

BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSES ONLINE SUPPORT

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Abstract

The paper deals with the project called Online Study Support for the Subject of Business English within the Fund of Higher Education Development of the Czech Republic. It will be created in the form of a twelve-module course in the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) on the B1 level of the Common European Framework of References for Languages. Moodle is an open source Virtual Learning Environment which is free, developed by a worldwide community and is used for study purposes. It allows the teachers to create online courses and the students to enrol in them. The course is focused on the development of business and economic terminology, on reading comprehension, listening comprehension and the work with up-to-date authentic audio-visual materials. The course comprises the topics such as business and its basic terms, business letters, business organizations, macroeconomics and microeconomics, personnel management, marketing, email, accounting and finance etc.

Single units have the following structure: lead in, key words and definitions, specialist material, various activities such as filling in the gaps, multiple choice, matching, word formation, word order etc. These electronic activities are created in the most famous authoring tool in our field called Hot Potatoes, they can be stored on a central server and accessed from anywhere through the Internet. Online support will be intended for students of all faculties and fields of study at the Czech University of Life Sciences (CULS) in Prague,

including incoming Erasmus students and academic staff as well as the students of other universities.

Key Words

Business English, terminology, online support, LMS Moodle, activities, authentic, audiovisual

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Introduction

Information and Communication(s) Technologies (ICTs) have appeared as a transformative element in language teaching and learning, and have become an integral part of a number of courses of English for specific purposes (ESP) in the last few years. However, technology in language teaching is not considered to be new. Since the 1960s and 1970s tape recorders, videos and language laboratories have been used in classrooms and are still used. In the 1980s, Computer assisted language learning (CALL) emerged (the use of computer technology is referred to as Computer Aided Instruction - (CAI), using computer-assisted materials and it became popular and common in language teaching. Learners reacted to the stimulus given by the computer (behaviorism) and carried out different tasks such as gapfilling, matching and multiple-choice activities with feedback on their performance provided by the computer.

In the 1990s, Technology enhanced language learning (TELL) appeared as a response to the opportunities offered by the Internet and web-based tools (Dudeney, Hockly, 2007). The terms of the Internet, Net, Web are often used interchangeably, though Chinnery (2005) distinguishes between the Internet and the Web. "The Internet is a network of networks connecting computers all over the world, allowing them to share information using a variety of languages or protocols. The Web is a section of the Internet that uses a special format called HyperTextTransfer Protocol to transfer information.". Use of ICT technologies was supported by the Council of Europe in 1989-1996, in the project focused on modern languages teaching "Language Learning for European Citizenship". One of the conclusions stressed that ICT development in recent decades was the strongest factor in the globalisation of modern life. (Hanzlíková, 2001)

The project is being created in the form of a twelve-module course in the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) on the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. A current trend in university teaching is the lowering of the number of contact lessons and a higher emphasis is put on e-learning method of studies. The project is designed in accordance with a long-term intention and key priorities of the CULS development that include the development of indirect teaching forms and methods, electronic teaching aids creation, enhancing the quality and effectiveness of studies and self-studies within the LMS Moodle. It is an open source Virtual Learning Environment which is free, developed by a worldwide community and is used for study purposes. It allows the teachers to create online courses and the students to enrol in them. As Dudeney and Hockly (2007) mention, teachers can combine various resources – pages and links to websites – with interactive activities such as quizzes, questionnaires, forums and chat rooms to create the course. Some electronic activities are created in the most famous authoring tool in our field called Hot Potatoes. An authoring tool is an installable program allowing teachers to create own materials in electronic format and then it can be distributed to students via web pages.

Hot Potatoes is Windows or Mac program that creates a variety of activities (multiple choice, short answer, jumbled sentence, crossword, matching, gap-fill) and teachers can freely download it for educational purposes. It also allows including audio files in MP3 format and exercises can be stored on a central server. It means that they can be accessed from anywhere through the Internet. (Dudeney, Hockly, 2007) The results of the project will be freely available in LMS Moodle on the university web pages for a period of at least two years after the year of commencing the solution of the project.

