ENHANCING LEARNER AUTONOMY USING *MEC*

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Language trainers are aware that an important part of the learning process takes place outside lesson time. The classroom is the place where the learners are introduced to new concepts and language for the first time, and get to practise their language skills in a controlled and supportive environment. But the most successful learners are those who continue to learn outside classroom. With access to an online learning platform and guidance, students will quickly become more independent learners – and independence is unquestionably a prerequisite for reaching mastery in the language.

Being aware of the need to introduce blended learning into our institution, we, here at International House Timisoara, have been looking for more modern ways in which we can deliver our classes to our students while providing a more interesting learning experience. This article is based on our hands-on experience of using MEC and the feedback we received from our learners. Choosing an online learning platform is thus motivated by both pedagogic reasons and the wish to meet learners' ever-changing expectations. To make our students learn and to make learning English more interactive and flexible, we have integrated the Macmillan English Campus into our teaching programmes. IH Timisoara is a member of International House World Organisation, one of the largest and oldest groups of language schools, teaching English and 25 modern languages in 145 schools in 50 countries worldwide, and a founder member of QUEST Romania – the Romanian Association for Quality Language Services.

WHAT DOES MEC OFFER?

• an extensive and flexible database of highly interactive resources for learners of all ages and levels

• cutting-edge course management offering learners the opportunity to create and adapt the existing resources according to their own needs.

WHAT IS MEC?

Macmillan English Campus is an on-line learning environment for learners of English as a foreign language with an extensive database of over 4,000 interactive learning resources. It helps institutions support and enhance English language learning at all levels.

MEC contains interactive exercises, regularly updated news articles, games, grammar references and full access to the Macmillan Online Dictionary.

The thinking behind MEC is very simple. Learning can be greatly enhanced by an effective blend of face-to-face/classroom learning and on-line support materials.

CONTENT

Macmillan English Campus comprises language exercises, listening activities, vocabulary activities, pronunciation activities, progress tests, news items, grammar reference units, web projects, exam practice activities, reference material, games and a host of other resources.

HOW CAN MEC BE USED?

• Self-study

With access to MEC resources, the learners can independently practise grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and receptive skills. However, few people are 'naturally' independent learners. Most are used to looking to the teacher for what to do next. Thus, the thousands of resources available are ideal for busy people who do not have time to attend a structured in-school study programme – the only thing needed is an Internet

connection. Features such as Resource Finder, Word List and Web Links will enable the learners to develop good learning strategies which apply not only to MEC, but to all their learning.

On balance, MEC gives students the opportunity to practise and learn more, at hteir own pace and in their own way.

• Blended learning

The focus on blended learning makes the online platform unique. Students should enjoy the best of both worlds: face-to-face tuition and contact with their language trainers, and the freedom to study and practise independently within a structured, managed environment that promises learner autonomy. The content has been developed by leading Macmillan ELT authors for use in an interactive online environment, so the highest quality of materials is assured.

• Homework

The resources available on the platform can be used as an additional source for homework ideal for those who would like to progress faster. The advantages of using MEC for homework are numerous and varied, making homework more motivating and productive for the learners.
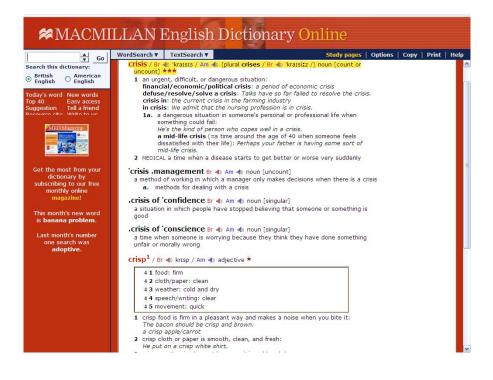
■ Learners do not have to wait until the next lesson to receive feedback.

■ Learners can have several attempts at a task.

■ Teachers do not have to spend time going through the answers with the learners in class, freeing up valuable lesson time for more communicative work.

■ Interactive activities and games are more appealing to the learners than their paper-based equivalents.

■ Listening tasks can be set as homework.

■ Resources such as the Grammar Reference Units and the Macmillan Online Dictionary are easily to hand to support students with the tasks.

•Classroom use

MEC offers teachers a huge range of activities and interaction types to enrich their lesson, not being only a resource for self-study. It is also a flexible, dynamic resource for use during lesson time as well. It can complement and supplement existing coursework in the areas of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and skills.

By making MEC a regular feature of in-class work, trainers can:

■ Use an additional resource within their standard repertoire of activities.

■ Create a new language learning environment using a very different medium.

■ Introduce activities that learners will finish at home.

■ Allow their learners to spend class time focusing on their own specific needs, with the teacher there to help them.

■ Let MEC provide the marking and feedback while teachers concentrate on classroom management and more specific learner support.

WHO IS MEC DESIGNED FOR?

Generally, it is most suitable for learners who do not have time to commit to a structured in-school study programme, or for those who want to supplement an existing course with further practice.

HOW DOES IT HELP LEARNERS?

Based on our own students' feedback, not only is it flexible and convenient (anytime, anywhere, with an internet connection), but it also encourages them to explore language on their own and take responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, MEC gives them greatly increased exposure to authentic English, while offering varied learning opportunities due to interactive and engaging resources.

RESOURCES

MEC provides practice for General English, Business English, English for Academic Purposes and Exams (Cambridge, IELTS, TOEFL), as well as being highly interactive and carefully chosen to suit all levels and age groups. In addition, the platform contains a variety of different interaction types: type-in gap fill, drag and drop gap fill, rearranging words, phrases and sentences, multiple choice, etc.

Feedback on performance is comprehensive and clear so students can quickly pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses. What is more, MEC allows learners to be monitored on their progress individually.

HOW DOES IT IMPROVE OUR BUSINESS?

Implementing MEC will give institutions a unique competitive advantage, by placing them at the forefront of learning technology and by supporting their reputation in a crowded market place.

The English Campus allows institutions to expand the number of courses on offer, by adapting the courses Macmillan provide and assigning students the pre-built ones, or by building completely new ones to suit the specific needs of each client.

Furthermore, MEC offers teachers many time-saving functions both inside and outside the classroom. For instance, the search functions help teachers cut down on class preparation time. And since homework is marked automatically, there is no need for teachers to waste contact time going over the answers.

Communication with students online is another essential feature, allowing you to send messages and reminders to your students. As for quality control, MEC resources ensure that the material being delivered to students is of the highest standard, thus eliminating the worry of unsuitable material being used in class and saving time sourcing such material from the Internet.

Bibliography
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