year		**No. of students**	**Repeaters**[7]	**A+**	**A**	**A-**	**B+**	**B**	**B-**	**C+**	**C**	**D**	**E**
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Academic year 2003/2004													
I	GERM 13033	51/57	2	5	15	7	5	6	5	5	1	-	2
	GERM 12042	50/57	1	2	7	9	6	6	4	8	3	3	2
II	GERM 22042	25/27	1	9	6	3	3	2	1	-	-	-	-
	GERM 23023	27/28	3	3	7	1	3	1	2	-	4	2	-
III	GERM 33023	02/02	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Academic year 2004/2005													
I	GERM 13033	53/53	3	-	11	7	5	4	7	3	9	3	4
	GERM 12042	52/52	4	-	11	3	6	4	7	5	6	9	1
II	GERM 22042	37/43	4	-	6	1	5	6	1	7	7	2	2
	GERM 23023	41/44	1	-	7	2	6	2	3	7	7	5	2
III	GERM 33023	22/24	-	1	10	2	4	3	1	.	1	.	.
Academic year 2005 /2006													
I	**GERM 13033**	58/59	8	25	21	1	-	-	1	-	9	1	-
	GERM 12042	61/63	9	13	19	6	4	2	4	1	9	3	-
II	GERM 22042	50/53	3	1	15	2	2	9	4	3	8	6	-
	GERM 23023	51/54	7	-	6	4	2	9	7	7	9	7	-
III	**GERM 33023**	33/38	1	9	13	4	3	1	-	-	-	-	-
	GERM 33042	30/30	-	-	14	1	2	6	2	2	2	1	-

Table 1. Results obtained for German course units over three academic years

Column 1 of the table indicates the year in which the course units given in column 2 are conducted. Column 3 indicates the number of students registered and the number of students sat (including the repeaters). The number of students who repeated the course unit due to failure or weak pass obtained during the previous academic year is indicated in Column 4. Columns 5 – 14 indicate the number of students obtaining individual grades from A+ to E. The number of students obtaining A+ or higher has increased following the introduction of web-based activities. Column 12 includes the number of repeat students who can only achieve a maximum of a 'C' Grade at second attempt.

[6] Key to Grades:

Grades	Marks	Grade point value	
A+ :	85% - 100%	4.5	
A :	70% - 84%	4.0	
A- :	65% - 69%	3.5	
B+ :	60% - 64%	3.3	
B :	55% - 59%	3.0	
B- :	50% - 54%	2.8	
C+ :	45% - 49%	2.5	
C :	40% - 44%	2.0	
D :	25% - 39%	1.0	weak pass
E :	00% - 24%	0.0	failed

[7] Students repeating course units are only given a maximum of 'C' Grade.

The graphs below [Fig.1, 2, 3] indicate results obtained by students for individual course units on German Language and Culture in their first and third years.

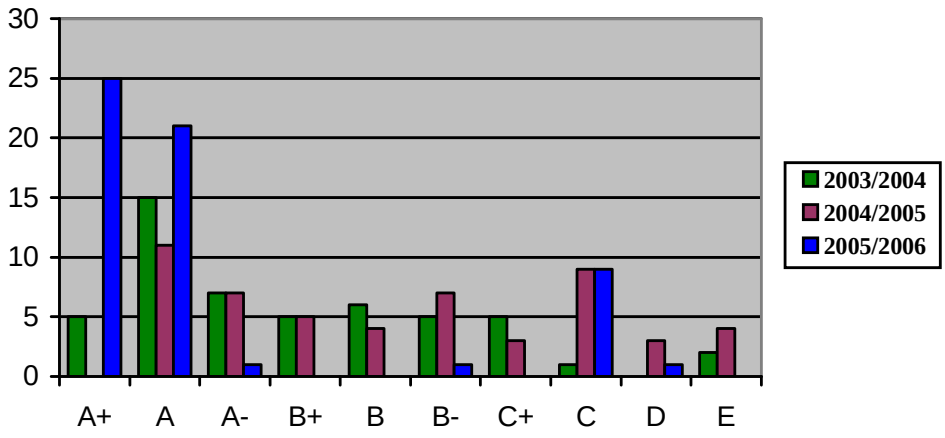


Fig. 1. Results obtained for GERM 13033 Contemporary German Lifestyle

The high achievement rate is indicated during the academic year 2005/2006 with the introduction of web-based teaching to this course unit. The majority of the 'C' grades and the only 'D' Grade have been obtained by repeat students[8]. Also there are no failures in this academic year.

