Newbie in e-Teaching. Focus on English for Special Purposes

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I was about to enter a new territory: teaching English virtually, not seeing my students at all. In Finland there is a tendency to move from traditional classroom education to blended and virtual teaching and learning. This tendency also applies to higher education, and we are offering an increasing number of courses to be studied virtually at a distance. Here is a report of my experience on what e-teaching includes including the background of teaching foreign language in this particular case.

Teaching EFL, ESP and EBP

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is something that I'm quite comfortable with as I have been doing it for a number of years, presently at a university of applied sciences. However, it appears that the field of teaching foreign languages has been in a state of change for some time now; the focus has shifted from learning vocabulary and grammar to communicative competence [1]. The next phase is yet to be seen but it has already been speculated. According to Kohonen & Kaikkonen [2], linguistic, communicative and intercultural goals have already been integrated into teaching EFL, and they suggest that the goal should be for students to become autonomous, intercultural, self-aware and capable of reflecting their learning environments, processes and outcomes.

There is even more to my experiment of e-teaching than the eternal question of the contents and methods of language teaching; namely, the course in question was called English Professional Communication. In a study course like this, teaching is aimed at catering for the needs of the learners in some specific field, in this particular case in business. Consequently, such language teaching is named English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and it makes use of methodologies and activities of the particular discipline it is to serve. The primary purpose is to provide students with an opportunity to learn to communicate within a specific academic or professional domain. [3] This poses some additional challenges for the planning and the actual teaching of the course. Well, no problem, I have plenty of experience of doing this as well.

In sum, it can be stated that teaching ESP, whether it be virtually or face-to-face, should be based on striving for communicative competence, in this course in the field of business, i.e. in English for Business Purposes (EBP) or Business English (BE). It is challenging to define the term 'communicative competence', though, as researchers and linguists have had differing views on it; in other words it is not clear what constitutes competence when it comes to language [4]. Still, Bachman [5] [6] presents a model of communicative language ability with the components of language knowledge and strategic competence, i.e. a set of metacognitive strategies. The former, in turn, is further defined as consisting of a number of components such as grammatical, textual, functional, and sociolinguistic knowledge [6].

It is a relatively novel idea to connect teaching EFL to the components of communicative competence. The more traditional view that teachers have widely shared on language ability encompasses four different skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing [6]. Even if this view has its limitations, these aspects of language use need to be taken into account in teaching EFL in one way or another. One of the most practical method would be to ensure that the tasks designed to train the communicative competence incorporate these 'skills'. So far so good, but the virtual aspect of teaching could prove to be a hard nut to crack.

Course Plan and Practical Implications

Summer behind us, it was time to start planning the virtual course of Professional English Communication for business students. In the beginning, it was all a bit confusing and disorganized to say the least; ideas kept popping up in my mind here and there and everywhere, but there was no order or structure to them. Nevertheless, there was one thing I was convinced of: even if the content in the course was to be the same, the intention was not to replicate the course set in a classroom context but to make use of the possibilities the new technology offers, at least to some extent. I also realised that, in all likelihood, this would not become the perfect course but on the way, I would surely come up with lots of new ideas.

As usual, course descriptions offer a framework for the actual contents of a course. Stemming from this, the topics chosen to be covered in this course were concerned with working life and international contexts. And, as the learners are business students, a topic dealing with economy at a general level was included. All in all, there were seven topics to be discussed during the course.

Specific topics in a course are naturally essential but this course was to include elements of teaching and learning English virtually. There are plenty of tools available for e-teaching purposes. Based on the ones used at our university, two tools were chosen, namely Adobe Connect, web conferencing software, and Moodle, virtual learning environment. The first one was for having online teaching sessions which were also recorded. Moodle, in turn, was for students to study individually on their own. Both of these tools have the potential to incorporate communicative activities, and this option was also employed in the course.

