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CONVENTIONAL ESP ACTIVITIES IN A DIGITAL FORMAT

The paper presents the author's experience of teaching English online to students majoring in Political Science and International Relations. It considers online modes of developing various language skills as compared with instruction in a traditional classroom. It also addresses the merits and demerits of online teaching, in particular, e-learning platforms like Moodle and Zoom, as well as the effects of new ICTs on university students' performance.

Key words: *ESP (Political English), language skills development, e-learning, learning management systems, Moodle, Zoom*

In the age of information technologies it has become commonplace for companies and educational institutions to provide various courses and trainings through the Internet. Many universities across the globe have designed digital educational platforms to supplement and aid traditional instruction practices. However, the recent necessity of social distancing as a means of combating COVID-19 has resulted in their switching to digital platforms completely (at least temporarily) to continue to provide effective education to the enrolled students.

In Armenia, schools and universities predominantly have chosen to teach through Zoom.us – a user-friendly platform for video and audio conferencing, which does not require a lot of specific knowledge or skills to operate. At the same time, Yerevan State University's e-learning website (www.e-learning.y-su) has incorporated a learning management system (LMS), namely Moodle, which it has already been using successfully for the past few years to create and store instructional resources and activities, as well as keep track of students' performance. Among other merits of Moodle are:

- ample opportunities for the teacher to provide versatility of both content and media all in one place while saving on printing costs;

- diversity of practice tasks and real-world scenarios, including ones that teach transferrable skills;
- ways to ensure increased learners' involvement by encouraging initiative, creativity, individual and group projects and allowing remote and mobile access;
- a motivational tool in terms of allowing each learner to proceed at an individual pace and giving him/her multiple chances to complete the tasks (successfully) and master the material.

Although the digital format opens up exciting opportunities to make the teaching content and methods more practical and applicable for the real world, it also raises considerable challenges for teachers and students alike, particularly in case of practical disciplines, such as foreign languages and LSP. Putting aside the technical difficulties in Armenia (inadequacy of the Internet connection provision throughout the country, limited availability of computers in many households, relative unpreparedness of both teaching staff and students), digitalized foreign language classes cannot replace real-life communication, build a sense of community and ensure exchange of extra- and paralinguistic information, which constitute the vital part of human interaction.

Given that online education is gaining pace and becoming a strategic necessity in the 21st century, foreign language teachers should consider how to minimize its potential negative impacts on the quality of learning and think of the ways to use the challenges for the learners' benefit. In this paper, I shall present the findings from my one-term-long practical work through Zoom and Moodle and my vision of how conventional LSP activities (with the focus on English for Political Science and International Relations) can be adapted to the new format.

One distinctive feature of LMS is that they make the tedious process of constructing practice exercises, tests and quizzes fun and creative for the course designer, although it should be admitted that the process can be laborious for those unfamiliar with the design tools. The good news is that once created, the quizzes can be stored for multiple future reuses. There is a considerable variety of question types the teacher can employ depending on the class level and interests. YSU Moodle allows making tasks for *dragging and dropping into text/onto image, matching, multiple choice, short answer matching, selecting missing words, identifying true or false answers*, and others. A more sophisticated tool H5P offers interactive media experience by empowering the creation of interactive and colourful content, such as charts, collages, virtual tours, various games, flashcards, as well as the previously mentioned task types. These activities serve many purposes, from vocabulary drill to reading / listening comprehension check. My one-term-long online observations allow me to conclude that these tasks are more eagerly accomplished in an online format than on the paper-and-pencil layout. It

seems to be more appealing for students to click on the answers than to tick them manually. The activities are self-correcting and self-assessing, so the teacher is freed from the arduous duty of checking up individual works. Moreover, depending on the teacher's preferences, the activities can be set up to give students a multiple attempt opportunity until they reach the desired learning outcome. At the same time, Moodle allows adding assignments such as translation, essay writing, written projects, term-papers and the like, which, regrettably, should be corrected and assessed individually.

Despite a good selection of practice and quiz task types on Moodle, the platform might be insufficient for instructors who desire to further diversify their teaching inventory. Here other digital apps step in to meet the needs of a scrupulous teacher, among them user-friendly websites <https://wordwall.net/>, which enables creating additional resources and teaching games, <https://learningapps.org/>, which, among many other interactive activities, could be helpful in designing crossword puzzles, <https://teachable.com/> with its multiple content-creating tools, *Thinglink* – to create interactive images, videos and other multimedia resources, *Nearpod* – to enrich lessons with informative and interactive assessment activities, *Squigl* – to transform speech or text into animated videos.

