

USING DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL CONTENT CORE CURRICULUM FOR ENGLISH AT ENGLISH LESSONS AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Využívanie digitálneho vzdelávacieho obsahu Core Curriculum for English na hodinách anglického jazyka na základných školách

Abstrakt

Moderné technológie sa stávajú neoddeliteľnou súčasťou vyučovacieho procesu, jazyky nevynímajú. Práve ich využitie a integrácia no hodinách anglického jazyka boli jedným z cieľov národného projektu Nové trendy vzdelávania učiteľov anglického jazyka na základných školách EnglishOne, ktorého primárnym cieľom bolo zvýšenie kvality vyučovania anglického jazyka na ZŠ. Predkladaný článok sa venuje analýze prípadových štúdií vypracovaných učiteľmi, účastníkmi projektu, ktorí prakticky otestovali prácu s digitálnym vzdelávacím obsahom na hodinách anglického jazyka. V prvej časti opisuje výsledky dotazníka určeného pre učiteľov a v druhej časti sa venuje analýze výsledkov žiackej ankety. V závere sumarizuje výhody a benefity používania materiálu EnglishOne, ktoré sa odrazili v zvýšení kvality výučby anglického jazyka z pohľadu učiteľov aj žiakov.

1 Introduction

The following paper provides an analysis of case studies carried out in the framework of a national project 'New trends in training English language teachers at primary schools' (EnglishOne, 2015). Its main ambition is to analyse and evaluate the main benefits of the project through case studies conducted by some participants of the project. The paper starts with giving background information on the project, then it briefly characterises a case study procedure and analyses the findings of the carried-out case studies. The paper concludes with summarising the findings. All the information was collected in the framework of the project and it published with a permission of the project management.

2 Background

A national project 'New trends in training English language teachers at primary schools' aimed at enhancing the quality of English language teaching in Slovakia including Bratislava Region was carried out from 1 November 2014 to 30 November 2015. (EnglishOne, 2015). This primary project objective was reached through training teachers at training centres, consultations directly at schools and a provision of modern teaching material. This included digital educational content called Core Curriculum for English (CCE). In total 3 000 teachers took part in the project during which they familiarised themselves with new trends in English language teaching as well as with new digital content (ibid.).

A main benefit of the project was the above mentioned teaching material that provides teachers with adequate supplementary material fully compatible with national curriculum ,‘Štátny vzdelávací program’ ISCED 1 and ISCED 2 (SPU, 2016). The so called educational package includes: digital educational content freely available at the Planet of Knowledge (Planéta vedomostí) portal in ‘Anglický jazyk’ section (Planéta vedomostí, 2016), teachers’ handbooks with detailed step-by-step lesson plans, and worksheets for students.

According to the national curriculum (Štátny vzdelávací program) students are supposed to reach A2 level of English language competence by the end of primary education (SPU, 2016). Core Curriculum for English helps to achieve this aim by offering teachers with comprehensive package of educational material that can be adapted to suit their students’ individual needs and used as an additional material to any traditional textbook at primary school.

Core Curriculum for English, divided into 9 levels (grades), was created by an international team of experts, methodologists, educators, native speakers and teachers with Simon Greenall, a renown English language training expert, as a key consultant and co-author (Handbook for Trainers, 2015).

The digital lessons are fifteen-minute (1-6 grade) and thirty-minute (7 – 9 grade) long. They are thematically categorized into sections and each thematic category includes lessons with various focus – vocabulary, language and its use, functions, pronunciation, skills (Handbook for Trainers, 2015). Lessons can be integrated into various parts of a traditional lesson or set as homework. They allow group pair as well as an individual work of students. The content of each lesson is formed by several screens that follow presentation, practice and production approach to English language teaching (ibid.).

3 Case study – main characteristics of the study

A case study provides a brief description of English lessons in selected classes at primary schools. It characterises an initial state with qualitative assumptions that are compared with a state after teaching at least five lessons with digital educational content Core Curriculum for English in a given class. The case study consisted of a questionnaire for teachers including a more detailed description of particular lessons and a subjective teacher’s reflection as well as of a class survey aimed at finding out students’ attitude towards learning English and gaining feedback on their hands-on experience with CCE. The final part of the case study allowed teachers to evaluate their personal experience and class survey results as well as to make suggestions, comments and give alternatives to the usage of CCE at English lessons at primary schools.

