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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: EXPERIENCE FROM UZBEK HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The article deals with the use of digital technologies in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at higher education institutions of Uzbekistan. The study is based on the analysis of state documents and ESP curricula, and on our own experience of introducing the VTTSS (Virtual Technologies for Teaching Special Subjects) methodology at three architecture universities. We describe the main groups of digital tools that are used in ESP classes, show which language skills and lesson stages each of them suits best, and discuss the advantages and problems we faced in practice. Our experience shows that a digital tool works well only when it is chosen for a concrete professional task, and not simply added to a traditional lesson. At the end of the article we give practical recommendations for ESP teachers and course designers.

Keywords: ESP, digital technologies, higher education, Uzbekistan, VTTSS, blended learning, professional competence.

Introduction

Foreign language competence has become one of the priorities of higher education in Uzbekistan. Presidential Decree PQ-5117 of 19 May 2021 defined measures for raising foreign language learning to a qualitatively new level, and the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026 (Decree PF-60) places great importance on the digitalisation of education. In non-linguistic universities this has changed the role of English. It is taught less as a general subject and more as a tool for the students' future profession, in other words as English for Specific Purposes.

As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) point out, an ESP course should be built around the needs of learners and the situations in which they will use the language. In Uzbek universities this is not always easy to achieve. Groups are often large and the number of hours is limited. Authentic professional materials in English are hard to find, and the ESP teacher is usually a language specialist, not an expert in architecture, medicine or economics (Basturkmen, 2010).

Digital technologies can partly solve these problems. Computer assisted language learning has developed from simple drill programs to communicative and integrative use of technology (Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Chapelle, 2001). Today ESP teachers can use virtual tours, 3D models, learning platforms and mobile applications. In practice, however, these tools are often used without a clear

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methodological basis, and their role in ESP courses in Uzbekistan has not yet been described in a systematic way.

In this article we aim to analyse the experience of using digital technologies in ESP teaching in Uzbek higher education, to group the tools according to their didactic function and to offer recommendations for their effective use.

Methods

This is a qualitative, descriptive study, and it is based on three kinds of material. First, we analysed state documents on foreign language education and digitalisation, together with ESP curricula and syllabi for architecture and civil engineering programmes. We wanted to see what these documents require in terms of digital competence and professional language skills.

Second, we used our own classroom experience. The VTTSS methodology was introduced at Tashkent University of Architecture and Civil Engineering (TAQU), Samarkand State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering (SamDAQU) and Urgench State University (UrDU), and 240 students took part in it. During this work we kept lesson plans and observation notes and collected samples of students' work, and these became an important source for the present article.

Third, we reviewed international research on computer assisted language learning, multimedia learning and ESP course design, which helped us interpret what we had observed. The digital tools were then grouped by their didactic function, by the skills they develop and by the stage of the lesson where they proved most useful. Advantages and difficulties were taken from teachers' notes and from students' feedback.

Results

As a result of the analysis we distinguished five groups of digital tools used in ESP teaching (Table 1). Each group has its own function, and the lessons that worked best were those where several tools were combined in a planned order.

Table 1. Digital tools in ESP by didactic function

Group	Examples	Main function	Skills supported	Lesson stage
Visualisation tools	Virtual tours, 360 degree panoramas, 3D models	Link terms to real objects	Vocabulary, speaking	Presentation of new terms
Learning platforms	Moodle, Google Classroom	Organise materials and independent work	Reading, writing	Before and after class
Vocabulary and quiz tools	Quizlet, Kahoot, Wordwall	Practise and check terms	Vocabulary, reading	Practice, review
Collaboration tools	Padlet, shared documents,	Group projects and peer feedback	Writing, speaking	Project work

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Group	Examples	Main function	Skills supported	Lesson stage
	online whiteboards			
Multimedia resources	Professional videos, podcasts, online lectures	Authentic professional input	Listening, speaking	Input, discussion

In practice we noticed several clear advantages. The first one is authenticity. Students worked with real buildings, real professional videos and real design tasks, so the English lesson became closer to their future work. Digital materials also increased motivation. Visual and interactive tasks kept students' attention much longer than exercises based only on texts, and this was especially true for students with a lower level of English. Another benefit was independent learning: thanks to the platforms and vocabulary applications students could revise terms at home, which partly made up for the small number of classroom hours.

At the same time, we faced some difficulties. Technical equipment and internet quality were different from one university to another and even from one classroom to another. Choosing and adapting digital materials for a particular specialty took teachers a lot of preparation time. Perhaps the most important problem was methodological. When a tool was used without a clear task, students saw it as entertainment, and the learning effect was much weaker.

Discussion

Our findings show that the effect of a digital tool in ESP depends not so much on the tool as on the task it is used for. Chapelle (2001) makes a similar point when she argues that technology should be judged by the learning opportunities it creates. The integrative approach to CALL described by Warschauer and Healey (1998) leads to the same conclusion. If a virtual tour is shown only as a nice picture, students learn little from it. But if they have to find, name and explain the elements of a building during the tour, it turns into a real professional task.

In our case the VTTSS methodology helped to organise this. Each tool had its place at a certain stage of learning, starting from the first meeting with a term in its visual context and ending with using it in a project. So the tools supported each other and were not used randomly. This also agrees with the idea that the content and methods of an ESP course should follow the learners' target situation (Basturkmen, 2010).

Some of the problems we met cannot be solved by the teacher alone. Universities need reliable equipment and internet, and ESP teachers need training both in digital tools and in the basics of the specialty they teach. In our opinion, closer cooperation between language teachers and teachers of specialty subjects would save preparation time and make the materials more accurate from a professional point of view.

Conclusion

Digital technologies can make ESP teaching in Uzbek universities much more effective, but only if they are used within a clear methodology. On the basis of this study we would like to offer several recommendations.

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1. Each digital tool should be chosen for a specific professional task and a specific stage of the lesson, rather than added to a traditional lesson for variety.
2. Visualisation tools work best for presenting new terms, while platforms and quiz applications are more useful for practice and independent work, so it makes sense to combine them.
3. It would be helpful to create shared banks of digital ESP materials for each specialty, which would reduce the load on individual teachers.
4. ESP teachers need regular training in digital pedagogy, ideally organised together with the specialty departments.
5. Frameworks such as VTTSS can help teachers build digital activities in a logical order, from the first input to real professional use.

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