

Challenges and Opportunities of Developing an ESP University Course without a Textbook – A Multiple Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The growing demand for ESP courses, due not only to the use of English as a lingua franca in a globalized professional world but also to the relatively recent requirements of “internationalized” university degrees, has made the teaching of English for Special Purposes, with the areas and the language teaching approaches (EOP, EAP, EVP) it has come to include, increasingly reliant on the use of specialized EFL textbooks. However, the ESP books available in the market still might not cover all the non-linguistic specialized university disciplines, or they might be too costly and time-consuming for short, elective, and pass/fail EFL courses worth few ECTS credits. This paper will report on the author’s experience of teaching a University Business Communication course without the use of textbooks, and with significant resort to online free educational resources and “non-desktop” technologies, materials and tools, which have also been exploited to involve students in the preparation of flipped lessons and the creation of their own educational material. The course-specific features and students’ outcomes, especially in terms of competence and skill development, will be described with a brief analysis of the pros and cons of transforming a formal educational setting in an informal language learning experience.

Keywords: Formal and Informal Foreign Language Acquisition; ESP; CBI; CMS; competence and skill development.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on three different teaching experiences in the field of ESP related to a short Business English course designed as a university-level vocational course targeting three different student categories; it aimed to teach typical forms of corporate written communication without employing traditional educational material such as textbooks and paper handouts. In each case study, the course was taught by using authentic material and free resources available on the Web and by building educational resources that involved students in various cooperative learning activities, from role play to project work, and from flipped classrooms to the creation of student-produced material, with the subsequent assessment of language learning outcomes and cross-skills development.

The research, therefore, illustrates the reflections of a cross-sectional study, conducted on multiple cases collected in the academic years 2014-18. These cases shared the same choice of teaching methodologies (CBI, CALL, with a focus on the development of reading and writing skills), teaching

modality (blended), length (an intensive course of 24-30 hours, divided into meetings of 3 hours each in one semester), the number of attendants (maximum 30-36 students) and the subject matter, Business English. However, this was adapted in each case study, in terms of the choice of content, materials and evaluation methods, to the different target: students of the Master's Degree course in Sports Management at the University of Rome "Foro Italico" for the academic year 2014-15; students of SSML, the University School for Linguistic Mediators of the Villaggio dei Ragazzi Foundation in Maddaloni (Caserta) for the academic year 2015-16; students of the Master's degree course in Marketing and Finance of the University of Viterbo Tuscia for 2016-17 and 2017-18.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

These three short courses were intended for students with B1/B1+ pre-acquired English language competences and they were all attending specialist degree courses in which it was necessary to develop their mastery of professional/vocational microlanguage as well as practical communication skills required in their field of work. Both goals are not always achievable by employing specific vocabulary and progressive communicative exercises that can be found in marketed textbooks, because such manuals may be rare or even inexistent as, for example, in the case of ESP texts for Sports Management. When they do exist, they can remain totally unused because of students' reluctance to purchase them for a short course of professional English worth only a few ECTS credits. In these cases, it was necessary to opt for authentic material available online and, above all, to resort to tools suitable for E-learning; these ranged from Yahoo groups for sharing educational resources with learners to an open-source e-learning platform such as Moodle, for its flexibility and provision of user-friendly synchronous and asynchronous communication tools (chat, forums, surveys), interactive activities (diaries, wikis, glossaries, etc.), and the possibility of creating blocks or sections containing uploaded files, multimedia resources, links and quizzes available in self-assessment modality and/or scored by the teacher.

