

REVISITING LEARNING AND TEACHING REALITIES IN THE ESP CLASS

Laura-Ioana COROAMA DORNEAN
Alina-Andreea DRAGOESCU URLICA

***Abstract:** The paper puts forward some considerations on the current changes in the language learning and teaching paradigms nowadays. The 4th industrial revolution, the emergence of a wide range of learning environments, transformations on the job market and different socially and psychologically young generations are more than serious reasons to change the perspective of how educators perceive learning and teaching in formal environments. The aim of the present study is to draw attention on the current challenges and their impact on language teaching and to provide some recommendations specific for the ESP class in the Higher Education system.*

***Keywords:** ESP (English for Specific Purposes), collaborative, learning environment, teaching mindset, emergence.*

Introduction

Several discussions or debates are in progress, continuously updating, about new generations of students, with very different learning mindset and motivations, acquiring knowledge and developing skills in various forms which are not exclusively in a formal environment. Millennials, the digital natives or the Net Generation (Net Gen) are only two of a series of denominations for the above-mentioned group of learners we currently have as educators in our classes. As Prensky (2007) summarises it, one of the most arduous challenges in today's classrooms is keeping this generation motivated and engaged long enough to learn the material.

This segment of students are complex individuals mainly characterized by a virtual and highly technological way of life. Nevertheless, in order to reach these learners and to avoid their fall into boredom, educators at all levels are engaged in an ongoing process of searching and exploring new strategies and techniques to attract, motivate and involve them in complex activities so that they nurture desire for learning and school in general (Annetta, 2008). Impatience, externalized memory, multitasking and technological skills are some key components of

the modern learner's portfolio. In addition, being familiarized at an early age with the virtual environment, these students desire and demand a multifaceted classroom including games, a variety of search engines, the possibility of using up-to-date applications and innovative course content which is animated, interactive, and musical (Carlson, 2005). Probably our most significant challenge as teachers preparing and interacting with Net Gens is to connect with them as long as possible, maintain this connection during the learning-teaching sequences and make learning meaningful to them, to their needs and to the environments where they use the outcome of their learning.

1. The ESP framework in the academic environment

ESP learning and teaching at a tertiary level presents several particularities which are meant to blend the linguistic and communicative approach with the learning and working environment our students interact with outside the walls of the university. As Dragoescu-Urlică (2018: 206) has underlined "when learning a foreign language, we must explore linguistic elements not formally, but as carriers of meaning and cultural implications for value systems we share."

Collective and individual interviews with 1st year students have helped us to draw a broad profile of the ESP learner in our university:

- their level of General English varies between A2 (50%), B1 (35%) and B2 (15%);
- the main sources of learning pointed out by the students are video games, films, music and the Internet. Sharp (2012:42) calls this form of learning 'stealth', meaning it exists but cannot be detected or identified through traditional tools: "Anytime learning is presented and students are unaware they are learning, it is an unexpected benefit";
- learning environments have known a remarkable expansion and diversification as the users access them constantly, both virtually and in the material world. However, we have noticed an improving level of written comprehension performance as texting, writing for posting on social networks are common practices among young learners;
- students are in contact with specific terminology in different fields prior to their entrance at the university;
- grammatical structures and grammatical correction are recurrently problematic for university students as their learning strategies in informal environments prioritise vocabulary.

One of our purposes as ESP language educators is to develop a network of relationships between the ESP class reality and the working environment in which students will work, perform and, finally apply and make use of their knowledge and skills acquired during school.

2. How can we prepare students for their future jobs?

Undoubtedly, this is the question on everybody's lips nowadays in the light of current major changes of the workforce and working perspectives. Much concern is in the educational world on the designing of employment, skills and workforce strategy for the future. In addition, much has been said and many studies have been conducted on what the Fourth Industrial Revolution will look like and how it will affect humanity. By 2020, this transformation will have brought us advanced robotics, innovative means of transport, artificial intelligence and machine learning, advanced materials and techniques, biotechnology and genomics. This framework requires more 'humanity' from the part of the humans, or what are known as 'soft skills' in order to compete with robots and highly performant machines. As previously mentioned, "integrating more skills and giving complex tasks based on finding solutions and implementing them could open a new perspective in language teaching and learning." (Coroama, 2018:89)

Dianne Pappafotopoulos (2019) comes up with a list of actions we can take in order to empower our students not only with field knowledge and competence, but with powerful career skills too. We are developing the set of actions in accordance with common goals for the language class.