In fact, some of the traditional tasks that I used to assign in a face-to-face classroom /Karapetyan, 2012/ cannot be performed online, while others can be replaced with their digital variations. Admittedly, these virtual activities are not equivalent to traditional ones, since live face-to-face interaction has no substitutes, but in some way or another they can actually serve to the learners' advantage in a time of crisis.

Political vocabulary build-up and revision

Modifications should be made in the methods of teaching and practising specialized vocabulary. For example, if I assign the students one of my traditional warm-up activities, namely, jotting down topical vocabulary in a set time frame and then reading it aloud to eliminate the repeated units and determine the winner, I might not be convinced that the students will not be cheating. Thus, the method may be ineffective. Similarly, in an online class, an “active learning” activity with a physical game (such as eliciting an answer from a target peer by throwing him/her a ping pong /Karapetyan, 2012: 193/) will be inappropriate.

What does work in an online classroom environment is an orally conducted vocabulary review, whether with the class as a whole or in small groups. Some e-learning apps, including the Zoom and Big Blue Button, available on Moodle, offer the breakout rooms function, which divides the class into smaller groups for working together as a team. In one activity, I texted each group a set of new vocabulary items or terms which the students were to process in 5 to 7 minutes

surfing the Internet for the meanings, pronunciation and sentences that demonstrate each item in use. Then each group shared their findings with the class. This task develops in students multiple skills and qualities, such as the ability to work both independently and in groups selecting and processing information, a sense of responsibility for their portion of work, self-confidence, collaboration skills and a team spirit.

Authentic texts on political theories and ideologies are saturated with technical vocabulary and hence difficult to apprehend. What we teachers are expected to do is to adjust to the needs and concerns of our students by enhancing the authentic materials by interactive and student-oriented activities and resources. One of such valuable resources that I have designed to guide my students in their first steps in Political Science is a glossary of unit-based collocations with their Armenian equivalents, which helps them to embark on their tour of the Political English world in the conditions of the flipped classroom. There exist numerous long-established methods to measure their progress, from translation method to constructing sentences, but LMS, including Moodle, give the learners a fresh outlook on ordinary exercises, while the teacher finds a lot of room for creative solutions. For instance, a regular *Multiple Choice* task can be designed with pictures by means of a *Drag and Drop* tool.

For daily vocabulary reviews, I found it effective to ask the class to brainstorm collocations for specific words, orally complete topical expressions, suggest synonyms, antonyms, definitions, and make sentences. This was done in a fast mode (up to 10 minutes) to check the overall preparedness or, if the students were not well-prepared, at least to refresh their memory. Another task that I found suitable for online practice was discussion aided with a vocabulary list, which I posted along with the topic before the lesson to stimulate prior preparation. For an individual checkup we used a digital variation of a face-to-face activity with students challenging their peers to respond.

For professional vocabulary practice and enrichment, however, role-plays, simulations, case-studies and problem solving remain by far the best and unsurpassed methods. These also promote all other competences and skills, especially professional communication skills and, therefore, we shall consider some of them in detail in the corresponding section of this paper.

Reading Comprehension Development

Online reading comprehension and practice activities do not very much differ from the conventional ways of developing reading skills, and e-classroom can be easily adapted to our students' learning needs. With the complexity of professional texts (especially for the freshmen, who are unfamiliar both with political phenomena and vocabulary), a guided practice still seems best, with pre-

reading tasks, reading strategies development and post-reading activities. Before a passage is read carefully as a home assignment, the teacher is to enhance students' background knowledge related to the content. The interactive whiteboard on Moodle and Zoom can be helpful for mind-mapping and brainstorming ideas, i.e. the teacher can draw and fill in the mind-maps as students brainstorm, or s/he can allow students to fill in the mind-maps themselves (although the latter option is claimed to be better avoided /<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQ4-wrwHAxk/>). But for students participating in class via mobile phones, reading to get the main idea or specific details may become a bit challenging as skimming and scanning through tiny phone screens takes extra time and effort.