Case studies carried out by in-service teachers provide insights into integration of innovative teaching methods into English lessons at primary schools, specifically into the use of digital education content CCE. An analysis of gathered information and data allowed for an objective evaluation of the given issue.

3.1 Teachers doing case studies - characteristics

Case studies were written during the period from September 2015 to November 2015. Total 130 case studies were carried out by 84 teachers from Slovakia of whom 41 were primary school teachers and 43 lower secondary school teachers. Table 1 shows more detailed breakdown according to particular regions.

Table 1: A number of teachers and case studies according to regions.

Region	A number of teachers	A number of case studies
Bratislava	10	14
Banska Bystrica	17	30
Košice	4	4
Nitra	7	9
Prešov	4	9
Trenčín	6	7
Trnava	19	39
Žilina	17	18
Total	84	130

39 case studies were done by 19 teachers from Trnava Region, while only 4 teachers from Prešov and Košice Region respectively conducted 9 studies in Prešov and 4 studies in Košice Region.

As Table 2 illustrates teachers aged from 31 to 40 were the most active, whereas those aged 51 to 60 were least willing to participate. With regard to teaching practice, both novice and experienced in-service teachers used CCE at their lessons (Table 4).

Table 2: Teachers and their age

Age	A number of teachers
20 - 30	14
31 - 40	44
41 - 50	21
51 - 60	5
Over 60	0

Table 3: Teachers and their teaching practice in years

Teaching practice in years	A number of teachers
1 - 5	16
6 - 10	20
11 - 15	14
16 - 20	16
Over 21	18

3.2 The benefits of CCE

The questionnaire for teachers was focused on evaluating the use of CCE at English lessons. It comprised of 9 statements and 5 closed-ended questions that might be thematically categorised as follows:

1. *Material EnglishOne (or CCE) at English lessons*
2. *The influence of EnglishOne material on the quality of teaching and students' study results*
3. *Using worksheets*
4. *Using teachers' material – methodology*
5. *Using EnglishOne material and working with Planet of Knowledge portal*

Participating teachers could express their opinion in a 'note' section aimed at the following areas: using EnglishOne material and its influence on the quality of the English language teaching, worksheets, teachers' material and the Planet of Knowledge. The following part comments on the findings of questionnaire regarding the categories mentioned earlier.

Material EnglishOne at English lessons

1. I use EnglishOne material - a statement measuring a frequency of using EnglishOne material. As Table 4 shows the majority of teachers considered EnglishOne material to be a suitable supplementary material (126 case studies), or the material they could use at any part of the lesson (121 case studies). 93 studies reported that teachers could teach a lesson just with CCE, without a traditional textbook or other material. Needless to say, primary and lower secondary school teachers used EnglishOne material with a similar frequency.

Table 4: Using EnglishOne material

			Primary level	Lower secondary level
I use EnglishOne material	as a separate teaching material	93	37	56
	as a supplementary material	126	52	74
	at a part of a lesson	121	50	71
	at a whole lesson	90	39	51
	every day	49	23	26
	every week	85	33	52
	once a month	6	2	4

The influence of EnglishOne material on the quality of teaching and students' study results

A second part of the questionnaire enabled the teachers to evaluate the impact of EnglishOne material on the quality of teaching and students' study results. They were asked to express their opinion on agreeing/disagreeing scales related to various items. The results obtained are displayed in Table 5 that follows a brief commentary on particular items.

The quality of English language teaching has improved – In all case studies teachers agreed with this statement. In 39% of them they strongly agreed with it. This proves the benefit of the project and the use of EnglishOne material at lessons.

Students' motivation towards learning English has increased – All participating teachers agreed that the EnglishOne material improved students' motivation. In 69% of the case studies the teachers strongly believed that this was the case, while in 31% of them agreed with this statement. Comparing primary and lower secondary students the motivation factor seemed to be slightly higher at primary level.

Students are achieving greater progress withing the same amount of time – improved study results were directly influenced by higher quality of teaching and strengthened motivation towards learning English. In 95% of the case studies the respondents agreed that students achieved better study results during the same allocated time. All teachers at primary schools agreed with this statement whereas at lower secondary schools teachers agreed with it in 91% case studies. The difference might have been caused by a process of learning, language complexity and other external factors of education process at higher grades.