The course tasks designed for the students varied to their form and content even if the face-to-face option for the teacher to interact with the students was not available apart from the starting and the finishing of the course. Adobe Connect software and Moodle provide different frameworks for the set of course tasks. During online sessions it is possible to interact with students, and they also have the possibility to communicate and interact with each other. Students can also work together in small groups and present the outcome of that work to other students in an AC room. Moodle, on the other hand, enables students to work both individually on their own and together with other students, albeit not necessarily orally [7] [8]. There is a wide variety of activities that can be designed; the challenge is to be able to choose the appropriate ones for the context. It requires quite an in-depth insight into the options of Adobe Connect and Moodle. As for this particular course, a summary of how the course contents and activities match the goals of teaching ELF are presented in the figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Goals of language teaching and how to achieve them [1]

The goals in the figure above originate from the thoughts of Kohonen and Kaikkonen [2] and are classified under the headings of learning-related and student-related goals. The first set of goals provides an answer to the question of what needs to be taught while the second one is about the qualities students need to possess in today's world. The term 'intercultural' is involved in both sets; first as intercultural themes to be taught and then as a quality of an individual. In response to each goal, a list of course activities is also submitted. Quite a few of them were concerned with communication, either oral or written. Still, there were plenty of tasks in Moodle that the students could work with individually on their own, and they were also able to keep track of their learning process by either checking the model answers or by receiving the information of their scores after the completion of each task, i.e. a quiz type of activity.

One thing became apparent even before the very beginning of the course: a lot of planning was required. For the Adobe Connect sessions, a meticulous manuscript was indispensable. The one I compiled included a plan of the activities as well as the estimated time and material they required. There was hardly any room for improvisation during the sessions even though it was possible to add some comments into the slides. As for Moodle, all the activities were planned and created before the beginning. For the teacher to answer any questions students might have in mind, there was also a discussion forum for students. Another discussion forum was for students to communicate with each other. Neither of the forums were actually used which could have been due to the fact that all the online sessions started with students posing questions. Another reason might be the fact that in other courses, the students actually study together in the traditional manner of attending lessons in classroom. There were also a couple of discussion forums on specific topics and these were used by students.

Afterword

The course ran for eight weeks and covered seven topics ranging from working life to international business and economy. The student group comprised students from various cultures. When necessary, a couple of changes were introduced to the original plan over the eight weeks. To begin with, the whole idea of learning English virtually turned out to be something of a surprise to the students. In consequence, they were not entirely prepared and, for example, some of them lacked microphones which would have come in handy in group discussions during the Adobe Connect sessions. As a result, some of the activities were modified accordingly, e.g. a job interview was not, after all, conducted during an online session but students did it on their own with one of the other students from a culture different from their own. Other, minor, adjustments to the course plan were also made on the way.

The experience on e-teaching demonstrated that e-teaching has both pros and cons. According to the survey carried out by Grosu and David [9], student and teachers alike list a number of advantages as well as disadvantages to e-teaching. As the teacher, I found at least the following to be advantages: learner autonomy and flexibility in terms of the time and place of studying. In addition, e-learning encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning although some individuals may find it challenging to be disciplined enough to do that. Speaking skills in this type of learning are also difficult to develop, especially if a student does not have an access to a microphone. In time, these and other challenges may be resolved as students and teachers become more accustomed to e-teaching and e-learning. To subsequent virtual courses I have actually introduced group and wiki type of tasks for students to work co-operatively. One idea behind this has been to incorporate yet another opportunity for students to learn communication skills, both oral and written. In future, the idea is to even further emphasize interaction with students and among students.

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Picture References

1. ^FIGURE 1. Goals of language teaching and how to achieve them. Modified from Kohonen, V. & Kaikkonen, P. 2002. Quo vadis, foreign language education. Tampereen yliopisto. Tampere.

Tiivistelmä: E-teaching as an option for teaching and learning has become increasingly common recently. Oulu University of Applied Sciences has also adopted the idea of providing students with courses and even study programmes to be studied virtually at a distance. The virtual aspect of language teaching might pose some challenges especially since over the years, the focus in teaching EFL has shifted from teaching grammar onto communicative competence. There is yet another aspect to this teaching, though, as ESP aims to cater the needs of some specific field. To incorporate all these aspects into e-teaching requires careful planning, and the actual teaching does not necessary follow the plan. There are numerous tools available for e-teaching, and in this case, two tools were selected, i.e. Adobe Connect and Moodle. Based on the experiences, the aim is to further develop e-teaching to better correspond to the communicative goal of ELF teaching.