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A Case Study of the Use of ICT in Face-To-Face, Third-Level English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Courses †

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Abstract: The paper looks at an experience of use of ICT in a face-to-face ESP required course in the curriculum of the BA in Commerce and Marketing currently taught at the University of Oviedo, Spain. The main aims were (1) to update the contents and methods of the course so that they allowed for significant, collaborative and autonomous learning; (2) to substantially reduce the time devoted to preparing, grading and reviewing tests, as well as handling student complaints, and (3) to ensure uniformity of content and assessment across sections. The results show that aims (1) and (3) were fully met. As regards aim (2), even though ICT did reduce the time spent reviewing tests and handling complaints, the preparation of computer-assisted, on-site exams took longer than expected, mainly because strict security measures had to be implemented to prevent cheating and the permission to use the computer labs at the Faculty involved a considerable amount of paperwork. Whereas the literature on the use of ICT in education mainly focuses on student motivation and engagement, the experience bears out that ICT can be effectively used to combat student unhappiness by ensuring uniformity of content and assessment in multi-section courses. It also shows that many digital native students do not have strong digital skills.

Keywords: ICT; ESP; assessment; multi-section courses; third-level education

1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICT) must be used in the classroom to engage and motivate students and make their learning significant, autonomous and collaborative. Like a mantra, this idea is repeated in the literature over and over and over again, without ever considering that educational innovation is out of the question when a teacher has a very cramped schedule and/or most of their working hours are taken up by course administration and coordination duties. If educational innovation just means extra, unpaid work for the teacher, it is very unlikely to thrive.

Although the literature remains mainly focused on how ICT can help the student, the truth is that they can also help the teacher. For instance, among the very few who go against the general trend is Simons, who points out that virtual learning environments (VLEs) "pueden servir en la enseñanza superior o en el marco de enseñanza a distancia, teniendo como objetivos sobre todo la disminución de la carga de trabajo para el profesor, una administración de los estudiantes más eficaz y una mayor disponibilidad del material de curso (independiente del lugar y tiempo)" [1] (p. 19).

This case study was born out of the necessity to radically improve the management, contents and methods of *English for Commerce I*, a face-to-face, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), one-term required course in the curriculum of the BA in Marketing and Commerce at the University of Oviedo (UniOvi). Every year, between 160 and 180 students enrol in the course, are divided into between 5 and 7 sections, and assigned to 3 or 4 lecturers, who have to administer up to four continuous assessment (CA) tests and one common final exam. All lecturers usually also teach at other UniOvi campuses, which makes coordination extremely difficult.

The year 2015–2016 saw how the authors were first assigned to the course two days before it started. With no time to select or create new content, we had to rely on a syllabus we had not written and teaching materials from the late 1990s. Moreover, the course space at the UniOvi VLE remained severely underused and was just a digital store for PDF versions of the materials. On top of that, a faculty member with a long record of unprofessional behaviour was also asked to join our team, which turned an already difficult course into a true ordeal. Throughout the term, tens of students from all sections but his would complain about the lack of uniformity in content and assessment. Some went even further and, in mid-term or even later, tried to get transferred to the sections he was responsible for, as it was widely rumoured that he was awarding A's to everyone. And about one third of them would excuse absence from every CA test and try to take them later in one of his sections.

All in all, over the academic year 2015–2016, *English for Commerce I* was hardly in line with current foreign language (FL) teaching theories and methods, did very little to encourage significant learning of commercial English and largely failed to comply with the requirements of the Bologna Process regarding uniformity of content and assessment. Moreover, coordination and assessment took much longer than in any other course, mainly due to the enormous amount of time we had to spend reviewing tests and handling student complaints.

The paper examines how the shortcomings above could be eventually overcome through the use of ICT, which we approached with the following in mind: (1) to update the contents and methods of the course so that they allowed for significant, collaborative and autonomous learning of commercial English; (2) to substantially reduce the time devoted to preparing, marking and reviewing tests, as well as handling student complaints; and (3) to greatly improve faculty coordination so that uniformity of content and assessment could be ensured.

2. Theoretical Framework

Since the early 1980s, the theory and practice of FL teaching, especially in higher education, have been largely dominated by three concepts: the communicative approach, ICT, and Language for Specific Purposes (LSP, ESP for English). Canale and Swain's Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing (1980) [2], still highly influential on FL teaching, is learner-centred and promotes the use of authentic over adapted materials in the classroom, as it assumes that "learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning. When learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language" [3]. It is hardly surprising then that ICT are currently regarded as a highly valuable asset in FL learning and teaching, especially when they are based on a communicative approach.

The concept of LSP/ESP began to develop in the 1960s, although it did not really come into wide use until two decades later. According to Hutchinson and Waters, ESP would be "an approach to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners" [4] (p. 21), that is, ESP would take the learner-centredness and significant learning goals of the communicative approach one step further. In practice, these needs usually have to do with developing the language skills necessary to communicate effectively in a specific academic or professional context [5].