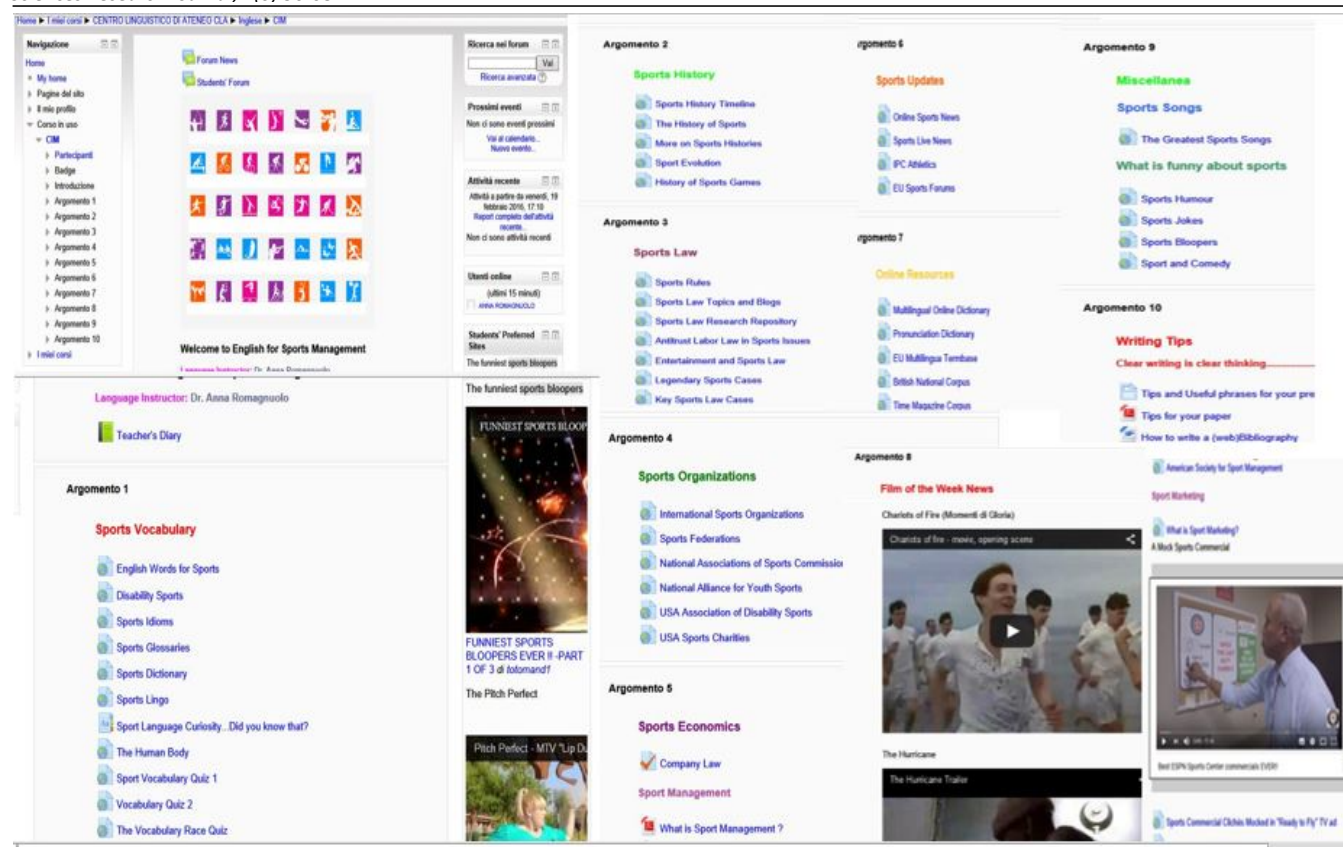


Figure 1. BusEng4SM Course Contents

A Course of Business English for Sports Management

The contents of the course of Business English for Sports Management (BusEng4SM) are illustrated in figure 1. The lack of general ESP books on the topic and the need to consolidate and expand both relevant basic vocabulary (nomenclature of physical activities and various sports disciplines and organizations) and the specialist terminology related to the organization of competitions and sporting events, the management of staff operating in the sector, legislation and regulations concerning sports equipment and facilities, the regulation of antagonistic and amateur sports activities and their marketing with advertising campaigns, dictated the use of educational resources entirely derived from websites, which were grouped in the Moodle Blocks under "Sports Vocabulary", "Sports History", "Sports Law", "Sports Economics"; "Sports Marketing". The sections were also enriched by links to film clips or trailers available on Youtube, dedicated to disciplines and/or sports heroes (as visible in Fig.1), to specialist online dictionaries (Fig. 2), to sports organizations (Fig. 3), English-language sports radio commentaries (Fig. 4), commercials which have marked the history of sports marketing and merchandising, available on Youtube or on specialist sites, links to repositories of bloopers of sports movies and advertisements (Fig. 5), and blogs, jokes and songs dedicated to sport (Fig. 6).

