

## E-teaching – a Wild Card for Vocational Curricula

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### **Abstract**

*The paper investigates a) the characteristics of language courses for vocational curricula and whether they meet the real needs of people working in companies or institutions operating in international contexts, b) the reasons why ICT is the most effective tool to teach languages for special purposes.*

*People who speak a foreign language at work can be divided into three categories: low level employees, high level employees/managers and people working in a foreign country. As far as the contents and register of their pieces of writing or speech are involved, belonging to one category or another makes a remarkable difference.*

*The managers who travel in foreign countries and have high level contacts are not our target learners, as they obviously represent a minority, who left school in the distant past, and quite often do not need any course at all. For the same reasons, as school teachers, we are not interested in the people who work in a foreign country and will have the best opportunities to learn their second language. Yet, as the paper will show, almost all courses follow a long established tradition, are written with these two categories in mind and do not focus the real needs of people facing the problems of their first days at work.*

*The paper will analyse the linguistic competences needed by the greatest majority of our students, who after graduation have to find a job and start working in their own country. They will use their competences only with foreigners, not to speak to people who work in their very office or for companies located in their own country.*

*That makes a great difference in the contents of the materials to be used. On the one hand certain aspects of every day communication should be better and more deeply developed than basic, general courses usually do, on the other, a more specialized language is needed. Materials and documents obtainable from local companies or professional environments offer language and knowledge in specific areas, at a level unlike to be reached by courses prepared for a national, sometimes even international, audience.*

*In addition, lots of materials can be found in the Internet which offers a large range of flexible, updated information ready to be integrated with the materials from local companies and institutions.*

*Both in the use of the Internet and in the contacts with business people or professionals students will have an active role in building their own micro-syllabuses, which will be the most powerful motivator for learning.*

*Teachers will use their ICT competences to create flashcards, units or modules out of the materials that have been chosen together with their students.*

E-teaching - not e-learning, as the paper is about the problems of teachers who are expected to run face to face courses with groups of students of upper secondary schools to prepare them to use a second language in a professional context. Teachers generally ignore the linguistic needs of such contexts as well as the habits and the roles of the people involved. They have spent all their lives at

school, first as students then as teachers – a context not so similar to the world of work. As a rule they choose a textbook and rely on it to develop an abridged syllabus for their students as the time devoted to the language for special purposes tends to be rather short. Pity the books are often written by teachers who are not much better informed...

A wild card is a playing card whose value can vary as determined by its holder. It has no fixed value. E-teaching, as a wild card in a game may help achieve results which are unobtainable with the other cards the fortune has given you. It is flexible in the integration with other materials and can be used at appropriate times, according to the learning situation. In the end it takes the value a teacher chooses to give it. It may also represent a break from routine with unexpected results.

Instruments to learn a second language for special purposes include textbooks, self study books or e-learning courses for many different sectors, as far as a large market of potential students has attracted the interest of publishers and authors. Many areas are still uncovered as they cannot represent a commercial success. Yet does the available literature offer the best instruments to achieve the competences the future jobs will require?

To answer the question we should have in mind who are the people who speak a foreign language at work and in which contexts. They can be roughly divided into three categories: high level employees/managers, people working in a foreign country, and low level employees working in their own country. As far as the contents and register of their pieces of writing or speech are involved, belonging to one group or another makes a remarkable difference.

The managers who have high level contacts in foreign countries or at home are not our target learners, as they obviously represent a minority, who left school in the distant past, and quite often do not need any course at all and develop their linguistic competences one day after the other, just inside their working environments.

For similar reasons, as school teachers, we are not interested in the people who work, or are willing to work in a foreign country. They represent a minority group, generally well determined and able of self study and, once abroad, they will soon have the best opportunities to learn their second language.

