

An A-Z of How an E-learning Course was Created

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ABSTRACT

As the result of the demands of the contemporary labour market in the globalized world, ESP e-learning courses are steadily growing in number. Language teaching and learning has irreversibly been bound to the use of computer software. Consequently, both second language teachers and students have to become acquainted with computer-mediated language courses. The specificity of learning tasks included in these courses lies in their interactive nature and the role of the teacher as a supervisor of the learning process and an evaluator of the learners' advancement. Numerous on-line language courses, particularly those for ESP, have been developed through international collaboration and the support of EU funds. Facing the shortage of specialist materials for the on-line teaching of the English language related to a specific professional field, the English teachers of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow have undertaken the task of the development of an e-learning course for ESP classes. This paper describes the stages of the development of such a course for therapeutic professionals. These stages include: the choice of the course content, the methodological basis of the course, the designing of interactive exercises, and the training for the English teachers how to conduct a computer-mediated course.

Keywords: e-learning; English for Specific Purposes; materials development; international project; multimedia

1. INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of communism in Poland in 1989, a great trend has been observed in learning the English language, especially the English language for academic and professional purposes. It was related to the opportunities given to scholars and students to participate in international conferences and projects, as well as the opportunities to teach and to study at prominent universities abroad. Job market abroad was opened for Polish specialists in various professions. In 2004 with the inclusion of Poland to the European Union the borders were abolished and international scientific collaboration, international business and visa-free tourism developed rapidly.

In the globalized scientific and professional world where English is the leading language of communication and dissemination of knowledge, the need for courses of

a specialist English language is stronger than ever before. In relation to this, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has developed to one of the most prominent branches of EFL. These courses, tailored to the learners needs, provide vocabulary, linguistic structures and phraseology used in the target academic and professional settings [1].

The increasing need for ESP courses led to a growing demand for specialist materials to teach languages for professional purposes. As a consequence, developing teaching materials for students of a given professional field has become a necessity. Teaching English for Specific Purposes for a long time focused mainly on Business English, Legal English and Technical English. More recently Medical English has been attracting attention as a target language on ESP courses.

The development of technology-based courseware and an access to the Internet with its countless resources, make the use of web-based educational materials worth considering while designing ESP courses. With the growing popularity of the use of virtual learning environments for educational purposes, e-learning ESP language courses have been regarded as a useful teaching option. Chapelle [2] stated "... anyone concerned with second language teaching and learning in the 21st century needs to grasp the nature of the unique technology-mediated tasks learners can engage in for language acquisition and how such tasks can be used for assessment".

2. TECHNOLOGY IN TEACHING LANGUAGES FOR PROFESSIONAL PURPOSES

The higher education sector is under increasing pressure to develop computer-based materials and to offer web-based training adjusted to the students' specific needs [3]. Although students increasingly expect universities to integrate technology into language teaching, many universities find it difficult to implement the web-based educational materials for the benefits of their students.

This situation is caused by a number of problems that university language teachers encounter while designing language courses for professional purposes. Among the most important impediments to using technology in developing educational resources are the lack of clearly depicted educational programs and specifications for the language competences that are to be developed on the language courses for specific purposes at the university level. The Common European Framework issued by the Council of Europe outlines a common basis for the

elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations and assessment across Europe [4], but this basis refers mainly to courses of General English and not to the courses which should be adjusted to the needs of a specific professional group. As a result there is a lack of educational materials which would address the real needs of a professional specialization. Another problem is a lack of knowledge about modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools that could facilitate the language teaching and learning process. Many teachers are afraid of new technology (digital immigrants), which is usually caused by a lack of training, and in consequence they are unable to see the benefit of using technologies in the classroom [5]. On the contrary, the majority of contemporary students grew up using technology (digital natives), and therefore they feel confident and at ease while exploiting it for various purposes.