Yet, the post-reading stage requires most attention. In my past experience of online teaching, I often had to work with webcams off since the Internet connection was rather poor; thus some students were tempted to cheat by reading the material right from the textbook or from its e-version because I could not watch them. To prevent this, I modified my text retelling strategies. I used to ask them to summarize the text, including their own ideas where relevant. Unfortunately, for many students, to summarize means to shorten the passage by omitting unnecessary sentences. Therefore, I now get each student to give the summary of a small section of the text, which cannot be shortened any further. I also prepare a set of text-related questions not only to check comprehension but also to provoke a discussion and make students express their identity. Considering that many students continue to cite sentences from the text, I direct the focus on paraphrasing tasks. Moodle tools can be fairly helpful in designing various reading comprehension and paraphrasing drills, such as *choosing the sentence that expresses the same meaning as the original, connecting two parts of paraphrased sentences from the text, choosing the right ending for a sentence, selecting the best summary, putting ideas/events in order*, etc. As a result, more students seem able to tell the most important ideas from the text in their own wording. More autonomous and inquisitive, senior students respond to the readings in other ways too, providing comments, expressing disagreement, making inferences about missing information, extending the ideas to real life situations, and comparing/contrasting the information to other sources.

With higher-level students I also find it possible to follow the jigsaw method, which I successfully employed in a traditional classroom /Karapetyan, 2012: 194/. The breakout rooms allow small groups to work separately to “put together” the reading “puzzle”, with each member responsible for one part of the passage to be communicated to the rest of the group. Additionally, in order to increase comprehension and deeper understanding of political texts, I create virtual situations or problems that should be dealt with using the target text information

and vocabulary. These activities help to visualize the information or events described. Thus, when studying about issue voting my second-year students are divided into different “issue publics” and make imaginary electoral choices. Alternatively, when my freshmen study about terrorism I put them in an imaginary situation where they should act on the part of the country’s leader to respond to terrorists’ ransom demand for 2000 hostages. Such simulations only benefit from the online environment.

To encourage supplementary in-class reading, I may assign each student a topic for brief research (e.g. “The UN’s main functions” or “The role of the Berlin Wall in politics”); then they share the findings with the class. In a traditional classroom, students need Internet connection to access the World Wide Web via their mobiles, but already being online for a live class makes their search fast, convenient and effective.

Listening Comprehension Development

Listening synchronously in an online class is inconvenient but not impossible. Although not perfectly, the recording played back on the teacher’s computer is audible to the students at the other end, as long as there is no background noise. If there is an urgent need to do listening activities during the virtual class, by far the best result can be reached with everyone’s microphones turned off so as to eliminate noise interference. Yet, e-learning platforms provide access to the teacher’s uploaded audio and video resources and activities 24/7, so learners are free to do the assignments whenever and wherever they wish. They can also playback as many times as necessary to accomplish the tasks successfully. Moreover, e-learning serves Political English purposes in that students can find a whole wealth of authentic multimedia resources, including interviews with public officials, political candidates and analysts, political news broadcasts, presidential and public speeches, debates, explanation for political phenomena, which are deficient on instructional audio- and video-CDs and DVDs, as opposed to abundant materials for English in other professional fields. These are available in various language proficiency levels, so every teacher can find useful sources for their students’ needs.

Listening activities that can be designed on Moodle range from simple *short answer questions* and *fill-in the missing words while listening* to more sophisticated *written analyses* and *summaries* of the passage. In turn, synchronous listening/viewing can stimulate an extended discussion. I also encourage my students to explore the subject matter further watching more videos which they will find relevant and thought-provoking and later report to the class. Admittedly, students making their own decisions have an enhanced motivation to explore the

topic in depth and they also become more independent learners /Huiwei, 2012: 843/.

Writing Practice

For political English purposes, it is vital to build learners' independent thinking and writing skills. With lower-level learners I start with guided short comments; then we focus on persuasive (opinion, problem-solution, agree-disagree, compare and contrast) essay writing, gradually upgrading to short group projects, speechwriting and brief political analyses. Simultaneously, I remain loyal to the grammar-translation method to help my students achieve grammatical accuracy and a good vocabulary range. Regrettably, such activities cannot be automatically checked by e-learning apps and require the teacher's individual attention to each piece of writing. The bright side is that learning management systems allow structuring activities in such a way that students can check and assess their peers, whereas the teacher can further assess the assessors. One of the rewarding activities I involve my freshmen in is peer translation. First, each student makes up 5 Armenian sentences using my collocation glossary and sends them to a target peer for translating into English. The translated sentences are then addressed to another peer, who reviews and amends them. Eventually, the instructor receives the final copies and grades both students.

E-learning brings numerous benefits to teaching writing. Take, for instance, the screen-sharing function, which enables a teacher to review and assess students' writing "in front of their eyes", just like it can happen in a face-to-face class. Synchronous and joint consideration of written pieces allows editing, correcting or improving the work collaboratively. In the meantime, the writer has an opportunity to clarify vague ideas and get the teacher's hints on how they can be expressed more clearly and accurately. In a small class, this approach can be used for process writing, where a student and a teacher work on producing a written text together, and it can as well benefit the other students participating in the activity. On the other hand, asynchronously reviewed works contain the teacher's detailed comments and suggestions, which learners can consider by themselves at any time, save them for future reference and resubmit their revised works.