The two groups are not statistically relevant and they do not represent the greatest majority of our students, who after graduation have to find a job and start working in their own country. Yet almost all courses follow a long established tradition and are written with a foreign, sometimes international context in mind. That is evident if we consider the space devoted to internal communication between colleagues by most textbooks, or e-learning courses, mainly those labelled for "business" or "tourism".

Unfortunately it is the same approach of the Examination Papers of Cambridge BEC [1], internationally recognized as the best known and important qualification in business English. We are far from underestimating the value of this kind of literature, which can guide the planning of precious syllabuses for University students who want to study either in English speaking countries, or in international courses as well as for brilliant young people willing to work abroad or in an important international company. What about our typical students? In the Cambridge tests to check all the four skills, great relevance is given to internal communication.

Every teacher, teaching a language for "business" or "tourism", is familiar with "how to write a memo" – Can you imagine Maria and Giuseppe working in Florence or Fritz and Ursula in Berlin writing each other memos in English? Or ask for an object in the room, or explain a graph to their boss in a language different from their own? They will use their second language competences only with foreigners, not to speak to people who work in their very office or for companies located in their own country. So the time spent in learning how to write a memo could be better used for other topics,

unless you use it for a lesson on differences in "hand writing" which could be useful to write or understand notes written on a reply fax.

If we examine textbooks which are not written for "business" or "tourism" instead of memos, we will probably find descriptions and explanations of what students already learn in their own language, while studying the other subjects of their specific curriculum. Most of this kind of textbooks use outdated articles from reviews, magazines or specialized literature, adding some letters of enquiry and an example of an application for a job, reminiscent of books for "business" but, once again, of little use for somebody looking for a job in his/her own country.

I will focus on textbooks of language for "business" and "tourism" not only because they represent the majority of the courses of second language for special purposes, but mainly because they are the most clear example of a syllabus which has lost sight of the target. Our target should be the language needed by the majority of our students at the very beginning of their future jobs or even just to get it. First of all, let us leave to our colleagues the study of any related theoretical knowledge, which in the end is their own field. Then let us make a list of the activities which our just graduated youngsters will most probably do in their mother tongue:

- Writing a CV and give information about themselves
- Every kind of internal communication (memos, notices, finding object in a room, explaining graphs...)
- Organizing deliveries
- Organizing travels
- Contacting insurance companies

What is being left for the second language?

- Socializing with customers, suppliers and agents
- Describing products or services
- Carrying out orders or services
- Dealing with minor complaints

Socializing in work environments includes all the four skills and has a major and most demanding role whenever contacts with foreign customers or suppliers are to be fruitfully kept. Both in oral and written communication all the registers are used from formal to neutral and even informal, the last one much more frequently than imagined. The amount of written and oral exercises we find in our textbooks is far from being helpful, either they are written for general training or special purposes. In addition it should not be undervalued what Angela Larrea Espinar so clearly wrote in the abstract of her paper for the present conference [2] . "Speakers of different languages see the world differently since cultural values are usually transferred to the communication process. Then doing business in a global market depends on the ability to successfully communicate in an intercultural context ... [and]...behave appropriately in different cultural settings"

Socializing takes place all the time in business correspondence as well as in face to face meetings in fairs or on visits at customers' or suppliers' premises. A formal register will be used in the first contacts, shifting little by little towards an informal one if the business relationship develops and going back to formal register whenever an important complaint or problem arises. The main skill required is oral understanding, a prerequisite for communication. In speaking, foreign accents, lack of fluency, grammar mistakes are acceptable, unless they create misunderstanding or embarrassment, while no communication can take place if we do not understand what we are told. It is evident that the understanding exercises provided by courses are not enough in quantity and quality. The Internet offers plentiful listening materials, from elementary exercises to live broadcast with different accents. To make the most obvious example, frequent training is needed to understand numbers and the spellings of names or e-mail addresses, activities never so simple in real situations, as well as to



understand broadcasts dealing with the main events of the day in the international context, which is often a favourite topic of conversation.

