Distance Learning materials for the teaching of English as a Language for Specific Purposes

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Abstract

Planning and writing learning materials for distance learning is difficult when teaching English for Specific Purposes in a technical university. The purpose of the present study was to show that distance learning materials should be adapted so as to create a holistic educational experience for our learners, to promote active, effective learning print, and to allow assessment of effectiveness. The main argument in doing so is that the philosophy of most distance learning systems aims at removing all barriers to education and at allowing learners to study what, when, and where they want, i.e. increasing educational access and educational choice.

Keywords: Distance learning, English, technical university, English for Specific Purposes;

1. Introduction

I have been planning and writing learning materials for use in Distance Learning (DL) for over 10 years, teaching Agricultural English (AE) in a technical university. As a teacher, content provider, writer and instructional designer, I had to answer the following questions:
- What are the similarities and the dissimilarities between Agricultural English Distance Learning (AEDL) materials and other types of AE learning materials?
- Should I adapt my existing AE learning materials (textbook and compendia of technical terms) or develop new AEDL ones?
- How should I plan AEDL courses to develop a holistic experience at a distance?
- What techniques should I use to promote active, effective learning of AE in print?
- In what ways are print AEDL materials similar/different?
- How could I assess the effectiveness of AEDL?
- How should I manage the drafting and quality assurance processes to produce high-quality AEDL materials on time and within budget?

The purpose of the study is to show that DL materials differ from other types of learning material and, therefore, the existing materials should be adapted so as to create a holistic educational experience, to promote active, effective...
learning in print, and to allow assessment of effectiveness – all based on similarities (defining what is to be learnt, providing information, giving examples, explaining, questioning, setting learning tasks for both individuals and groups, marking works, answering learners’ questions, checking what learners have learnt, providing feedback to individual learners on their progress, providing other learning resources, giving advice on how to use those resources, giving study advice, and helping with individual problems) and differences (no teacher, no marking work) between traditional print learning materials and print DL materials. The main argument in doing so is that the philosophy of most DL systems aims at removing barriers to education and at allowing learners to study what they want, when they want, and where they want, i.e. increasing educational access and educational choice.

2. Similarities and dissimilarities between AEDL materials and traditional AE textbooks

A comparison between AEDL materials and traditional AE textbooks shows that there are fewer similarities than dissimilarities between them. AEDL materials and traditional AE textbooks have in common only the following two features: inclusion of diagrams and pictures and inclusion of examples. AEDL materials and traditional AE textbooks have the following different features (Table 1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AEDL materials:</th>
<th>AE textbooks:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- address individual learners</td>
<td>- address learners and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- address the learner directly (e.g., you can see that..., you will note that..., etc.)</td>
<td>- address the learner impersonally (e.g., it can be seen that..., the reader will note that..., etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- are divided into study units representing a week’s work</td>
<td>- are divided into chapters based on topics rather than study time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- are tightly structured</td>
<td>- are not tightly structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- attempt to meet all the needs of the learner</td>
<td>- do not attempt to meet all the needs of the learner because they assume the teacher can amplify the printed text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- have a generous layout</td>
<td>- do not have a generous layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- include a study guide on how to use the materials and how to study by oneself</td>
<td>- do not include a study guide on how to use the materials and how to study by oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- include a wide range of learning devices (activities, advance organizers, examples, feedback to activities, learning objectives, self-tests, study tips, summaries and lists of key points, tests of prior knowledge)</td>
<td>- include a narrow range of learning devices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- include space for learners to write in</td>
<td>- do not include space for learners to write in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Adaptation of AE learning materials

When confronted with the task of producing an AEDL course, I had to adapt my own existing AE textbook, because there was no AEDL course to adapt and because we did not agree the idea of producing a wrap-round guide to an existing non-DL resource such as my AE textbook. My choice was also motivated by time (writing a new AEDL from scratch would have taken 2-3 years) and cost reasons. I was aware of the fact that this option had its advantages (my AE textbook could be adapted, added to, modified, or re-targeted) and disadvantage (the new AEDL material could not be considered unique). In my adaptation, I did not have to produce a pre-course supplement to bring my learners up to the starting point of the course (in case the prior knowledge assumed was more than my learners would have) because my learners had a course in general English in their 1st year of study, but I had to focus on matching the needs of my learners as closely as possible, and updating my AE textbook paying attention to content accuracy, authoritativeness, and appropriateness (vocabulary appropriateness, proper length sentences, sentence complexity), to cost acceptability, coverage comprehensiveness, language level appropriateness, progress tests adequateness, and number of high-quality activities for my learners.