Despite many advantages, an alarming tendency that has been increasing fast with the advent of the internet is plagiarism. Machine translation has brought about another form of cheating as well. Students' essays are often "compiled" or completely copied from the existing essays online, or, at best, they are independently written in the native language and then google-translated into English. Currently, there seems to be no workable solution to the problem: checking the works through anti-plagiarism software does not always produce plausible results as creative students manage to somehow bypass the program. At

the same time, there are no ways to prevent machine translation but to raise learners' consciousness or enhance the translation task by requiring two or more alternative translations for each sentence.

Lastly, one of the upsides of technology-enhanced learning platforms is that they offer discussion forums, where students (and their course teacher) can initiate a conversation about issues of concern. These discussions are extracurricular and they keep students busy practising their language skills out of class. Furthermore, a discussion topic can be set up by the teacher as a writing assignment. As an extension to this activity, I recommend my students to visit the website <https://www.englishclub.com/>, go to Forums, choose a topic of interest and participate in a discussion with other interested people. Apart from building writing skills, discussion forums are a great way to reinforce general and specialized vocabulary.

Oral and Written Professional Communication

Communication is the most effective method for students to practise and reinforce what they have learnt. The idea behind attending a synchronous online English class is to speak a target language as much as possible /Rainbow, 2020/, exchange and discuss ideas, negotiate meaning with the teacher and classmates, work collaboratively on finding solutions to problems. Furthermore, long before e-learning platforms gained momentum, various researchers proposed that online communication should enable a “structured, project-based approach that allows learners to engage in increasingly complex tasks throughout a course, in collaboration with partners” /The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2001: 211/.

With consideration of the learners' specific needs an ESP session provides a narrower focus on professional communication online. Such learning experiences as role-plays, simulations, case-studies and problem solving do not only support the development of professional vocabulary but also contribute to the formation of certain professional skills and hence are a vital part of ESP classes. In these forms of learning, the knowledge is put into use in real-life vocational situations, where students gain practical know-how in dealing with their future profession-related issues developing critical thinking and language skills at the same time. In addition, project research into specific aspects of the material studied in class further expands students' knowledge about it and improves skills of in-depth and all-round analysis. For instance, after exploring the topic of “Propaganda” my third-year students are assigned to carry out independent study of various fields where propaganda is spread. Among the topics they chose last year were propaganda in movies, propaganda in Hitler Germany, propaganda in Azerbaijan, and many more. Similarly, after considering “Public Opinion Polls” and the rules of conducting

them, my first-year students formed digital teams to undertake their own group surveys on various matters of interest. From among my proposed topics, they chose to make questionnaires about the following: Females are better students/workers than males; Androids are better than IOS; Democracy is the best form of government; Military parades are a waste of money. I should say that the implementation of the task was challenged by the forced quarantine, because of which my pollsters' choice of representative samples was restricted to family members, friends and acquaintances. Later on, the survey results were presented both in writing (to the teacher) and orally (to the class). Such presentations usually lead to a discussion, which comprises a variety of useful skills and techniques, such as questioning, analyzing, commenting, explaining, pointing to instances, arguing, persuading. Thus, students can display and develop their creative abilities of language production. Among other exciting situational learning projects I can list conducting election campaigns, broadcasting news, press conferences, speeches and interviews, podcasting bright ideas, drawing up a party manifesto, designing a leaflet, to name just a few. Students learn to develop a scenario and enact it. In this respect, the unique feature of a virtual classroom is the ability of both the instructor and the learners to use a wealth of visual, aural and verbal aids to boost understanding of the target material before undertaking a project. Moreover, some simulation activities actually require application of information technologies to resemble the reality.

The above mentioned activities have long been used in a traditional classroom, but, obviously, the digital analogues are more dynamic, motivating and rewarding. E-learning builds a completely different environment for the course participants, where their activity and creativity are reinforced by multimedia, such as chat boards, instant messaging, webcams, audio and video recorders, audio and video sharing possibility, presentation slides, animation, as well as those of their own production. Last but not least, as different from a traditional environment, students do not have to bring their laptops to the university and waste time adjusting them to the classroom projector in order to demonstrate their work.