1. *Create conducive learning spaces with resources* to accommodate the curriculum and required skills. The quantity of resources is a minimal condition for problem solving, but students must also acquire and develop strategies to access this content and learn appropriation techniques depending on the learning and working tasks.
2. *Assign a problem/project that highlights the content* that you want students to learn in your curriculum. If educators formulate clear tasks and content for their students, they could retrieve reciprocal response.
3. *Allow time for research to learn how to troubleshoot the project at hand.* Two of the major issues of the millennials is the impatience and the urge to compete despite quality errors. Allotting extra time for research, for the quality of the process would impact their perspective on task solving.

4. *Prompt students to write an essential question that they have about the content explored.* Expressing personal opinions and practising critical thinking through a variety of activities are mandatory in the academic environment. The ESP class is an optimal case where students can make use and blend their specialised knowledge in different science fields with the communicative one.
5. *Introduce guest speakers* (foreigners, if possible, in order to achieve the multicultural goal too) in the field of study to highlight a “day in the life” of their job.
6. *Encourage students to work alone and in groups*, knowing that they must communicate, share ideas, and participate in class discussions. Working in groups or teamwork seems to be extremely challenging for Romanian students as there is less education in this type of organizing learning. Therefore, even in the academic environment, and later at the work place, learners report difficulties in integrating their peers and/or providing joint results. As Dragoescu and Stefanović (2018) have emphasized, dialogical interaction and cooperation among peers are at the core of ecologically holistic environments for learning.
7. *Create a project to-do list with benchmarks and checkpoints for stages of completion.*
8. *Highlight participation in daily tasks* (writing emails, setting up meetings, and dealing with time-management issues). We believe these aspects should be mostly dealt with by students as part of their peer management series of activities. Coordinating with others and establishing qualitative relationships with one’s peers are most appreciated skills in the future.
9. *Lead students through the professional process* required to accomplish their project goal.
10. *Assess students on how well they met all the steps towards their goal.* Undoubtedly, continuous assessment represents a valuable and useful tool. However, low attendance or inability to integrate the learning group may prove to be serious deterrents.

3. From ‘flat’ management to ‘flat’ learning’?

In a world of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity), controlling things no longer appears plausible, and controlling people is downright counterproductive. By ‘flat’ management, we broadly understand an organization structure with few or no levels of management between management and staff level employees. The flat organisation

supervises employees less while promoting their increased involvement in the decision-making process. Empowerment and responsibility are key concepts in this organisational structure. Similarly, we believe that empowering students by providing the appropriate tools, techniques and orientation they could take in charge their learning and engage themselves in a more challenging experience.

On the other hand, although this type of revolutionary transformation is needed in the light of current economic and social changes, it cannot be accomplished without solid similar experiences. In the Romanian educational system, individual performance is more appreciated than the collective result. Examinations throughout the whole educational journey are evaluating the individual's achievement in a specific task, therefore students encounter serious difficulties when asked to work in a team and solve a problem as a community. Respecting one's peers, sharing roles, individual and collective responsibility are a series of values and skills that need to be developed in real contexts and through meaningful experiences. During our ESP classes we have noticed this two-folded objective: to develop communicative skills in English and to familiarise students with the demands and skills required in a working environment. Consequently, our job as educators is to build a positive learning environment, responding both to the academic curriculum and the external standards of the society we live in.

