



When a Future Landscape Architect and a Student of Logistics Meet in their On-Line Classes in the Educational Cloud – from Transversal Skills to Specific Language Abilities

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Abstract

The Malopolska Educational Cloud (Małopolska Chmura Edukacyjna – MChE) is part of the “Modernization of Vocational Training in Malopolska” project. On-line classes taught by university faculty members from Cracow are supposed to help to develop the skills of students of various vocational schools in the region and to encourage them to take up university studies. The author of this paper is responsible for the area of English for Vocational Purposes of the project.

Upon finishing the enrolment procedure, we realised that the pilot group combines such a variety of different specialisations as the aforementioned logistics specialists and landscape architects, but also occupations such as accountants and people from the tourism and hospitality sector. In consequence, the offered teaching approach had to be based on transversal skills shared by many different occupations (e.g. workplace rules and regulations – Do’s & Don’ts, responses to complaints, writing a CV). Those general concepts were then adapted to the specific requirements of the various vocations by the students themselves, who worked in groups using the WebQuest method. The aim of such an approach was also to prepare the students for the further independent development of their language abilities. Additionally, the use of game-design elements (gamification) and a variety of applications (Padlet, Socrative, Movie Maker, Mind Map, etc.) enhanced the positive perception of the classes by the students participating in the project.

Keywords: LSP, ICT, Vocational Training

1. The context of the project

As all the countries in Europe, Poland is subject to dynamic industrial changes. The job market is constantly in demand of representatives of various occupations. Vocational education is trying to address these needs: technical schools open classes with new profiles of instruction. Teachers working in these institutions have to cope with the requirements.

This refers also to foreign language teachers, especially to the teachers of English as a foreign language, English being chosen most often by students of these schools. Unfortunately, readymade coursebooks or other teaching resources for the new fields of study are rarely available. This is a significant problem. As a result of the ministerial act of 2012, languages for specific purposes (LSP) have become an obligatory element of vocational training. In effect, foreign language teachers working in such schools face the need to adjust their lessons to the specific specialisations, occupations, or work position. Considering the scarcity of teaching resources, the situation tends to be rather difficult.

A vast majority of language teachers in Polish schools are graduates of philology studies. The main aims of the field of studies is obtaining a good command of general language skills, as well as getting to know the culture of the country (or countries) where the target languages are spoken. Graduates are able to use the foreign language in its academic and literary version. Vocational/functional variants of the languages are taught to a limited extent. These are mainly the language of business, sometimes of tourism and the hotel industry, and occasionally the language of law (the latter is usually taught as an introduction to translation studies). In consequence, teachers starting work in technical schools preparing their students for jobs other than the ones mentioned, usually do not have the proper background to be able to teach foreign languages for specific purposes. They do not know the vocabulary nor the specific norms of communication in the particular line of business, not to mention the professional knowledge which influences communication in the particular work environment.

Not surprisingly, these teachers gladly accepted the possibilities offered by the Malopolska Educational Cloud (Małopolska Chmura Edukacyjna – MChE) project. The MChE is an innovative way of transferring knowledge from higher education institutions to upper secondary school students from

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the Małopolskie voivodship using information and telecommunication technologies. Between 2015-2020 6 higher education schools – including the Pedagogical University of Cracow – cooperate with 67 schools within 7 thematic fields. One of these areas is English for Specific Purposes (ESP; or rather English for Professional Purposes). Students from several schools take part in classes conducted remotely by an academic teacher of English from the Pedagogical University of Cracow (in the 2017 edition: Ewa Piskorz-Zarzycka). Thanks to cloud computing, they can communicate with the teacher and students from other schools. They can also use PC, tablet, or smartphone applications that make the learning process more attractive.

The terms of the call for participation in the project, however, resulted in one “virtual classroom” consisting of students preparing for different professions. Very often even the groups recruited within a single institution were not homogeneous. In the current edition of the project, one class comprises students of logistics, future landscape architects, florists, bookkeepers and tourism and hotel workers. In principle, this should have prevented effective work, or at least language training tailored precisely to the needs of students representing the particular specialties. Thanks to the established assumptions, however, it was not so.