Though a written confirmation for any arrangement is generally required, it is usually preceded by a phone call or some chatting, which include good communication skills even if we deal with the practical problems connected with a despatch, a payment or the time of arrival at the airport.

In case of visits and participation in fairs socializing has a much broader meaning. It will require a basic knowledge of customs and habits of your foreign customers or suppliers, and once it is clear which are the countries involved, a research on the Internet will provide our students with useful information. At the same time they will be practicing the target language. Another aspect to be emphasized is the awareness of our own customs and habits. Stereotypes should be known, at least to be avoided. Even though a style of life may be appreciated, reading articles on one's own country in foreign magazines or newspaper will help students have a much clearer view of the country's problems and create interest in different behaviours – the basis for an interesting, fruitful exchange of ideas.

Speaking skills should be related to the main topics of conversation which are:

- the events of the day at international level together with those of the country where the meeting, visit or fair takes place
- leisure activities
- sports
- food.

Our students should become familiar with such sites as <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world> continually updated and in a rather simple language. The foreign versions of "What's on" in town, from monuments to concerts offer materials which can be developed, while for the two favourites, sports and food, the creation of e-materials is most appropriate. Even the simplest PPT presentation is more attractive than a photocopy, and it can be easily saved on a USB drive and most of all it may involve students in the preparation of the learning unit starting from a football match or a menu including how a dish is prepared.

"Socializing" should not be taught as separate from general training and to develop this most important aspect ICT can be our wild card. In the Internet we can find additional, updated materials, which can be used as such, or can help us create e-materials together with documents from the world of work. Surely some competence in ICT is necessary and the portal of the LeTS Go project can be quite helpful. [3]

Describing products or services. The first step is to have a clear picture of the fields of business or work our students will experience in their probable, future job. It will most probably be located in the same area of their schools. Products and services are often typical of one area of the country and the young employee will hardly take an advantage of the examples given in courses written for a national, sometimes even international community of learners. This is an intrinsic, insurmountable limit of most courses. In-training placements in companies or institutions, as they are usually organized by vocational schools, may be of great help. Provided you delete sensitive data and inappropriate information, companies are generally willing to help teachers and students and give them interesting documents. Another useful source of information is the foreign version of the local companies' sites, obviously technically perfect but sometimes incorrect from a linguistic point of view. To correct them can be a nice exercise for your students. Or we can use the sites of foreign companies or magazines. For example the site of <http://www.decanter.com> is very interesting if you teach in an area which produces wine.



Students can be involved in the activity of selecting and elaborating the materials to create learning units on specific subjects. An effective example of how to use new technologies and the Internet in this area is the initiative promoted by Paola Gherardelli. [4] whose paper for the present conference is quite interesting.

Carrying out order or services, as well as dealing with minor complaints presents the same problems of the previous point, adding those created by each country's different business customs and habits. The acquisition of first-hand materials, interviews with companies' managers and the experiences from our students' in-training placements will help plan the syllabus and cooperate in the creation of e-materials.

The involvement of students arouses weaker learners' interest and can be of valuable technical help for those of us who are far from being familiar with the new technologies. We should never forget that the computer, as an instrument, is a most powerful motivator for today's students, as most of us have experienced.

Last but not least working with a computer is in line with the system of thinking typical of digital natives – but this will make a future paper.

## References

- [1] *Preliminary 4, Examination papers from University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations: English for Speakers of Other languages*, Cambridge University Press, 2009
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- [3] <http://www.leonardo-lets.net> Training Package Course 3 and Tools Section for those who already have a general competence. Downloadable from the portal see also G:D'Angelo *From Didactics to E-Didactics*, Liguori Editore, Napoli, 2007
- [4] Paola Gherardelli *Hands On - An Initiative for the Development of the ESP Teaching and Learning*, International Conference" ICT for Language Learning, Florence 2010 International Conference" ICT for Language Learning, Florence 2010