Integrating Microsoft Teams into English for Specific Purposes Course for Future Learning: A New Business English course Concept

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Abstract

What is a future scenario of English language teaching at Universities of Applied Sciences like? One of the essential shifts in English language teaching in connection to the general trend of informationalism is emphasizing learners' skills in online navigation, hypermedia analysis and all types of online communication; project-based content with possibilities of situational practice and critical thinking is to be the core of the new curriculum [8]. In addition, this change challenges English teachers to choose new tools to enhance English language learning for specific purposes. The present paper addresses the vital needs of the future English language teaching curriculum in the form of proposal for Business English course concept around project-based communication enabled through exploiting Microsoft Teams as a course platform.

Keywords: *English for specific purposes (Business), Project-based communication, Microsoft Teams, Business-challenge simulation.*

1. Introduction

Maintaining relationships within organizations and in the business environment outside organizations is crucial and cannot be implemented without video-conferencing, real-time communication and collaboration tools among others [4]. The goal of English for Specific Purposes courses is to teach the skills that will be useful in the future profession [7]. In addition to that, the principles of English for Specific Purposes concept should be followed when choosing applications for language studies, i.e. *needs as a basis, pragmatism, efficiency, cost-effectivity and functionality* [1]. In other words, one needs to use the same tools in English language courses as the ones that are used in the real world by organizations in their professional communication.

The process of searching for the correct tools coincided with the development of Teams-application by Microsoft as a tool for more efficient collaborative communication at work place. Quick communication, transparent teamwork, mind maps, news, sharing, video calls and recording – are some of the features that make Microsoft Teams be the choice for the current concept. This solution posed further questions to answer. The use of such an application in the English for specific purposes course should be meaningful; the meaning can be achieved through correctly chosen content. Belcher, D. (2006) claims that content can be interpreted differently. Content can mean specific themes of interest, relevant to the studied subject, or it can mean connection to the professional discourse community through, for example, business cases [1]. What if students receive a chance to involve into real professional communication around one concrete project for the length of the whole course?

2. Business challenge as professional content

In the pilot version of the course, the business challenge is provided by a Dutch company and is built around a pet food product that implements principles of circular economy, responsibility and sustainability. The product does exist, though the company needs to develop the whole concept behind it; it needs visual identity, customer analysis, future market analysis and research on plausible export channels.

In this context, students are required to be involved in teamwork and actively prepare this product for export to Finland. Thus, English for Specific purposes course can be integrated with such professional courses as International Selling, Product Conceptualization, Customer Project or other courses on entrepreneurship and innovation, linking language and subject-area classes [1].

From the very beginning, the students simulate related business activities on bringing the product into the new market. According to Drury-Grogan and Russ (2013), simulations allow students to explore how they might manage in different business communication situations.

3. Pedagogical rationale

The pedgagocial benefits of simulations, including cognitive, affective and kinesthetic engagement were widely discussed in the literature [5]. Based on the study by Drury-Grogan and Russ (2013), students improve teamwork skills, learn to manage stress, understand real-life practices, and develop effectiveness of communication.

Contemporary business world sets new high demands to the use of English language. People at work places find themselves in situations when they need to produce persuasive messages, analytically interpret information, and implement complex cooperation in English. Warschauer (2000) argues that advanced argumentation and persuasion skills can be developed in a most effecient way through project-based approaches, that give the students opportunity to practice sophisticated skills of their future careers. [8]

On the whole, the pedagagical rationale of the course concept rests on the elements, suggested by the New London Group in 1996 : *immersion in situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice.* [8]

In addition to that, new technologies are keys to effective learning: they can be helpful in creating the authentic learning activities in authentic situations, involving authentic language. These opportunities positively influence student motivation and facilitate student engagement due to opportunities of constructing knowledge and building communities. [6]

3.1 Learning modules

The course is designed around seven thematic modules: the course runs for 14 weeks and each module runs for 2 weeks. Table 1 demonstrates an example of possible interrelation of the topical modules of innovation courses and the language course concept under development. Each module concentrates on subject related questions while language focus and tasks in the end of each module are chosen to logically fit the subject areas. Warschauer (2000) claims that projects-based courses might involve individual tasks, though the greatest benefit of project-based pedagogy is in its critical and transformative practice. Following this advice, the current course includes individual assignments (to see individual progress of each student for the purposes of final evaluation) and big amount of collaboration, including collaboration online, conveniently enabled by Microsoft Teams. [8]

Table 1. Possibilities for linking language and innovation courses

Module	Content	Language focus	Tasks
Module 1. Introduce your team	- Creative team building	- Vocabulary on education, professional skills and abilities - Getting started: introductions and team building	- Individual Video CV of each group member - Team Profile
Module 2. Introducing the company		- Presentation skills - Trends and figures	- Case company presentation
Module 3. Our product	- Concept development - Product development - Story behind the product	- Summary writing - Vocabulary on telling about a product	- Individual summary of an article on the topic in question - Minutes of meetings
Module 4. Our customer	- Final customer profile - Customer research	- Carrying out a survey - Other market research forms	- A short report on findings

Module 5. Bringing the stories together	- Value Proposition Canvas - Customer problem solving	- Making logical connections	- Product concept and the story behind it ready
Module 6. New Market	- Seizing opportunities - Environment - Culture - Channels	- Making suggestions - Negotiations skills	- Negotiations simulation
Module 7. Business Model	- Business model of the project for the Finnish market	- Argumentation skills	- Pitch it

3.2. Language skills

The chosen approach allows reaching continuous synergy between reading and writing activities raising the students' skills in both domains to a new level. As it has been fairly noted summarizing or synthesizing activities reveal students' abilities in a more profound way and let students see their own potential to work with English language sources purposefully. [1]

However, the course utilizes benefits of new technological solutions: Microsoft Teams application enables authentic interaction to be a part of curriculum when creating *participatory learning communities* [1]. In the present case, there is real-word business problem to address, research, develop and report on in different contexts of oral and written communication. The case company representatives are there to answer the students' questions and support them in their ideas, i.e. students get involved into email correspondence, skype-calls, short messages and telephone calls, training the targeted language skills in the natural environment. In addition, one of the requirement for every module is keeping minutes of all the meetings the students have, requiring that every time a different team member is the one responsible for the minutes.

