

When Business English Went Virtual

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Abstract. *English for Specific Purposes, differently from other academic subjects, has always been compatible with the affordances of technology. The specialised literature has acknowledged well-established branches of language education, such as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), or Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), long before the online teaching has been forced upon the systems of education throughout the world following the pandemic. The compatibility between foreign language teaching and computers is not surprising since the former has always searched for authentic immersive experiences that can simulate real-life situations, of which the latter has plenty.*

The present article concentrates on a particular type of English for Specific Purposes—Business English, which is currently taught at the University of Bucharest to students enrolled in Economics degrees. Beginning with the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, all classes have been moved online due to the threat posed by the Corona virus. The seminar rooms and lecture rooms have been basically overnight replaced by a multitude of platforms and meeting spaces unknown before to a great many: Zoom, Google Classroom, Moodle, Microsoft teams, to mention just a few. Google Classroom, part of Google Apps for Education, has been one of the most frequently chosen platforms due to its friendly interface and the possibility of holding both a-synchronous and synchronous classes (following the integration of Google Meet). The article discusses the way Google Classroom has been used by language instructors for both the teaching and the final assessment of students' progress.

Keywords: Business English, Computer-Assisted Language Learning, English for Specific Purposes, Google Classroom, Task-Based Approach.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the teaching of foreign languages has been on a continuous search for immersive experiences meant to place the learners in life-like situations which would require them to act and react spontaneously, using all the competences acquired during the learning process. As a consequence, all kinds of approaches have emerged, most of them under the umbrella of the communicative methods. They have been readily embraced because previous traditional pedagogical approaches seemed to favour grammatical competence over all the other competences and, thus, appeared detached from the learner's real needs. One of the most successful methods has been the task-based approach, first described by Long (1985) and Prabhu (1987). The focus on linguistic accuracy has been replaced by the completion of functional tasks aimed at preparing learners to use language in the real world: at work, for travelling or for their studies. The new method has targeted the development of language competencies tailored for the students' future professional and personal life. English for Specific Purposes (ESP)—the academic English class taught in non-philological faculties—has greatly benefited from the task-based approach to language teaching.

Once these new methods have been in place—although, one must say, there has been a certain “resistance” from the old school who has mistakenly rushed to proclaim “the demise” of grammar studies—, another important element has completely transformed the face of language education: the incorporation of the affordances offered by the advent of technology, the computers and the Internet in particular. What they have managed to bring in the picture has been the most needed touch of authenticity.

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Once again, pedagogy has tried to provide theoretical frameworks to integrate the new technologies, hence the emergence of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)—budding as early as the 1960s (Warschauer & Healey, 1998)—and, in more recent years, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), beginning with 1994 (Callan, 1994), when studies started to acknowledge the use of various types of handheld devices in foreign language classes.

In 2020, the pandemic sent students all over the world in the safety of the virtual space to continue learning. Many e-learning solutions have already been on offer, replacing the physical classrooms, each with its own benefits and shortcomings: Zoom, Google Classroom, Moodle, Microsoft teams, to mention just a few. The language instructors have faced the difficult problem of trying to effectively replace the in-person interaction with a platform that could best facilitate communication and, at the same time, aid in the transmission of knowledge. Although ESP had previously integrated technology in the class design, it was for the first time when it completely exchanged the physical space for the virtual. Moreover, the institutional learning environment was swapped for a personal learning environment, making things even more difficult.

The present paper will focus solely on Google Classroom (GC)—the most used platform for the teaching of Business English class. Although initially Zoom was preferred, once Google Meet was integrated allowing for video classes, GC has become the platform of choice. The article discusses in depth the way GC has been used by language instructors for both the teaching and the final assessment of students' progress.

2. The Specifics of the Business English Class

2.1. English for Specific Purposes

ESP established itself as a fully fledged domain in the second half of the 20th century, in the 1960s more precisely, once English became the international language of commerce and technology. In fact, ESP has a foot in two domains: on the one hand, it is part of Language for Specific Purposes—an approach to language learning focused on the needs of people working or studying in a certain domain—and, on the other hand, it remains heavily indebted to the general objectives of English learning, in particular improving the learner's communication skills, via the acquisition of grammar structures and vocabulary, and enhancement of reading, speaking and listening skills. A comprehensive definition of ESP is given by Räisänen and Fortanet-Gómez (2008): "ESP teaching uses the methodologies and activities of the various disciplines it is designed to serve, and it focuses on the language, lexis, grammar, discourses and genres, of those disciplines rather than using the general grammar, learners' dictionaries and general public genres and discourses." (p. 12).