The main objective of the project is creating the complex online support for the Business English course intended for students of all fields of studies at the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, particularly for the students of the Faculty of Economics and Management and for the Students of the Technical Faculty majoring in Trade and Business field of study. It is designed for at least intermediate students who mastered general grammatical principles and basic vocabulary in their previous studies. Online study material will support an interactive form of the teaching by means of multimedia application on the condition of the increasing of specialist demands for studies and of course the quality of studies. It concerns the usage of information and communication technologies for more effective access to education for a bigger number of learners at the qualitatively higher level.

One of the basic prerequisites of this type of studies is the quality of study materials. They will substitute, if the need be, immediate contact of teachers with full time students as well as with distance students.

Material and Methods

At present, Business English is taught in the form of contact teaching (once in a week for 90 minutes) combined with the use of a textbook and additional audio-visual materials. The time that is available for the lessons does not enable to use the potential of authentic materials and current events in the field of studies. This can be effectively offset by the online study support which will also strengthen the motivation of the students and support them as autonomous learners. Moreover, the students of distance studies, which have a substantial support within university studies, have very limited opportunities to consult with the teacher owing to their jobs, time and distance

limitations. This project and computer technology will enable them to control solved assignments and a feedback.

The way of solution follows from the following schedule:

1st phase: The gathering of material and its analysis from the methodological point of view as far as single phases of lessons of Business English are concerned and with regards to using knowledge in business and management spheres, in negotiations with foreign partners, in the sphere of research etc. The complete gathering of material includes specialist topics that are encompassed into online study support.

2nd phase: The processing and the arrangement of specialist texts with exercises, listening, videos, picture materials and independent tasks so that they would correspond with the requirements stipulated for self-studies within e-learning teaching.

3rd phase: Teaching material will be evaluated together with foreign colleagues from partner University of Plymouth and Slovak agricultural university in Nitra and then will be placed on web pages of the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague within LMS Moodle.

Results

The course is focused on the development of business and economic terminology, on reading comprehension, listening comprehension and the work with up-to-date authentic audio-visual materials. Online study support for Business English is in the form of a 12-module course in the learning management system (LMS) Moodle with the following topics:

- Business and its basic terms
- Business letter: layout, content, style
- Business Organizations

- Company profile
- Macroeconomics, microeconomics
- Enquiries, replies, orders
- Personnel management
- Curriculum vitae, letter of application, job contract
- Marketing
- Email
- Accounting and finance
- Invoicing, quotation, payment

Module structure

Single thematic units are of the following structure with respect to the principles of e-learning teaching:

- Lead-in
- Key words and definitions
- Specialist material – reading/audio-visual
- Various activities
- Resources

The course will be focused primarily on:

- development of specialist vocabulary
- reading comprehension
- listening comprehension
- work with authentic and up-to-date audio-visual language materials (web pages and presentation of firms, products, services, business chambers, specialist journals).

The content of the course

The content of the course will be the following:

- authentic materials concerning the topic** (a follow-up to the contact lesson and the work with a textbook)

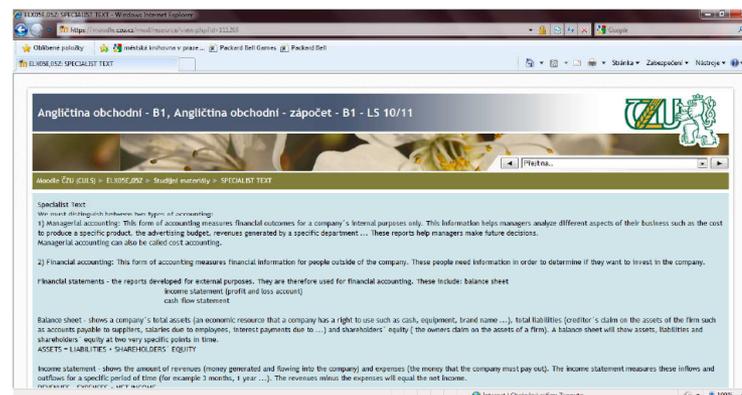


Figure 1: A page from the Moodle Business English course showing a specialist test intended for reading comprehension practice

- autocorrective exercises** such as filling in the gaps, multiple choice, true/false, word formation, matching, synonyms/antonyms etc.