Students use English more often at lessons – In 92% of case studies the respondents agreed that students used English more often at lessons thanks to EnglishOne material. Similarly to a previous statement, more primary (98% of case studies) than lower secondary school teachers (87% of case studies) agreed with that statement.

Students' ability to interpret has improved – in 92% of case studies teachers agreed that students' ability to understand the purpose of an utterance improved. The percentage was slightly higher at primary than in lower secondary schools. The ability to interpret language forms an important part of foreign language competence and enables an English user to be an active agent in social encounters.

Students' pronunciation has improved – in 96% of case studies teachers said that students' pronunciation improved. The results were almost the same at both levels, primary – 98%, and lower secondary level – 95%. This appears to be thanks to high quality video and audio recordings recorded by native speakers taking into consideration learning differences and developmental stages of primary and lower secondary students.

Better individual approach to students' needs – in 91% of case studies teachers stated that the material EnglishOne created favourable conditions for highly individual approach to students. Immediate feedback, given to students in the form of an audio signal or written prompts, informs students about their achievement and allows them to work on their own. This frees a teacher to spend more time with students who need assistance, while the rest of the class is working at their own pace. This stimulates students' engagement in education process and increases its effectiveness.

Increased interactivity in English language teaching – interactivity as a significant result of integrating information-communication technology into education process makes learning and teaching a foreign language attractive and stimulating. Students interact not only with one another and a teacher but also with digital software (in various forms of devices) that becomes their tutor (Walker and White, 2013). All teachers maintained that the lessons with EnglishOne material were more interactive. In 88% of case studies they strongly agreed with this statement.

Table 5: The influence of EnglishOne material on the quality of teaching and students' study results

		Total			Primary level			Lower secondary level		
The quality of teaching has improved	strongly agree	51	39%	100%	23	43%	100%	28	36%	100%
	agree	79	61%		30	57%		49	64%	
	don't agree	0	0%		0			0		
	strongly disagree	0	0%		0			0		
Students' motivation towards English language learning has increased	strongly agree	90	69%	100%	39	74%	100%	51	66%	100%
	agree	40	31%		14	26%		26	34%	
	don't agree	0	0%		0			0		
	strongly disagree	0	0%		0			0		
Students are achieving greater progress within the same amount of time	strongly agree	18	14%	95%	11	21%	100%	7	9%	91%
	agree	105	81%		42	79%		63	82%	
	don't agree	7	5%		0			7	9%	
	strongly disagree	0	0%		0			0		
Students use English more often at lessons	strongly agree	44	34%	92%	21	40%	98%	23	30%	87%
	agree	75	58%		31	58%		44	57%	
	don't agree	11	8%		1	2%		10	13%	
	strongly disagree	0	0%		0			0		
Students' ability to interpret has improved	strongly agree	32	25%	92%	17	32%	98%	15	19%	88%
	agree	88	68%		35	66%		53	69%	
	don't agree	10	8%		1	2%		9	12%	
	strongly disagree	0	0%		0			0		
Students' pronunciation has improved	strongly agree	58	45%	96%	26	49%	98%	32	42%	95%
	agree	67	52%		26	49%		41	53%	
	don't agree	5	4%		1	2%		4	5%	
	strongly disagree	0	0%		0			0		
Better individual approach to students' needs	strongly agree	38	29%	91%	14	26%	94%	24	31%	88%
	agree	80	62%		36	68%		44	57%	
	don't agree	11	8%		3	6%		8	10%	
	strongly disagree	0	0%		0			0		
Increased interactivity in English language teaching	strongly agree	115	88%	100%	45	85%	100%	70	91%	100%
	agree	15	12%		8	15%		7	9%	
	don't agree	0	0%		0			0		
	strongly disagree	0	0%		0			0		

Using EnglishOne material and working with Planet of Knowledge portal

The results of the analysis relating this area are shown in Table 6.

Will you use material EnglishOne in the future?

In 98% of case studies the respondents said that they would continue using material EnglishOne. In 86% of them they would definitely use it at lessons, while only in 1% of case studies the teachers were not sure about using it. Interestingly, all primary school teachers would definitely use the material while teachers at lower secondary school would use it in 97% of case studies.

Would you recommend EnglishOne material to your colleagues?