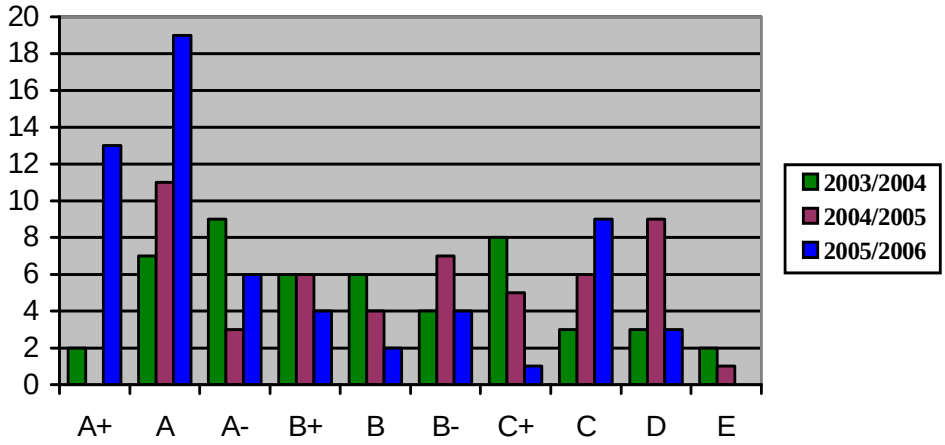


Fig. 2. Results obtained for GERM 12042 Language Structure, Guided Writing and Composition

The high achievement rate is also indicated by results of the course unit where web-based teaching was not included. However, high grades have been achieved by students during the academic year 2005/2006 with the introduction of web-based teaching to the above mentioned course unit on German Culture and Lifestyle. The majority of the 'C' grades and the three 'D'

[8] Students who repeat a course unit do not attend lecture sessions. Thus they have not being exposed to web-based activities conducted in 2005/2006

Grades have been obtained by repeat students. In contrast to previous years there are no failures during 2005/2006.

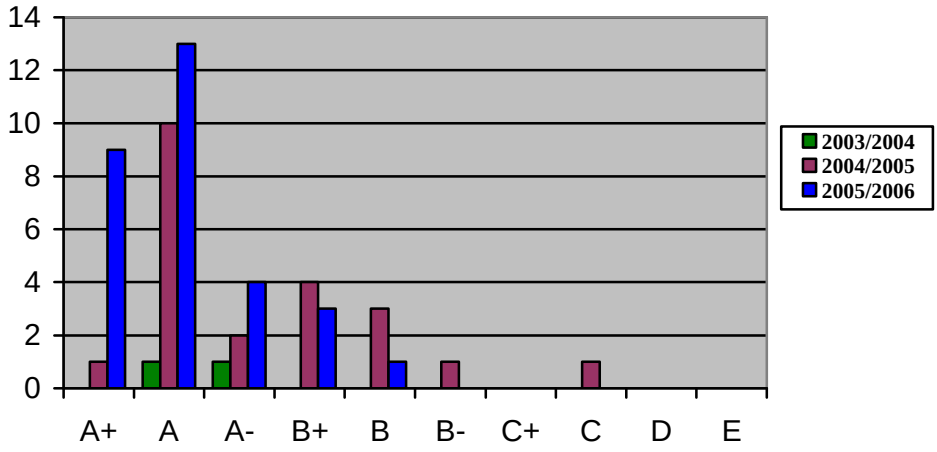


Fig. 3. Results obtained for GERM 33023 Analysis and Interpretation of Non-Literary Texts

The number of students in the third year has increased within the three academic years. Remarkable improvement of students in achieving higher grades is indicated in the year 2005/2006. The lowest Grade obtained is 'B'.

Table 2 below indicates results of 30 students in German during their first, second and third years. The course units selected are based on language. The results of the literature components are not included although these units also showed a marked improvement from the results of the second year. The number of students offering course units on German literature is much less than the students registered for course units based on German language. Thus only the results of language based course units are given below. The results obtained by students in the first year are from the academic year 2003/2004 and in the second year from the academic year 2004/2005. The same students sat the third year examination in 2005/2006. Their performance during the examinations at the end of the second year is far from satisfactory.

