

Using LAMS with ESOL students



QIA in partnership with ALT with the support of CEL, LSC, JISC, LSN and Becta.

This paper is one of a series of 21 from the ALT/QIA Making e-learning work conference held in Nottingham on 11 October 2007. Other papers in the series, as well as a compilation of all of them, can be accessed in PDF format from <http://www.alt.ac.uk/fepec2007.html>

Lorna Burns, ESOL Coordinator, Barnet College

1. The organisation

Barnet College is a large further education college on five main sites in North West London. It has about 25,000 students and 1,500 members of staff and offers over 2,000 courses including academic, professional, vocational and general interest courses.

Its ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) department is one of the biggest departments in the College with classes on all of the sites. The ESOL provision includes full- and part-time courses at a variety of levels and classes in the community.

2. Overview

Barnet College is one of the partners of the eLIDA CAMEL (e-learning independent design activities for collaborative approaches to the management of e-learning) project, which is part of the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) design for learning strand. Our part in the project is to trial the use of LAMS (learning activity management system) with some of our full-time ESOL students to see its impact on teaching and learning.

Three practitioners created LAMS sequences, which were run with three classes of E2/3 Level ESOL students and subsequently evaluated.

3. The detail

3.1 Approaches

Collaborative approach: the success of trialling LAMS stems from the support that the practitioners received from each other and from members of the eLIDA CAMEL team. The practitioners had a series of face-to-face meetings to discuss and critique their learning designs as critical friends. They also uploaded their sequences onto the project website and received comments from other members of the eLIDA CAMEL team before running them with students.

The pedagogical approach is built on LAMS being a software system that facilitates activity-based learning. It supports a variety of pedagogical methods so practitioners can use that which best suits them and their students. It is designed to support group and collaborative activities.

It is a particularly suitable tool for ESOL classes, as these classes traditionally follow an activity based approach to learning and teaching where the learner takes centre stage.

The ESOL practitioners created their sequences starting with learning outcomes that were relevant to their group of students and then designed suitable, engaging and motivating activities so that their students could meet the outcomes.

The practitioners in this trial used different pedagogical approaches in different parts of the sequences that they created. They all started with the instructional approach but also included group collaborative activities based on the social constructivist approach, recognising the importance and effectiveness of students working cooperatively.

3.2 Scale

The trial of LAMS was a small-scale project, which involved 34 ESOL students from 3 E2/3 classes during the summer term of 2007 at one of the College sites.

Each sequence was run in a classroom and covered a two-hour session. The three practitioners ran at least one sequence each with their learners and one of the practitioners used LAMS 6 times in the summer term as LAMS had proved to be so successful. One sequence was adapted and re-used with the other two classes.

3.3 Impact

... on students and teachers

Impact on students: the 34 ESOL students completed an online questionnaire as part of the project but not all of them answered all of the questions. Their comments were very positive and are summarised below:

Students enjoyed using LAMS

19 students enjoyed using LAMS very much

14 students quite enjoyed using LAMS

12 students enjoyed using LAMS a lot more than the usual way

14 students enjoyed using LAMS a bit more than the usual way

Six (6) students enjoyed using LAMS the same as in the usual way

One (1) student enjoyed using LAMS less than in the usual way

Students' views of their learning and LAMS

8 students felt they learnt a lot more than the usual way

16 students felt they learnt a bit more than the usual way

Nine (9) students felt they learnt about the same as in the usual way

Students' ease of using LAMS

13 students found it very easy to use LAMS

10 students found it fairly easy to use LAMS

Six (6) students found it a bit difficult to use LAMS

Students want to use LAMS again

32 of the 34 students want to use LAMS again.

The following comments encapsulate the students' views:

"I found it easy, easier than other grammar. I don't know but it was very fantastic very good grammar. I did it very good and I like to do more like this."

"I think if we use LAMS the rest of the time we have to finish the year [it would be good]"

"Yeah, I would really like to use LAMS again. I hope we're going to carry on by using this LAMS."

Impact on teachers: the practitioners who used LAMS were extremely positive about its use as an effective teaching and learning tool. They particularly liked being able to use a huge range of resources that students can access from one place. LAMS did not necessarily change the practitioners' approach to teaching but made them rethink their pedagogical approach and gave them an extra skill to their teaching toolkit.

Teachers also commented that LAMS fosters independent learning and allows students to work at their own pace. It therefore gave the teachers time to support the slower, weaker students as the stronger ones were able to work through the activities without much help. They enjoyed using LAMS and want to use it again.

They considered that LAMS lessons took longer than ordinary lessons to plan but thought that this would reduce the more they used LAMS. They were also keen to share their learning design across the ESOL department and hoped to get the benefit of re-using and adapting their own and other tutors' sequences. They considered that it was more important to plan the LAMS lessons extremely carefully as it was not possible to change the sequence on the fly.

... on the organisation

The success of the LAMS trial has been reported to the senior management team at Barnet College and a proposal has been put forward to widen the use of LAMS, first in the ESOL Department and then in other subject areas in the College. A meeting has been arranged to discuss this proposal.

3.4 Costs and benefits

LAMS is open source software and therefore does not cost anything to use. However, an organisation would need to support LAMS on their server and there would be a cost for technical support, upgrades and so on. Alternatively, the institution could use the services of LAMS International, who will host LAMS on their server for a minimum of £495 a year and a further minimum of £495 for technical support, dependent on the needs of the organisation and the number of students using LAMS.

(<http://www.lamsinternational.com/product/>)

The other cost of implementing LAMS would be the time taken to train teachers to use LAMS and for them to create their sequences.

Should this pilot be extended the main benefits would be the transformation of learning and teaching in the College.

4. Lessons, caveats, and implications

4.1 for the organisation

Research has shown that LAMS is most effective when there is a management buy-in of the benefits of using the system and buy-in from practitioners who have been shown how effective it can be as a teaching and learning tool (Masterman and Lee, 2005: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/LAMS%20Final%20Report.pdf). This needs to be achieved before the LAMS trial is extended at Barnet College.

It might be necessary to give incentives to practitioners to encourage them to use LAMS as it takes time to train tutors to use it and the sequences take longer to create than usual lessons, especially at first, which will increase the already onerous workload.

4.2 for others

If you decide to use LAMS:

- Make your sequences straight forward and short to start with.
- Write clear simple instructions.
- Think about which activities would be best online and which would be best offline and incorporate both types in your lesson.
- Show a colleague your sequence and pre-trial it with a few learners before you use it with your students.
- Show the students the LAMS interface before they are given their first sequence.
- Add communicative and collaborative activities but make sure that they are appropriate for the learning outcomes.
- Don't forget to look at the monitor view while your students are going through the sequence.

As one practitioner said, *"Do it. It's worth the time and effort, not least in terms of personal satisfaction!"*

5. Contact details

Lorna Burns Lorna.Burns@barnet.ac.uk