

Creation of an Online ESP Course in Web 2.0 Environment

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Abstract: The Internet of today offers almost unlimited options and tools for the creation of various online teaching materials that can be used for all the needs of an ESP course, both as main and as extracurricular (additional) materials.

After a brief introduction bringing some important facts about Web 2.0 and its use related to e-learning, the central part of this paper will be dedicated to the creation of an online course in English for Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) used as an extracurricular resource for the students of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering in East Sarajevo. The course will be described through the tools and services necessary for its creation as well as through its organizational concepts and practical usage. Such a description will be briefly preceded by the presentation of some general facts about the English language, lessons, tuition and curriculum at the Faculty.

In the conclusion of the paper, some general conclusions and expected practical results will be mentioned.

Key Words: ESP, online course, Web 2.0, tuition, e-learning

Introduction: Specificities of ESP Tuition at Faculties

English for Special Purposes (ESP) is taught at many faculties today in form of courses that expand the courses in general English by dealing with the specific features of vocabulary, grammar and terminology of certain field of science, technology, art etc. In such a way it enables the student – future expert in certain field – to use the language actively for all kinds of professional purposes.

To be able to follow the tuition without problems, an ESP student has to be able to deal with the most important concepts of the English language, but also to have some general and professional knowledge to help him deal with the materials in foreign language.

Standard, classroom ESP tuition is mostly based on various books. In present time, there are really innumerable books and other resources for all the aspects and levels of ESP starting from those issued by famous education centers and publishing houses such to those prepared by different known or anonymous teachers, which can be found on various web pages on the Internet. All these resources are very useful, they are, actually, the basis of English language teaching all over the world, but they still have some limitations, mostly in terms of interactivity and being absolutely up-to-date.

Namely, although the books and other written materials are still the main source of information and knowledge in contemporary education, in terms of language learning they are still limited to a one-way communication, in which, on one side, the writer or creator presents the theoretical part of some unit and then gives the assignments related to it, while the reader- a student, standing on the other side, tries to adopt the given theoretical knowledge and to improve it by doing and solving the assignments. The role of the teacher in the classroom is to improve this communication and to make it vivid, but it usually takes just a limited amount of time which is simply not enough. At the same time, something which is written down on a piece of paper is not easy to be changed or updated, and these changes are updates are something which is necessary in this time of enormous number of information which is transferred throughout the world every day, especially when dealing with such a lively matter as English language is.

One of the possible things that can be done to improve the interactivity in ESP learning is the creation of online courses dealing with specific matters.

University Students, English Language and the Internet

The overall situation in higher education during the last two decades imposes the active Internet usage on all faculty levels (students, administration, teachers and non-academic staff) as one of the main features for a constant progress, development and standing in line with the competitive institutions. On the other side, from the perspective of an ordinary young man – student, a general decrease of Internet costs and, at the same time, increase in connection speeds, together with various possible ways of connecting (ADSL, Wireless, Cable) make the usage of the Internet available to almost everyone.

In such an environment, a great number of students use the Internet actively, both for academic and studying purposes and for fun, entertainment and communication. Taking into account that, besides all the efforts in localization, the official language of the Internet is English language, it becomes obvious that at least a part of time which the students spend on the Internet can be effectively used for their language improvement. Web 2.0 technologies and user-generated content can be of great help in that.

Web 2.0 and User-Generated Internet Content

In recent years, the Internet has constantly been developing in many different ways, and that development goes far beyond its original role of a worldwide service for information exchange. Together with the appearance of fast broadband connections, the Internet has turned into a complete interactive, multidisciplinary and multimedia system – a kind of virtual reality with an almost indefinite number of possibilities and opportunities offered to each user.

Throughout such evolution, the relation between the Internet and its users changed from the one-way distribution of information (“Packaged Goods Media”) to a two-way interactive process (“Conversational Media”), what came with the appearance of Web 2.0 technology. Web 2.0 is a term describing the trend in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design which aims to enhance creativity, information sharing, and, most notably, collaboration among users. Although such a term suggests a new version of the World Wide Web, it does not refer to an update to any technical specifications, but to changes in the ways software developers and end-users use the Web.

