



## Hands On: An Initiative for the Development of ESP Teaching and Learning

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### Abstract

*The increasingly competitive nature of the economy and the ever-changing technologies have had a remarkable impact on education.*

*Consequently ESP (English for Specific Purposes) has become one of the prominent areas of EFL. Nowadays the knowledge of English related to specific disciplines is a must in most working sectors.*

*So far there are certain gaps in ESP teaching and learning. Most textbooks are out-of-date, uninteresting and unrelated to the students' specialisations and to the requirements of the world of work. Teachers of English are given little support in teaching technical subjects they frequently know little about.*

*This has often resulted in low students' motivation and learning.*

*In order to address these issues an innovative initiative called 'Hands On' has been carried out in the Leonardo Da Vinci Institute since the year 2006.*

*The initiative - promoted by Paola Gherardelli, expert in ESP and textbook writer - has been carried out with the headmaster's approval and in cooperation with many of the Institute's teachers of English and of specific subjects.*

*This initiative is based on practical, learner-centred activities (such as projects, presentations etc.) strictly related to their specific disciplines. These activities allow the students to learn by doing, work in team and express their potential while using the English language.*

*I will describe the objectives of the initiative, the various activities done focusing on how new technologies and the Internet have been successfully integrated with the initiative's practical approach.*

*I will also talk about the positive impact of this approach on the students and teachers and about the results achieved in terms of motivation and learning.*

*This work is meant to share the initiative's approach and results, demonstrate the potential of new technologies and the Internet in ESP, involve other teachers and experts and eventually create an online community.*

### 1.0 Introduction

Nowadays English has become the accepted international language of technology and commerce. The need to develop teaching and learning of English in vocational schools is therefore crucial.



However ESP teaching and learning poses a series of problems such as scarcity of effective textbooks and low students' motivation.

How can new technologies support the teaching and learning of English for Specific Purposes? Is it possible to integrate the use of new technologies into a practical approach? Can new technologies be used also when there are some limitations in using them?

### **1.1. Objectives**

This paper is intended to:

- present Hands on, an innovative practical approach to the teaching and learning of ESP
- show how new technologies can be integrated into this approach
- describe activities that are transferable across different vocations and are suitable for teachers and trainers
- demonstrate the effectiveness of this blended approach both on teachers and students

## **2.0. Hands On**

Started at the Institute Leonardo da Vinci in 2006, “Hands on” is meant to promote an innovative, practical language learning approach in vocational schools. This project aims at enhancing language learning and improving students' performance and motivation through authentic English practice.

### **2.1. Reasons for the project**

The initiative started to address a series of issues related to the teaching and learning of ESP.

One of the most relevant problems in vocational schools is low student motivation.

Many students attend school just because they are obliged to by their families and don't like studying. Therefore, the possibility to provide them with effective activities, materials and, most of all, a link with the world of work is vital.

Along with that, textbooks are frequently out-of-date and do not match the needs of teachers and students.

Little support is provided to teachers of English in approaching technical subjects.

And, last but not least, access to new technologies poses a good number of problems. These include: computers out-of-date, scarce technical support, internet connection problems.

### **2.2. Activities**

The project has carried out a great number of activities such as lessons based on materials designed in co-operation with teachers and experts, projects related to the various specialisations, school exchanges, meetings and workshops. An extensive use of ICT has been made in various contexts.

### **2.3. Objectives**

The main objectives of the initiative include:

- promote language learning through practical activities
- strengthen the link between the school and the world of work
- stimulate learners' participation and team work
- integrate a practical approach into the use of new technologies
- familiarise teachers of English with new technologies
- provide methods and materials which match the needs of teachers and students



- create opportunities to exchange ideas and experiences among teachers, experts and materials writers.

All the experiences, activities and results here related have been achieved thanks to the collaboration and mutual consultation with several teachers of the Institute Leonardo da Vinci.

### **3. Method**

In order to illustrate the method used I will present here a few experiences. New technologies have been used to different degrees and in different situations.

The activities have taken place with the help and in the constant presence of the teachers of English participating in the project. In many cases also teachers of specific subjects have participated in the activities.

1. The first one (The Tools you need) shows how the Internet can support teachers of vocational schools in finding authentic materials. This activity has been carried out first in a computer room using Internet access and then in the classroom with some materials downloaded from the Internet.
2. The second (Safety in the Workshop) is an activity based on materials downloaded from the Internet. This activity has been carried out in the classroom and in the laboratory.
3. The third one (A Final Presentation) is an example of how teachers and students can successfully create their own materials. This activity has been carried out in a room with a computer and a screen.

#### **3.1 The Tools you need**

This activity was carried out with a fifth year students specialising in mechanics in 2009.

The tools they use in the workshop are one of the main topics of their curriculum. The objectives of this activity included teaching the names of some of the tools they use in the workshop, increase motivation, make them carry out a practical task and stimulate team work.

In the face to face lesson we introduced the topic and made them do a very simple matching exercise related to the names of the various tools.

In the computer room we browsed some commercial websites that specialise in tools and equipment and had a look at their brochures and price-lists.

