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BLENDED LANGUAGE LEARNING

KOMBINIRANO UČENJE TUJIH JEZIKOV

Poročilo o opravljenem raziskovalnem delu

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Ključne besede raziskave v slovenskem jeziku: kombinirano učenje jezikov, visoko šolstvo, IKT, računalniško podprto učenje jezikov, visoko šolstvo

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Blended language learning

1 Introduction

Tertiary education institutions should address changing expectations associated with the quality of the learning experience and the wave of technological innovation, if they want to provide relevant and engaging learning experience. They must provide students with an opportunity to engage their professors and peers in critical and creative reflections and discourse and not hold onto past practices that are incongruent with the needs and demands of a knowledge society. Blended learning approach, when well understood and implemented, has the potential to transform higher education. On the other hand, when considering blended learning, there is, of course, no single perfect blend – the concept is grounded on the notion of flexibility. In addition, blended learning can provide a means to rethink how we can improve teaching and learning in a cost effective manner.

The combined approach of using ICT with more traditional tutor-led teaching seems to appeal to many learners. It has the advantage of group interaction, listening and speaking practice as well as allowing the learners to work at their own individual pace or area of interest. Guidance and assistance from the tutor gives confidence to those learners with little previous experience of using ICT, making the learning experience more rewarding as both language and ICT skills are being practiced.

Online learning is one of the fastest growing trends in educational uses of technology. This form of learning is a far cry from the televised broadcasts and videoconferencing that characterized earlier generations of distance education. Moreover, interest in hybrid approaches that blend in-class and online activities is increasing. A survey of e-learning at 274 colleges and universities in the United States found that 80 percent of undergraduate higher education institutions and 93 percent of doctoral institutions offer blended learning courses (Arabasz and Baker, 2003). The idea of blended language learning emerged at the Faculty of Management, University of Primorska in Koper, Slovenia, almost at the same time, when teachers became aware that a more experiential, inquiry-based and hands-on learning approach is required and that more responsibility should be transferred to students for their work, i.e. goal setting, record-keeping, monitoring and evaluation. Students, teachers agreed, need more choice for choosing their own materials, writing topics, research projects etc. and thus decided to:

1. prepare a number of guidelines (on effective writing, on oral and written presentations, on summarising and note-taking, on language awareness, etc.)

2. set up appropriate e-Lecture rooms (say, by using Moodle, which is an effective open source software package designed to help teachers create online courses)

3. build their own WWW pages

4. prepare language portfolio for students

5. familiarise students with computer-assisted language learning

6. keep encouraging students in their efforts to master the foreign language.

2. History of CALL in Slovenia

In Slovenian higher education institutions, e-learning programmes continue to evolve as they grow out of infancy. As a matter of fact, online instruction has become increasingly popular as a mode of instruction in many higher education institutions. Despite the fact that some tertiary education language teachers are still more comfortable with textbooks and because some teachers believe that the use of computers threatens traditional literacy skills (which are heavily tied to books), there is a growing number of younger language teachers who are aware of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) not just because of the importance of the technology in their work, but because ICT is changing the ways in which English can be taught. These language teachers are also aware that web-based language learning solutions will only be used successfully if they can be seamlessly combined with tried and tested traditional learning and teaching approaches in pedagogically relevant ways and have a high value-added at reasonable additional costs. In other words, teachers should not be interested in adopting technology for technology's sake, should not deprive students of interaction with their professors nor offer irrelevant content and trivial tasks in their e-Lecture rooms.

The beginnings of CALL in Slovenia can be traced back to the 1990s, when the Bank of English, Sara and other concordancing software were used for various

language learning purposes, most often related to the vocabulary and grammar of a given foreign language both in general and business courses. In such language courses, the participants carried out practical work with vocabulary and grammar frequency lists, concordances, key word lists, collocations, etc. In addition, corpus techniques enabled corpus-based reference dictionaries and grammars (e.g. COBUILD Dictionary and Grammar, Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English and Chemnitz Internet Grammar of English) as well as corpus-based evaluation of ELT textbooks and grammars. The introduction of software e-learning platforms (*e.g.*, Moodle) in language courses represents the second wave of CALL in many private and public higher education institutions in Slovenia. Teachers quickly recognised that the accessibility of online resources is a benefit, which may encourage students to practice outside the classroom.