3.3. Assessment

As it was mentioned earlier, the course includes individual and team assignments to make summative assessment of each individual student possible, according to their learning process [2]. The chosen format of the course assumes implementation of formative assessment [2] in the run of the course. Module structure of the course enables in-progress assessment in the formal and informal way.

Microsoft Teams as a platform makes students possible to be in immediate contact with the teacher when they feel they need support and feedback, when they have doubts and feel lost. The teacher's role is to react to these situations and through formative assessment adjust their instruction correspondingly [2]. The open character of the platform provides possibilities for qualitative peer review. Formative assessment prepares a basis for student self-assessment [2] that is the final component of the course.

4. "Mashup" in Microsoft Teams

The use of the term "Mashup" is not a mistake and the term is used on purpose: in order to give a metaphoric description of Microsoft Teams application as a tool. Microsoft Teams is smart, is full of hidden channels and buttons, is linked to dozens of applications and functionalities. Ways, in which, a language teacher would like to creatively integrate it into language courses are numerous and depend on different methodologies and personalities.
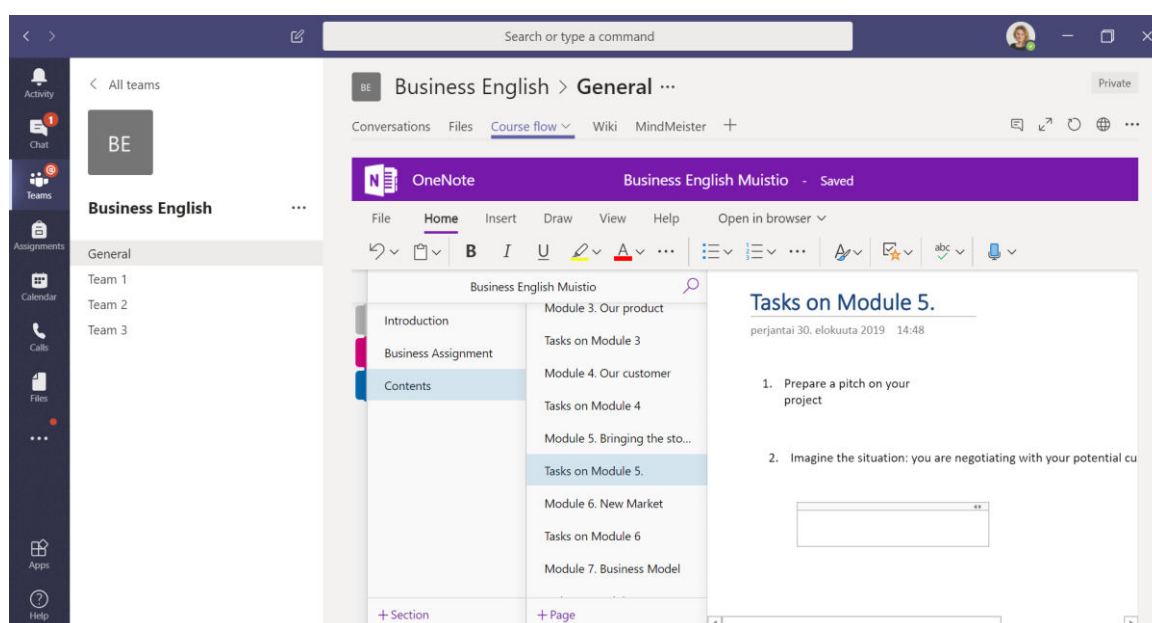
Figure 1. Workpage of the Business English course draft in Microsoft Teams

In the current course, OneNote document is an electronic guide for the students (Figure 1). Online video meetings are possible; it is possible to record them and to share. This tool is ideal for training negotiation skills if face-to-face option is not possible. Computer-mediated communication is an integral part of Microsoft Teams. MindMeister application, Minutes of meetings, direct links to world news, Wiki, Quizlet, Padlet: lots of freedom to do a unique Mashup for specific purposes.

6. Conclusion

Microsoft Teams is one of the new technological tools currently becoming more and more acquired by organisations. Is it really a good platform for language courses? When using it, it is good not to be blown away by "mashup" possibiities, there should be clarity and logic in applications use, that should answer the objectives of the course.

It has a great potential only when the content of the course provides a meaningful context for using it. This makes content and language integration the main prerequisite of successful use of the platform. Without the motivating content, project or challenge, using Microsoft Teams might create barriers rather than opportunities for lanaguage proficiency.

The current concept discussed introduction of a real-life business challenge from an existing company with existing targets for new markets. To make this concept sustainable, it is important to have a certain network or community of businesses ready to cooperate with univeristies of applied sciences for long-term involvement.

Overall, the suggested concept might be further applied to the new language curriculum of 2020 and the new study models that implement the best principles of CLIL.

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