It should also be mentioned that there are very limited funds designed by universities (especially the national ones) to be invested in the creation of a virtual environment. The same can be said for the training of teachers to be able to utilize it.

There is frequently a significant discrepancy between the present reality of the classroom equipment and teaching methods that are employed by teachers and the expectations of the students who are used to virtual communication in their everyday life. In addition, if students see that the contents of a given course and the teaching methods used do not comply with the language standards indicated in the Common European Framework and the requirements of the European labour market, it may have a negative effect on their motivation for language learning and on their participation in language classes.

In such circumstances developing materials for ESP courses has become a prerequisite for many ESP teachers. Being a difficult and time-consuming task, the creation of materials for the course in the form of e-learning or “blended learning” is a real challenge which involves both obstacles and benefits when compared with the traditional course.

3. ICT IN THE CLASSROOM

Technology in language teaching has been used for many decades. However, the way in which this technology has been exploited for educational purposes has been evolving continuously over the years. The use, for example, of language laboratories, which once were a standard practice are nowadays regarded as old-fashioned compared to the present use of more modern innovative tools.

In the 1980s a Computer Assisted Language Learning approach, frequently referred to CALL, was developed and was based on the use of computer programs to do simple language exercises such as filling in gapped texts, matching sentence halves, and for doing multiple-choice

or text reconstruction activities. With a growing access to the Internet, web-based tools have become more popular. The CALL approach has been extended to the use of Internet and Communication Technology (ICT). In the 1990s the term Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) was introduced to refer to using ICT tools for language learning [6]. With the use of modern technology it has become possible to create a Virtual Learning Environment – the collection of systems required to manage the online learning process. The core of this system is an e-learning platform where course materials are delivered to students. It should be kept in mind that implementing ICT tools in the classroom does not replace using traditional materials but supplement them.

4. ORIGINS OF THE ESP-T PROJECT

The Jagiellonian Language Centre of the Medical College in the Jagiellonian University in Krakow provides language courses for students of a wide variety of medical and therapeutic faculties. For a long time the language teachers who are employed there have been concerned about the scarcity of ESP educational resources in such fields as physiotherapy, medical rescue, and midwifery, for which no coursebooks were available on the market. Even though it seemed plausible that of a large number of medical textbooks already published, it would be easy to adopt the contents of these for this group of students, it turned out that apart from teaching anatomy vocabulary and enabling the students to conduct an interview with a patient, the competences required for these specializations not identical, but differed to a large extent. Therefore, educational materials for language teaching cannot be uniform, but should be adjusted to the target situations of each of these specialties.

Taking into consideration the fact that physiotherapy was a relatively new subject at the Jagiellonian University, the scarcity of suitable language teaching materials, as well as a lack of funds designed by the University for the creation of these had a hard felt effect. An idea was suggested to solve this problem by creating web-based teaching materials through incorporation of the language teachers into an international project and by applying to the European Union for financial support.

After establishing a partnership with 10 other educational institutes in Europe and choosing an appropriate program which was accepted by all the partners, an application for the European Union funding was prepared. This application precisely outlined the whole project together with its cost. The project was called ESP-T, which means English for Specific Purposes – Therapists, and, after its acceptance by the sector for international projects of the European Union, work began on its realization.

The starting point for the development of the project was the carrying out of a language needs analysis. The aim of it was to reveal the students’ target professional requirements, as well as the “lacks” and “wants”

concerning their linguistic knowledge and communicative competence. The main recipients of the program are students and people who are already working as therapists.

5. DEVELOPMENT MODEL

The process of developing ESP-T e-learning course consisted of the following stages:

- Finding the human and financial resources to run the project.
- Choosing the e-learning platform (Moodle).
- Basic IT training for material developers during which technical possibilities and limitations were discussed, and the types of educational activities were specified.
- Language needs analysis was carried out to outline the contents of the course and the type of language learning activities.
- Authentic materials were collected.
- Learning activities were developed on the basis of authentic materials which were in line with the results of the language needs analysis.
- The developed materials were evaluated in terms of language correctness, methodology applied, the ability of staff and students to correctly use the technological implements they are presented with, and visual appeal.
- The validated materials were implemented on the e-learning platform.
- The e-learning platform was tested by the users.
- All necessary changes were introduced.