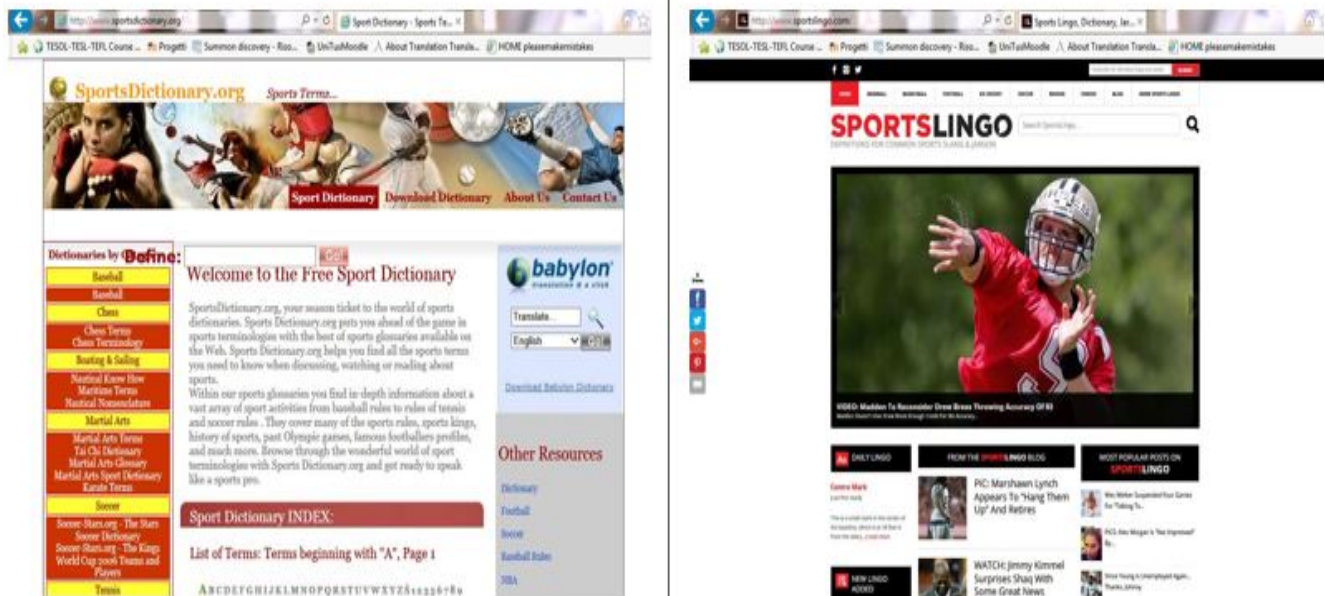


Figure 2 Online Sports Dictionaries

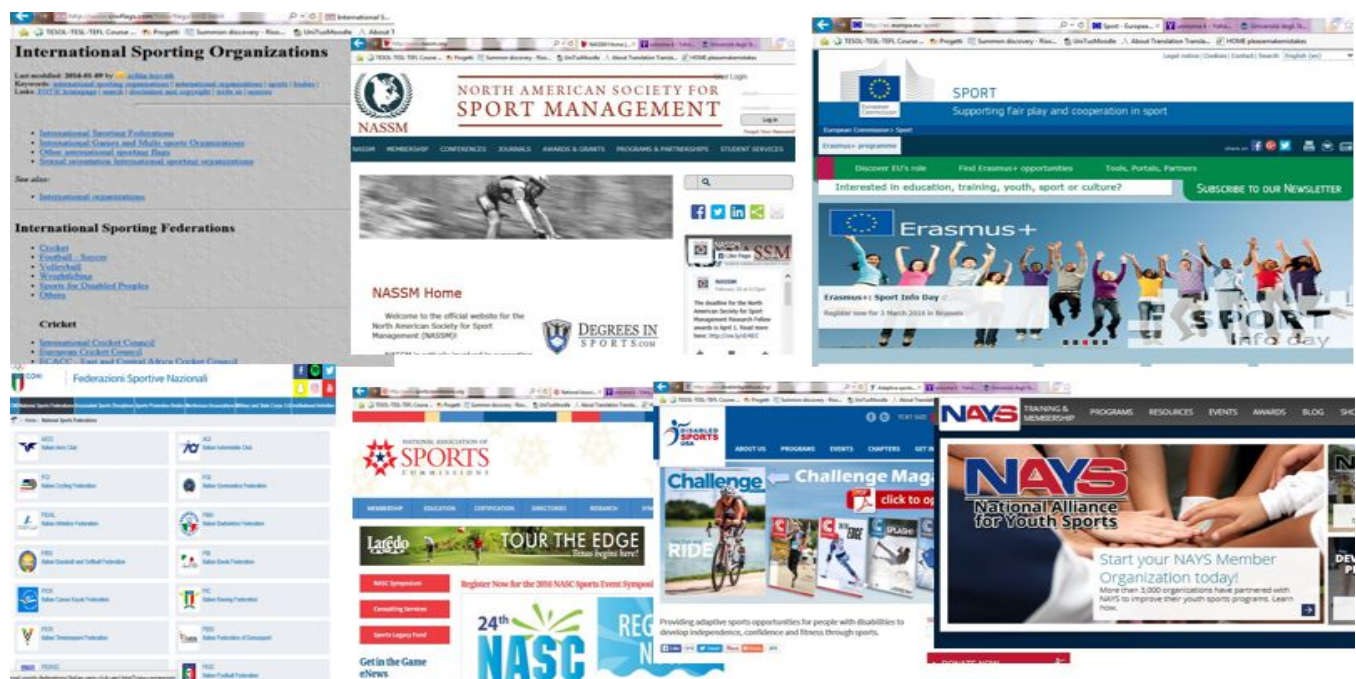


Figure 3. Sports Organizations

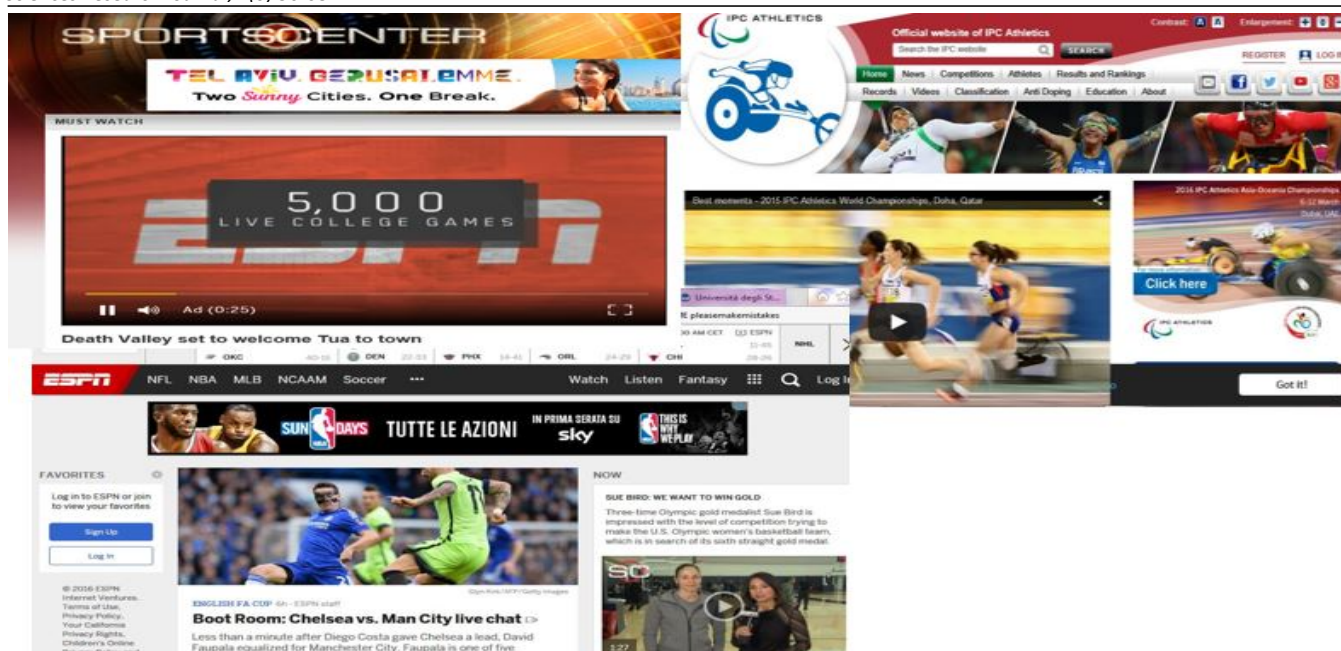


Figure 4. Sports radio commentaries

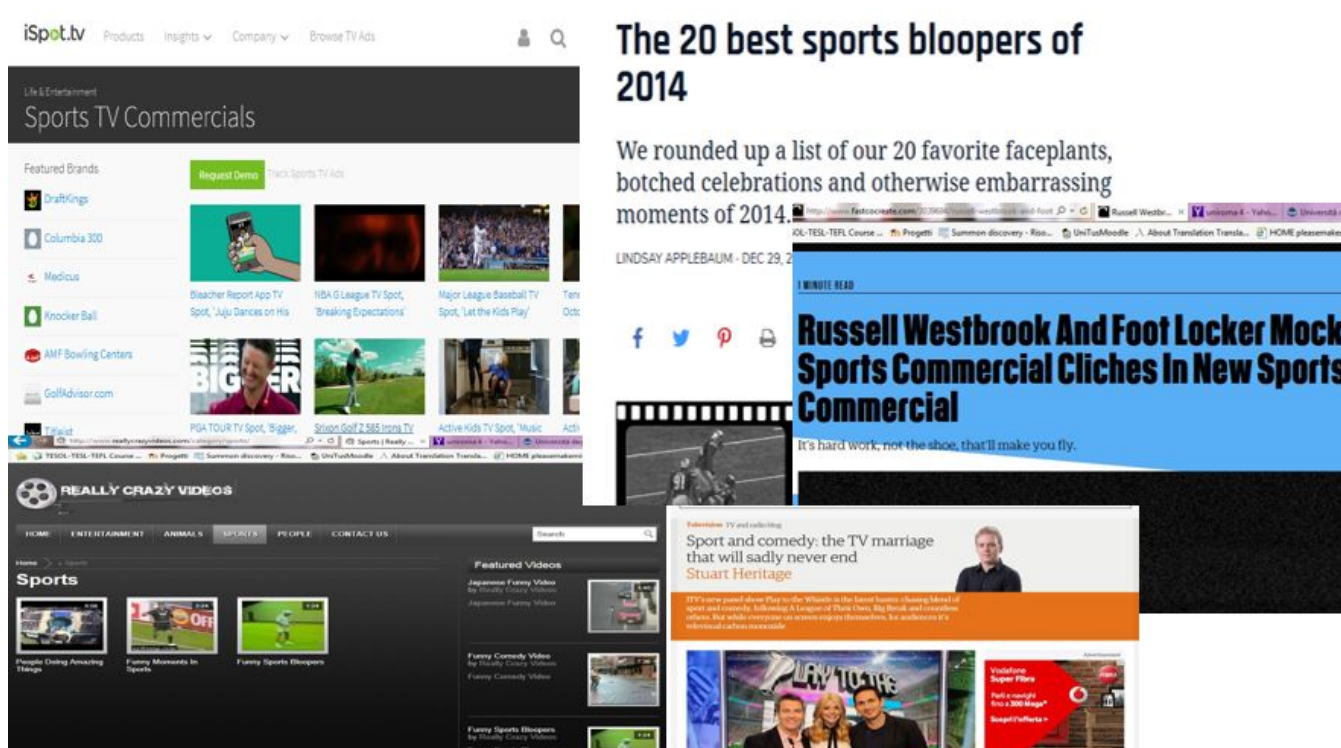


Figure 5. Sports commercials and video bloopers

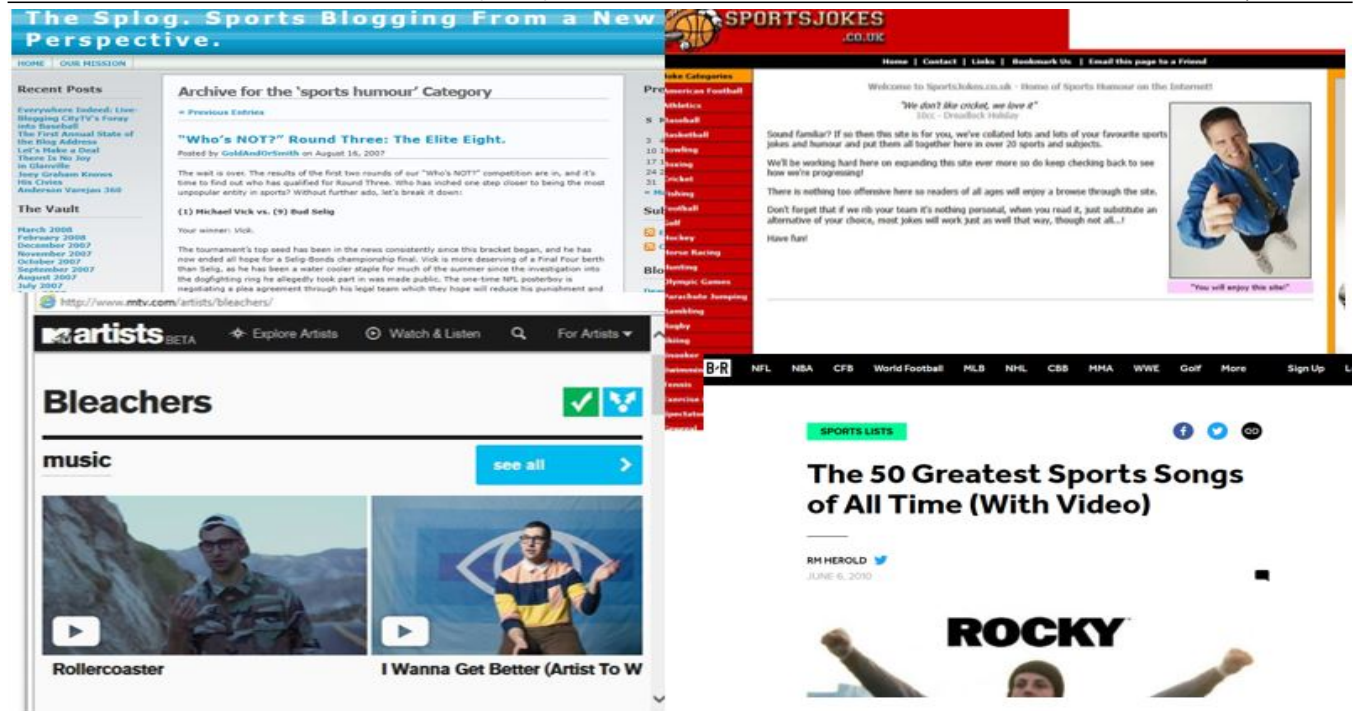


Figure 6. Sports blogs, jokes and songs

The final assessment of the learners' commitment and improvement was based on the outcomes of the lexical exercises uploaded on the platform, concerning the terminology encountered in the Moodle sections, and on the group performance during the oral PowerPoint presentation summarizing the results of a research project on one of the topics and/or case studies illustrated in the Moodle sections, as shown in Figure 7.