By analysing the results it is clear that each and every student has achieved a higher grade in the third year especially in the course unit 33023 with web-based teaching. Even students who have obtained 'D' or failed in course units during the second year have shown improvement in the third year, [eg. students 2, 3, 25, 28]. As lecturer in charge of course unit 33023, the author was first confronted at the beginning of academic year 2005/2006 with a group of students who lacked confidence in their language ability due to the poor results obtained in the second year. Their language knowledge expected was B1. However, the majority of the students did not even possess A2 level. The knowledge achieved during the first year and better performance shown during that year also indicated that the students are capable of achieving better results with more commitment and means to improve their skills. It has to be noted that no ICT based activities were used for any of the 4 course units during their second year although one course unit in the first year introduced them to computer applications in language learning (GERM 13022 Foundations in Language Learning). With web-based activities paving way for improvement in their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, all the students obtained higher grades in their third year. The feed back from the students during the student evaluation at the end of the course was extremely positive, showing their

confidence in their language ability and motivation for self learning using web-based activities.

Student No.[9]	Course units in German					
	13033	12042	23023[10]	22042[11]	33023[12]	33042[13]
1	B+	B-	C	C	A	B
2	C+	C	D	D	B	C
3	B+	D	D	E	B+	C+
4	C+	B	C+	C+	B+	A-
5	A	C+	B-	C	A	B
6	A	A	B+	B	A-	A
7	B-	B	B	A	A+	A
8	A	B+	C+	B	A	A
9	A	A-	B-	B+	A	A
10	A-	A-	A-	B	A	A
11	B+	A-	B+	C+	A	A
12	A+	A	B+	A	A+	A
13	A	A	A-	B+	A+	A
14	A	A	B	B+	A	A
15	A+	A+	A	A	A+	A
16	B	A	C	B	A+	B-
17	A-	A	A	B+	A+	A
18	A	A+	A	A	A+	A
19	C	C	A	A	A+	A-
20	A-	B+	C+	C	A	B
21	C+	A	C+	C	A	B-
22	B-	B	C	C	A	B
23	A	A+	A	B	A	A
24	B	A	B+	C	A+	B+
25	D	B-	E	C+	B+	D
26	A-	A-	B+	B+	A-	B+
27	C	B-	C+	B-	A-	C
28	B	A	D	C+	A	C+
29	B	B-	C	C	A-	B
30	B+	A-	D	A-	A	B

Table 2. Results obtained for German by individual students in the first, second and third years

5 Conclusion

The results of the pilot study indicate an increase in the performance of students due to web-based activities. Feed back given by students during student evaluation at the end of the course also confirmed this fact. During the previous academic years several students gave up German following their poor performance in the second year. With more positive results being achieved now due to web-based teaching it is expected that the students will continue offering German as a subject during all three years of the General Degree Programme. As a result of motivation and high achievements of students in the first year during 2005/2006, the number of students registering for German as a main subject increased to 82 this year. This is

[9] Due to confidentiality of results the student registration numbers are not included
[10] GERM 23023 Comprehension and Guided Writing
[11] GERM 22042 Grammar and Vocabulary through Non-literary Texts
[12] Course unit with web-based teaching integrated (Analysis and Interpretation of Non-Literary Texts)
[13] Course unit with no web-based teaching integrated (German for Professional Purposes)

an indication of the confidence students have in teaching methodology and course content. Furthermore, overall performance of students of German at degree level during the final examination clearly showed the impact of their achievements in German on the final result. Out of the students securing First Class and Second Class Honours Passes at the end of 2005/2006, majority of them had offered German as a main subject. It was also noted that web-based activities not only improved students' four areas of language competency, but also contributed to their acquiring soft skills, i.e. computer skills, presentation skills. As future perspectives, the current course units will continue with the web-based activities and it is expected to integrate similar course content to course units on language in the second year. Albeit the pilot study observed achievements of only one group of students, web-based teaching is also continued during the current academic year 2006/2007 where the first semester has come to a close and students showing remarkable improvement in their language competency.

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