As the demand for ESP grew, it was further divided into EST (English for Science and Technology), EBE (English for Business and Economics) and ESS (English for the Social Sciences) (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Business English is today one of the best established branches of ESP and is taught throughout all Romanian universities which offer a degree in Economics.

2.2. Computer-mediation in the foreign languages class

The 1960s saw a revolution in language education with the advent of CALL. At its first stages indebted to structuralism and dwelling on grammar-translation and audiolingual methods with a view to increasing the learners' accuracy, in the last two decades of the millennium, CALL grew into a communicative approach which used multimedia simulation software to develop learners' fluency. In the 21st century, CALL has become integrative bringing to the ESP class computer-mediated communication and social media. This approach focuses on learners' agency — "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Yim & Warschauer, 2016, p.593)

The author of this article has considered the potential benefits of using the Internet in the ESP classes for several years, long before the pandemic outbreak, in a series of published papers. As early as 2015, the author discussed the findings of a project whose purpose was to create a virtual ecosystem where students enrolled to study one of the several digitalized courses the project put forth (Epure et al, 2015). Among these courses, Strategies of Communication in English proposed a pedagogical method considered innovative at the time. The paper touted the benefits of the flipped classroom which combined “pedagogy and learning technologies in ways that extend to large numbers of student's opportunities for deep learning through application and consolidation.” (Sankey & Hunt, 2013, p. 786). Students were able to learn interactively, using authentic materials and engaging activities. It was observed that students’ retention rate increased and the overwhelming majority of participants assessed the experience as more enjoyable, engaging and interactive than the traditional in-person classes. Another article started from the observation that the main weakness of the students majoring in Economics was their productive skills, i.e. the capacity to produce a grammatically accurate and persuasive written or spoken discourse in English (Dimitriu & Mihăeș, 2018). The explanation was that the students had not been enough exposed to authentic situations to which to respond properly and correctly. The gradual integration of technology in the ESP class, culminating with the prevalent use of mobile phones, has seen a boost in students’ level of competence in English. The limitless potential of mobile technology was further enlarged upon in an article entirely dedicated to MALL (Mihăeș & Dimitriu, 2019). It concluded with the observation that, while MALL enhanced student’s receptive skills due to the devices’ efficiency and ease of use, the noticeable improvement was, again, in productive skills. Last but not least, a chapter published in 2021, when the whole educational paradigm had already changed, looked at the transition of the ESP class from the traditional medium of instruction to the virtual environment (Mihăeș, 2021). What was new in picture was the implementation, albeit forced, of e-assessment. If previously looked down upon and only tentatively approached by CALL, e-assessment has proven its validity and reliability.

2.3. Business English meets Google Classroom

Business English (BE) is now one of the most common ESP courses taught throughout Romanian universities. This comes as no surprise since the language of commerce is English and many universities prepare students to work in this domain. The BE class taught at the Faculty of Business Administration, University of Bucharest, is a four-semester compulsory subject and is taught for a certain undergraduate studies. The course also continues to some Master’s degrees, adding to a total of six semesters. If the primary purpose of BE at the undergraduate level is to teach English for work purposes by bringing linguistic performance in touch with actual business activities, at graduate studies, the emphasis shifts to teaching business discourse.

The students’ initial level is generally B1—Threshold Level (Council of Europe, 2001)—, which means that they are able to carry on a conversation in a range of contexts and deal with everyday life situations. There are also less competent students who are usually grouped in a pre-intermediate group and teaching is tailored for their level. Most of them manage to catch up, so beginning with the third semester, they are able to join the more advanced groups. The students enrolled in English-medium degrees usually have a C1 competency level, which requires that more difficult tasks should be designed for them. Regardless of their entrance level, however, very few of them have a good grasp of the vocabulary pertaining to business.

Another particularity of the BE class is that it further branches out to fit into the various study programmes within the faculty: Business Administration, Public Administration, Marketing

and Cybernetics. The BE class is designed for each sub-domain, preserving a common core of general BE (especially during the first two semesters). In the traditional in-presence class, the teacher worked with a corpora of authentic materials taken from high-profile economic magazines and newspapers, such as *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Forbes*, etc. Likewise, many textbooks were used, in particular the *Market Leader* series. Following the guidelines of the task-based approach, the class concentrated on students' performance of authentic tasks, with a view to practicing and enhancing both receptive and productive skills. Sometimes audio pods were used so that students might practice the listening skills. At the Master's degree level, the BE classes become more specialised, focusing on business discourse rather than on small individual tasks meant to enhance vocabulary or grammar.

