Enhancing Students' Language Competence
Applying Innovative Teaching/Learning Tools

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Abstract.   Globalization has changed the world as we have previously known it setting different requirements for communication and introducing new learning opportunities. In these conditions ubiquitous learning is developing and language learning for special purposes is flourishing. Hence, the content of the language course and the methodology applied are significant. The present paper provides an overview of the latest trends in teaching Languages for Special Purposes and introduces teaching/learning tools designed to enhance students' language competence in an online and/or blended-learning course. The language learning tools were developed within the framework of an LLO project the aims of which are also reflected in the present paper. The paper offers a practical guide on how to apply the developed online learning materials and elaborates suggestions on alternative ways for the development of students' language competence for special purposes.

Introduction

Globalization is changing the world as we have known it. The dramatic increase in mobility and contacts has turned communication into the big issue and cultures and languages play a major role in successful communication [1]. Communication is everywhere, all around us and it includes not only oral communication but also written communication. However, the rapid pace of life sets its own requirements for communication, especially the one for business purposes. Communicators tend to express themselves briefly and efficiently, using specific lexis which is suitable for the communication context and sometimes might be understood within professional circles only. Similarly, in written communication precision dominates over verbosity. In fact, here we can speak about the specifics of Languages for Special or Specific Purposes.

Another factor that has changed contemporary life is the World Wide Web which has opened "new channels for communication and information delivery and retrieval. Recent advances in information, and communication technologies have led to advances in mobile devices that have nurtured the development of learning on-the-go and access opportunities for learning anywhere at any time" [2]. These latest technological advancements have impacted the development of a new kind of learning - *ubiquitous learning*, which is associated with a mixture of mobile learning with e-learning. According to Watson and Plymale ubiquitous learning or U-learning is a learning paradigm that offers "support for teaching anything at any time in any place by using ubiquitous computing de-

vices, software, and services" [3]. Various supporting devices can be used in ubiquitous learning, for example, personal computers, notebooks, personal digital assistance devices (PDA), smartphones, iPads, GPS, interactive television, podcasts, etc. [4].

The afore-mentioned factors set new requirements for language teaching/learning and, hence, the content of the language course and the applied methodology are significant. The aim of the present study is to provide an overview of the latest trends in teaching Languages for Special Purposes and introduce the online teaching/learning tools designed within the EU project "Language learning opportunities - ways out of unemployment risks" (LLO) from 2012 to 2014 [5] that may be applied to enhance students' language competence in the following languages - English, German, French, Spanish, Russian, and Latvian.

1. Languages for Special Purposes

The emergence and development of Languages for Special Purposes (LSP) is connected with the emergence and satisfying of social and communicative needs of definite speakers [6], and the main function of LSP is associated with "the special discourse used in specific settings by people sharing common purposes" [7]. Regarding the origin of LSP, we may refer to the period of Antiquity when a limited group of people engaged in a certain activity for a long time had to communicate with each other intensively, for example, early physicians. Latin may be considered as the first LSP which

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especially flourished as LSP and became even a lingua franca in the Middle Ages [8].

The origin of contemporary LSP is closely connected with recognizing the communicative role of languages and their functional styles in 1920ies when linguists from the Prague linguistic circle defined functional language. Next, in the 1930ies German linguists introduced the concept of *Fachsprachen* and in 1950ies Savory laid the foundations for the theory of LSP. 1960ies could be considered as the beginning of specialized language courses for different target groups in America. In the 1970ies linguists agreed that LSP served the needs of individual fields of science, for example, business, law, medicine, etc. By 1980, LSP, to be more precise - English for Special Purposes (ESP), was established as an institutional reality entering the field of higher education as well [9], [10]. In 1985 LSP courses and programs were delivered in 275 out of 450 higher education institutions of the USA [11].

One of the first great contributors to LSP was Henry G. Widdowson who differentiated between the purpose of General Language and Special Language courses pointing out that the purpose in LSP is a descriptive term, not a theoretical term, and it "refers to eventual practical use to which the language will be put in achieving occupational and academic aims" [12]. Although many prominent scholars have defined ESP, LSP definitions are rarer, which might be explained by the fact that most research in LSP has been done in the field of ESP. Still, Laborda defines LSP as "the teaching of a language as a second or foreign language for certain groups of students to whom the syllabus, tasks and methodology is especially tailored to their interests and needs" and he also argues that the most essential linguistic aspects of LSP are lexis, language forms, topics for conversation integrating authentic texts and materials [13].