2. Transversal competences as “typical” training

The very idea of teaching LSP is associated with the postulate of matching the course scheme to the expectations of the target group as a result of a careful analysis of their needs. This assumption is, however, difficult to meet in many aspects. Sometimes learners (especially pupils in vocational schools, including the ones participating in the MChE project) do not yet know the position, the type of company or even the specific profession they will work for. In this situation, language training precedes the existence of the need itself. The training institution therefore conducts the course not in the perspective of demand, but in the perspective of supply (distinction made by Mangiante and Parpette [4]). Education based on supply, as opposed to education based on demand (taking into consideration a needs analysis), is like clothing available in a number of standard sizes contrasted with tailor-made clothes produced specially for the individual client’s silhouette. It is based on “typical” competences, found in many different professions.

Such typical competences are useful not only when the recipient of the course does not yet know his/her actual future needs. They are also desirable for economic reasons – to increase the group of potential recipients of the course. The rate of return of training targeted at small groups of customers is low due to the high costs of work needed to produce the necessary materials. Dudley-Evans and St John [1] notice the time consumption of the process of preparing own materials: according to their estimates, one hour of an effective class requires up to 15 hours of teachers’ preparation time. This factor was also taken into account in the development of the concept of the Vocational English sector (JAZ) of the project, described later.

These transversal competences are related to the concept of “corporate communication”. They include editing official letters (correspondence, minutes, reports), telephone conversations, attending meetings. They are identical in different sectors or work positions, and their formation can begin at a very low level of language proficiency. This latter feature is also part of the boundary conditions of the JAZ MChE project. Finally, for the 30-hour block of classes the following issues were chosen:

- Enterprise forms
- Your future workplace
- Workplace rules and regulations: what I am not allowed and what I have to do
- Selling your product or services: the advantages of my product, the advantages of my services
- Business telephone communication: *I’m calling to...*
- Principles of written communication in the company (traditional mail and electronic communication): my “writing patterns”
- We are actively looking for work: my professional skills.

The listed transversal competences were to be introduced and discussed by the Pedagogical University lecturer. However, leaving it at that would certainly not be satisfactory for the participants of the project.

3. Transversal competences and the individualisation of education

The solutions we were looking for were to provide the best possible fit for the students’ expected future needs and, at the same time, meet the demands of practicality. To this end, the author of this text proposed a solution based on a pedagogical project, specifically – taking into account the technological dimension of the project – on WebQuest. A general introduction to the transversal



competences (relevant to a particular industry or sector, common to many occupations) takes place in lessons during which all students meet in a particular cloud class. These are essentially on-line lectures with the support of an academic staff member. In those introductory classes, the lecturer presents, for instance, the ways of drafting internal company rules and regulations (do's & don'ts). He/she also introduces the linguistic means for the realization of certain linguistic functions which are useful in a particular genre. We then have the time and space for doing some traditional language exercises. These general indications are further refined in more homogenous groups of students with the same professional profile.

In the quoted example, they then create rules and regulations in their respective types of business and the professional sector. To this end, they are encouraged to search for authentic texts representing the specific genre and to analyse them. The produced work is then evaluated by peers, but primarily by the "management" of the project, i.e. the teachers. Ideally, a native expert whose role it would be to evaluate the produced texts according to the sociolinguistic principles of a particular work environment should be part of the team of experts (we intend to introduce this idea in the subsequent editions).

The activities are spread over time. A full sequence consists of three meetings (see Fig. 1).