When the computer was integrated in the BE class, learning entered a new era. It seemed that the teacher could make the best of both worlds: the activities supposed physical attendance yet, more often than not, the internet connection was used for various tasks. The sudden shift to remote language teaching, i.e. "the practice of teaching a language interactively via videoconferencing" (Stanley, 2019, p. 8), was, in itself, a small revolution. It is more than what the researchers have documented and described in CALL and MALL, because the language instructor had, this time, both to teach the lesson and command the technology (for instance, to manage the screen for presentations, images, videos, etc., to manage the students and sometimes even to have to overcome technical problems, such as unstable internet connection or camera issues).

In March 2020, almost overnight, the classes were moved in the online environment. It was not a carefully planned move and there was no transition period, no time for preparations or training of any kind. Everybody was taken aback, so, after a short period of trial and error to see which technical solution worked out better, the BE classes began to be held synchronously on Zoom and Google Classroom.

GC was launched in 2014, initially to assist teachers and students with file sharing. It has grown rapidly so that by 2021, it has already been used by 150 million people (Lazare, 2021). The success of the platform has been enhanced by the switch to online classes due to the pandemic. What makes it so popular is both the fact that it is a free source and that it integrates a series of other useful applications (Google Docs, Google Sheets, Google Slides, Gmail, and Google Calendar). Google Classroom offers a series of facilities to both teachers and enrolled students. Teachers can create and manage classes, upload materials and videos, create, distribute, receive and score assignments. Students, in turn, can upload assignments, they can receive feedback and have their assignments scored.

The integration of Google Meet in Google Suite offered the possibility to videoconferencing, so Zoom began to be used less and less. Google Meet can foster up to 100 students (more than enough as groups are usually made up of no more than 30 students) and allows the recording of classes. Participation in these online meetings was not made compulsory as not all students had an available internet connection at all times. Instead, the weekly assignments had to be solved by everybody. The answers were stored in GC and students received private feedback from the professor.

3. The Digital Teacher: Teaching and Assessment in the Virtual Space

Moved from the physical seminar rooms to the infinity and anonymity of the virtual space, the first thing the teachers had to do was to set up an online classroom. This can be done either by personally inviting students or by distributing the course code while students enrol themselves. One of the first difficulties that had to be surmounted was the incompatibility of certain e-mail addresses (like yahoo) with GC, therefore new Gmail addresses had to be created. In fact, the heavy reliance on Google apps and services was

considered the major flaw of GC (Pappas, 2015). When both students and teachers began to use the institutional addresses, the problem was solved.

The second step has involved the creation and distribution of course materials. Besides the regular sources used in face-to-face teaching, too, the instructors have found it easier now to update their materials and use the latest issues of various business magazines and newspapers, together with the podcasts they offer. It has been observed that students are more receptive to materials that discuss the latest developments and trends in the field of economics and, as a consequence, their retention rate is higher. The course materials have been designed so as to enhance both receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing), yet in a more holistic manner than before. If in the physical classroom it was more difficult to teach all skills during the same seminar, the online medium has allowed for the accomplishment of a greater variety of tasks. The task-based teaching method has remained the approach which has shaped the course design. The philosophy behind this approach—learning by doing (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2016, p. 1)—is very consonant with technology. Tasks have been chosen to best fit the student's profile. Moreover, GC permits both a traditional teacher-led class and collaborative learning, students being able to step forward as the teacher lets them take the lead.

The reading activities have been centred on business texts and required students to read for the gist and for details, to understand the author's opinion and then express their own. Listening activities have gained more ground, sometimes accompanied by video materials, which has made the task even more challenging. For both reading and listening activities, there is a multitude of possibilities for the teacher to design tasks in order to check comprehension. GC allows the teacher to create questions, quizzes or share resources. The tasks may be made visible instantaneously or they can be scheduled as assignments with set deadlines. Once submitted, students may go over their answers if the teacher considers it necessary. This means that students can improve their weak points, allowing the teacher to keep track of the students who lag behind and to intervene spot-on whenever necessary with supplementary explanations or extra resources.