During this period, individual teachers also tried to encourage their students to use blogs, wikis, Rich Site Summary (RSS) feeds and other web tools in order to improve their language skills. The main purpose of these efforts was to find a route to better teaching/learning, more motivated students and more successful courses.

Let me briefly describe the first phase of CALL at FM, during which computers, a database (BNC) and a software package (Sara) were used in order to investigate the system of past and present tenses, simple, progressive and perfect, their function and differences in meaning and the frequency of occurrences of particular tenses. During the academic year 2006–2007, a group of 38 first year students, studying at the Faculty of Management and the author of this article decided to have a closer look at the English tense system. Despite the fact that

they have attended English courses for, on average, eight years, they are still frequently in doubt about which tense to use both in their written assignments and oral presentations. Our hypothesis was (a) that rules in textbooks cannot describe the English tense system in all its complexity (Hypothesis 1) and (b) that progressive and perfect tenses are used in less than 10% of cases (Hypothesis 2). First, our investigation centred on the explanations concerning tenses as given in a textbook used for first year students at the Faculty of Management in Koper.

First, a random set of ten verbs in a specific tense was chosen to find out the number of occurrences, and second, different usages and functions of particular tenses were searched. The verbs chosen were break, decide, feel, give, look, meet, read, skim, stop, and want, half of them regular and the other half irregular verbs. No other special criteria were followed in the choice of verbs.

Two issues concerning English tenses were addressed, namely, rules given by textbooks and the internet sites vs. rules arrived at by concordancing a set of verbs in corpus (BNC) and frequencies of tense forms of the same set of verbs. It was proved, first, that the number of rules offered by textbooks, and Internet sites is too small to describe the variety of uses in English tense system and, second, that progressive and perfect forms (of chosen verbs) occur in less than 5% of cases, and simple forms in almost 95% of sentences, thus confirming both hypothesis in their entirety. In addition, corpus examples are important in language learning as they expose students to the kinds of sentences and structures, which they will encounter when using the language in real-life business situations. Students who are taught with traditional textbooks are often

unable to analyse more complex structures, because there are considerable differences between what textbooks are teaching and how native speakers actually use language as evidenced in the corpora. Teaching based on non-empirical teaching materials can be misleading, whereas corpus-based studies inform us about usages that are more common and to which more attention should be given.

The results clearly showed that the use of tenses is very often verb-dependable; therefore, students should be at least informed about such dependency. Students also agreed that hard and fast rules regarding tenses should be substituted by corpus-based data-driven hypothesis testing learner-centred notions. Oversimplified views about the system of English tenses stated in textbooks and on the majority of the Internet sites are responsible for many of the problems that students of (Business) English have in making their decisions about the correct tense usage. According to naïve theories of meaning, grammatical tense directly reflects the threefold division of time, each tense referring to the appropriate sector of time. I strongly believe that anyone working in any field of language study, language description, or – even more so – language teaching should use corpora as a source for language research. Unfortunately, the English language teaching profession has been rather slow to incorporate corpus methods into its working practices. On the contrary, materials and teachers rely on a well-established canon of apparently self-evident 'facts' about the language, which have, more or less, the status of tradition in which knowledge is simply handed down from teacher to student. Corpus-based approach in teaching represents a shift towards a more learner-centred paradigm of discovery

learning, which enables students to test their own hypotheses and discover their own rules in the process of the so-called data-driven learning.

The second phase of CALL at FM took place in the academic year 2007–2008, two e-lecture rooms were set up using Moodle. The layout of both e-lecture rooms was similar. Both consisted of an introductory section in which the course objectives, assignments and course requirements were described. The e-lecture room for the first-year students comprised of eight sections (two for each week), in which the main activities were described and written texts and MP3s were available for downloading. The texts in this section were related to the topics that were discussed during the F2F sessions (the topics were the qualities of good managers, business etiquette, company structure and organisation, entertaining, describing trends, presentations, telephoning, business trips and annual reports). In addition, a set of guidelines was prepared for the students.

The e-lecture room for the second-year students also comprised of eight sections (two for each week), but with a selection of materials on the following topics: human resources and job interviews, international trade, banking, stock exchange, mergers and acquisitions, marketing, advertising, the European Union (EU) and commercial correspondence. A section called 'Resources' represented the links to useful Internet sites; the section called 'Miscellaneous Resources' consisted of the materials that students could use in order to improve their language skills by studying on their own.