The analysis of the learners' needs is regarded in the literature as the most important issue in ESP course design. Much of the literature also argues that LSP/ESP does not have a distinctive methodology, although there is a wide consensus that LSP/ESP courses should include "contenidos gramaticales, discursivos, sociolingüísticos y socioculturales" [6] (p. 923), and "métodos de trabajo que se fundamenten en actividades que frecuentemente desempeñen los profesionales del campo, entre los que destacan la simulación global, los proyectos, las tareas, las presentaciones orales y los estudios de casos" [6] (p. 924). In other words, all activities in an ESP course, assessable and non-assessable, should be geared towards developing the language skills necessary to communicate effectively in a specific academic or professional context and, whenever possible, attempt to simulate workplace or academic communicative situations. Since much of today's professional communication is electronic, it seems clear that ICT must play a key role in LSP/ESP courses.

3. Methodology

Over the summer of 2016, the authors wrote a new course syllabus, selected a recently published commercial English textbook, created slideshows and handouts, uploaded plenty of links to useful online resources and, more importantly, agreed to integrate ICT into the course through the Moodle-based UniOvi VLE and the Microsoft Office 365 Professional package. We also agreed that coursework would be assessed through one common final exam, a role play of a business telephone conversation, a presentation of a company profile, and a joint Use of English and writing test.

In the academic year 2016–2017, the telephone conversation role play was done as an out-of-classroom activity which the students, in pairs or groups of three, had to video record and edit on their smartphones, and upload the resulting file to the UniOvi VLE for double marking. Each student had to give their presentation in front of their assigned lecturer, who was also in charge of audio recording it and uploading the file to the UniOvi VLE for double marking. Prior to delivery, the students had to submit a Power Point document. Finally, the Use of English and writing test was designed as a computer-based test to be taken at one of the computer labs at the faculty. The students were asked to complete different exercises on business English vocabulary, functions and grammar, and write a short professional text. The role play, the presentation and the professional text were all graded on standardised rubrics, available on the lecturers' Office workgroup on the UniOvi intranet. The Use of English test was scored by the Moodle automatic scoring tool and then manually reviewed to ensure accuracy.

The experience was evaluated on two five-point Likert-type scale satisfaction questionnaires, one aimed at the lecturers and the other at the students, which were made available at the end of the term, several informal interviews with the students, and a register of complaints, which each lecturer had to keep throughout the term.

4. Results

The results show that aims (1) and (3) were fully met. The course contents and methods were successfully updated to allow for significant, collaborative and autonomous learning of commercial English, faculty coordination was greatly improved, and uniformity of content and assessment was ensured across sections. As regards aim (2), the use of ICT did reduce significantly the time devoted to reviewing tests and handling complaints, mostly due to a dramatic plunge in student complaints in comparison to the previous year. The computer-based tests, however, took longer to prepare and review than expected, and the decision to have every oral test double marked did increase the grading workload to a great extent.

Although the total number of student complaints received, including grade appeals, was 12, the satisfaction survey had an average global score of 3/5, showing that the students were only moderately happy with the experience, mainly because some of them did not actually care for fair assessment or up-to-date contents and methods. Even though many considered what they had learnt in the course very useful for their professional future and fully agreed that they had been assessed fairly and equally, they were disappointed because all they really wanted was an A, regardless of merit or achievement. What is more, contrary to their expectations, the computer-based tests had

proven to be as rigorous as traditional ones and unfounded or false grade appeals had had no chance of going through. It should be noted, for instance, that only 3 students out of the 144 that took the oral tests disputed their grades and backed down immediately after listening to the recordings.

Rather unexpectedly and worryingly, the experience also showed that many digital native students did not know how to edit, compress and upload digital video, create a basic Power Point presentation or had the slightest idea about file formats and sizes. As a matter of fact, in many cases it was us who had to guide them throughout the whole process because they did not even know how to search for tutorials online.

5. Conclusions

Twenty-first century FL teachers cannot afford to ignore that ICT skills are essential for achieving effective communication, so they have no choice but to integrate these skills into their syllabi if they truly aim to make learning significant for their students. We firmly believe that by integrating audio-visual recording and edition, PowerPoint creation, virtual workgroup, typing and computer-based exams into the CA, we have better served the needs of our students and, therefore, greatly improved the relevance and quality of the course.

The experience also bears out that Office and Moodle are very powerful deterrents against faculty unprofessionalism and student opportunism. Unlike face-to-face collaboration, all electronic activity can be easily, fully and reliably logged and traced and, if need be, used as evidence. As a result, faculty members will think twice before eschewing their course administration obligations and only the students who have solid reasons to believe that they have been unfairly assessed will appeal their grade. In any case, very few students will believe that they have been unfairly or unequally assessed when ICT have been integrated into the assessment process. The benefits of ICT, however, do not end here.

Automatic scoring is often cited as the main benefit of computer-based tests, as it speeds up grading and ensures uniformity of assessment. The Moodle exam module also allows any course lecturer to monitor contributions to test creation, manual revisions of automatically scored questions and manual grading of essay questions, which promotes mutual control and further ensures uniformity. When it comes to oral exams, digital recordings give further assurance of fair assessment because they can be easily shared online and double marked asynchronously on a standardised rubric.

All in all, ICT prove to be effective to combat student unhappiness stemming from the lack of uniformity in content and/or assessment across the sections of a multi-section course. That notwithstanding, the use of ICT has some time-consuming drawbacks. In our case, we had to go through a considerable amount of paperwork to be granted permission to use the faculty computer labs, implement strict security measures to ensure exam reliability, and manually review many automatically scored questions in case there were valid answers that, for whatever reason, the tool had missed.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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