Using instructional technology to integrate CEFR 'can do' performance objectives into an advanced-level language course

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Abstract. The purpose of this presentation is to show how instructional technology can be exploited to effectively integrate Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) 'Can Do' performance objectives (Council of Europe, 2001) into the syllabus and assessment of an advanced (B2) level course. The particular course that will be used for purposes of demonstration is English for Rehabilitation, an English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) course offered at the Cyprus University of Technology. It is a two-semester compulsory subject for first-year students majoring in Rehabilitation Sciences, a Health Faculty discipline. The ultimate goal of the course is to increase students' linguistic competence to allow them to function professionally in English as independent learners in all four skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. It will be shown how Internet resources, in particular YouTube and various Google applications (Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Scholar, Google Slides, Hangouts) are used to provide and organise online content as well as to support students in the production of written and oral materials based on discipline-specific input.

Keywords: instructional technology, CEFR descriptors, English for specific academic purposes.

1. Introduction

The CEFR for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) provides illustrative scales of 'Can Do' statements, describing foreign language proficiency at six levels, which

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enable the comparability of tests and examinations across languages and national boundaries and the recognition of language qualifications. Instructional technology can facilitate the attainment of 'Can Do' skills in many ways by providing learners with an abundance of resources for both practising and producing the target language. Moreover, in Languages for Specific Academic Purposes courses, technology adds to the 'specific' and 'academic' components since it helps to develop complementary skills like online library searching, retrieving and evaluating academic and other material on the Internet, preparing assignments and presentations using digital tools, etc. Although the linguistic part of any language course can be readily aligned to the CEFR 'Can Do' statements, no such descriptors exist for related specific academic skills or the use of technology. It is, thus, the intent of this paper to help close this gap by demonstrating, within the context of an ESAP course, how instructional technology can be exploited to adapt the CEFR descriptors for B2-level competence to the teaching of both linguistic and specific academic skills.

2.   Method

The particular course that was used for purposes of demonstration is English for Rehabilitation, an ESAP at the Cyprus University of Technology. It is a two-semester compulsory subject for first-year students majoring in Rehabilitation Sciences, a Health Faculty discipline. The ultimate goal of the course is to increase students' linguistic competence to allow them to function professionally in English as independent learners in all four skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing at an advanced (B2) level. The course was implemented in collaboration with faculty members of the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences. Subject area content derives from an introductory course, simultaneously taught by this faculty in the L1 (Greek). Parts of this course were restructured to focus on the interactive use of related L2 English vocabulary and grammatical structures. Language instructors organised each semester of the ESAP course into four thematic blocks, each lasting three to four weeks.

At the beginning of each thematic block, a member of the academic staff from the Rehabilitation Sciences department gave a short lecture (30-45 minutes) in English on the block's topic. The lecture was audio-recorded in Hangouts on Air and stored in the language instructors' YouTube channel and made available to students. Over the following weeks, students undertook various tasks based on the content theme. These all involved realisations of specific B2-level 'Can Do' descriptors such as 'Listening as a member of a live audience', 'Note-taking (lectures, seminars)', 'Processing Text', and 'Sustained Monologue'.

Once the learning objectives were set, the technology tools to be used were chosen and it was decided how these were to be used in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Internet resources, in particular YouTube and various Google applications (Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Scholar, Google Slides, Hangouts) were used to provide and organise online content, as well as to support students in the production of written and oral materials based on discipline-specific input. These included listening to lectures in their field of study, taking notes and collaboratively synthesising these in written course summaries. Individual note-taking and paraphrasing of assigned disciplinary readings were also undertaken based on printed as well as web-based sources. Students were taught to take responsibility for their professional learning in English through collaborative web-based research on topics related to their discipline, for which they produced essay outlines. Communicative use of the language was practised through regular small-group interactions in class as well as through the preparation and delivery of professionally-related oral presentations using various PowerPoint functions and Prezi. Finally, students also had to provide their reflections at the end of each thematic block, which aimed to make them aware of their own learning processes and thus more independent.

Course assessment, both formative and summative, was determined in relation to students' 'Can Do' linguistic performance. The course grade was based, for both individual and group assignments, upon the extent to which students' lecture summaries, reading synopses, research outlines and oral presentations corresponded to the CEFR B2-level 'Can Do' descriptors for reading, writing, listening and speaking. As a capstone project, students produced a Google Doc-based individual e-portfolio in which they summarised the activities carried out during the course and, more generally, reflected upon their learning. The final exam, although in paper form, assessed students against the same 'Can Do' descriptors, i.e. reading a profession-related text, taking notes on it, paraphrasing some parts, summarising the whole text and showing awareness of the vocabulary learnt.

3.   Results

At the beginning of the first semester course, students were overwhelmed by the fact that they had to deal with discipline-specific material in English. Within a few weeks, however, as the lecture topics became more professionally targeted, they were not only more interested in the content, but also more engaged in the use of the language, working on summarising, synthesising, taking notes, vocabulary and language activities in English. The recurring pattern of activities

in each thematic block helped students become more at ease with the assigned tasks, which they often undertook without being told.

As with the specific academic skills aspect of the course, the use of technology tools initially proved very daunting for students, most especially Google Drive. However, the support provided to students, and their own experimentation, allowed them to quickly overcome their apprehensions. After the first two thematic blocks in the first semester, students were comfortable using the various technologies and even tried out new ones (e.g. Prezi, PowerPoint) on their own. Most use of technology took place outside of class, with one student who was abroad at the time even using Skype to contribute to a group presentation in class. Above all, students had easy access to online materials and could carry out their activities via tools such as Google drive and Google docs, which were automatically saved and accessible from virtually anywhere. Ubiquitous online access to shared documents also fostered the undertaking of collaborative tasks, allowing students to easily work together to improve their English and co-construct disciplinary knowledge.

4.   Conclusions

Overall, it can be said that technology, especially Google applications, played a vital role in realising the 'Can Do' objectives of the English for Rehabilitation course. The course Google Drive allowed instructors to store and distribute course materials in digital form as well as link to a multitude of online resources. With Google Docs, students had access to their own work online at any time. So, too, the online collaborative work that the Google Drive and Google Docs made possible constituted a motivational factor for all group members in the completion of activities, as well as a means for improving linguistically, especially for lower level students. Finally, Google docs provided the platform for the e-portfolios in which students synthesised all work (assessed and non-assessed) carried out in each semester, constituting in effect each student's self-generated online textbook for the course.

5.   Acknowledgements

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