

Chapter 14

English for Specific Purposes in the Digital Age: The University of Bucharest in the Context of the European Union

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ABSTRACT

The information revolution has enhanced the role of English as the lingua franca of global communication and has dramatically increased the demand for academic English courses which focus on discipline-specific knowledge. The present chapter examines the current state of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course at the University of Bucharest, Romania. Against the wider background provided by language education policies and digital initiatives within the European Union, the chapter presents how technology-integrated teaching methods have begun to shape both the content and the delivery format of the specialised English class and to renew the task-based framework on which the course is developed. If, not long ago, the traditional assessment was considered the only reliable way of testing students' knowledge, the initially forced adoption of e-assessment following the global health crisis has shown that it can be an efficient tool, covering a relevant evaluation of both receptive and productive skills.

INTRODUCTION

The world is changing at an unexpected pace – literally overnight, everything has moved into the safety of the virtual space: work, school, commerce, you name it. The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the modern times' revolution whose main driver is technology and which is blurring the lines between the physical and the digital, and, ultimately, of the biological as well. The shift was unexpected and dramatic, and many domains were not completely ready for it. Education was partly prepared, but definitely not fully equipped and eager to embrace e-learning as the sole medium of instruction. All kind of online teaching platforms that were basically unknown to students and teachers alike have suddenly

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replaced physical classrooms: Zoom, Google Classroom, Moodle, Microsoft teams, to mention just a few. Various organizations quickly mobilized to support the continuation of teaching and learning by presenting in detail the educational resources available in the online environment. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, for instance, released an annotated selection of online resources meant to help educators navigate through the sea of virtual instructional resources, classifying each resource by type, language, subject, grade level, competencies, and so on. (Reimers, Schleicher, Saavedra, & Tuominen, 2020).

It is still early to predict what this will mean for the academic teaching and learning in the long run. While some claim that the obstacles that must be surmounted are too big – insufficient bandwidth, lack of connectable devices, little training of both students and teachers to make remote teaching truly efficient – others taught the benefits. Wang Tao, Vice President of Tencent Cloud and Vice President of Tencent Education, maintains that there is no way back: online learning will eventually become an integral component of school education (Li & Lalani, 2020). Important universities in England such as Cambridge and Manchester have already announced that all face-to-face lectures for the entire 2020-2021 academic year will be cancelled and moved online (Jack, 2020). The wind of change is obviously blowing strongly.

Whether e-learning will be adopted by schools and universities alongside traditional learning, or whether it will be regarded as a temporary solution to an unprecedented situation which made in-person teaching unsafe, one thing is certain: it has proven its potential (as well as its limitations) and has raised many educators' awareness that many e-resources and tools can be used as effective educational materials.

Language learners have long known the benefits of technology. The compatibility between foreign language teaching and technology, especially in its digital format, can be explained by the former's ceaseless search for authentic immersive experiences that can simulate real-life situations, and by the latter's inexhaustible resources of authentic materials, together with many possibilities of practicing and enhancing nearly all language skills. The use of computers in the process of language learning – Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) – has been around since the 1960s (Warschauer & Healey, 1998).

The present chapter looks at a branch of Language for Specific Purposes - English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the digital age. With English becoming the lingua franca of education and of research nowadays, there has been an increasing demand for academic courses that support the acquisition of English with a focus on discipline-specific vocabulary. The discussion will be contextualized by referring to the situation of ESP in Romania, in particular at the University of Bucharest, against the larger background provided by post-Bologna European higher education systems and the European Union's language policies and language education in universities. Both teaching and assessment practices will be presented within the task-based framework, with an emphasis on the way that the adoption of new technology has begun to shape the once traditionally-taught ESP course. The case of an undergraduate English for History course will be provided as an example.

The conclusion of this chapter is that technology-integrated ESP teaching is a thriving, though still not fully exploited area. In contrast, not until long ago, assessment procedures used to be more at ease in a traditional environment. The computer was used mainly for listening comprehension and searching for appropriate texts on the Internet to devise various reading and speaking tasks. However, this is about to change, as for the first time in the history of ESP at the University of Bucharest, the end-of-semester exams have all moved online. The feedback of both students and teachers is encouraging – some teachers even maintain that they will incorporate e-assessment in their future evaluations.

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