Among various consequences irrelevant to this work, the concepts of Web 2.0 led to the development and evolution of User-generated content (UGC) on the Internet. The term UGC entered mainstream usage during 2005, after a radical arising in web publishing and new media production circles. It reflects the expansion of media production through new technologies that are accessible and affordable to the general public. These include video streaming, blogging, podcasting, wikis, social networking sites, discussion boards (forums), news sites, trip planners, experience and photo sharing sites, online word processors, online desktop environments etc. In addition to these technologies, UGC may also involve a combination of open source, free software and flexible licensing or related agreements to further diminish the barriers to collaboration, skill-building and discovery.

The three basic characteristics of UGC are:

1. Publication requirement: While UGC could be made by a user and never published online or elsewhere, the focus here is on the work that is published in some context, be it on a publicly accessible website or on a page on a social networking site only accessible to a select group of people (e.g. fellow university students). This is a useful way to exclude email, two-way instant messages and the like.

2. Creative effort: This implies that a certain amount of creative effort was put into creating the work or adapting existing works to construct a new one; i.e. users must add their own value to the work. The creative effort behind UGC often also has a collaborative element to it, as is the case with websites which users can edit collaboratively. For example, merely copying a portion of a television show and posting it to an online video website (an activity frequently seen on the UGC sites) would not be considered UGC. If a user uploads his/her photographs, however, expresses his/her thoughts in a blog, or creates a new music video, this could be considered UGC. Yet the minimum amount of creative effort is hard to define and depends on the context.

3. Creation outside of professional routines and practices: User generated content is generally created outside of professional routines and practices. It often does not have an institutional or a commercial market context. In extreme cases, UGC may be produced by non-professionals without the expectation of profit or remuneration. Motivating factors include: interactive connecting with people or target groups, achieving a certain level of fame, notoriety, or prestige, and the desire to express oneself.

It is often possible for an UGC to be partially or totally monitored by website administrators to avoid offensive content or language, copyright infringement issues, or simply to determine if the posted content is relevant to the general theme of a site.

Use of Web 2.0 and UGC in English Language Teaching and Acquisition

Because of its availability and also because of global popularization of some services that came with the appearance of Web 2.0 technologies, some UGCs, such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and social networking sites have become very popular, especially among the senior secondary school pupils and the university students. Being extremely easy to use, and giving many opportunities to young people (personal presentations, presentation of personal attitudes and gained knowledge, publication and availability of various audio and video material, meeting friends and new people in various ways, file and information interchange, etc.), User-generated internet contents have been taking a large amount of time which students spend on the Internet. Observing the Internet as a global network where a page is just a few clicks away from every other, and taking into consideration the popularization of an organized Internet usage in education, through e-learning, distance learning and various CMS tools, the teachers' active participation in particular UGCs and the guided directing of students to the same UGCs (in this case, of course, using exclusively English language as the means of communication), together with the proper control of their activities there would surely lead to the creation of an interactive, all time up-to-date language learning system, in all components possible for a particular UGC. One of the ways for making such a system is to create an online course which would integrate and organize various UGC within a single website.

At the faculties that have the possibility and resources to involve distance learning or e-learning as a regular part of their curricula, such courses can be used as an integral part of tuition, while at others they can be used as an extracurricular, additional tool for knowledge improvement and widening, exercising and practicing. This paper will discuss the necessary steps, knowledge and tools for the creation of one such course, a course in English for ICT, which is taught at the second semester of the first year of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering in East Sarajevo.

Steps Before and During the Course Creation

There are many things that must be kept in mind during the creation of an online course. At first, there is the defining of the purpose, scope and organization of the course. Then, there is a degree of computer literacy in teachers and students, in accordance with that, the selection of adequate tools for online course creating. Together with that selection, it is necessary to discuss the important issues of payment and licensing both for the tools and the contents created in them, and also the matter of data storage and hosting space. Only after taking into account everything that has been mentioned, the practical creation of course can start.