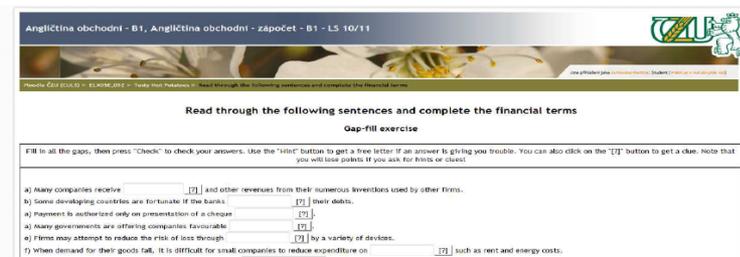


Fig. 2: A page from the Moodle Business English course showing a fill-in gap exercise intended for students' vocabulary practice

- c) in some modules on-line handing in of **written assignments** (translations, letters)
- d) **other additional activities**

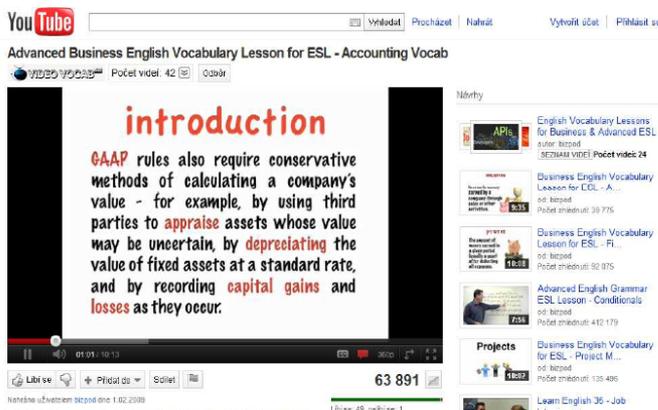


Fig. 3: A page from the Moodle Business English course showing a link with a listening comprehension exercise on the Internet

e) test (it can be for training purposes with limited or unlimited number of possibilities or it can be a credit test with just one try and a time limit)



Fig. 4: A page from the Moodle Business English course showing a multiple choice test which can be used either for revision of the topic or as an assessment device

Discussion

The authors of the project are not economists, they are language teachers. Just the same, the course does not focus on the issues of business and economics as such but on the English language used in business. It should provide the students with a useful guide or a tool how to communicate about business in English. Therefore, the development of the four above mentioned skills will be of major importance. The development of grammatical knowledge was not in the first plan of the course, as the students are already supposed to have a sufficient command of English grammar appropriate for B1 level within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The development of vocabulary that can be applied in business and economics is of primary importance. By learning and practising specialist vocabulary the students more or less receive a guide, or a key to performing other activities like speaking, reading, writing and last but not least, listening. As this is of course an on-line course which serves as a teaching/learning support, the development of a speaking skill will be left to a regular class where a face-to-face student/teacher interaction is possible. On the contrary, the on-line support should emphasise the development and practice of those skills that are “neglected” in face-to-face teaching/learning in favour of developing speaking skills. And vice versa, the use of the online course should give conversation in class more room and thus by engaging the class in conversation it enhances their speaking skill.

Lexical versus grammatical and phonological competence

Learning the language of science is a major part of science education. Every science lesson is in fact a language lesson. Science education often involves dealing with familiar words and giving them new meaning in new contexts. And equally, many of the words from our daily lives have been derived from science (Wellington, Osborne, 2001). Every single word is unique in its etymology, meaning and behaviour, including its collocations (Stubbs, 1986). Furthermore, any individual speaker’s vocabulary is unique. It is the network of personal connections which seemingly do not concern the linguistic competence at all. In this respect, grammatical and phonological competence is essentially different from lexical competence. As Stubbs (1986) further claims, unlike the two former competences,

the lexical competence never really achieves its completeness, not even for a native speaker.