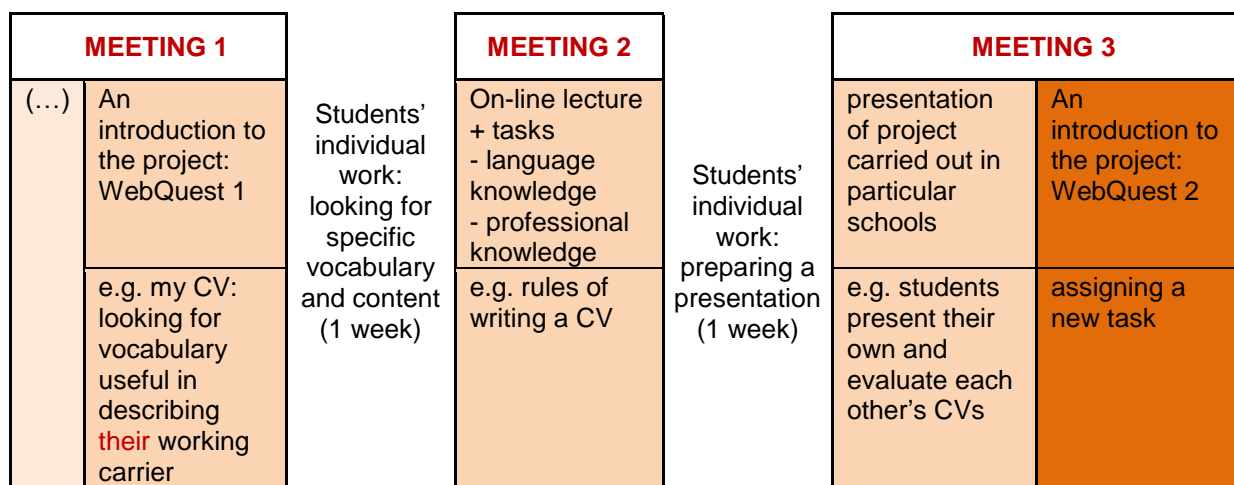


Fig. 1. The activities within a sequence of project meetings

When working on genres specific to the particular profession, students are encouraged not to focus solely on the search for specialized vocabulary relevant to their profession. In the case of describing their skills, the introduction also includes, for example, a reflection on how to boast about oneself without violating the rules of courtesy (based on, among others, Grice's Maxims).

Let us add that, in order to increase the students' motivation to engage in work, the lecturer (the aforementioned Ewa Zarzycka-Piskorz) proposed the gamification formula. Students can earn points in the competition with other teams. The Learner-centered Approach, applied to linguistic training for specific needs by such authors as Hutchinson and Waters [2] or Lehmann [3], has also been drawn on. These authors point out that there are other than strictly linguistic needs of the learners, i.e. the needs connected with the process itself. These include the need to reduce the stress and fatigue through gaming items.

Using the mind mapping application, students work on a text for an automated hotline (*for ... press 1*). To do this, they use vocabulary that describes the current occupational activities specific to the profession. For relaxation and to stimulate creativity, one of the digits is supposed to represent a strange request (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2 shows what future hotel employees came up with while working on the task.

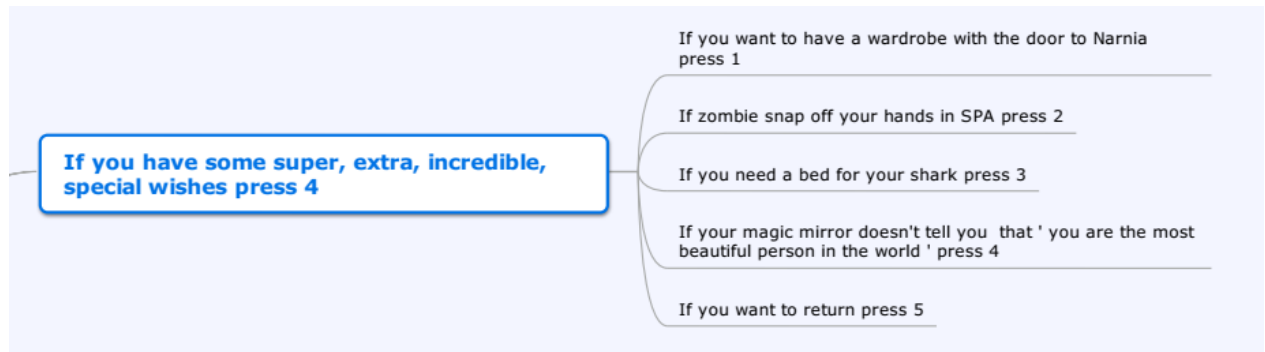


Fig. 2. Text for an automated hotline produced by students of secondary school of hotel administration

The project was positively evaluated by the pupils and teachers involved. An additional side effect of the project was the development of the participants' digital competence, in regard to a range of skills such as filmmaking with the use of dedicated applications. The documents developed in the project are collected, creating a gradual database, which the teacher can use in the subsequent years. In this way, the burden of creating teaching resources has to some extent been transferred to the pupils, saving the teacher's time and helping him/her to reduce the high workload mentioned in 2. As a result, the heterogeneity of the groups, instead of causing the project to fail, seems to have contributed to the development of a creative solution that brings satisfactory results.

References

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