Both e-lecture rooms also had an additional section with sample tests and a section in which a number of longer texts were available for downloading. Both groups of students could also download the *Language Portfolio for students of*

management, which has been prepared by the author of this article according to the common criteria accepted throughout Europe.

3. Research purpose

The main purpose of our efforts was to find a route to better teaching/learning, more motivated students and more successful courses through the implementation of computer technologies – from multimedia to the Internet – and to assess their potential for language learning and teaching in post-secondary education in Slovenia.

4. Research aims

Our aims were to provide a more flexible approach to language learning, encourage learner autonomy, personalise the learning experience improve the retention rate, and to find a route to more motivated students and more successful courses. If the ultimate goal of educational experience is not to acquire fragments of information but to collaboratively construct core concepts and schema based on important ideas and information, then carefully planned blended language courses have the potential to evolutionary transform teaching and learning in higher education.

What is needed are academic courses and programmes aimed at meeting the lifelong and just-in-time education needs of various target groups of students. In their efforts to maintain or enhance their competitiveness faculties and

universities should strive to be proactive and innovative, which can, to some extent, be done by moving from f2f interaction into blended mode of teaching/learning. Equally important, students in higher education institutions with advanced foreign language skills need rich input in terms of quality, quantity, variety, genuineness and relevance.

Following our initial research activity carried out during the academic year 2009-2010 on a group of full-time students, we carried out a second research study by focusing on three groups of part-time students at two higher education institutions, the Faculty of management in Koper and the International Business School in Ljubljana, with the aim to find out if there are any (considerable) differences in the perception of blended language practices between full-time and part-time students.

5. Expected results

We expected that a sound approach to blended language learning in both groups of students (full—time and part-time) and at both higher education institutions (the Faculty of Management and the International Business School) would provide a positive learning experience. It was expected that students will like the diversified learning concept offered by the blended language learning approach, that they will accept the variety and quality of materials with keen interest and enthusiasm and that they will value highly the flexibility of time and space offered by the blended language learning approach.

On the other hand, we also predicted that there might be some motivation problems, minor technical problems and that some students may find the workload too high.

6. Work methodology

In order to assess the satisfaction of students participating in the blended learning Business English course at the Faculty of Management Koper a questionnaire was prepared in which we inquired about students' computer and Internet literacy as well as about their satisfaction with the Business English e-lecture room and online activities. The questionnaire consisted of a set of closed ended questions (multiple choice and scaled questions) and a set of open-ended questions (unstructured questions).

We obtained useful information about students' computer skills, Internet skills, e-mail skills, the amount of their time spent on the Internet, and their awareness of different services provided on the Internet (e-mail, search engines, remote login, file transfer protocol, discussion groups, bulletin board services, frequently asked questions and chatting). We also asked the participants how the Internet influenced their academic efficiency. Students were asked about their attitude towards blended language learning experience, and had to assess (on a scale from 1-not useful to 5-extremely useful) the usefulness of documents and activities available in the e-Lecture room. Last but not least, we wanted to know to what extent they were satisfied with the Business English e-Lecture room and if they think that e-Lecture room could replace f2f teaching. The respondents

were also encouraged to make suggestions to improve Business English e-Lecture room.

7. Results and discussion

In order to introduce e-learning/teaching practice at the Faculty of Management in Koper (The University of Primorska, Slovenia) in the academic year 2009/2010 two e-lecture rooms were set up using Moodle, a free software e-learning platform. Moodle has a significant user base with 38,896 registered sites with 16,927,590 users in 1,713,438 courses (as of January, 2008) and is designed to help educators create online courses with opportunities for rich interaction, is modular in construction and can readily be extended by creating plugins for specific new functionality. Moodle's infrastructure supports many types of plugins: activities, resource types, question types, data field types, graphical themes, authentication methods, etc.

Following the first research carried out during the academic year 2009-2010 and in order to test the blended language learning concept on a group of part-time students three additional e-lecture rooms were set up prior to the academic year 2010-2011.