Over the past twenty years global socio-economic and political changes have made an impact on LSP - globalization, internationalization of higher education, requirements of the labour market, multiculturalism, technology development have favoured its development. This trend has been observed at universities all over the world. With the introduction of ubiquitous learning opportunities language learners may engage in communication with other learners and not only develop their language competence but also enhance intercultural competence and collaboration skills. The Internet has brought significant changes to language teaching/learning. "Blogs, Wikis, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, chat and text messaging by means of mobile communication devices and videoconferencing programs" are just some of the examples [14].

Various Internet resources are widely used as authentic teaching/learning tools nowadays. As summarized by Arnó-Maciá [15] the changes brought to language learning by the Internet are associated with authenticity, literacy, interaction, vitality, and empowerment. Moreover, lots of materials are also suitable for mobile devices. Laborda [16] groups the Internet materials into 4 large groups which are further broken down into several subgroups:

i)   traditional web materials - chats and forums; E-pal; online dictionaries;

ii) social web: podcasts, video casts and video sharing; blogs; wikis and Wikipedia;

iii) virtual worlds - for example, Second life;

iv) mobile learning.

Presuming that with the invention of new technologies ubiquitous learning opportunities will increase in the future, special attention shall be paid to the tasks design and maintaining communication between language learners as well as learners and the teacher. As pointed out by Arnó-Maciá [17] tasks have to be authentic and ecologically valid, reflect activities performed in learners' professional fields and develop their collaboration and problem solving skills. It is especially important in LSP, as in LSP we are dealing with students for whom language learning "is auxiliary to some other primary professional or academic purpose. It is clearly a means for achieving something else and is not an end in itself" [18] as the focus is on students' future profession and language is a means to successfully operate in it. To increase students' motivation and diversify modes of learning, classroom learning should be supplemented with online learning, i.e., LSP courses may be delivered in a blended-learning format.

Most higher education institutions of Latvia, including Turiba University, offer its students the opportunity to acquire ESP courses, which have become popular in Latvia during the last 15 years. During the last ten years LSP courses have been introduced alongside with ESP courses. The most frequently offered languages are German, Russian, and Spanish. Some universities offer also the LSP courses of Italian, French, Latvian for foreigners, and other languages. In all these courses teachers tailor their own language teaching/learning materials, including technology-based tools. Lots of different teaching/learning materials have been created within the framework of various EU projects.

The current paper introduces the online teaching/learning modules created for LSP courses (English, German, French, Spanish, Russian, and Latvian) during the implementation of Leonardo da Vinci Grundtvig Learning Partnerships project "Language learning opportunities - ways out of unemployment risks (LLO)" (2012-2014). The modules created are used as supplementary teaching/learning tools thus making the traditional teaching/learning more versatile and providing students with an opportunity for autonomous learning.

2. Language learning opportunities - ways out of unemployment risks

This part of the paper deals with the main ideas of the EU Grundtvig Learning Partnerships project "Language learning opportunities - ways out of unemployment risks (LLO)" implemented in the Lifelong Learning programme in the period 2012-2014, the project No. 2012-1-DE2-GRU06-11344 X.

The aim of the project is to better integrate different groups of people in the European society, and improve their professional abilities on the European labour market through language skills. Additionally, the project is focussed on the exchange of various experiences in formal and non-formal language learning as a means of improving communication skills of the target groups. There is a wide range of methods,

Fig. 1. Online learning tools for Spanish.

Fig. 2. Tasks for the ESP module Travelling by Air.

tools and instruments which play different roles in each country. Traditional and new methods of communication are combined and have a great influence on individual activity, creativity and intercultural development. This also means that the relation between communication, exchange and mobility is the main tool to implement this approach into action. The project is focussed on interested partners, i.e., teachers and learners, to share their experience and learn to communicate with partners/learners across Europe, broaden participants' horizons and help find other opportunities around them that can make them more attractive for the European labour market using new skills and methods.

The consortium is formed by adult educators from six EU countries representing different types of education institutions - tertiary level education institutions (Biznesa augstskola Turība, Latvia; Vilniaus verso kolegija, Lithuania; Ekonomska šola Murska Sobota, Višja strokovna šola, Slovenia), second chance education provider (Voksenuddannelsescenter Frederiksberg, Denmark), and adult education centres (EUROPANORAT Schulung - Training - Management - Consulting GmbH, Germany; Gönen Halk Egitim Merkezi ve Aksam Sanat Okulu, Turkey).

The general topic of the project is of overall relevance for adult education in the partner organisations and in their countries. Alternative and classic approaches to language learning and their blending with non-formal methods is the general way to communicate and improve mutual understanding. The LLO project introduces and applies new and innovative communication tools, such as different versions of comic strip exercises, using games in foreign language classes, e.g., *Scrabble*, *Bingo*, *Monopoly*, *Hangman*, combined with intercultural games on the Internet and supplemented with different and relevant grammar exercises.