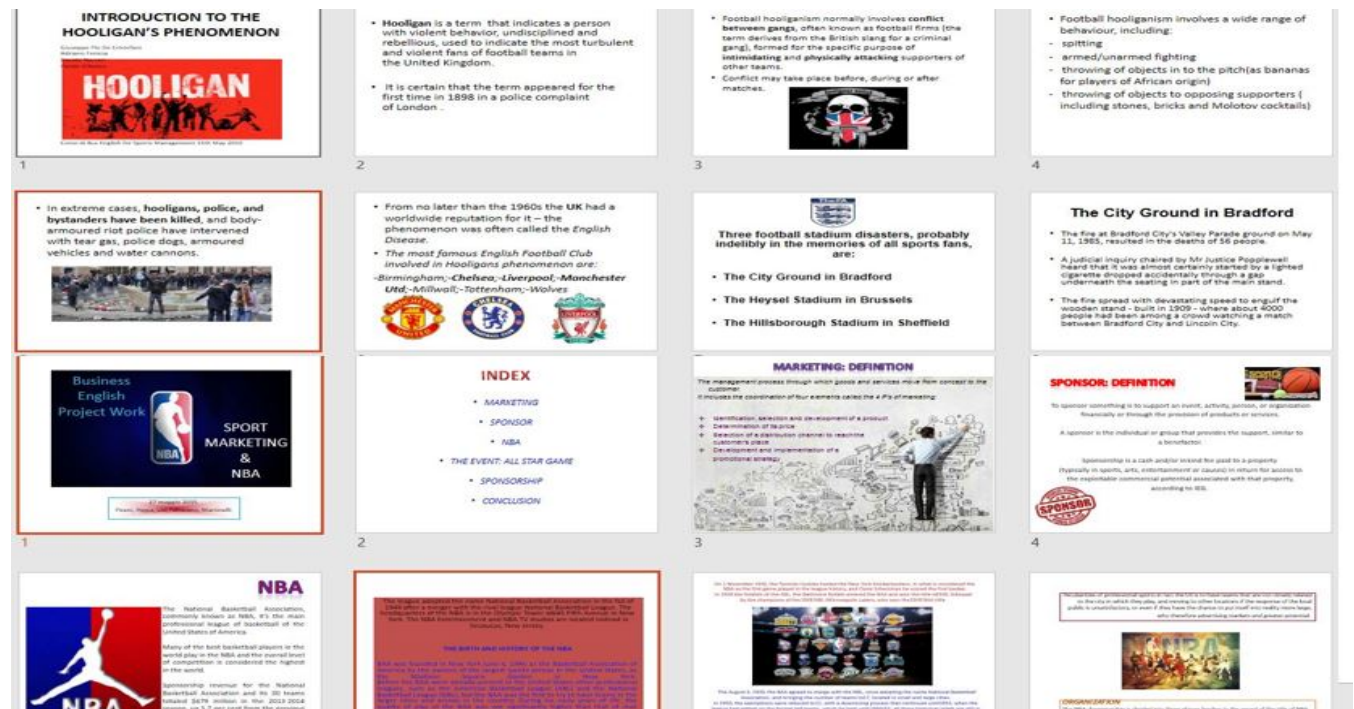


Figure 7. Students' Presentations

A Course of Business English for Linguistic and Cultural Mediators

The Business English course for Linguistic and Cultural Mediators (BusEng4CM), designed for the students of Maddaloni's SSML University School, consisted of a short, one semester English Language Module aimed at teaching the basic forms of business communication, especially written forms (enquiry, reply, order, complaint, apology, report, memo, email, business plan, etc.). Given the heterogeneous composition of the class, whose students came from different high school educational backgrounds, and their lack of the basics of accounting, commercial law and management, which would have helped them understand the legal structure, the organization chart and company operations, and also facilitate the understanding of the purposes of the different forms of internal and external communication, and in the absence of a short and useful textbook for the purpose, in this case the option of Role Play activities was preferred, to help students experience company life, even if only virtually. A fictitious company, WEBCO, was created to start a recruitment process (Fig. 8) that could force students to research the job post requirements and specifications, write an appropriate CV with the cover letter, undergo a peer-to-peer mock job selection and interview process, and then, once hired, perform the writing tasks required by the post held (Fig. 9), using the Yahoo group created for the company.



The WEBCO Corporation
Via Dell'Archeologia
81031 Aversa
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www.webco.it
Email: info@webco.it

The WEBCO Group:

COMPANY OVERVIEW:
Webco is a medium/large sized business (212 employees, total). There are twenty managers altogether. *Webco* provides recruitment advertising and communication services. The company offers market research and analysis, and strategy and planning solutions.

HISTORY: *Webco* has grown in a solid and successful way. It has a good reputation among its competitors and it is financially healthy. The *Webco* Corporation hires selectively and its workforce has a reputation for "being the best of the best". Right now the company is expanding; therefore, it needs more personnel for its new branches in the South of Italy. It aims at increasing its technological capacity as well, and there is some hope that with up-to-date technology, communication will become more productive. Right now, the southern branches still operate with telephone and paper messages.

The WEBCO project is to investigate strategies and technologies for improving communication within the Company by means of new technologies and workforce education and training.

TEAM PROFILE: Your group will be comprised of: a human resources manager, a production manager, a marketing manager, three accountants, an executive assistant, an office supervisor, a marketing assistant, a communication manager, a program coordinator, three secretaries, a customer relations representative, a records supervisor.

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provide successful candidates with training, equipment, telephone lines and a one-year contractual commitment. E-mail your resume and salary requirements to our Personnel manager (marcomagnuolo@yahoo.it) or write to WEBCO CORPORATION, Via dell'Archeologia, 81031 Aversa, Italy.

College Grade!!
Are you a detailed-oriented person? Have you excellent writing skills? WE WANT TO TALK WITH YOU!!! English majors are encouraged to apply for secretarial and press operations positions at WEBCO: Via dell'Archeologia, 81031 Aversa, Italy.

Accounting
Are you looking for a perfect entry-level position? Are you looking for advancement? Are you interested in working for an exciting, growing firm where you would have a bright future? Apply to: The WEBCO Corporation, Via dell'Archeologia, 81031 Aversa, or send your application form to the Human Resources Manager (marcomagnuolo@yahoo.it)

WEBCO Corporation is designing a company-wide Intranet system. Join our team of programming and information management specialists! If you have experience and interest in electronic communication, please send your CV to: WEBCO Corporation, Via dell'Archeologia, 81031 Aversa.

EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT
Assistant to busy executive will be required to coordinate schedules, make travel arrangements, maintain correspondence, E-Mail, etc. while boss is on the road. Great pay and excellent benefits for a detailed-oriented person. Please send resume and references to: The Webco Company, Via dell'Archeologia, 81031 Aversa, Italy.

Be e Pioneer in our Virtual Workplace!!!!
The Webco Corporation is establishing a new customer service division that will be located in cyberspace. As a member of this department, you will work from your home answering customer inquiries over the Internet. We will

Communication Manager Wanted: the Webco Corporation is looking for an energetic beginner for an entry-level position in our Marketing Department. Please send resume and cover letter WEBCO Corporation, Via dell'Archeologia, 81031 Aversa

WEBCO Corporation is looking for a well-organized person to establish and maintain computerized personnel records. As Records Supervisor, the person in this position will be in charge of converting the records of 212 employees from conventional paper files to an electronic format. The Records Supervisor will coordinate with the data system department to devise a security and access system for this information. Computer Knowledge is a must. Office work experience is a plus. Please send resume and letter of application to: The Webco Company, Via dell'Archeologia, 81031 Aversa, Italy.