Then we divided the class into groups and handed them some price-lists we had downloaded from the Internet.

Each group had to choose the tools for their toolbox adhering to a fixed budget.

At the end of the lesson each group had to present to the rest of the class the tools they had chosen, the total cost and give reasons for their choices.

The results of this experience were very satisfactory for several reasons. The students enjoyed this activity and made great efforts to speak in front of their classmates. Even the less motivated participated actively.

#### **3.2 Safety in the Workshop**

Safety is a primary issue for all students and in particular for those who attend vocational schools.

In places such as chemistry laboratories and machine tool workshops safety is a primary issue.



For this reason a couple of years ago we decided to carry out a project related to safety in the chemistry lab with a grade four of students specialising in chemistry.

The objectives of this activity included:

1. - teaching terms and verbs related to safety
2. - raise awareness about safety at school
3. - create cross-curriculum connections

During the warm-up session we asked the students about the potential hazards in a chemistry lab and the protective clothing they have to wear (lab coat, protective glasses, etc.)

Then we downloaded from the Internet a safety check-list and handed a copy to each student . We read it together and we explained the terms and verbs they did not understand.

In pairs they played the role of the supervisors and did a survey of the laboratory on the basis of what required by the check-list. The students were actively engaged in this activity. They were particularly satisfied when they found something that did not comply with the regulations!

After collecting all the check-lists we summarised them into a short report. The report was then presented orally to the safety personnel of the school. They appreciated the students' work and asked for a written copy of the report.

In this way the students were given the opportunity to play an active role in the management of the school. They enjoyed playing the role of supervisors and doing an activity outside the classroom.

### **3.3 A Final Presentation**

Last year we decided to focus the initiative's activities on the school environment. With a four year grade students specialising in electrotechnology and automation we decided to carry out a project related to the renovation of the electrical system of a workshop.

The students followed all the basic steps required by a project ( doing survey, taking measurements, identifying problems, making a sketch and giving a quote).

The students worked hard and the results were very satisfactory. Therefore we decided to show their projects to the headmaster of the school.

We decided to create a PowerPoint presentation with a short video.

First we wrote the script of an interview for the video.

Then we divided the class into groups. Each group had to carry out a specific task: take pictures, make the video, assemble the material into a PowerPoint presentation.

When the presentation was ready we reviewed it together and made the necessary changes.

We let the students decide who would present the project and make comments to the presentation. Finally we rehearsed it several times.

On the day appointed for the presentation in front of the headmaster, the students made us feel very proud of them. The headmaster congratulated them on the work done and asked to have a copy of their projects.

This experience required a lot of work but we were very satisfied with the results. Indeed the students had completed a task, developed oral skills, and - most of all - increased their self-esteem.



These are just a few of the many activities carried out by Hands on. As some teachers involved in the initiative are also participating in the Lets Go Project some experiences can be found in the Lets Portal.

#### **4. Results**

The main results of this initiative include:

1. Increased use of new technologies by teachers of English: creation PowerPoint presentations, use of materials downloaded from the Net, use of interactive activities and online courses.
2. Improvement in language learning, oral skills in particular. The tests handed before and after the activities testify a remarkable improvement in language learning.
3. Increased students' participation. Questionnaires issued revealed the students' satisfaction and wish to repeat similar experiences in the future.
4. Development of links among teachers of English and those of specific subjects.
5. Creation of electronic materials that can be re-used in various contexts.

All the materials can be requested contacting the author.

#### **5. Conclusions**

New technologies joined with a practical approach proved to be a very successful blend.

The results achieved by the initiative have affected both teachers and students.

Teachers of English are frequently wary about new technologies for several reasons.

During the various activities most teachers have understood that new technologies can be used in a huge variety of ways.

They have become more familiar with ICT and have started to use new technologies on a regular basis even without any support.

The teachers involved in the project have also fully understood the potential of the Internet as a means for increasing motivation, and providing authentic materials both for classroom activities and extra materials.

The overall students' response to the initiative was very positive.

They participated actively and with enthusiasm to activities that involved the use of new technologies. It has proved to be an opportunity to demonstrate their skills in a field their are very familiar with.

In particular the students enjoyed working in a team and doing activities outside the classroom.

The outcome in terms of learning, motivation and self-esteem has been remarkable..

In particular these activities have contributed to develop oral skills - which is a very remarkable result in vocational schools.

On some occasions reports of the activities carried out in the classroom have been presented by the students at the final exam. The work done has been much appreciated by the teachers of the various commissions.

The main drawback is that some activities require a long preparation time.

However this problem has been solved by providing the teachers with some tailored materials and support.



This initiative demonstrated that the presence of experts able to support teachers of English is very relevant.

There are lots of teachers of English who wish to carry out innovative projects but are restrained by several factors such as lack of time and limited computer skills.

I would like to underline that all the activities are transferable across different vocations and are suitable for teachers and trainers.

Many further developments for this project could be foreseen, such as the creation of a learning community and a good practice guide.

In a broader perspective, this project could be then be considered as a first step in providing practical guidance for teachers involved in ESP

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