Other tools applied are the exchange of cooking recipes and cooking food, learning in the natural environment, e.g., from buildings, monuments, etc., learning from proverbs and poems, e.g., form Haiku, as well as applying online teaching/learning tools.

This paper further introduces online teaching/learning tools created within the project to enhance students' language competence in six languages - English, German, French, Spanish, Russian, and Latvian.

3. The online teaching/learning tools created for Languages for Special Purposes

The materials created comprise online learning modules ensuring the enhancement of students' pluricultural competence and professional language skills. The study materials created are available on the project Website of Turiba University: <http://llo.turiba.lv/> [19].

The online learning modules are designed for different language competence levels: 1) English - A2, B1, other languages - A1, A2, texts in general require a higher language competence level - B1, B2.

The section "Study materials" is further subdivided into six subsections - one subsection per language. The materials created for each language consist of two parts: online learning materials created within the LLO project and other publicly available online learning materials for the target language (see Fig. 1).

The created modules cover a wide range of topics characteristic to LSP (*Meetings, Occupation, Job Interview, Travelling, Hotels, Restaurants, Business Etiquette* etc.) and include the following traditional types of exercises in an unaccustomed online learning form - *Matching tasks, Gap filling, Quiz, Substitution, Jumbled word order, Sentence completion, Word formation and derivation, Crossword puzzle for learning lexis, Describing a picture, Reading comprehension,* etc. The materials also include texts on intercultural topics and text comprehension tasks. Created modules may be used as a supplementary material to regular lectures and as self-study materials for those who want to refresh their language skills. The project website offers also links to online dictionaries. In order to use the created online tasks for students' self-dependent learning it is important to provide students with the necessary vocabulary which is done twofold:

i)   including the relevant vocabulary items as a *.pdf file for students to study the vocabulary on their own (see Fig. 2), or

ii) the vocabulary is prior acquired during the face-to-face stage of learning.

Students may choose a module they want to study and then by clicking on the title *1.uzdevums* [Task 1] start doing the
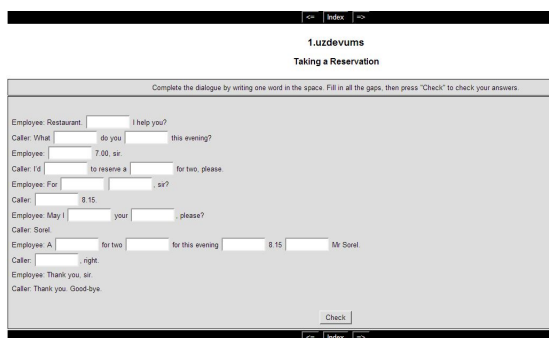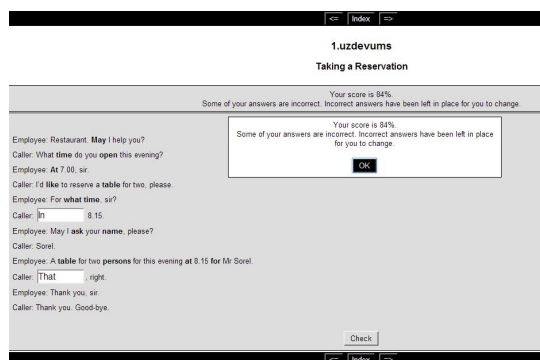
Fig. 3. An example of a gap fill task.

Fig. 4. An example of the key for the task.

task (see Fig. 3). When students have done the task, they click on *Check* and see their score and mistakes (see Fig. 4). In some tasks students may avail help - a hint on how to do the task.

As the tasks in one module are contextually related, it is recommended to start with the first task of the module and finish with the last one and only then select another module for learning. Students can get from one task to another by clicking on the arrow next to the *Index* sign: "→" to go forth and "←" to go back.

The last module for all languages is connected with intercultural issues comprising two intercultural topics. First, students are supposed to read a text presented in a pdf file and then do the reading comprehension task and other tasks which might be lexical, grammar, conversation tasks depending on the text presented. In reading comprehension tasks students can do one question after the other or alternatively clicking on the button *Show all questions* they are first exposed to all the questions and afterwards students may do the task.

As the created materials focus on the development of students' professional lexis and reading skills, they can be used as a source of information on pluricultural issues as well as a supplementary material to develop students' Language for

Special Purposes competence. If the created online teaching/learning tools are used for blended learning purposes, of course, it might be useful to discuss the result at the face-to-face stage of learning in which a teacher can explain the issues not clear to the students. For online teaching option the project website provides contact details of the staff involved in the current project and if requested consultancy over e-mail will be provided.

The project website was launched in January 2013 with a couple of tasks. All online learning tasks were uploaded by March 2013. The website statistics counts unique visitors and page views. The statistics might be derived per hour, day, week, month, country, on each separate module, etc. Fig. 5 shows the statistics for applying learning tools since launching of the website.

