Summary

GCSE English resit students at Loughborough College learn difficult vocabulary by testing themselves on their mobile devices with the language learning app, Memrise. Competing with each other to earn badges for each completed test motivates students to tackle less appealing aspects of the curriculum. This innovative assessment-for-learning approach helps staff track individual learners’ progress so they can provide more support to those who need it.

Organisation

Loughborough College, a large, general further education college in Leicestershire, provides high-quality teaching and training its 11,000 learners on courses which range from GCSEs and A-levels to vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and foundation degrees. When grading the college as ‘good’ in 2013, Ofsted inspectors noted in particular that use of assessment and electronic resources to support learning was either good or very good.

Challenge

Ofqual reforms in 2012 placed a new emphasis on the accuracy of spelling, punctuation and use of grammar in GCSE English. Specifications for GCSE English or English Language since then have required learners to demonstrate knowledge of grammatical terms. Learners needing to obtain a Grade C to progress to higher level courses can join re-sit classes to improve their grades but many find difficulty in understanding and remembering unfamiliar terminology.

Making it happen

English teachers looking for strategies to engage and motivate learners were inspired by the success of the college’s Your Passport scheme. Shortlisted for a 2016 TES FE award, Your Passport is a set of self-testing modules on Moodle designed by the college’s in-house e-learning team to help learners acquire and demonstrate real-world skills, such as e-safety. By Easter of 2016, 30,000 badges had been earned across the Your Passport
units, showing that learners see a lot of value in ‘bite-sized’, online units of learning which they can work on independently.

Prompted by the bite-sized, quiz-based approach of the Your Passport scheme, English staff found a free app for language learning called Memrise which is available via Google Play or the App Store for use on Android or iOS tablets and smartphones. Memrise offers matching activities to help learners recognise, define and use a new term appropriately in a sentence in any language, with an extensive bank of resources, including multimedia, to support individual learning styles. Teachers can also create personalised quizzes for learners with specific learning needs. The reward on completion of each bite-sized chunk of learning is a badge.

The teaching and learning lead for English at Loughborough College wanted Memrise to be accessed by learners from their own mobile devices. The college has an established bring your own device (BYOD) policy, with the necessary firewalls and capacity to block inappropriate sites, so to enable learners to take advantage of Memrise, the app had first to be added to the ‘allowed’ list.

Teachers then set up their own separate groups of learners on Memrise so that they can focus on the progress of those learners rather than view results from the whole cohort. The process is easy and presents no technical challenges. Making a glossary of terms in Microsoft Word is the next step; this is then cut and pasted into Memrise. A stats option in the software allows teachers to bring up records of learners who have completed activities and earned badges. A short video made by the Loughborough College English staff illustrates the process.

Outcomes

Learners have responded well to this games-based approach to learning, and it is now established across the department. Accessible anytime and anywhere, with the option of working offline if necessary, many learners are motivated to work independently. But activities based on Memrise have also become an established part of GCSE English sessions:

“We bring up the stats at the start of each lesson to see who has completed a particular quiz and been badged, and who hasn’t. Then I give them 10 minutes on their phones to improve their score. After that, we get on with the class.”

Tracey Maitland, teaching and learning lead for English, Loughborough College

Learners are particularly motivated by competition in the classroom. Early indications are that the learners who engage the most are making the most progress with the grammatical elements of the course:
“With the presence of competition more of the students engaged with Memrise. In the first term of using Memrise, we had a very positive impact on outcomes and overall those students (top 15) have a 0.4 correlation between numbers of words learned and their total score. Overall, it was 0.23 for the whole cohort. When competition was not pushed at the beginning of the class, participation waned.”

Tracey Maitland, teaching and learning lead for English, Loughborough College

Results with dyslexic learners have been particularly good:

“I was surprised on how well the dyslexic students who engaged with Memrise performed in the controlled assessments. Their marks were higher than I would have expected,”

Tracey Maitland, teaching and learning lead for English, Loughborough College

“I think Memrise is good because it’s a fun way to learn new words to help me for the exams.”

Loughborough College GSCE English learner

For their part, teachers find the online records of badge winners in the system help identify who is engaging and who isn’t. They can then provide encouragement or support, for example, by adding multimedia resources as an aide-memoire.

A further valuable by-product of the Memrise initiative is that learners understand better how mobile devices can be used as an aid to learning. Using their own devices makes difficult concepts more accessible, removes the technical barriers of unfamiliar technologies and encourages learning to continue beyond the classroom, for example, in preparation for examinations or controlled assessments (available only in the academic year 2015-2016):
“Learners get to see that mobile phones can be really valuable learning aids and use them to work harder.”

Tracey Maitland, teaching and learning lead for English, Loughborough College

Benefits of the technology

» Introduces a competitive element to learning
» Motivates learners to engage with difficult aspects of a course
» Extends learning beyond the classroom
» Captures records to track learner progress

Key points for effective practice

» Competitive, games-playing techniques can engage difficult-to-reach learners in the classroom; trying to gain a higher level is a powerful driver of improved performance
» Digital records of badge achievement provide a tracking mechanism that shows at a glance who has and hasn’t engaged with required elements of the syllabus
» Include multimedia elements to benefit learners with a preference for, or need of, visual learning aids
» Explore setting up a BOYD policy if your organisation does not already have one; learners can find it encouraging to use their own mobile devices for learning

More information

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Jisc guides:

Quick guide to mobile learning
Developing coherent “bring your own” policies
Making assessments accessible