6. COURSE CONTENTS

The ESP-T course has a modular structure, that is to say it is divided into several modules which are further subdivided into chapters. There are two broad modules and four specialization modules. The first module, referred to as the academic module, concentrates on language abilities which are necessary for students who plan to attend college, educational training, or take part in conferences in an English speaking context. The module provides language practice for different academic skills like understanding lectures, participating in seminars and conferences, preparing presentations, and writing essays.

The second part of the course – the general therapeutic module – introduces specialization vocabulary, but on a broad level, common for various types of therapy. This module is based on the authentic case of a patient who was hospitalized due to an accident, and who then had to undergo a long rehabilitation process. The story of the patient is presented with the use of different media, including numerous video clips featuring the most typical elements of the treating of the patient, from the moment of the injury, through hospitalization, diagnosis making to the application of various specific rehabilitation methods. The goal was to practice the language communication skills in all the typical situations which therapists may

meet at their work.

The remaining four modules are dedicated to four different therapeutic specializations: physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and massage therapy. All of the specialist modules provide learners with extensive language practice for typical situations that they have encountered, or will encounter, in their professional life. This language practice focuses on effective communication with patients and health care professionals in such areas as examining, diagnosing, treating and referring patients to other specialists. The learning activities were designed in the way which develops reading, listening and writing skills. Speaking takes place mainly in the classroom in the form of face-to-face activity. The exercises can be done by an individual student who works on the materials at their own pace or by small groups of students who do exercises together.

7. TYPES OF TASKS

The ESP-T course offers an array of interactive language exercises based on scenarios describing authentic situations, showing authentic cases and professional documentation with the use of video and audio clips featuring typical conversational situations taking place in hospital and rehabilitation settings. Hence, many activities are directly related to audiovisual material introducing specialist vocabulary and communication patterns in a professional context. Typical tasks include: watching the video clip or listening to the audio clip and answering the comprehension questions. The presentation stage and the checking of general comprehension are followed by tasks practicing new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Many of the activities are self-marking, with feedback given automatically by the computer. New lexical items are presented in sections related to specific micro-skills that therapeutic professionals need to master in English. For example if the chapter is devoted to the process of diagnosing the patient, then vocabulary related to different diseases, their symptoms and diagnostic procedures are provided. They are presented in the form of conversations recorded as video or audio clips followed by exercises that extend vocabulary and phraseology.

The range of different exercises includes:

- True/False questions
- multiple-choice questions
- gap-filling
- ordering
- matching
- categorizing
- selecting.

Additionally, language games such as crosswords and picture-based quizzes are offered to students.

8. PEDAGOGICAL BASIS

The ESP-T course was designed according to the following pedagogical principles for second language learning:

1. **Situation-based learning:** Learners are being immersed in a particular situation related to their target professional situation. It facilitates an effective grasping of language structures, specialist vocabulary, and communicative strategies used in a work-based context.
2. **Learner-focused learning:** Because it is an online course, students need to assume the role of managers of their own learning process. It assures a learner's autonomy and responsibility for meeting the course objectives. Each chapter begins with the presentation of the objectives of that part of the course and the key vocabulary that they need to cover. Efforts have been made to provide learners with appropriate feedback with the correct answers for all the activities and the explanation of typical mistakes. Learners can choose on their own which module they want to start with and in which order they prefer to do the course tasks. However, they are guided throughout the course with suggestions as to the sequence in which exercises should be done.
3. **Learner motivation:** Several features of the course have been introduced to increase the motivation of the learners, including the use of a variety of multimedia resources such as video and audio clips, interactive games and activities. A positive effect of the use of multimedia on a learner's attitude and self-esteem has been widely acknowledged [7], [8]. Bosco [9] assessed the effectiveness of interactive video and found out that this instructional medium positively affected learners' attitudes to learning.