In the practical case of the named course, the purpose has already been mentioned – an online contribution to the lessons at one-semester English for ICT classroom course. The course itself is based on the selection of texts from Cambridge "Professional English in Use – ICT" book and lasts for 15 weeks (30 lessons) and covering 27 units from the book. Because of the copyright, the materials from the book units (lessons, exercises) must not be directly used in the online course, but, thanks to the fact that the units cover some general issues of ICT (living with computers, types of computer system, hardware components, software types, networking, the Internet, security, mobile phones etc.), new materials of the same type, with the same topics, features and vocabulary can be easily created or found on various free resources on the Internet. In such a way, the online course would also consist of 27 units, where every unit from the book would be covered with one or more relevant texts, and a lot of interactive materials connected to it, that enable memorizing, practicing, and renewing of knowledge. Besides such a following of the "main", classroom course, the course would also enable relative independence of units to enable the users to work at their own speed if necessary, and that is to be done by creating a common glossary of terms for the entire website, accessible from every page.

In terms of computer literacy, computer science and computers are so present in everyday life of today that almost every person is capable of performing at least basic tasks on a computer, so that it neither teachers nor students should have a problem in dealing with the course, especially if abundant documentation and tutorials that come with most of the programs are taken into account. Still, if there is a need, some additional advice may be asked from the IT department of the faculty, and the students may also ask to be introduced to the course by their teachers.

The next question that naturally appears deals with which tools and applications should be used.

There are numerous tools and management systems on the Internet of today that enable the realization of language courses, with different features, ways of payment and licensing, data storage and hosting space, degree of complexity, and the amount of interactivity that they offer.

All of them can be classified in three groups: CMS or LMS (Classroom/Learning Management System), applications for creating interactive contents in Flash or standard HTML format to be published on the web, and the Internet services for website creation and hosting.

CMS/LMS is a tool for creating complete online virtual classroom environment in form of an interactive website. Its installation and setup often require some computer knowledge, while the usage is intuitive, logical and easy. On the other side, various applications for creating interactive contents in Adobe Flash or HTML format (tests, lessons, exercises, quizzes etc.) work on the WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) principle, and are mostly easy for use, requiring only essential computer knowledge and no knowledge in programming and design. Finally, the Internet of today offers various options for both online design and hosting of web pages, which also work on WYSIWYG principle and are intuitive and logical for average user. They can be used both for creation of teaching materials and in combination with interactive web-ready contents created in other programs.

After the observation and testing of many programs from all three categories, together with taking into account the objective needs of an ESP course, some general conclusions are made. Although there are various free LMS/CMS solutions on the web, their installation, setup and use, together with hosting and registration issues, would be too complicated for a relatively simple one-semester course to follow “regular” tuition, and because of that they have not been taken into account. The decision is made to make the course by combining some of two other types of resources – online services for website creation and hosting and Flash interactive contents authoring tools. Among many offered options, two have been selected: Weebly, as a full online service for website creation and hosting, and iSpring Presenter, as an excellent Flash contents authoring tool, and. Some facts about the named will be given in the text that follows.

Tools for the Course Creation Weebly

Weebly is an online service that, after an easy and quick registration, enables the creation and hosting of a web page with the address in the form username.weebly.com. It enables the teacher-administrator to create pages and menus within the site and also to insert various external elements (HTML code, text, images, video, animations, Flash applications, forums, surveys etc.) and publish them on the web, thus offering both multimedia and interactivity. Everything can be done very easily and intuitively, often by simple text typing and dragging and dropping of page elements.

In the case of an English in ICT course, it can offer a course base in form of a website which is, at the same time, an information exchange system (containing lessons, presentations, discussions results) and the tool for embedding, grouping and organisation of interactive Flash materials created in some other programs (quizzes, tests, exercises). In that way, it solves most of the technical problems in terms of course administration and hosting.

The service also allows the creation of Assignment Forms with the options for uploading the assignments, and students’ blogs. What makes it is an excellent tool for getting various types of feedback from students.

iSpring Presenter

iSpring Presenter is a PowerPoint add-in which, basically, enables the conversion of PowerPoint presentations into Adobe Flash (.swf) or self-executive (.exe) format (thus enabling them to be published for different media and reproduced on every computer, regardless its software), and also, what is more important, it gives various additional features in terms of interactivity, besides those that already exist in PowerPoint (adding quizzes and Flash animations). Such presentations can also be embedded into websites, with their interactivity fully preserved.

