Business English: Introducing Learning Apps into a Blended Learning Course

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Abstract

This Business English course in entrepreneurship goes beyond communicative language instruction and offers a course designed to introduce students to innovative thinking, entrepreneurship and sustainable business practices. About 120 students in their first year are enrolled as part of the required foreign language module in Business Management (B.Sc.). Each week students learn new concepts and terminology in sustainable business practices while applying the material in a simulation task-based course using English as a lingua franca. It prepares students to work in an international context while offering online components for autonomous learning. This 12-14 week course is designed in a student-centered and blended learning format with a flipped classroom approach. Through a grant from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research the "work&study project" will offer additional online materials by developing new educational apps to enhance autonomous language learning and making the app content available under the Creative Commons license. The research project focuses on offering new learning environments to enhance the opportunities for non-traditional students enrolled at Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences. This paper will focus on the development of the first apps and results of the first testing phase. It shows how game-based learning and elements of gamification were added for educational purposes to enhance teaching and learning processes that were already well established.

Keywords: *Learning App, Gamification, Business English, Blended Learning;*

Business English: A Simulation Course in Entrepreneurship

Figure 1 (Simulation Course Design)
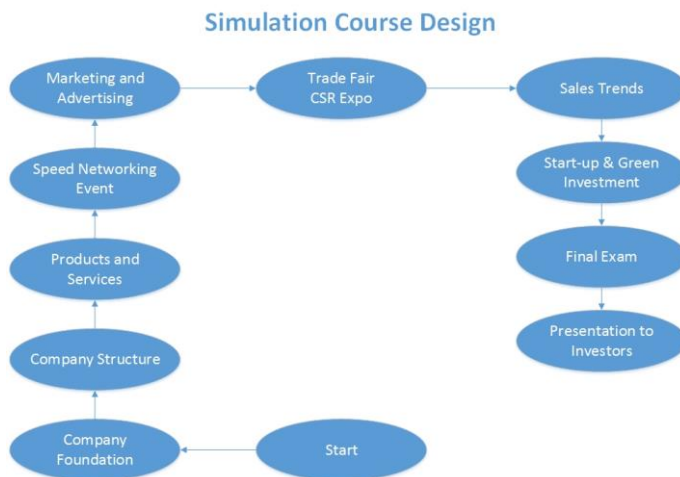
This content-based English language course in entrepreneurship goes beyond communicative language instruction and offers a course designed to introduce students to innovative thinking, entrepreneurship and sustainable business practices. Each week students learn new concepts and terminology in sustainable business practices while applying the material in a simulation task-based course using English as a lingua franca as seen in figure 1 (Simulation Course Design). Students are divided into groups of four to five entrepreneurs that start their own fictitious start–up company, create their own product or service, design their own

website with a sustainable business concept and sell their products at a simulated trade fair. At the end of the course, the start-up companies convince investors by presenting their business plans. The course is taught at the B2/C1 level of the European Common Framework of Reference for Languages. The course materials are based on textbooks and video material available under the Creative Commons license.

Business English is a required course in their first year of the Bachelors of Science in Management Sciences with roughly 120-130 students taking the course each semester. Each class has between 12 and 22 students that meet once a week for three hours. Each semester there are around five to six

classes. The course is designed to offer students access to authentic learning material and authentic communication scenarios. Furthermore, students are exposed to different media tools that they will encounter in the workforce. All students receive the same instructions, assignments on the course wiki that they can access at any time. There are many advantages of using a one-course wiki. For the teaching team the workload is divided up into special areas of expertise. One lecturer is responsible for creating the lesson plans, the other writes the exam and one person is responsible for the vocabulary exercises. The team does not teach together but each class is taught independently with the same material and the quality has risen significantly as each contributes to the entire course. Everyone can benefit from the quality provided by each expert and all use the same platforms. Furthermore, the use of a wiki offers an easy method to embed videos from YouTube on topics that are relevant and provides an easy way to write and update information by taking advantage of the collaborative writing tool.

Blended Learning and Flipped Classroom Approach: In 2009, the course was changed from a traditional lecture class into a blended learning format course that was re-designed in a student-centered and flipped classroom approach. Before attending the 3-hour lecture each week, students read authentic texts related to the topic and watch online video material that is then discussed in class. Most time in class is used for active learning by applying the language skills and course content to learn by doing their own tasks related to the relevant topic. The last 45-minutes are used for simulation time and students work in their simulation companies and the instructor monitors the interactions and supports if students need assistance in their collaborative assignments.