4. Planning an AEDL course to develop a holistic experience at a distance
In the planning of my AEDL course, I had to take into account the following:

- **content analysis and planning** – I chose the topic-oriented approach to content, i.e. I started from the topic (agriculture) and I broke it down into its components, when the subject was hierarchical, or in its associated sub-topics, when the subject was not hierarchical (Agriculture: Definition and Importance; The Farm; The farm: Seasonal Work; Types of Agriculture; Crop Production Agriculture; Organic Gardening; Organic Fertilisers; Genetic Engineering Techniques; Classification of Soils; Agricultural Regions; Agriculture in the World; Agriculture after World War II);

- **content ordering** was done according to the following principles: from simple to complex (when teaching the sequence of tenses, I taught Type I before Types II and III and Type II before Type III) and from known to unknown (when teaching about crops, I asked my learners to consider first the crops they grow in their region, then the crops grown in Romania, and finally the crops grown abroad);

- **context issues** concerned the learner’s place to study (at home or at work), the resources my learners had access to (my AEDL course and compendia of technical terms used in agriculture both in printed and electronic format, an English-Romanian dictionary and a Romanian-English dictionary, the Internet, other printed and/or electronic-format sources) and the resources I needed to provide to my learners (my AEDL course and compendia of technical terms used in agriculture both in printed and electronic format);

- **a course guide** in which I included the following: a short course overview, the course aims, the course pre-requisite knowledge and skills, the course contents, the course structure, the course components and explanations on what they are for, a course schedule with dates of key events (exams), the support system, the assignments to be submitted, the course assessment, the course use, and skills advice;

- **course pacing** was done to help my learners complete courses: I made AEDL material accessible on certain dates and in small amounts, I met my learners at regular time intervals (thrice a semester), I required that certain tasks (assignments and exams) be done by set deadlines, and I e-mailed my learners every two weeks to check on their progress;

- **course specifications** contained the following: assessment specifications (assessment details), content specifications (learning outcomes at unit level, unit titles), developmental testing specifications (how the testing was to be done, which parts of the AEDL course would be tested), general specifications (course aims, course title, expected learning hours, learner circumstances, learners’ needs, learner vignettes, number of weeks over which the course was to be studied, pre-requisite skill and knowledge assumed), instructional design style specifications (media to be used, sample unit, typical activities for each learning outcome), tutorial support specifications (assignments to be submitted to tutors, type of tutorial support to be provided);

- **learner profile** – age group (the choice of examples and of topics largely depended on it), home situation (I had to find out if my learners had access to electricity, to Internet, to a computer – because they receive all the textbooks – including the AEDL materials – on a CD or DVD, and a place to study), ITC skills (some of my learners needed to be taught how to use a computer), learning situation (this helped me establish the sort of tasks to set, e.g. I gave up asking my learners to go to a library because libraries with books in English are not always accessible, particularly is small towns and in the countryside), literacy level (all my learners could make an option for the study of English only if they had already studied it for at least 4 years and only if they had passes a test to prove it), prior knowledge (I assumed my learners had some knowledge in both English and agriculture and I decided what to teach based on this prior knowledge), and reasons for studying (the choice of the type of approach and of the type of examples helped me better motivate my learners);

- **setting course aims and objectives** included, among aims, equipping the learners to understand, read, write and speak in general English and in AE and, among objectives, being able to calculate the amount of pesticide given the crop area, to conjugate a verb given the rules for the conjugation, to explain why a crop needs to be watered, to identify the best of a number of strategies, to identify the statement following from a set of premises, to be able to name different types of agricultural systems, different crop species or domestic animal species, different agricultural cultivation technologies, different types of soil, different types of pesticides (herbicides, insecticides), to put a definition in one’s own words (comprehension), to repeat a
definition, and to write a report on different agriculture-related topics. The goal here was double – testing both agricultural knowledge and English language knowledge.

