ICT in an ESP Classroom – Looking for a Balance

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Abstract

ICT has become an inseparable part of language teaching; e-learning or blended learning is a must especially in a university environment and mobile learning with its wide range of applications is increasingly popular due to unlimited ways of employing them.
This paper focuses on the use of technology in a face-to-face setting, specifically in an undergraduate course of legal English; however, the findings and suggestions could be further generalized to any university course of English for Specific Purposes.
Although the majority of current university students belong to the generation of digital natives, our experience suggests that not all of them may be enthusiastic about using their laptops, tablets or smart phones in the course of the lesson since the answer to the choice "a pen or a keyboard" is not 100% the same. The paper addresses the question of balancing the number of technology activities throughout a 4-semester undergraduate legal English course, the author shares good practice from using Google Docs and Socrative for various tasks reaching specific learning goals.

1. Introduction

The majority of today's learners are seen as digital natives and as Kongchan [8] states their preference for learning and their learning strategies have changed enormously with the advancement of technology. ICT has become part of language teaching at all levels of education, e-learning or blended learning is a must in a university setting. Dawson even asks: "Is there really any such thing as non-blended learning anymore?" [6]. Although research generally reports relatively consistent positive opinions of students regarding e-learning and m-learning, there are nearly always some students who disliked new methods [1]. Such findings reflect the observations made in my classes. If I give the choice in the instructions: "technology or paper and a pen", the result is not always in favour of technology. In this paper, I share ideas from an undergraduate course of legal English and present examples of tasks with the use of Google Docs and Socrative which could inspire any ESP (English for specific purposes) teacher.

2. ESP and technology

Dashtestani and Stojkovic [5] state that ESP teachers need to take into account both language and content, and the use of any type of technology in ESP instruction should be, therefore, based on students' needs and preferences. Bloch [3] identifies two roles of technology in teaching ESP. First, being a tool for helping with traditional types of learning and, second, technology being a space for creating new forms of communicating.

3. Teaching context – Legal English classes at Masaryk University

Undergraduates at the Faculty of Law of Masaryk University take a 4-semester course of Legal English consisting of twelve 90-minute sessions each semester. The lessons are interactive with students practicing all language skills and the basics of professional skills. The syllabus is topic based, with tailor-made teaching materials, including an e-learning support.

Apart from working with regular technology, e.g. videos or ppt presentations, in the face-to-face setting, there are two applications which I like to use with my students – Google Docs and Socrative, however, I am aware of the fact that although I would expect all 20-year old learners to be enthusiastic about any technology, it is not the case. In my teaching, therefore, I strive to search for a balance between employing technology to its most and yet, not overusing it.

My experience shows that it is not possible to generalize or anticipate typical seminar group behaviour in the lessons. The class attitude towards technology varies greatly, there can be classes where all students come with laptops, tablets or i-Pads, some of them even do not carry a pen, on the other hand, there are classes where only one third of students is equipped with the above mentioned devices. Nevertheless, the teacher can be sure that all young undergraduates possess smart phones these days.

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4. A pen or a keyboard?

The moment that confirms the idea that not all university students prefer technology to paper is repeated every semester with these instructions: "In groups, you are going to work on a piece of writing, you can write into a laptop/mobile devise, or on paper." I never guess the proportion of keyboards to pens in advance. It ranges from 100% for keyboards to 100% for pens. The reasons for the group choice include practical issues such as discharged batteries, or social and psychological aspects, e.g. the choice is decided by the most dominant student, or the group follows the choice of neighbouring groups, or students have no experience with using mobile devices for learning.

If we consult literature, we find several works related to this choice and to its consequences. Goldberg at al. [7] found out that when using computers, learners tend to make more revisions while producing the text, as opposed to making revisions after producing the text when using a pen. This research also reported that in most cases, the quantity as well as the quality of writing was higher when writing with computers, however, Chemin [4] states that experts on writing point out that pens and keyboards bring into play very different cognitive processes because handwriting is a complex task requiring various skills, while operating a keyboard is matter of the same movement, i.e. pressing the right key. Mueller and Oppenheimer [10] demonstrated that students who take notes on computers do worse at learning material than their longhand counterparts since note-taking with a pen gives students a better grasp of the subject. Whithaus at al. [12] examined the choice of keyboarding versus handwriting in a high-stakes writing assignment and found out that students showed preference for the keyboard version of the exam. Keyboarding was chosen for being faster, more familiar, legible, convenient, and more effective for proofreading. Students preferring handwriting stated reliability and feeling more comfortable when using pen and paper.

5. Using Google Docs in the Classroom

Google Docs is a cloud word processing tool which enables multiple users to edit the same document concurrently. When implemented for teaching purposes, Google Docs can facilitate student work and can offer new opportunities for the teacher, e.g. allowing monitoring in real time or generating various types of student-created content. Research and online resources have indicated several areas where Google Docs proved to be successful (see e.g. [6], [8], [9],[11]).

In my legal English classes, I also greatly appreciate the work with Google Docs, mainly the possibility of providing prompt feedback. Bearing in mind the fact that not every student likes working with the keyboard I carefully consider how many times and for what purpose to employ Google Docs. After some experimenting, I arrived at the conclusion that my classes use Google Docs at least twice and maximum three times each semester. Two activities are such that students have to work in Google Docs, the first one at the beginning of the semester, with the aim to make a quick student diagnosis about their language and technology skills. My experience goes in line with what many authors stress: the teacher cannot expect that all students are familiar with Google Docs. The first, initial, activity is therefore a short one, in the course of which the basic technical features can be made understood. The first semester students write a definition of law; the second semester students are engaged in simultaneous continuing of a story related to civil or criminal procedures; the third semester students are supposed to fill in a complex table presenting the main features of different types of business; the fourth semester students brainstorm dos and don'ts of a successful presentation skills. As far as the second Google Docs activity is concerned, it is an important piece of writing where both the teacher and students can make the most of immediate monitoring and helping, e.g. a follow-up letter to a client or reviewing peers' writing. If I decide to implement Google Docs another time, then I give students a choice: a keyboard or a pen, to accommodate their preferences.

Although Google Docs, being a successful collaboration instrument, can serve as a new communication space in an ESP classroom, the described examples of tasks employ Google Docs as a means towards the learning goals: to develop the language skills and to work on technical language, i.e. the first role in the sense of Bloch mentioned above.

6. Socrative App in the Classroom

Socrative is an application which helps teachers monitor student learning and understanding. It offers multiple choice or open questions; students input their responses, the teacher can visualize student performance in real time and can easily identify areas that students mastered and areas which need additional explanations. We can find a number of papers and online resources describing how to use Socrative in teaching and showing its positive influence on student participation, e.g. [2], [9].

I employ Socrative for checking student comprehension (various quizzes) or initiating class discussion (e.g. what kind of punishment students would choose in a given case) in a number of classes, but not

every lesson. It is advisable to make the tasks short, which means that the teacher needs to prepare questions carefully and unambiguously.

7. Conclusion

My experience from using Google Docs and Socrative in legal English classes shows that these tools can engage students, raise motivation, bring variety to the classroom and they enable teachers to see student difficulties quite promptly. It is, therefore, interesting to see that when students are given the choice of keyboard or paper-and-pen, a certain number of students still opts for the latter. The reasons may vary: some students may struggle with using technology, some may simply prefer a pen and paper to typing, some may be influenced by the behavior of their peers, some may not be used to using mobile devices for class purposes. When choosing technology, the teacher should consider the types of technology, the goal of specific activity and the balance between different sorts of interaction in the classroom.

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