As shown in Table 6 all respondents would definitely recommend the material to their colleagues.

Do you use the Planet of Knowledge portal for creating tasks related to EnglishOne material?

At the time of writing, in 83% of case studies teachers were using the portal for setting students tasks, in 16% of case studies they rarely used it and in 1% of case studies the respondents did not work with the portal. Answering this question teacher had a chance to make comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the portal. We will mention just the most significant ones here.

Strengths

The Planet of Knowledge provides wide educational content and various tools for personalizing lessons, setting tasks and checking their accomplishments. Teachers appreciate user-friendliness of the portal, its tools and immediate feedback. Another advantage is a possibility of setting digital homework that students can do whenever it suits them under the condition they are online. After submitting digital homework teachers get results showing them who did the task when and how successful students were.

Suggestions for improvements

Teachers commented on a complicated search for materials as the titles of the lessons did not provide sufficient information on their content. They suggested a way of searching based on lesson content, e.g. grammar, vocabulary, a certain theme or pronunciation.

Table 6: Using EnglishOne material and working with Planet of Knowledge portal

		Total			Primary level			Lower secondary level		
Will you use EnglishOne material in the future?	yes	112	86%	98%	48	91%	100%	64	83%	97%
	rather yes	16	12%		5	9%		11	14%	
	rather no	1	1%		0			1	1%	
	no	0	0%		0			0		
	don't know	1	1%		0			1	1%	
Would you recommend EnglishOne material to your colleagues?	yes	130	100%	100%	53	100%	100%	77	100%	100%
	no	0	0%		0			0		
Do you use the Planet of Knowledge portal for creating tasks related to EnglishOne material?	yes, often	108	83%		47	89%		61	79%	100%
	rarely	21	16%		5	9%		16	21%	
	never	1	1%		1	2%		0		

4 Class survey

After teaching at least 5 lessons with CCE, a teacher did a simple survey focused on three main areas:

1. *Students' attitude towards English in general as well as English as a subject taught at school*
2. *Evaluation of English lessons with EnglishOne materials in comparison to traditional lessons*
3. *Evaluation of the EnglishOne material itself*

The class survey comprised of 15 questions of which 14 were closed-ended and 1 open-ended. Students responded to closed-ended question through assessment scales and they could verbally express their opinion on EnglishOne material and make comments and recommendations.

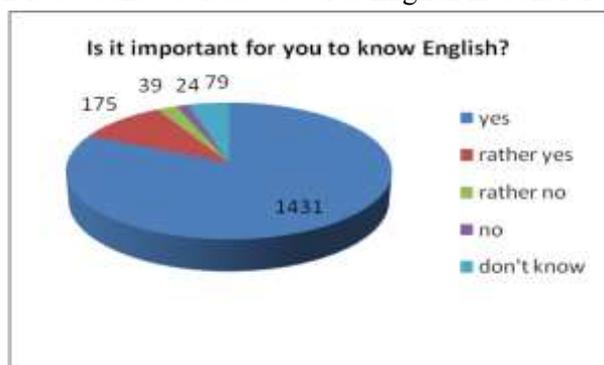
The survey was conducted in 130 classes at primary and lower secondary schools, of which 53 were primary and 77 lower secondary classes. 1743 students took part in the survey. Teachers could conduct the survey orally and indicate the results onto a pre-prepared form that was a part of case studies, or students themselves completed the survey form that was processed by the teachers. Due to various forms of conducting a survey, students might have selected more than one option with closed-ended items or they might have omitted some questions. This explains the difference between the number of participating students and the number of responses to particular questions.

4.1 The analysis of the class survey

Two questions probed students' attitude towards English in general as well as towards English as a subject at schools: *Do you think it is important for you to know English? Do you like English you study at school?*

The results show that 92 % of students considered English language competence to be important for them. As Graph 1 illustrates, 1431 of them thought it is very important and for 175 of them it was important.

Graph 1: Students' attitude towards English in General



Regarding English as a subject, 85 % of students liked this subject. 1109 of the them definitely liked English lessons at school and 370 of them rather liked it.