Our vocabulary, be it native or foreign, may keep growing throughout our whole life. New meanings may be acquired for old words; new relations between words can be formed. Correspondingly, when we think of language, we almost inevitably think of words – vocabulary. And when we speak about language development, we tend to speak about the enlargement of our vocabulary. The notion of extending our vocabulary derives from our intuition that some words are simpler, more basic or more important than others (Perera, 1980). As Stubbs (1986) claims, in some form the idea of basic vocabulary must underline all vocabulary teaching. It certainly underlines vocabulary lists of various kinds including teaching English as a foreign language or English for specific purposes (ESP).

The stock of words of a language creates its vocabulary or lexicon. The lexicon of a language encapsulates the perceptions and experiences of a language community and thus its culture. It is structured in very complex ways (Quirk, Stein, 1993). The extent and depth of command of the particular words that we use vary according to our age, education and social and professional surroundings. There is a difference between the so-called active and passive vocabulary. The active vocabulary includes words that a person actually uses, whereas the passive vocabulary includes the words the person understands or would understand, however, does not use them actively in speech. In reality, the command of words which we think we actually „have“ either actively or passively are mixed. There are words in our lexicon that we know very well and words that we have no idea what they mean and there will be many layers in

between. The process of learning new senses of words is never complete.

Quirk and Stein (1993, p. 141,142) distinguish three types of vocabulary in which we operate. All the necessities of our every-day life are covered in the core vocabulary which is actually much bigger than the other two types. The second type is what might be referred to as the private vocabulary which is shared only with family and close friends and which came into being only through personal experience of the members of the group. Last but not least, there is the specialized vocabulary shared with groups that pursue special interests. Especially in our adult life, as Quirk and Stein (1993, p.144) further argue, we are too busy to give much thought to our command of the core vocabulary. On the contrary, we are far more preoccupied with learning the specialized vocabularies that we need for our profession. That is why the study of the lexicon has a crucial role in the teaching and learning both mother tongue and foreign languages.

An important part of the speaker's language competence is the ability to recognize that some words are ordinary while others are rare, exotic, specialist, technical and so on. The introduction to The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) presents the following concept of vocabulary. The vocabulary of English is not a fixed quantity with definite limits. It is rather a nebulous mass with its clear and unmistakable nucleus which spreads to all sides (OED, 1989) Thus in the middle we find common vocabulary which is enriched by colloquial, literary vocabulary and slang. Distancing from the core common vocabulary, we will find foreign, dialectal, technical and scientific vocabulary.

Vocabulary enlargement and reading comprehension

In recent years, it has been argued whether to teach specialist vocabulary or not. The study of vocabulary has been given a minor focus in classrooms. This was partially due to the use of modern communicative approaches to foreign language teaching (Bramki, Williams, 2003). For instance, Robinson (1980) says that textbooks do not need to concentrate on specialist vocabulary as the students will absorb it from the main course studies. However, the issue is not whether to teach specialist vocabulary or not, but what strategies to apply to its teaching and learning. In their article, Bramki and Williams (2003) argue that when teaching vocabulary we must consider the difference between development and recognition.

Vocabulary development refers to the teacher who deliberately and systematically expands the students' vocabulary by introducing word lists, dictionary exercises, functional grouping and the like. It is probably this deliberate, systematic expansion of specialist vocabulary that is regarded as being outside of the province of the teacher. In contrast, vocabulary recognition relates to the strategies that an efficient student/reader employs while reading a text. This way the reader works out the meaning of unfamiliar words that he encounters within the text. However, it is up to the teacher to help the student/reader to acquire effective strategies which will enable the student/reader to understand the unfamiliar words or contexts. Those **strategies** are common to both specialist and non-specialist vocabulary. According to Bramki and Williams (2003), these strategies include guessing from context, cognate recognition and back-tracking a nominal compound in order to find functional inter-relationships of its constituents.

