

Book review

Teaching Academic and Professional English Online, Editors: Isabel González-Pueyo, Carmen Foz Gil, Mercedes Jaime Siso, and María José Luzón Marco.
Teaching Academic and Professional English Online Peter Lang, 2009 228 pages
42.50 euros (plus VAT, where payable) ISBN: 978-3-03911-582-2

This volume, edited by four members of staff of the University of Zaragoza, brings together contributors from Spain, Italy, Austria and Poland, to describe a range of ways in which online environments are used for the delivery of courses in English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes in their institutions.

At first sight, the link between CALL and the teaching of languages for specific purposes may seem tenuous. But a rationale for it is supplied by Ana Gimeno Sanz, who suggests that, while those studying English at beginners' level may benefit most from classroom-based learning, more advanced learners are sufficiently motivated to engage profitably in independent study using the kind of online environments to which this volume is chiefly dedicated (see p. 83). Another factor militating for this form of delivery is the often highly specialized nature of ESP learners' needs at advanced level which means that teachers with the ideal mix of disciplinary knowledge, specialized second language proficiency and pedagogic skills are in short supply. Though the investment involved in developing online solutions can be sizeable, these also bring with them substantial benefits, in that, once constructed, they (a) have a certain amount of durability and (b) enable learners to negotiate a personalized pathway through the materials and activities made available by them. Given the role of English as a Lingua Franca in a broad range of academic, commercial and technical sectors, the only surprise may be that they are not more numerous.

The book's introductory chapter, 'Learning Academic and Professional English Online: Integrating Technology, Language Learning and Disciplinary Knowledge' is authored by one of its four editors, María José Luzon Marco. In it she explores a range of potential positives to be derived from online learning environments, from fostering learner autonomy and new forms of literacy to offering flexible access to authentic materials and learner interaction. She then offers some design principles for online language learning drawing on a combination of thinking about learner autonomy, CALL and recent theories of SLA. Finally Luzon provides a brief history of the development of online learning environments, from the late 90s to the present day, ranging from in-house developments at the Universities of Warwick and Hull,

to the advent of proprietary Virtual Learning Environments such as Blackboard, Web CT and Moodle. She is critical of the “one size fits all” nature of the latter. While lamenting the scarcity of research into the effectiveness of online environments for learning ESP, Luzón praises ESP teachers for their readiness to overcome lack of familiarity with new technologies to explore the use of ICT for the benefit of their students. She concludes by suggesting that most of the studies in this volume deal in fact with blended learning and underlines the level of planning and tutor support needed to achieve a successful blend of online and face-to-face modes.

The second chapter of the volume is entitled ‘The Potential of Blended Learning Environments in Terms of Beneficial Language Learning Conditions’. Its author is Ruth Trinder. It stands out as being based on quantitative research, namely a large-scale questionnaire survey of reaction to studying a first level ESP class at *Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien* in two alternative delivery modes (teacher-fronted lectures versus the Online English Mentor). While this would not perhaps be universally accepted as blended learning (the two modes seem to have been available as alternatives, rather than in an actual blend) Trinder’s conclusions are measured, if sometimes surprising. Among other things she reports that

- Students felt they had better opportunities for negotiation of meaning in the CALL environment;
- Students found the tasks they undertook in the classroom more authentic and motivating;
- Students felt that they have more control in an online environment;
- Students were less worried about making errors, when learning online;
- Students felt that they got more feedback on their progress in the online environment (see pp. 52–3).

Following this, several chapters of the book describe a range of approaches to the use of online environments for ESP learning. Two of them, authored by Maria Camino Bueno Alastuey and Philippa Mungra report the application of course management systems to particular disciplinary contexts, charting the use made of Web CT and Blackboard to deliver courses in English for Agriculture at the Public University of Navarre and final year writing classes at Rome University Medical School, respectively. Two other chapters detail significant technical innovations. The first is the account of the design and development of an in-house learning environment *Quantum Leap*, for the delivery of a course in EAP at the *Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya*, which is offered by Elisabet Arnó Macià, Carmen Rueda Ramos and Antonia Soler Cervera. Even more adventurous is the development of *Ingenio*, an authoring shell for the creation of courses in English for Engineering at the *Universidad Politècnica de Valencia*, which is described by Ana Gimeno Sanz. Given the highly diverse linguistic needs of students in different branches of Engineering, this venturesome project makes eminent sense.