The layout of all e-lecture rooms was similar. They all consisted of an introductory section in which course objectives, assignments and course requirements were described. The e-lecture room for the first year students comprised of eight sections, two for each week, in which main activities were described and written texts and MP3s were available for downloading. Texts in

this section were related to topics discussed during the f2f sessions (Topics were qualities of good managers, business etiquette, company structure and organisation, entertaining, describing trends, presentations, telephoning, business trips and annual reports). In addition, a set of guidelines was prepared for students (e.g. guidelines for oral presentations, general course guidelines, guidelines for summarising and note-taking, guidelines for writing e-mail, guidelines for the English Tense System, guidelines for writing a CV, etc.)

The e-lecture room for second year students also comprised of eight sections, two for each week, but with a selection of materials on the following topics: human resources and job interviews, international trade, banking, stock exchange, mergers and acquisitions, marketing, advertising, the European Union and commercial correspondence. A section called Resources represented links to useful Internet sites; the section called Miscellaneous Resources consisted of materials students could use in order to improve their language skills.

Before the beginning of academic year 2010-2011, three more e-lecture rooms were designed. The layout of these new e-lecture rooms was identical to the previously designed e-lecture rooms, some of the materials were updated, new texts were added, some old texts were not included and some minor changes were made with regard to the overall layout.

Both e-lecture rooms also had an additional section with sample tests and a section in which a number of longer texts were available for download. Both groups of students could also download the *Language Portfolio for students of management*, which has been prepared by the author of this article according to common criteria accepted throughout Europe. The document contains a detailed

language biography describing the student's experiences in languages and is designed to guide the learner in planning and assessing progress. The language portfolio has two main aims: 1. to motivate students by acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language skills and 2. to provide a record of the linguistic and cultural skills students have acquired. The pedagogic functions of the Portfolio are: a) to enhance students' motivation, b) help students to reflect their objectives, ways of learning and success in language learning, c) help students to learn autonomously and d) encourage students to enhance their language and cultural experience.

The number of pages for students to download exceeded several thousand, and ranged from (business) vocabulary exercises, proficiency tests, interview tips, features of social language, recommended additional study literature, information on various language corpuses, notes on efficient learning and cultural differences, to name but a few. The texts available in the e-lecture room were prepared by the teacher during his 20-year practice as a teacher of Business English in higher education institutions in Slovenia and had been extensively trialled with students before being used in any of the e-lecture rooms.

Active class participation, home assignments in the form of writing short summaries on a weekly basis, posting a number of comments on topics related to the discussed issues during face-to-face lectures were essential prerequisites for students to be entitled to take the final written and oral examination. Students had to participate in at least two forums on a business topic started by the teacher. They had to write at least six posts and comment upon at least twice as

many posts written by their fellow students.

80 full-time first year (30 participants) and second year (50 participants) students took part in the blended English language course. In accordance with *the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, the participating students were independent users of English (ranging from B1 to B2 level). 83 % or 25 first year students and 92 % or 46 second year students fulfilled all course requirements in due time. The second research activity carried out during the academic year 2010-2011 included 70 part-time students who were also independent users of English (B1 to C1). 85 % of full-time students managed to fulfil all course requirements in due time and passed the final exam.

The analysis of questionnaires has shown that in both groups, the blended English course was judged as "good" or "very good" without any exception. The following aspects were regarded as especially positive by both groups of students (full-time and part-time):

• the diversified learning concept

• the variety and quality of the multimedia learning materials

• the new learning experience with the chat

• the possibility to direct one's own learning process and the flexibility of time and space

• the communication contact with other participants and the teacher.

On the whole, adjusting to this new form of course was judged as unproblematic. This is due to the fact that all full-time students rated their current computer

skills as either very good (second year students) or good to very good (first year students). Their Internet skills were rated as good (10 first year students or 66 %; 36 second year students or 72 %) and their e-mail skills as very good by both groups of students. On average, students in both groups spend a substantial share of their time on the Internet. Only four (or 13 %) first year students spend just 2-4 hours a week on the Internet, one student spends between 5-6 hours on the Internet, while 5 students (17 %) spend on the Internet between 7 and 9 hours a week. Six students in their first year of study spend between 10 and 20 hours online and 14 students or 63 % of all students spend more than 20 hours a week on the Internet. Second year students spend on the Internet even more time. 26 students (52 %) wrote that they spend more than 20 hours a week online, 11 or 22 % of second year students spend between 7 and 9 hours on the Internet, 8 (16 %) students spend between 10 to 20 hours online, only three (6 %) students are online between 5 and 6 hours weekly and two second year students are online between two and four hours a week.