WEBCO IS LOOKING FOR A MARKETING MANAGER.
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: B.A. AND THREE-YEAR WORKING EXPERIENCE IN RELEVANT FIELD. MBA IS PREFERABLE. EXPOSURE TO INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT IS A PLUS.
SEND CV AND TWO REFERENCE LETTERS TO THE WEBCO COMPANY, VIA DELL'ARCHEOLOGIA, 81031 AVERSA, ITALY.

Accounting!!!!!! If numbers are your thing, you are the 1 for us!!! WEBCO Inc. is looking for a few accountants to expand our accountant division. Work in a dynamic and friendly environment.

WEBCO CORPORATION, Via dell'Archeologia, 81031 Aversa, Italy
Email: info@webco.it

Figure 8. WEBCO Profile and Job Ads

To: Kimsmith@webcom.com
 From: carolinap@webco.com
 Date: November 15, 2015

Dear Kim,

How are you? I have just received your report but I am sorry to say that this is not what I have been expecting from you. Unfortunately, I have to say that the length of the report is not enough because the chief wants a very detailed research, so we should write more information.

Could you also revise the organisation of the entire report? There are some mistakes in the conclusion, so I suggest we should rewrite it.

I know you have been working hard lately, so if you need help, please call me!

I am sure you can do it!

Best wishes, To: pen&paper-service.co.usa

Carolina. From: ucopyoffice@webco.com

Subject: order number 795302pq

Dear sirs,
 We are writing to enquire about an order I placed on 17/05/2008.
 The item in question is two hundred reams of Papers, each of them priced £ .
 We expected them on the bound date but we did not receive anything.
 Despite several calls to helpline to chase up the order and the proof of the effected payment, we have still not received the items.
 We would be grateful if you could look into the delay and mare sure the reams are delivered to me within 72 hours.
 I would be most grateful if you would look into this matter as soon as possible.
 Thank you for your help in this matter.
 I look forward to hearing from you soon.
 Yours faithfully,
 Loretta

To: thermalhotel@gmail.com
 From: ilariao@webco.com
 Subject: Room vailability
 Date: December 3,2015

Dear Sir/Madam,

for New Year's Eve our company is planning to arrange a party and offer half board accommodation to its best employees of the year; therefore, we are looking for a suitable accommodation, which could also allow a visit to the many city attractions and places in the area.

Therefore, we require to know:

- The exact position of your hotel, if nearby the city centre with good transport links;
- The cost for 24 double rooms and 6 rooms with 3 beds with in-side facilities and high speed Wi-Fi connection;
- Half board service;
- The availability for dates 31st December 2015 – 2nd January 2016.

Are there any special offer for big groups like ours?

Many thanks for your help. We look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,
 Iliaria

Figure 9. BusEng4CM Role Play Writing Samples

A Course of Business English for Marketing and Finance

The course of Business English for Marketing and Finance (BusEng4M&F) in Figure 10, for the students of the graduate program of DEIM (Department of Economics, Engineering, Society and Enterprise) at the University of Tuscia in Viterbo, was basically a business writing course that also sought to teach the principles of business communication in a cross-cultural and historical perspective by tracing the evolution of the discipline from its origins, found in Cicero's rhetoric and in the medieval *Ars Dictaminis* and *Mercatoria*. Again, since there was no volume of Business English published for Italian students combining exercises of commercial writing in English with the theoretical foundations of the discipline and notions of the legal and internal structure of the company and its *modus operandi*, which is rather a subject of interest of commercial law, management and economic studies, Moodle was used not only to administer interactive quizzes (cloze, reordering, drag and drop) and online letter writing exercises to develop writing skills in English, but also, and above all, to upload information on the structure, organizational chart and purposes of different business forms, and post academic articles on the history of corporate communication and links to digital libraries containing reproductions of medieval formularies, ancient writing manuals and historic letter collections. The participants reported on them as part of a task assigned as groupwork in flipped classroom modality, both in oral presentations, video recorded with their consent (Fig. 11), or in a written form, contributing to the chapters of a students' e-book on the course content and entitled: *From Letter Writing to Modern Business Communication* (Fig. 12), which all the students of this course used to prepare for a final test.