Evaluation of English lessons with EnglishOne materials in comparison to traditional lessons

In general students considered lessons with EnglishOne material interesting, motivating, funny and they would like to have them regularly. A majority of them believed that CCE enhanced their English language learning. As Table 7 displays, 88 % of the respondents considered the lessons with EnglishOne material engaging and would like to learn English with it. In comparison to traditional lesson almost 70 % of students believed that with EnglishOne material they could speak English more than at traditional lessons (1192 students). This was enabled through Practice exercises focused on development of the four skills as well as English to take away part of digital lessons. These exercises provide space for talking and encourage students to use language through various speaking tasks. 83 % of the students strongly believed or rather believed that the material made their learning easier.

Table 7: Evaluation of English lessons with EnglishOne materials in comparison to traditional lessons

Are the lessons with EnglishOne interesting and funny?	yes	1183	88%
	rather yes	349	
	rather no	93	
	no	46	
	don't know	79	
Would you like to use EnglishOne material at traditional lessons?	yes	1269	88%
	rather yes	275	
	rather no	59	
	no	49	
	don't know	97	
With EnglishOne material do you speak English more often?	yes	1192	68%
	no	563	
Do you think it is easier to learn English with EnglishOne material?	yes	988	83%
	rather yes	450	
	rather no	66	
	no	41	
	don't know	194	

Evaluation of the EnglishOne material itself

As displayed in Table 8, for 90% of the respondents, primary and lower secondary school students lessons with EnglishOne were interesting and they enjoyed them.

Table 8: EnglishOne material

Do you like EnglishOne material?	Yes, a lot	1047	90%
	Rather yes	530	
	Rather no	56	
	no	21	
	don't know	99	

In comparison to textbooks used at lessons, over the half of students 68% (Table 9) preferred doing digital exercises due to their interactivity, active engagement and immediate feedback.

Table 9: EnglishOne material- exercises

What exercises do you like most?	From EnglishOne material	1185	68%
	From worksheets related to EnglishOne material	253	14%
	From textbook we use at lessons	315	18%

Teachers can creatively use EnglishOne lessons in line with their teaching objectives and students' needs. Digital lessons are simply structured and after initial experience with them students are able to work by themselves. The class survey results show (Table 10) that 53% of the respondents (928 students) did not require any help. 620 (35%) of them needed some kind of assistance at the lesson and only 12% (213) needed support while working alone. This might have been caused by the content of the lessons or by technical issues. Instructions to lessons and tasks are in English apart from the first grade and the majority of students (86%) understand them: for 1014 of them they are fully intelligible and for 490 they are intelligible.

Table 10: EnglishOne material – required support

Did you need any help while working with EnglishOne material?	Yes, at a lesson	620	35%
	Yes, at home	213	12%
	no	928	53%
Do you understand instructions to screens in EnglishOne material?	Yes	1014	86%
	Rather yes	490	
	Rather no	135	
	no	49	
	Don't know	66	

After five digital lessons, EnglishOne material motivated students to such an extent they worked with them even after school. 60% of the students (Table 11) worked with the material at home or outside the school, whereas 40% of them did that only at school.

78% of the students believed that they would be able to use the language taught through EnglishOne material outside school, which means they considered the content to be meaningful, and practical.

Table 11 : Using EnglishOne material at school and outside it and transfer of knowledge

Do you use EnglishOne material at home or somewhere else outside the school?	yes	1046	60%
	no	704	40%
Do you think you will be able to use the content learnt with EnglishOne material outside school?	yes	826	78%
	rather yes	541	
	rather no	132	
	no	43	
	don't know	208	

5 Conclusions

As the results of the case study analysis show the quality of English language teaching has improved according to the participating teachers. They claimed students had a more positive attitude towards the language and they were more actively involved in learning process. Digital content with comprehensible, audiovisual lessons motivated students and had a positive impact on their concentration and study results. Interactive material is student-centred and allows students to work at their own pace.

The class survey showed that the lessons with CCE were interesting and funny for students they enjoyed them. They preferred working with digital content of the Planet of knowledge portal to classical exercises in textbooks. Digital homework was more popular among them than traditional one. A logical structure of digital lessons with a variety of interactive exercises actively engages students and builds on their previous knowledge. Immediate feedback in a form of an audio signal or written prompts and qualitative evaluation of tasks and the whole lessons provide students with space for reflection and self-assessment. The majority of them consider the content of lessons to be meaningful, which is a significant motivating factor. Survey results prove that students regard EnglishOne material as an attractive way of learning English.

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