For speaking practice, hot issues have been usually chosen to keep students' interest alive. For example, a topic which is always engaging is crypto currency. Students can work in small groups to debate the topic, trying to construct their argumentation in a logical manner, using a wide range of BE vocabulary and linking expressions acquired through the writing tasks. Students can also make the debate more interesting by using whatever online resources they may consider helpful to illustrate their point. Speaking activities can be part of assignments, encouraging collaboration beyond the class.

GC has helped restoring the writing activities to the important place they once held in the more traditional approaches to language education. Writing is usually done as a follow-up, post-task activity, part of the assignment, so that the teacher may have time to check the papers. In face-to-face classes, only some pieces of writing got to be checked by the teacher. As a Learning Management System, GC enables teachers to track learning. Students' progress and their grades are visible on their personal pages. Perfecting writing skills (which includes, among other things, the usage of the formal register and an adequate business vocabulary) is very important in particular because some students decide to apply for English-medium graduate and post-graduate degrees (Master's Degrees, PhDs and even MBAs) where excellent writing skills are mandatory. Moreover, many students will work in multinational companies where English is used on a daily basis.

Computer-based assessment has always been regarded with scepticism by researchers. Douglas (2000), for example, underlined that language testing should not be driven by technology, but rather technology should be put in the service of language testing (p. 275). Prior to March 2020, all assessments were classroom-based, either as oral examinations or paper-based end-of-semester exams. GC has eased the

teacher's job to evaluate students because a clear measurement of their progress throughout the semester sets the ground for a more accurate and valid assessment. The reliability of scores is extremely important and the European Union has urged language educators to improve the relevance and comparability of testing and assessment (European Commission, n.d.).

Presentations and electronic portfolios (also called e-portfolios, e-folios, digital portfolios or web folios) have been the most used methods of assessment. An e-portfolio is "a digitized collection of artifacts including demonstrations, resources, and accomplishments that represent an individual, group or institutions." (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2015). Differently from traditional portfolios, electronic portfolios may include video, graphics, short clips, etc. This form of assessment mainly checks the productive skills (speaking and writing) while the receptive skills (listening and reading) have been more subject to continuous evaluation throughout the semester.

The same task-based approach has been used for the e-portfolios. First-year students had to choose a successful business enterprise in their home town and describe it in economic terms (they had to use the business vocabulary acquired during the semester). Some students even took pictures of the company they discussed (and some even of their town) and included them in their presentation which added a flavour of authenticity to the whole endeavour. Second-year students had to compile a portfolio on how businesses have managed to survive during the pandemic. The task was to pick up a particular industry and, using various type of data – including tables, graphics, etc.—to dwell on its state during the last two years (a "before and after" comparison). The students had to briefly present their papers using Power Points slides. The Master-degree students worked in pairs to create their own business plan—the task was to set up their own company and describe the major problems they may encounter and how they could overcome them. Again, visual aids were used when presenting.

Several conclusions have been drawn: there has been a clear improvement in students' writing skills from the first-year students to those enrolled in the Master's degree; e-portfolios have favoured reflective learning (students become more aware of the language they use and more critical about the ideas they promote and the sources they use); there has been an increased interaction among students and the teacher; a faster and spot-on feedback from the teacher's part has been provided.

4. Conclusions

Google Classroom continues to develop, with new features and facilities being added. Among them, tracking students' engagement, improving the access to GC from a mobile device (including the possibility to grade students' papers from a mobile phone) and the possibility to detect potential plagiarism will ease even further the teacher's job. Although once the pandemic is over and the classes will more likely return to the traditional face-to-face format, technology will still be around as it has proven its benefits: personalised learning environments, interactivity, special features, accessibility from any device, anytime, anywhere. As the author of this article has noted elsewhere, there is, however, the feeling that teachers might become redundant one day, their place taken by the very computers that prove to be so helpful nowadays (Mihăeș, 2021). A more optimistic (and realistic) scenario is that various forms of blended learning will replace the traditional learning once the pandemic is over.

Just like with CALL and MALL, technology is an enabler but without a skilful hand that manoeuvres it, it remains just a tool. Therefore, to quote the conclusion reached by Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Digital Technology report on educational technology (2016) "introducing technology on its own is

unlikely to have an impact; it must be accompanied by a change in pedagogy to improve learning.” Pedagogy will have to post-factum provide more solid theoretical frameworks for remote language teaching, but one thing is by now sure: the computer is here to stay.

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