With regard to the part-time students, the following differences and similarities are worth mentioning:

- the Internet skills of part-time students were most often rated as very good (75 %);
- part-time students spend slightly less time on the Internet (on average, 66 % of students spend 2-4 hours on the Internet, while the remaining 33 % of students spend on the Internet either between 5-6 hours or less than 2 hours a week).

Students (both full-time and part-time) had proper awareness of different services provided on the Internet, with a clear preferences for www, e-mail and search engines, followed by FTP, discussion groups and chatting in both groups of students. With regard to the influence of the use of the Internet on students' academic efficiency, respondents in both groups (part-time and full-time) believe that the use of conventional documents has decreased and that the dependency on the Internet has increased substantially.

Despite the fact that students in both groups (full-time and part-time) were, on average, very satisfied with the Business English e-lecture room (18 or 60 % of first year full-time students were fully satisfied and 12 or 40 % of full-time students were partially satisfied; 41 or 82 % of second year full-time students were fully satisfied and 9 or 18 % of full-time students were partially satisfied; similarly, 64 % of part-time students were fully satisfied with the blended course, with 36 % of part-time students being partially satisfied), only one full-time student thought that e-Lecture room could replace f2f teaching completely.

Students' attitude towards blended language learning experience was, on average, between positive and very positive in both groups of respondents, with almost 84 % of second year students who would recommend e-lectures to a friend and 73 % of first year students who would do the same. The results for the part-time students differed slightly, with 85 % (or 60 students) who would recommend blended activities to their friends.

All students frequently printed out at least some documents connected with individual sessions, which were – on a scale from 1 – not useful at all to 5 – extremely useful – ranked with 4.7 by second year students and 4.3 by first year

students, whereas the usefulness of online activities was ranked slightly lower by both groups of students (by 3.9 and 3.6 respectively). Part-time students ranked the documents as extremely useful (4,4) and activities as useful (3.8). Chapelle (2001) points out that one criterion of CALL task appropriateness is 'learner fit'. If the language level of a task is too easy, learners will not develop their ability, if too difficult, they will give up. In Slovenian higher education environment learners are sometimes mixed into classes without regard to their L2 level, or taught in ways that do not match their goals or learning styles. Other researchers report the same problems (Felder & Henriques, 1995; Robinson, 2002).

Among the most interesting suggestions to improve the Business English e-lecture room the following should be pointed out: video-recorded face-to-face lectures could be added to the e-Lecture room for students who missed lectures, short video clips could be added, some students wished there would be more team-work and project work.

Both full-time and part-time students pointed out the following obstacles: some minor technical problems were mentioned, some activities were too time-consuming and therefore frustrating; some students found the work-load to be (too) high; some texts too difficult to understand, the possibility of self-organisation bore the risk of "shallow" learning activities, and there were also some motivation problems, especially in the group of first year students and part-time students.

8. Conclusion

In Slovenia, the potential of blended learning as a catalyst for change in higher education has been recognized by some teachers who are rethinking their teaching and learning approaches. What these teachers have discovered is that more attention should be given to student needs and the varying learning styles of individual students, with lecture rooms developed into independent communities. Students' brain and their mind's natural curiosity should be engaged by complex and meaningful challenges through activities that require full brain interaction and communication. Isolated pieces of information offered by textbooks make learning difficult and should thus be avoided. Facts and skills in isolation should not be practiced, because they inevitably lead in rote-learning and regurgitating. Equally important, learning should be fun, despite the fact that for some students learning is – and should be – hard work. Last but not least, learning involves learning to learn, which is too often excluded in Business English textbooks, but in blended course the teacher's main role should become the role of a facilitator, who is spending more time recommending and directing students to resources and helping them to interpret these resources. In other words, the role of the teacher is to monitor progress, give feedback, boost confidence and maintain motivation.