5. Planning and writing learning units

I had to pay attention to the following aspects of planning and writing AEDL learning units:

- **structuring learning units**, i.e. explaining to my learners what the units were about in a comparative form (reminding them of something they already knew that would be useful in helping them understand the new teaching), conducting the teaching-learning session (based on learning objectives) and reminding my learners what the learning session was about and checking that they had learnt it (based on self-marked tests and on a summary of the key points of the learning units)

- **including activities** such as applying new concepts and principles, distinguishing between examples of concepts and principles, reporting one’s own examples and observations, restating facts under the form of exercises of the ‘put in order’, complete the diagram/graph/table, create something, data collecting, extended answer, fill-in-the-blank, matching, multiple-choice, short answer, true-false, etc. task types;

- **using examples** to aid understanding (of concepts, principles, procedures, or rules) and to develop proficiency in application (use of concepts, principles, procedures, and rules);

- **providing illustrative devices** through the use of illustrations (cartoons, charts, diagrams, drawings, graphs, histograms, icons, maps, number tables, photographs, word tables, plans, etc.);

- **providing access devices** was done before starting the learning unit (advance organisers, concept maps, contents lists, glossary items, introductions, objectives, pre-requisites and pre-tests, titles), during the study of the learning unit (headings, icons, layout, unit numbering, verbal signposts) and after completing the learning unit (key points, links with previous material, post-tests, summaries);

- **approaching diversity issues** (age, ethnicity, gender, religion, etc.) was done by portraying people and by treating sensitive issue carefully;

- **estimating study time per learning unit** was done by listing everything my learners had to do and by attaching a time estimate to that activity based on my 35-teaching year activity.

6. Planning assessment

In my assessment planning, I had to take into account the role of **formative assessment** (of the activities designed to enhance understanding, to motivate and to provide my learners with an indication of their progress) and of **summative assessment** (of the activities designed to certify the level of knowledge reached by each of my learners, to find out if my AEDL course effectively reached it aims, to inform my learners of the standard achieved, and to make decisions about my learners’ eligibility for further courses). I am a partisan of continuous assessment because it increases reliability better than final assessment. I considered self-assessment more important than my own assessment because it helped my learners identify the errors and the misunderstandings made, because it provided my learners with advice on additional study to prevent future errors and misunderstandings, and because it provided my learners with summative assessment of what they learned.

7. Developing study guides
What I developed for my learners was a course guide to explain them how to use my AEDL course. I included in the course guide the following: a short course overview, the course aims, the course pre-requisite knowledge and skills, the course contents, the course structure, the course components and explanations on what they were for, a course schedule with dates of key events (exams), the support system, the assignments to be submitted, the course assessment, the course use, and skills advice.

8. Writing in an accessible way

My main concern has always been to write clearly, i.e. to avoid unnecessary words and phrases, to favour the active voice, to favour the specific to the general, to maximise cohesion, to prefer the positive to the negative, to use familiar, short words and short sentences, to use signposting abundantly, to use the first and second persons, to write logically – given that my learners are not English native speaking learners.

9. Assuring quality

To make sure my AEDL materials were high-quality materials, I had to figure out very clearly what I had to do – developing an AEDL course, who should do it (my assistants – the tutors – and I) and the standards it should reach (a short course overview, the course aims, the course pre-requisite knowledge and skills, the course contents, the course structure, the course components and explanations on what they are for, a course schedule with dates of key events such as exams, the support system, the assignments to be submitted, the course assessment, the course use, and skills advice).

10. Conclusion

Creating, designing, or developing Distance Learning materials for the teaching of English as a Language for Specific Purposes in a technical university is difficult, but not impossible. The purpose of the present study was to show that distance learning materials can be adapted so as to create a holistic educational experience for our learners, to promote active, effective learning print, and to allow assessment of effectiveness. The main argument in doing so has been that most distance learning systems aims at removing all barriers to education and at allowing learners to study what, when, and where they want, thus increasing educational access and educational choice.

References