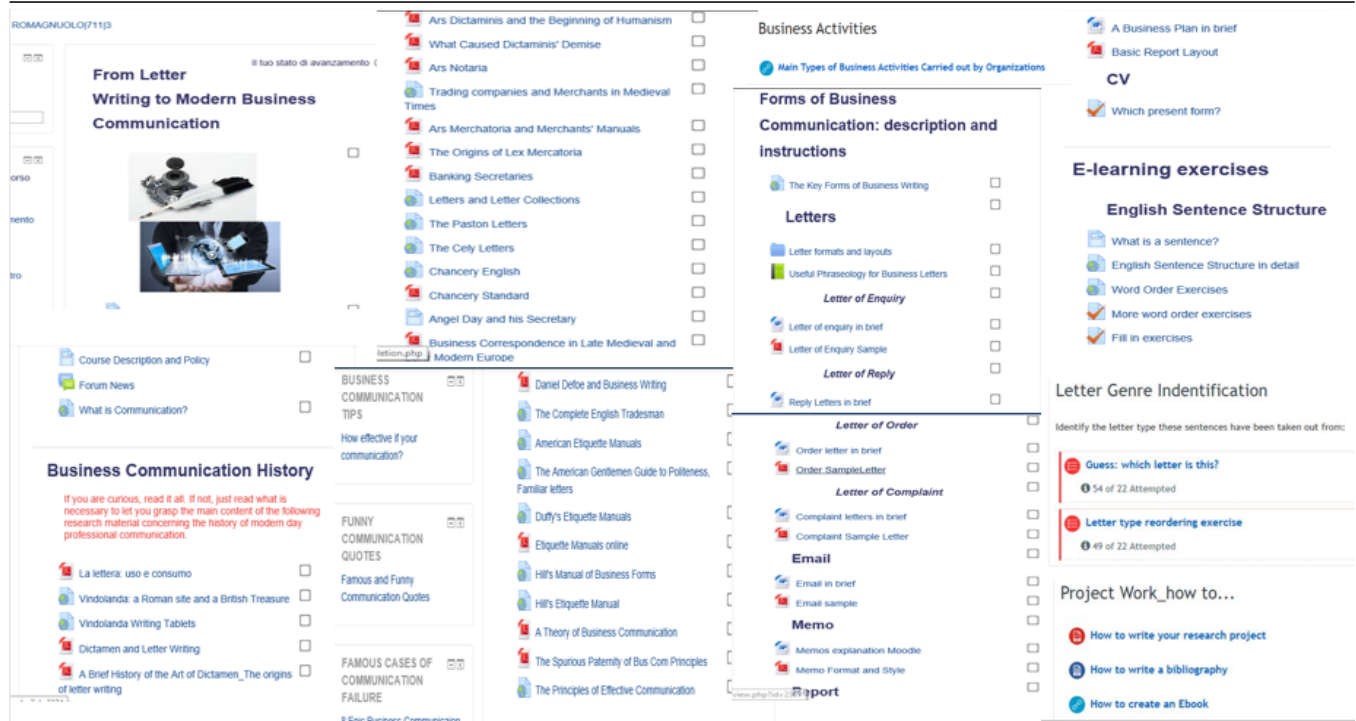


Figure 10. BusEng4M&F Course Contents



Figure 11. BusEng4M&F Students' Video Presentations



Figure 12. BusEng4M&F Students' E-Book Chapters

RESULTS

The results of students' final assessments, which mostly consisted of project work for BusEng4SM and BusEng4M&F, confirmed the advantages and disadvantages of using innovative teaching methodologies to encourage learning methods closer to those stimulated by informal environments and to increase motivation for language learning with practical-professional activities similar to those performed in the work sector related to the field of study.

The writing and discussion of projects on sports case studies and on the history of Business Communication certainly improved the English language writing and oral skills of the students participating in the various research groups, and enhanced relational and teamwork skills. However, it also confirmed the existence of management problems related to the coordination of group work: the need to convince students, accustomed to the reassuring use of a textbook, of the validity and feasibility of the project and, above all, the need to assign specific, shared and complementary tasks to stimulate the integration and collaboration of the group members and discourage potential negligence and laziness. The use of a digital platform that makes all the educational materials available at the same time, from which students can choose to read what they consider most interesting and useful to their research project, also poses the risk that they may select the easiest material, skip what they consider unnecessary and only focus on what they believe to be sufficient to prepare for and pass the final test. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to supervise students' selection and completion of the writing tasks and monitor the original reuse of the available sources with a Moodle anti-plagiarism plugin tool to check user-submitted content.

The Role Play experience as an employee of the WEBCO Corporation certainly stimulated students' curiosity towards job posts and employment tasks they are very likely to find at the end of their

academic career, and which they had to research, before trying the simulation experiment, in order to acquire practical notions and appropriate vocabulary to perform their tasks. The simulation has also encouraged the development of communication and negotiation skills necessary to work in a company, as well as the co-management with their peers of the simulation experiment - from attending the Mock Job Interview to performing practical administrative tasks such as writing and sending emails and memos to WEBCO's work colleagues. However, the experiment also revealed Role Play limits due to students' lack of extra-textual and pragmatic knowledge of the real working world, as well as their lack of familiarity with the assigned textual genre, probably little known and not sufficiently practiced in their native language, as evidenced by the errors found in the exam tasks reproduced in Figure 13, which tended to be pragmatic errors rather than grammar mistakes.

Task: As Marketing Manager, write to your assistant asking her to gather all the planning details about the exhibition your company is organizing at the Milan Expo and verify that she has provided all your guests with the relevant information.

Dear Rosa Ms. D. ¹

Please check the schedule and the details of the organization of our event at Expo and send me a memo about it. Also send the info to our guest. Tell all staff to follow these instructions: Have you sent the Expo brochure with cards and maps to our guests?

Be polite, cordial, and respectful to each customer. ²

Yours sincerely. ¹

Anna S. [redacted]

¹ She is your assistant! You do not need to be so formal, unless she is a recent hire and it is your company policy to call everyone by Mr. or Ms. + last name.

² Are you implying they are usually rude and disrespectful to clients??? You are asked to verify that the right information about the event has been given to the invited guests!

From: HRmanagerL.C@webco.com

To: All Staff

CC: Technical Dept

Subject: Health and Safety Training Course

Please Note that the next Health and Safety Training Course will be held next Thursday on November 14th at 10.00. We will use the conference room center ??? next to our company headquarters. ¹

Lucia R. [redacted]

¹ How can a conference room be located "next to" a corporate main building? A room is a space in a building.

Task: As Advertising Associate, write to your assistant asking her to gather all the details about the Expo campaign your company is organizing in Milan and verify that the brief is ready.

To: marta.cad@webco.com ¹

From: Francesca.rad@webco.com

Date: 12 December 2015

Subject: Check details for next Milan/Expo Exhibition

Please give send? email? me all the campaign organization details for the next exhibition. I'd like to know the date, time, and place of the event. ² Is the brief ready?

Could you also send me a report about our catering costs of catering? ³

Best regards ¹

Francesca R. [redacted]

¹ you are writing to your assistant!

² if you work in the Advertising Department and are engaged in the organization of an advertising campaign at the Milan fair, shouldn't you already know the date, time, and place of the event?!!!!

³ Not sure what catering has to do with it.

is a reply to Mr. Crane who has complained about the delivery of a faulty product (Inv. No. 18871). The shipping company inspector has just sent us photos of an office desk with minor scratches and a broken leg. Send replacement and offer compensation.

To: lcrane@satex.co.it

From: lmsales@webco.it

Subject: Your Order 14478

Dear Mr. Crane,

Thank you for informing us about the damage to our consignment (Inv. No. 18871). We apologize for the inconvenience. We will send you a replacement next Monday and, as a form of compensation, we will send you a voucher? a partial refund? ship two more desks. ¹ We hope I hope this adjustment fulfils your expectations. We are looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely

Lucia Maria R. [redacted]

Sales Director

¹ you could have also sent a discount on future orders or a small gift. Two desks would be quite expensive as a gift and the customer might not need them. And he may not have enough space in his office.