It can be argued that the highly volatile higher education environment of the 21st century needs managers and teachers who will be able to transform tertiary education institutions in order to respond to the constant changes. What is needed are academic courses and programmes that aim to meet the lifelong and just-in-time education needs of various target groups of students. In their efforts

to maintain or enhance their competitiveness, universities and faculties should strive to be proactive and innovative. This can, to some extent, be done by moving from F2F interaction into blended mode provision, forming university/industry strategic alliances or addressing the niche markets that are ignored by competitors. Technology-related developments are change drivers that have significantly reshaped tertiary education in pursuit of flexible lifelong learning, new learning paradigms and online delivery.

In our research, the following strengths of blended language learning/teaching were identified:

- preferred for convenience, retention and efficiency in asynchronous communication
- promotes independent learning
- promotes life-long learning
- promotes learner-centred approach
- enables self-study with authentic content
- appropriate if wide dissemination is desired
- it helps create documentation and may help reduce ambiguity
- it may be used by many people at the same time.

On the other hand, the following weaknesses were identified:

- lack of personal communication
- loss of context (poorly edited or unrelated pieces of information can be difficult to understand)
- minor technical problems may occur
- motivation problems (especially for students with poor language skills)

- information overload (students can receive too difficult, unwanted or irrelevant information of little use to them)
- increased teacher workload.

Similar findings were found in Pena-Sanchez and Hicks (Pena-Sanchez and Hicks, 2006) who reported that e-mail could be considered to be an innovative e-learning tool and whose findings impact both managers and educators and their choice of communication media. On the other hand, e-materials for language learning are not always based on valid didactic concepts and display a narrow degree of innovation.

Today, the needs of students cannot be met simply by the imperfect fine-tuning of the *status quo* in higher education institutions. Thus, online learning environments should go beyond the replication of learning events that traditionally occur in the classroom and are made available through the Internet. Online learning/teaching environments provide for different ways of learning and the construction of a potentially richer learning environment that provides for fresh approaches to learning caters for different learning styles, as well as allows for greater diversification in learning and greater access to learning. Such learning environments should supplement or complement traditional F2F learning environments or may, on the other hand, provide a complete learning package that requires little F2F contact.

With new technologies, the world of teaching and learning is not less complex; on the contrary, it is richer and more demanding. The technology-enhanced business English learning/teaching practice at the Faculty of Management Koper strengthens my belief that blended learning/teaching should be further

developed and offered to both part-time and full-time students because it involves the learning process, which is learner-centred and autonomy-based. In addition, the rich resources of language learning materials put the students in the position of decision-makers with regard to the content of their study. Equally important, the language environment provides the learners with learning stimuli for both language competence and new contents and reflections on language and intercultural phenomena, as well as on the aspects of the learning process. Our aims were also to provide a more flexible approach to language learning, encourage learner autonomy, personalise the learning experience improve the retention rate, and to find a route to more motivated students and more successful courses. If the ultimate goal of educational experience is not to acquire fragments of information but to collaboratively construct core concepts and schema based on important ideas and information, then carefully planned blended language courses have the potential to evolutionary transform teaching and learning in higher education.

Blended language learning/teaching provides an acceptable means to question traditional face-to-face learning experiences in terms of not fully capitalizing on the opportunities offered by the Internet. At the same time, control of the learning experience is being transferred to the students who should engage in online and class activities armed with the most current information and be prepared to engage in the creative process of making sense of the information.

The knowledge society and ubiquitous communications technologies have precipitated significant changes in the society, which consequently led to the

transformation of higher education institutions with the concept of blended (languge) learning as a powerful tool to mobilize innovation.

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SUMMARY

Blended learning is the collocation commonly used to describe courses that combine face-to-face classroom instruction with computer-based learning. Blended courses move a significant part of course learning online and, as a result, reduce the amount of classroom contact hours. Blended learning offers a real opportunity to create learning experiences that can provide the right learning at the right time and in the right place for students in tertiary education institutions, thus becoming one of the most convincing concepts in learning of the 21st century.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of foreign language teaching in Slovenia is still carried out in face-to-face environments, a growing extent of foreign language teaching in a number of higher education institutions has moved, at least partly, online. In this research, the development of e-learning practice at the Faculty of Management, University of Primorska, and the International Business School is described, together with the changing role of teachers in blended language teaching/learning environments. Blended language learning/teaching provides an acceptable means to question traditional face-to-face learning experiences in terms of not fully capitalizing on the opportunities offered by the Internet.