The statistics also shows that so far most of the learners have been from Europe (92.41% or 414 learners), 20 learners from North America (4.46%), and 14 learners (3.12%) from Asia. The statistics on different countries is reflected in Fig. 6.

The statistics also shows that most of the learners have used computers, only some have used other devices (see Fig. 7) which points to the fact that learners still prefer more traditional learning options and although we are entering the phase of ubiquitous learning, in language learning more traditional devices dominate.

To summarize, the online teaching/learning modules designed have been used by learners as a self-dependent lear-
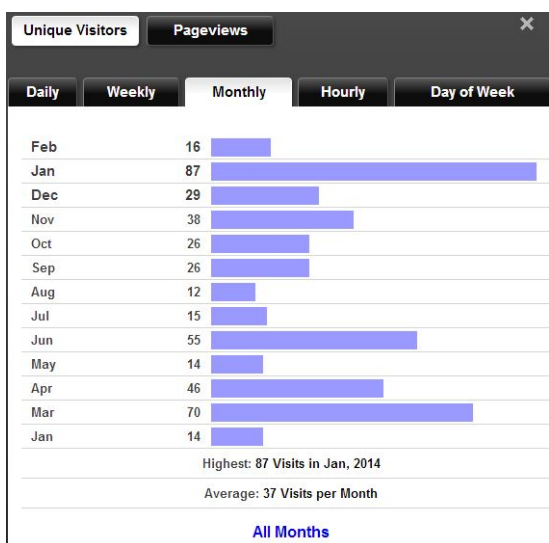

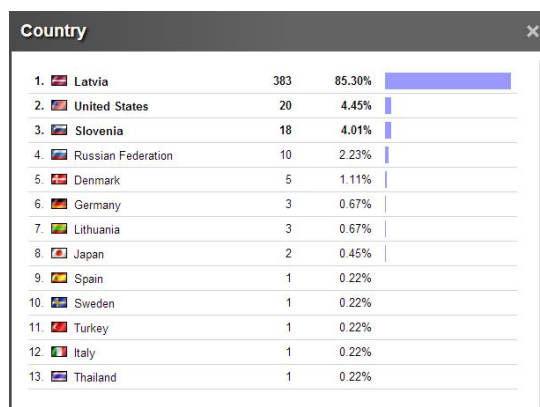Fig. 5. The number of the unique visitors of the learning programme.

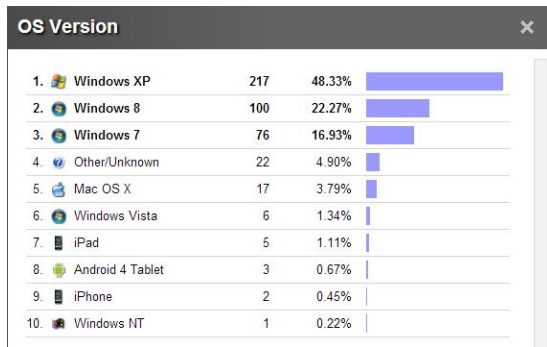Fig. 6. The number of learners per country.

Fig. 7. OS version of learning devices used for doing the tasks.

ning tool and as a supplementary material for developing language competence in LSP and although the number of tasks for the second foreign language is limited, the materials may be evaluated as useful and more modules and tasks could be designed and uploaded onto the current website.

Conclusions

Globalization has changed the life as we have known it; consequently the learning paradigm is changing. There is a shift from traditional scheduled teaching/learning at education institutions to ubiquitous learning which is emerging as a significant contributing factor to lifelong learning. This means that learning occurs anywhere and at any time and from anything. The integration of a range of learning technologies in education requires a different kind of thinking and learners' readiness to apply new learning options. Although the research points to the use of a variety of technological devices to be used in formal and non-formal learning, including learning LSP, practice reveals that language learners give preference to traditional face-to-face learning and applying PCs for online learning. When designing online language teaching/learning tools, it is essential to create a learning platform which would enable learners' online communication and communication with the teacher so that language learning could stimulate learners' activities and provide opportunities for learning from others and learning with others.

To conclude, in order to ensure real U-learning opportunities the following features of U-learning pointed out by Watson and Plymale [20] have to be taken into an account:
1) urgency of learning need;
2) initiative of knowledge acquisition;
3) interactivity of learning process;
4) situated interaction;
5) context-awareness;
6) personalized services;
7) self-regulated learning;
8) seamless learning;
9) adaptation of subject contents;
10) interaction between learners and teachers.

These characteristics are in line with social constructivist learning approach that has been applied to language teaching/learning since communicative approach has gained its popularity, which means that if appropriately applied U-learning may successfully enhance students' language competence.

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