Vocabulary recognition is in fact lexical familiarization. In their article, Bramki and Williams (2003) present examples of different categories of lexical familiarization. **Exemplification** provides the reader with an instance or instances of what the newly introduced term refers to. For instance *durable consumer goods* will be exemplified by the list of the following: books, furniture, TV sets, and domestic electric appliances. **Explanation** will provide the reader with a sequence of words equivalent or opposed in meaning to the newly-introduced term. For instance, saving will be explained as the act of foregoing consumption. They further mention **definition** and **stipulation** which is a kind of definition indicating that the term being defined has its particular meaning only in a given situation and that it will not have the same meaning in different situations. Most dictionary or thesaurus entries may be regarded as definitions or stipulations. Finally, synonymy provides the reader with a more familiar lexical item with almost the same meaning. Thus *laissez-faire* will be referred to as market economy for better understanding the unfamiliar term.

Listening comprehension

Learning the language depends on listening which provides the aural input that functions as the basis for language acquisition and thus enables the learners to interact in spoken communication. There are several listening strategies, or techniques, that contribute to the listening comprehension and remembering of listening input. The strategies can be classified into two groups depending on how the listener/learner processes this input. The two groups include „top-down“ strategies and „bottom-up“ strategies (The National Capital Language Resource Center, 2004).

The **top-down strategies** are listener based. This means that the listener makes use of background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text and last but not least, the language. Among the top-down strategies are included listening for main idea, predicting, drawing inferences and summarizing. With the help of the background knowledge the listener can interpret what is heard and even anticipate what will come next using the above-mentioned techniques.

In contrast to the top-down strategies there are the so-called **bottom-up strategies** which are entirely text-based. This means that the listener relies on the language of the message, i.e. the combination of sounds, words, grammar which all together create meaning. They include listening for specific details and recognizing words and word-order patterns. Both kinds of the listening strategies can be successfully combined. In class it is up to the teacher to monitor which strategies or their combination was effective and whether the students achieved their listening comprehension goals using these strategies.

Before starting any listening comprehension, the teacher should decide which strategy or their mixture would serve best in a particular situation. This means activating the students' background knowledge of the topic in order to predict or anticipate content. Then attending to the parts of listening which are relevant for the identified purpose and ignoring the rest. This selectivity enables the students to focus on specific items that they are listening for and reduces the amount of information they have to hold in their short-term memory in order to recognize those specific items.

The combination of selected strategies should include both top-down and bottom-up strategies to increase the students' listening confidence. Last but not least, the monitoring of the listening comprehension should not be neglected as it helps

them detect inconsistencies and failures and direct them to the use of alternate strategies.

As regards our course in the LMS Moodle, development of productive skills such as speaking and writing in a specialist level is limited. Writing is realized by email when students translate specialist text from Czech to English or write (rewrite) business letters, send them to the teacher who corrects them and send them back so that the students receive the feedback. Speaking is not realized within Moodle LMS, it is left to the face-to-face teaching. In Moodle there is included the development of receptive language skills such as listening comprehension and reading comprehension. There are listening activities with the follow-up activities for widening and strengthening terminology. All introductory specialist articles are focused on reading comprehension. Here the content and language integrated learning is used as there is the demand for the students to have the basic knowledge of topics that relate to the main field of studies at the FEM and specialist departments. Apart from the articles, all exercises are based on reading with proper comprehension.

Conclusion

Online support will serve for students of all faculties and fields of studies at the Czech University of Life Sciences (CULS) in Prague, including incoming Erasmus students and academic staff as well as the students of other universities. It will be the advantage for the students to have this material, which can be used for improving the communication with foreign partners, extending the terminology for specialist literature studies, whenever available on the Internet. New online study support will be focused on business and economic vocabulary and will

be available to all students in time that will be the most proper for their studies. They can return to it, practice it and enhance it whenever they need. Language teaching will correspond to a modern way of teaching based on using new didactic procedures and technologies in the lessons.

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