After the installation, the program is fully integrated in PowerPoint and is placed in the ribbon of PowerPoint as a separate tab. By clicking on it, the user can see all the general options it offers, grouped in the sections: Publish, Presentation, Narration, Insert and About.

Some of the options (e.g. those in the sections Presentation and Narration) as more or less the same as those contained in PowerPoint, although they offer some more advanced options and adjustments. Within the

section Narration, such options are Record/Import Audio/Video, and Sync, which enables the synchronization of narrations with animation effects. On the other side, Presentation offers the overview of presentation (exploration and editing of its structure) within Presentation Explorer, the management of the presentation links and references within Links and the customization of presenters within Presenters.

However, the sections Insert and Publish come with the options that widely expand the features of PowerPoint. The section Insert enables the insertion of Flash objects, YouTube videos and quizzes into the slides of a presentation. Each of the categories can be broadly used both in classes and in learning at home. The insertion of Flash objects enables the user to insert the already prepared Flash (.swf) files in the presentation, with their functionality completely preserved. On the other side, for inserting YouTube videos, it is necessary to have the link of the video, which is then pasted or typed in the Insert You Tube Video window.

However, the most important and the most appropriate feature for creating interactive materials to be embedded within an ESP course is the possibility of making and inserting Quizzes.

When the option Quiz in the section Insert is selected, the QuizMaker window opens, allowing the user to make various types of questions within a quiz. Those types of questions are: True/False, Multiple Choice, Multiple Response, Type In, Matching, Sequence, Numeric, Fill in the Blank, Multiple Choice Text and Word Bank.

All of these question types can be freely combined within a quiz. Each of the quizzes created can be given a unique title, helping it to be distinguished from the others. The QuizMaker also deals with other relevant options and settings for test making, such as feedback (via e-mail), visual appearance, awarded points, number of attempts, passing score, etc. It also offers the preview of a quiz being created in every moment. The insertion of images, audio and video is also enabled.

In such a way, the quizzes can be created both as parts of presentations, coming together with other presentation elements containing the text, images, charts, tables, or as standalone test units to be published on a website or sent to students by e-mail. They enable the user to type in the answers, or select and arrange them with mouse actions, and to get the points and scores for the achieved results upon finishing. The review of correct answers is also enabled.

The created quizzes have to be published through some of the publishing options offered in the section Publish of iSpring Presenter. The simplest option is Quick Publish, which is used for publishing the presentation in Flash format using the default settings offered by the program. The other option, Publish, offers four different options for publishing presentations to Flash: Web, CD, iSpring Online and LMS.

As their titles suggest, each of the options prepares the presentation for publishing to different media, with some options shared and some other which are specific for the intended media. Basically, and depending on the purpose, the presentations can be exported as Flash, .exe, HTML or compressed (.zip) files. Many other publishing options can also be adjusted in detail, such as the player design, playback and navigation, compression, Flash animation properties and protection.

Conclusion: Practical Course Creation

As it has already been mentioned, a website created and hosted at Weebly will be a basis of the English in ICT accompanying online course. Its home page should contain the relevant information and RSS feed for the news and updated information, while the menu bar should lead to Lessons and Exercises, organized in accordance with the titles of the units from the mentioned coursebook, and further linked to each other, and also to Glossary. It should also lead to students' Discussion Board (forum), necessary for getting the feedback, and to a page dedicated to embedded audio and video materials relevant to the course.

While the lessons should appear as ordinary web pages operating in hyper textual environment, to have adequate Exercises, that would provide both interactivity and feedback, it is necessary to embed various quizzes created in iSpring Presenter to webpages. Depending on the purpose and the needs of particular lessons, the quizzes can be of different types and contain various indirect test units. Together with exercises for each lessons, some general tests should be prepared on the basis of grouping particular Lessons in accordance with their contents.

All the mentioned enables a successful creation of an online ESP course that will stand as a supportive and additional teaching material to a classroom course, and, at the same time, give the students options to learn, exercise and improve their knowledge outside the classroom and regular tuition time.

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