The starting point of this paper is the increasing need for guidance for e-learners in language education. We argue that the representatives of the “net generation” are not automatically efficient e-learners. In fact, they need a great deal of guidance for making them get the most out of their e-learning experience. For enhancing the learners’ e-study skills the Department of Languages and Communication at Helsinki School of Economics started a guidance project in 2007. Emerging from the first stage of the project, we present four main components of effective guidance, which include orientation for e-learning, e-learning skills and the roles of the e-learner, the roles of an e-tutor, and guidance for interaction, peer reviewing and utilizing feedback. We also introduce one of the department’s e-learning courses in which a great deal of effective guidance is needed.

1. E-learning and the Need for Guidance

The growth of e-learning in foreign language and communication courses has been considerable in higher education in recent years. In our presentation we use the term “e-learning” as an umbrella term for various ways of using computers and the internet for learning (cf. Littlejohn and Pegler, 2007). The two e-learning modes that our paper is mainly based on are those of blended learning and online learning. By blended learning we refer to courses that use a mix of approaches ranging from classroom teaching to a variety of uses of technology, whereas by online courses we refer to courses that take place fully online with no difference whether the students attending the course live at a distance or are campus-based.

As the e-learning options are becoming a regular part of the language curricula, it seems that the focus on the teacher and the teacher’s role is being shifted onto the role of the learner. Consequently, the role of guidance in e-learning has increased and its importance is being increasingly recognized. As a result of these developments, language teachers are facing the challenge of guiding their e-learners as effectively as possible in order to help them to get the most out of their learning experience. Although it seems that in many parts of the world the “net generation” (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) is competent in using the media and new technologies especially in connection with their outside school activities, such competencies do no automatically make the “digital natives” (Prensky, 2006) efficient e-learners. E-learners therefore need to be provided with sufficient and effective guidance and training (see also ODLAC, 2008).

In 2007 the Department of Languages and Communication at Helsinki School of Economics launched a research project on the guidance of e-learners (Peltonen, Puranen & Tammelin, 2007) for the purpose of enhancing language learners’ e-learning skills. The main aim of our paper is to present the components of effective guidance arising from our project and to give an example of how guidance is given in one of the department’s courses.

2. Components of Effective Guidance

When launching the Department’s guidance project we first defined what we meant by effective guidance and what we regarded as its aims. We consider good guidance to consist of the following three main points: giving time, attention, and respect to the learners. The main aims of guidance are to increase the learners’ motivation, to empower the learners and to reduce the number of possible course dropouts. We see that guidance given to e-learners includes four main components that center on the following issues: 1) orientation for e-learning, 2) e-learning skills and the roles of the e-learner, 3) the roles of the e-tutor, and 4) guidance for interaction, peer reviewing and utilizing feedback.

2.1 Orientation for e-learning

Learners need to have a clear idea of what to expect from an e-learning course. Does the
course take place fully online or is the course format a blended one consisting of a mix of approaches, activities and use of e-tools. It is important to ensure that all course participants have the basic ICT skills needed for studying in an e-learning course. Some learners may need guidance in improving even their basic ICT skills. The course kick-off session is highly important for providing instructions for e-studying and for creating a sense of belonging to the group and a positive atmosphere.

2.2 E-learning skills and the roles of an e-learner

E-learners need guidance in making them aware of what skills they need and how their roles as e-learners may differ from their traditional classroom roles.

An e-learner
- can communicate effectively in an online environment,
- is aware of his/her own e-learning skills: setting goals for oneself, ability to evaluate one’s learning outcomes,
- can control his/her own self-motivation,
- is capable of working within a timetable without timetables,
- is able to work alone and in a group,
- can avoid superficial learning and aimless “surfing” on the Internet.

2.3 The roles of an e-tutor

In order to be able to provide effective guidance, the e-tutor needs to be aware of his/her own role in the learner’s learning and study process. Ideally, an e-tutor should be able to serve as a model of an exemplary e-learner. The tutor should be able to take on many different roles, including the roles of an advisor and a supporter of the learners’ study goals, a motivator and coach, a “personal trainer”, a producer of content when needed, and very importantly, a creator of a positive and supportive atmosphere.

2.4 Interaction, peer reviewing and feedback

As interaction and e-communication can still be difficult to some learners, they may need guidance for coping with different forms and channels of interaction such as discussion forums, chat, group tasks, social media, etc. E-learners also need guidance for carrying out their peer review assignments as they play an important role in most online and blended learning courses. Furthermore, learners need guidance for utilizing the tutor and peer feedback.

3. Case Swedish for Business

Many of the courses offered by the Department of Languages and Communication at HSE utilize blended or online course formats. One example of a blended course is a course called Swedish for Business. The starting level of the language proficiency of the students attending the course is B1 in accordance with the European Framework (CEFR, 2007). The course lasts 7 weeks. The contact hours in class are used for oral presentations and all written work is conducted in an online environment. The total amount of course work for the students is calculated as 80 hours.

In small groups the students set up their own companies for which they create their own websites. The students give oral company presentations in class. They also work in subject-specific theme groups in cooperation with another group of students studying at another Finnish university. The theme groups communicate with each other via videoconferencing and via an LMS platform. They produce final reports on their themes (e.g. related to finance, marketing, business law) in collaboration with their team members.

Because of the short duration of the course and the amount of intensive course work the course involves, the participants need a great deal of tutor guidance and feedback. The tutor gives guidance before the course regarding course information and practical instructions. Guidance during the course is related to technical support and the students’ learning process. Guidance and feedback after the course focus on evaluating the learning outcomes and raising the students’ awareness of their needs for lifelong learning. The Swedish for Business course has shown that students appreciate guidance that includes individual (especially) oral online feedback as well as regular, up-to-date and critical feedback.

4. Conclusions

Many language and communication teachers involved with online and blended learning teaching environments feel that their workloads have increased. Therefore, they may not welcome any more pressures on increasing their availability in the capacity of an “omnipresent”, “ubiquitous” guide. These pressures may have also been multiplied because of various institutional constraints such as insufficient institutional support, e.g. technical support (Tammelin, 2004). Therefore, teachers and tutors should be given all
possible institutional support in the use of versatile e-tools for giving guidance and feedback for their e-learners. Institutions should also realize that language learning – with or without the prefix “e” – also involves gaining competencies (Rychen & Salganik, 2003) that are required in society and are relevant to modern life such as using tools interactively, interacting in heterogeneous groups, and acting autonomously.

References