Two further chapters stand out as having adopted approaches to the use of ICT which require a degree of commitment on the part of learners to make them work. One of them, by Jaroslaw Krajka, of the *Szkola Wyzsza Psychologii Społecznej*, in Warsaw, explores the potential of discovery learning, as a means of compensating for the unavailability of textbooks for teaching English to students in highly specialized

disciplines. Krajka proposes using a Moodle-based web concordancer to interrogate online language corpora, thus adding a new dimension to an approach that was first promulgated in the 1980s and 1990s by Tim Johns and Chris Tribble. Among the advantages he claims for such an approach, are that it actively engages learners and encourages them to identify recurrent patterns and formulate their own rules, thereby developing their capacity for inductive reasoning. One disadvantage is the relative complexity of the approach, which means that learners require some training in concordancer use before they are able to apply corpus consultation procedures to the actual task of language learning. Krajka also concedes that some constraints are imposed by the limitations of Moodle itself as a learning management system. Krajka reports having devised a course in corpus-based learning for trainee ESP teachers. This particular approach may indeed perhaps be more useful as a tool in their pedagogic armoury than for direct application by ESP learners themselves.

Another approach to the active engagement of learners is reported by Antonella Elia of the Faculty of Languages at the *Università degli Studi di Napoli l'Orientale*. Her chapter bears the enigmatic and ungainly title 'Can a Collaborative *Wiki Weblish Dictionary* Project help Academic Writing of ICT Language Learners?' The project reported by Elia is distinct from most other initiatives dealt with in this volume, in that, rather than using a course or learning management system, or undertaking the development of in-house software it takes a rather simpler route, by capitalizing on the inventive application of a widely available generic Web 2.0 tool. Secondly, though wikis are inherently collaborative, it is the design of the task, rather than the nature of the environment which works most effectively to ensure that this potential for collaboration is maximized.

Weblish, as Elia explains, is the hybrid, half spoken, half written genre of English commonly employed by users of the World Wide Web. The task given to her learners is to work together, in groups of six, over the course of an academic year, to compile a bilingual English-Italian dictionary of Weblish. This involves categorizing entries according to whether they belong (a) to general slang, (b) to the informal jargon favoured by web-users, or (c) to the formal technical terminology of computer science and information technology. The rationale is that since many of the learners in question will have access to English primarily by surfing the Web, it is their competence in respect of the particular language variety they will encounter there that needs to be developed. But the potential benefits of the task are considerably broader than this. The six aims listed by Elia can be paraphrased as being:

- to familiarize students with Internet-influenced linguistic trends;
- to enhance student competence in the use of different registers and varieties of English;
- to develop their lexical and grammatical knowledge as a resource for their academic writing;
- to improve their motivation by engaging them in authentic online searching;
- to familiarize them with the co-authoring opportunities offered by Web 2.0;
- to engage them actively in the collaborative construction of an experimental dictionary. (see pp. 169–170)

Whether all of these were achieved, the reader cannot know. Elia reports having administered an end-of-project questionnaire to her students. Their responses are claimed to be positive, but there is no detailed analysis of the results. What is particularly interesting about this initiative, however, is the kind of paradigm shift it represents. The transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 is accompanied by a number of transformations. Elia's learners are no longer consumers of content; they have become its creators. And while most of the projects reported in this volume appear to associate the effective delivery of online study with the individualization of the learning experience, Elia's creation of an apparently successful task-based learning community has its roots instead in a view of learning as a social and collaborative activity¹.

Teaching Academic and Professional English Online offers evidence of an interesting variety of approaches to the use of ICT in teaching ESP. Each contributor makes a number of claims for his or her approach. But the diversity on display may be both a strength and a weakness. For, since the volume is dedicated largely to description, there is little way of knowing which of the projects described really are effective, nor whether the claims made by authors can be substantiated, nor indeed which paradigm of online learning is to be espoused. Only when all the projects in question have been subjected to rigorous evaluation will this become more apparent. In the process, variety may diminish, as certainty – or at least a degree of conviction – emerges.

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¹ For an account of task-based learning communities and the view of learning which underpins them, see Riel, M. and Polin, L, 'Online Learning Communities: Common Ground and Critical Differences in Designing Technical Environments', in *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*. Edited by S. A. Barab, R. Kling and J. H. Gray Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 pp. 16–50.