Speaking of shortcomings, holding discussions and debates for the whole class becomes quite inconvenient because of the incessant background noise that ultimately forces us to mute all the microphones. The only solution is to allow each speaker to express him- or herself at a time, which eventually benefits the discussion as the participants do not try to outcry each other.

Final Remarks

Online education as a mandatory measure has been stressful for many teachers and learners in Armenia. Poor Internet connection, lack of time to acquire a deep understanding of how e-learning apps work, an unorthodox teaching/learning

environment and forced immobility created various obstacles for effective work. Yet, over time it stops being that frightening as we gain more experience and adopt new strategies and techniques. Regardless of many constraints, it can be not only opportune and content-rich, but also positive and entertaining.

Creating a lively and friendly atmosphere will help overcome difficulties, ensure active collaboration and build a sense of community in the virtual classroom. More than ever before, we need to alternate the “serious” lesson content with the light mood and fun activities. We also need to break stereotypes. For instance, when explaining a new topic in a conventional classroom, I draw a lot of familiar examples from real life and even mimic the people from these examples so my students will obtain a clear insight into the subject matter. The virtual classroom seemingly restricts such a dynamic approach. However, while reading a blog on improving online teaching skills, I discovered that using a webcam does not mean the teacher should stay motionless in front of the computer throughout the class. It is possible to adjust the webcam settings so you can stand up, move and act out your class content to make it more interesting and cut the tension [/https://www.fluentu.com/blog/educator/teach-languages-online/](https://www.fluentu.com/blog/educator/teach-languages-online/).

Look at the situation on the bright side. E-teaching provides versatility in that lessons can be both synchronous and asynchronous. As a teacher you have all the resources necessary to video-record your lectures for students’ further reference. You can disengage from routine tasks and introduce new ones that are more thought-provoking and more related to your students’ communicative needs. Engage them in language exchange opportunities outside the classroom as well (using social networks and other websites). Remarkably, Moodle not only enables you to grade and keep track of your students’ performance, but also “award” the outstanding ones with a badge of excellence. And although digital content design is a lot of creative and painstaking work, and technical difficulties may still hinder attendance rates, it must be admitted that it is also rewarding as it boosts learners’ interest and increases their involvement in doing assignments. Eventually, learning to navigate through the apps using the various useful functions, you the teacher can learn new life skills.

As a final point, having experienced the process and effects of teaching online, I am convinced that learning management systems would work best as digital aids to traditional teaching and learning. Only in that case can all the obstructions be eliminated.

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VIDEO RESOURCES

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQ4-wrwHAxk>

Մ. ԿԱՐԱՊԵՏՅԱՆ – Անգլերենի դասավանդումը հատուկ նպատակների համար թվային ձևաչափով. – Սույն հոդվածում հեղինակը ներկայացնում է քաղաքական անգլերեն ուսումնասիրող ուսանողներին առցանց դասավանդման սեփական փորձը: Դիտարկվում են լեզվական հմտություններն առցանց եղանակով ձևավորելու և զարգացնելու մեթոդները՝ ի հակադրություն ավանդական լսարանում կատարվող աշխատանքի: Ուսումնասիրվում են առցանց ուսուցման՝ հատկապես Moodle և Zoom հեռավար հաղորդակցության հարթակների կիրառման առավելություններն ու թերությունները, ինչպես նաև տեղեկատվական-հաղորդակցային նոր տեխնոլոգիաների ազդեցությունը բուհերի ուսանողների արդյունավետության վրա:

Քանալի բառեր. անգլերենը հատուկ նպատակների համար (քաղաքական անգլերեն), լեզվական հմտությունների զարգացում, էլեկտրոնային-հեռավար ուսուցում, ուսուցման կառավարման համակարգեր, Moodle, Zoom

М. КАРАПЕТЯН – Обучение английскому языку для специальных целей в цифровом формате. – В статье автор представляет собственный опыт преподавания английского языка для специальных целей студентам, специализирующимся в политологии и международных отношениях. Рассматриваются способы развития языковых навыков в режиме онлайн в сопоставлении с обучением в традиционном формате. Выявляются преимущества и недостатки онлайн-обучения, в частности, таких сетевых образовательных платформ как Moodle и Zoom, а также влияние новых информационно-коммуникационных технологий на результаты работы студентов вузов.

Ключевые слова: английский язык для специальных целей (политический английский язык), развитие языковых навыков, электронно-дистанционное обучение, системы управления обучением, Moodle, Zoom

Ներկայացվել է՝ 31.08.2020
Երաշխավորվել է ԵՊՀ Անգլերենի թիվ 2 ամբիոնի կողմից
Ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 20.11.2020