Creative Commons and Copyright: In order to offer students different online learning environments it was important to adhere to German copyright. Therefore it was important to use teaching material that was available under the creative commons license to permit the use of the work for creating specialized language learning exercises, quizzes and games that can be stored online. By 2014, many parts of the course material were rewritten using creative commons course book material. The teaching team transferred its in-class vocabulary exercises and games into the learning management system (LMS) to offer weekly quizzes as a review option that could be used as well for the final exam preparation. This extended the online components and offered students more review options and time to work on vocabulary autonomously. It also provides immediate feedback with the correct answer. This was also useful for students, who could not attend the lessons. In addition, German students are used to getting so-called "scripts" that can be purchased for a small copy fee at the university copy shop. These scripts are texts and slides that are used during the lecture and should mainly replace expensive course books. In many language classes our university also offers copies of language course books in the university library for our students to borrow so that they do not have to purchase the book themselves. With the use of creative commons course material, we were able to provide the newly created course material "script" as a download without having to worry about any infringement on copyright. This also gives us the opportunity to create tailor-made vocabulary exercises that correspond to the course content for each session. These exercises were then offered on our learning management system (LMS), known as ILIAS. ILIAS is a German open source LMS that is used by many German universities (https://www.ilias.de/).

Mobile Learning App (Business English Applied – HBRS)
Mobile learning and the use of mobile apps for courses are still not that common. There are a few developers that have created tools to enable course apps to be designed for personalized courses as described in the NMC Horizon Project Strategic Brief 2016 [1]. Through a grant from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research the "work&study project" will offer additional online materials by developing new educational apps to enhance autonomous language learning and making the app content available under the Creative Commons license. The research project focuses on offering new learning environments to enhance the opportunities for non-traditional students enrolled at Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences. The aim was to offer a mobile version app of the course comprised of smaller app exercises that were previously only offered on the LMS. The researchers have developed a new approach that provides apps that are embedded in the browser and not in an LMS itself [2]. So far in e-learning the platform is where an exercise is stored and it cannot easily be used in different platforms or transferred to different institutions or courses if they are not all using the same platform. With the new modular apps there is no longer a restriction to use one singular platform as the app can be embedded in any website browser. The Client-side Component

Model (CCM) was developed to run web components in the browser itself. These web components can be combined or used in a Lego-style system that enables teachers to create their own online material without using an LMS. The content can be used in many different browser settings and can replace an LMS [3]. This is also very interesting for many freelance teachers as they can create and use their own apps.

Figure 2 (Screenshot of Mobile App)
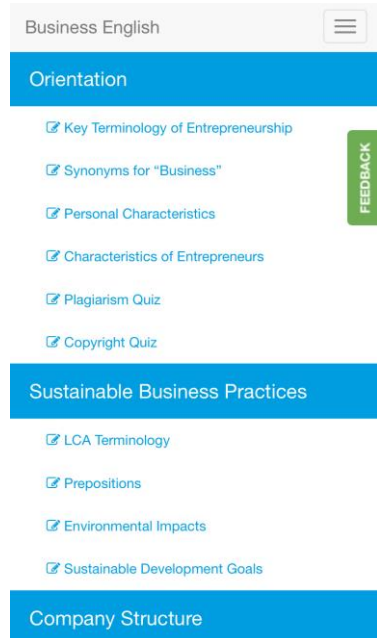
In June 2018 the first phase of the tailor-made apps for the Business English course were designed using the material from the original exercises stored on the university LMS. The newly created app exercises were placed directly into the course wiki. The students tested the apps and gave immediate feedback to the developers in person directly in class. 75% preferred to use the app to the original paper version quizzes offered in class. All apps worked with the recent iPhones and iPad models. Students also criticized having to retype correct answers if they had to redo the quiz itself. The students enjoyed using their mobile phones for the quizzes and only a few students preferred to work on their laptops and tablets. However, the layout needs to be adjusted to the mobile format as some exercises were easily done on paper and not on the mobile phones. With the use of mobile devices, the questions and design needed to be adjusted to reflect the restrictions in the small screen and the use of scrolling up and down. Students also wanted to have a summary of the score at the end of the screen (i.e. 5 out 7 correct) and there were some devices that did not display the information as intended. These issues were resolved in the second phase of testing that took place at the beginning of December 2017. Again, all 120 students were asked to use the app with their own device. In most cases, the students used their mobile device to complete the exercises. By October 2018 the complete course app is being launched. As seen in figure 2 the course app is now offered in a completed mobile app version which includes all exercises from the script directly in the Business English App that can be accessed with a link. There is also a feedback feature where students can quickly type in issues that they would like to immediately share with the app developers.

Learning analytics and statistics will be developed in the next testing phase starting at the end of 2018. Then students will be able to access a detailed dashboard of their own assessment and can monitor their own rate of performance. This includes the possibilities of checking the time spent on an assignment, but also the number of tries it took to get the correct answer compared to their classmates by using pseudonym names to protect the personal data of students. Furthermore, different other statistical features will be added (e.g. bar charts that can be created easily to give an overview of the entire course and the statistics of individual performance on specific questions in relation to the entire number of students that completed the task). The student learning analytics can be accessed by the students and is also entirely student-driven.

Conclusion: Students are highly motivated in this student-centered course and have provided positive feedback on the use of the wikis and the new learning apps. The teaching staff is also keen on the idea of being able to create individual learning apps that can be layered and combined in different other larger components which is possible through the modular web components (ccm). We are still in the developing stage, but the first test phases have been successfully completed.

References

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