9. OPTIONS FOR USING COURSE MATERIALS

All of the discussed course materials constitute a fully-fledged specialist online course which is available in a pilot version on an e-learning platform under the web address www.esp-t.eu for registered online users. In addition, different internet tools are placed on the platform for the convenience of the users such as forums with additional materials, giving more insight into subjects discussed in the course. Additional open resources for teachers and learners can be downloaded on the platform.

The course can be utilized through the use of any of the following modes of learning:

Web-based learning

The course was designed to be used as an e-learning course and is only available in a web-based version and no contact with teachers is required.

Blended learning

The course can be offered in a "blended learning" mode, an approach combining a face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of technology [10]; in

the case of the ESP-T course the materials from the e-learning platform may be combined with traditional teaching methods such as teacher and students meeting together in the classroom as a learning group.

Distance learning

The course can be provided as an e-learning course with a teacher, who is also available in a distance mode, for example through Skype.

In case the teacher wants to use the e-learning course for group work in the classroom and does not have the proper facility (minimum one computer or laptop with a projector), some exercises can be copied and printed, and provided to the students as handouts. However, this course has a number of features of an e-learning course which make it more attractive than working in a traditional way with a textbook.

These features include:

- interactive exercises,
- broader visualization of contents, the advantage of the potential to use materials such as short video clips, pictures, and animations,
- a higher possibility to use audio materials,
- the ability to create internet communities, using available internet communications such as forums, blogs, and Skype to compare the students' abilities with other students from different countries,
- the availability of an ocean of information which is on the Internet, for example, wikipedia, online dictionaries and hyperwords that help broaden the contents of the course,
- the information found on the Internet can be used to create different types of language projects, get extra information on certain topics, or help out with basic questions (e.g. Webquests),
- the breaking of many barriers important to people who, for example, cannot participate in traditional classes because of health issues.

10. CONCLUSIONS

After naming a few of the benefits of e-learning courses, there appears the question of why teachers approach these courses with such uncertainty. It seems that both teachers and students, tend to be afraid of things they do not understand. From the point of view of the course takers, the only disadvantage of such a course seems to be the lack of ... a teacher, someone to whom they can ask questions or someone who can further explain something they might not completely understand. And what is most important, the lack of someone who they can speak with in a given language and have the comfort of knowing that the person they are talking to is qualified to constantly control and correct their ability to speak in that given language.

From the point of view of the material developers, there are also many barriers to break in a long-distance

collaboration. Firstly, the material developers are older than the people who are going to be using the materials created, which means that their ability to function in a technological modern world is more limited than that of the course takers. This creates discomfort, which tends to block many people from venturing into unknown areas of e-learning. It may also occur that the students of ESP courses know more about their specialty than their language teachers, or that something will be incorrectly said, or written by them, and then the teachers are faced with the question of how they should react in front of their students in such cases. Jordan [11] suggests that such a situation should be treated as an authentic communication with an information gap. When students can explain something they know better than their language teacher, they become more motivated to communicate in the classroom. Thus asking a student for help is not dishonorable for a teacher, but is a part of the natural learning process teachers go through during the entire course and during the entire life. The concept promoted by the EU - "lifelong learning", means learning something new each day, and it applies to everyone without exception (teachers are included).

When this first barrier, that is, the fear of the unknown, is broken, it is much easier to overcome further barriers: the lack of funds for proper equipment, for software, and for the training of teachers, etc. Having in mind the possible advantage of at least a few of these educational, long-distance elements, it is good to remember that it is impossible to reverse the growing influence of information technology, and using of certain solutions from the field of IT, may well, in the near future, become the only way in which learning can proceed.

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