Figure 13. BusEng4CM Students' Sample Assignments Showing Lack of Extra-textual Knowledge

Finally, the Flipped Classroom experiment, which went as far as assigning the task of creating educational materials with the creation of the e-book *From Letter Writing to Modern Business Communication*, has fully revealed its advantages: increasing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn the foreign language by involving students in sufficiently demanding activities that not only led to an improvement in written and oral language skills – because of the obvious need to practice academic writing and oral performances, but also enabled students to acquire and/or develop other skills: research skills, necessary to complete their project work, intermediate digital skills (especially with the creation of graphic content for the e-book), social skills (in particular time-management and public speaking), and interpersonal skills (from analytical thinking to conflict resolution) necessary for collaborative work.

The graph in Figure 14 illustrates the comparative results of the final task of the students of the three courses, revealing the effectiveness of the flipped-classroom experiment, which allowed

students of non-linguistic degree courses to achieve significant language improvements in a short time, reaching an exit level not dissimilar, in terms of fluency, accuracy in the use of the specialist lexicon, and syntactic-grammar correctness, from that demonstrated by students of BusEng4CM at SSML, which is a University degree specializing in foreign language mediation.

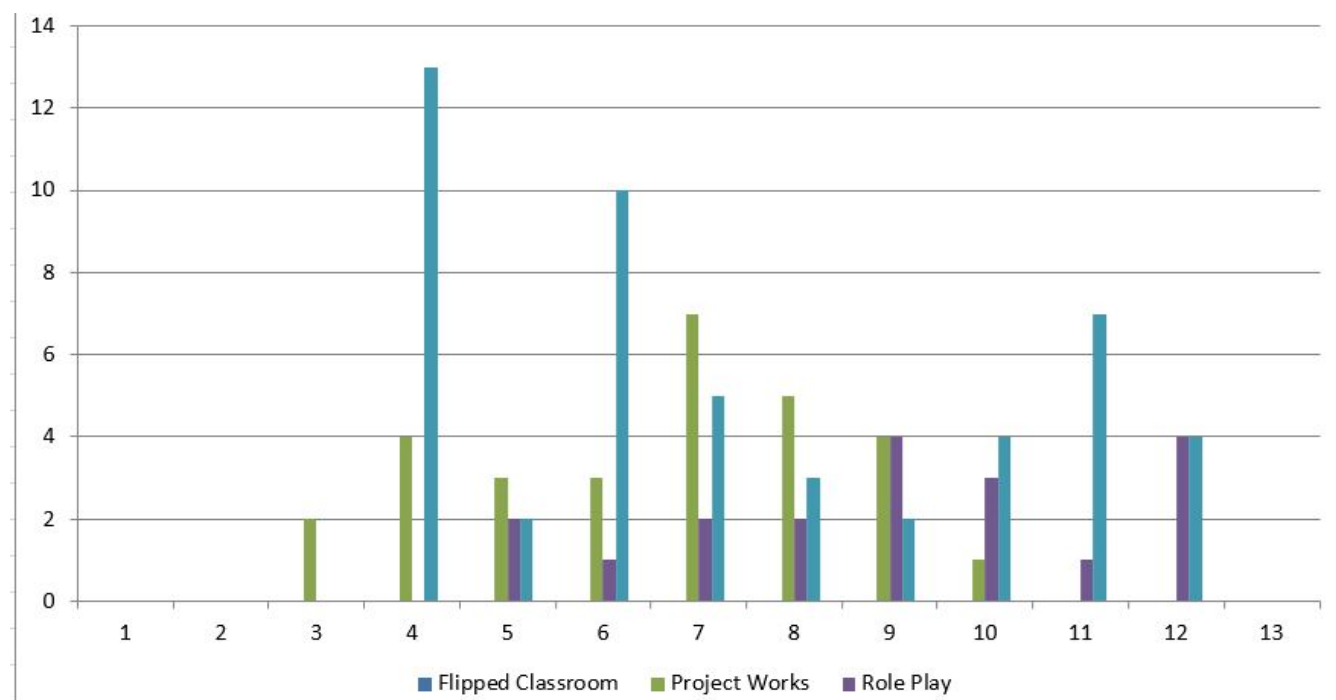


Figure 14. Comparative Results

CONCLUSION

Although taught in different settings, the three courses had several commonalities: the target consisted of graduate students with an intermediate level of EFL; no textbook was used during the course; the course was taught applying a content-based Instruction approach, and distance learning tools were used to allow the acquisition of professional skills by role playing and learner-centered activities.

In all the three courses, students were not only learning English specialist vocabulary and phraseology relevant to their future communities of practice but also content related to their field of studies; therefore, English was not only the target language but also the medium of instruction, which undoubtedly increased student motivation, especially when unknown topics such as corporate functions, recruitment procedures, and managerial and administrative tasks were presented. Although all the courses had innovative elements for these students, both in terms of course content organization and teaching modality, which in many ways reproduced informal learning settings [11], the flipped classroom experiment determined better results because students were involved in activities, such as e-book writing, which they felt might be beneficial in their future career. They did not only develop professional writing skills (by practicing commercial letters in online exercises) and technical skills, such as drafting and digital content editing (when working on their e-chapters), but they also, and most importantly, practiced academic writing, which is something Italian students do not usually learn before starting PhD studies. Moreover, the

continual feedback they were provided with during the writing process gave them a feeling of progress that boosted their intrinsic motivation to learn the foreign language.

As I said elsewhere [6], criticism of flipped classroom practice as merely shifting traditional, lecture-based knowledge transmission to out-of-class time cannot be levelled against a course that encourages students to choose topics to research and create their own educational material. However, as Moiseenko observes, “material-development tasks are usually initiated and guided by the instructor”, but “students are eventually left alone to complete the task and pace their own learning” [12]. Hence, the production of learner-generated resources requires careful planning and constant group monitoring by the teacher. In these experiments, the students who prepared a Power Point research study and/or an e-chapter were given clear *how-to write* instructions and assigned an equal minimum number of slides/pages to contribute individually to the group project. While body language, turn taking and transition between speakers can reveal group dynamics and teamwork during an oral performance, a group writing project such as an ebook cannot easily be assessed in terms of collaboration with peers, since the projects were only partly carried out in class. Managing and sharing students’ drafts in Google Doc might help in future course design to better monitor each student’s contribution, initiative, choice, and assess the development of self-efficacy, creativity and negotiation skills, which are as necessary as language competence to a functional adult and competent professional.

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