Positive, productive learning environments are key to students' academic, emotional and social success at the university. Unfortunately, positive learning environments don't just happen on their own—they must be deliberately created. There are many components that go into making a positive learning environment for students. For starters, positive learning environments should offer a climate of safety, where risk-taking is encouraged, there is open authentic conversation, trust and respect are fostered, and positive interaction is the norm. In our case, this means we must closely interact with other educators who are in contact with our students and to decide upon the content and the skills the foreign language should facilitate and what type of meaning is to be negotiated.

We are persuaded that, for our type of learners, concepts like 'values', 'life goals', 'meaningful experience', 'authentic strong relationships', 'connections' are both challenging and more motivating than knowledge in its theoretic shape. Movement, interactive tasks and collaborative activities have been reported as more attractive, responding to students' needs and motivating.

Conclusions

More than ever, teachers, students, researchers should be tightly connected to the technological trends and to how society unfolds its resources. Cognitive flexibility blending with social adaptability and emotional intelligence are powerful allies in building one's career. ESP skills are necessary from both a personal and professional perspective in a holistic learning environment. Moreover, politic, social and economic realities cannot be disregarded either. Further research and reasoning are required in order to cope up with a coherent strategy which melts down organically knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, taking into consideration current and future realities.

References

- Annetta, L. A. 2008. "Video games in education: Why they should be used and how they are being used" in *Theory into Practice*, 47(3), pp. 229-239.
- Carlson, S. 2005. "The Net Generation goes to college" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52(7), A34.
- Coroama Dorneanu, L.I & A.A. Dragoescu Urlica (2018). "The Language Class, an Environment for Developing Soft Skills" in *RJAS*, 50 (4), pp. 87-91.
- Dragoescu Urlica, A. 2018. "The Ecology of Language as an Optimal Learning Model" in *Quaestus*, Timișoara, no. 13, vol VII, pp. 199-208.
- Dragoescu Urlica, A.A & Sandra Stefanović. 2018. "Ecolinguistic Qualities of the Optimal English Language Learning Experience" in *International Journal for Quality Research*, Vol. 12 Issue 2, pp. 537-546.
- Kramsch, C. (2014). The Challenge of Globalization for the Teaching of Foreign Languages and Cultures. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching* Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 249–254.
- Pappafotopoulos, D. (2019). "10 things Teachers Can Do Today to Prepare Students for the Future". Last accessed 27.03.2019 at <https://www.eschoolnews.com/2019/02/13/10-things-teachers-can-do-today-to-prepare-students-for-the-future/>.
- Prensky, M. 200). *Digital game-based learning*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House Publishers.
- Sharp, L. A (2012). « Stealth Learning : Unexpected Learning Opportunities Through Games » in *Journal of Instructional Research*. Volume 1. pp. 42-48.
- van Lier, L. 2008. "Agency in the classroom" in J. P. Lantolf & M. E. Poehner (eds.), *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages*. London: Equinox, pp.163–86.

NOTES ON THE AUTHORS

Laura Ioana COROAMA DORNEANU teaches English and French for Specific Purposes at the BUASVM "King Michael I of Romania" from Timisoara. She has a PhD in Language Sciences and her fields of interest include the

ecological approach of learning, ESP (The language of Life/Natural sciences), multicultural studies and cultural mediation in foreign languages. She is currently an associate researcher in the group LANGUenACT (Didactique des langues & éaction) at the Paris-Est Créteil University. She has published several papers and books on these topics and a textbook for tertiary-level students of ESP in the field of Life Sciences.

Alina Andreea DRAGOESCU URLICA is a qualified teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the BUASVM “King Michael I of Romania” from Timisoara. She has a PhD in Philology (Cultural studies) and her fields of interest include (but are not limited to) ecolinguistics, ESP (The language of Life/Natural sciences), scientific discourse and deconstruction, the ecology of language learning/teaching, holistic learning, semiotics, conceptual metaphor and expanding learning communities. She has published several papers on these topics, as well as four textbooks for tertiary-level students of ESP (*English for Genetic Engineers*, 2009, *English for Agricultural Engineers*, 2016, etc.).