DESIGNING AN ONLINE COURSE: FREE EDUCATIONAL TOOLS FOR ESP (FET-ESP)

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Abstract. The need to learn online has become a current practice, forcing teaching online to become a stringency rather than an option. The current paper will present a basic model for designing an online course focussing on free tools for Educational Purposes adapted to teaching/learning English for specific purposes (ESP), with presentation of both the synchronous and the asynchronous components. The paper will showcase basic speaking and writing tools and platforms (Google sites and docs, Wikispaces, Blogger, moviemakers and quizzes) that can form the content of the FET-ESP online course and exemplify how teachers who intend to enhance their activity and motivate their students can use them in their activity.

Keywords: online teaching, Wiki, Google sites and docs, moviemakers, quizzes, Voice Thread

Teaching ESP with technology is a fascinating enterprise, in a steady dynamic transformation and improvement, with the only downside of specific tools being discontinued. This paper represents an attempt of helping ESP teachers keep abreast the rapid evolvement of technology-based teaching as well as of their buiding an online presence and delivering online language courses via free Educational tools that have somehow maintained this status of late.

The starting point in each educational enterprise based on new approaches and technologies is guided by the desire to offer students updated knowledge, to form their specific practical skills and abilities, and at the same time to empower them to select, evaluate and recreate essential information in the process of their lifelong, autonomous learning. Moreover, employing technology means far more than using PowerPoint presentations or videoclips in the teaching/learning process. Effective technology-enhanced ESP learning/teaching is based on formation of skills and abilities such as cooperation, collaboration, creation, problem solving and decsion making, peer learning and peer-evaluation, which are twenty-first century skills and abilities.

This paper will present a possible model for designing an online course based on free, easy to use educational tools for teaching/learning ESP. The FET-ESP course was delivered online as part of the E-tutor international training, coordinated by Al. I. Cuza University of Medicine, Iasi, on November 23-27, 2016.

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Elements of online course design

Although various formats are possible, the essentials of each online course, FET-ESP including, are:

1) a component for **synchronous, live communication (e.g. Skype, Google Hangout)**, and
2) a platform for **asynchronous** delivery of the syllabus, materials, student production portfolios (e,g, Wikipedia, special playground areas or student blogs). The asynchronous component may add a separate place where students can upload their portfolios and a forum or chat for participants' interaction (e.g. YahooGroup) unless this is inbuilt in the asynchronous communication platform (as in the case of Moodle)

1) The **synchronous component** is meant to confer a sense of present-ness and connectedness to the otherwise dispersed group of students who very rarely, if ever, participate and connect with the trainer from one single place. Therefore, online courses have several live sessions or webinars scheduled, allowing participants not only to communicate in writing in the chat area but also to make their voices heard and, therefore, to humanize an otherwise impersonal online classroom. Wiziq (https://www.wiziq.com/), although not free, is such a dedicated platform for learning delivery that allows audio-video communication in real time. Free platforms that allow a lower number of participants for online course delivery are Skype and Google Hangouts. The screen-sharing feature in both Skype and Google Hangouts makes the course content visible to the user's end, i.e. no matter what runs on the trainer's screen is visible to the students. Control over the screen cannot be transferred to the students, however, as it happens in the case of real online interactive classes with Wiziq.

2) To illustrate the **asynchronous component**, the Baw pbworks [1] may represent a model. BAW (Becoming a Webhead) was an international hands-on online course that ran until a couple of years ago, sponsored by EVO TESOL, in order to familiarize and consolidate the EFL teachers' skills of teaching English with technology. Pbworks was chosen for this course content delivery, despite other existing choices of free wikipedias such as Wikispaces. The purpose of choosing a wiki instead of a site for online course content delivery was the collaboration facility the former allows, with content breakdown on weeks, tutorials, comments, and the added value of activity tracking, which is essential in group projects such as those in which students far apart from one another engage.

Sites (e.g. Google sites), wikis (Pbworks, Wikispaces), even blogs (Blogger, Edublogs) and/or other virtual learning platforms such as Moodle or Edmodo can be used for asynchronous course content delivery, communication, evaluation and student involvement. If sites and wikis function as optimal course delivery platforms, Moodle and especially Edmodo are dedicated virtual learning platforms that also include assignment management, grading and progress monitoring components.

Asynchronous communication: sites, wikis or blogs?

When choosing the online course delivery platform, ESP teachers need to define whether it will be used solely for content delivery or for content delivery and student cooperation and engagement. User-friendly free sites such as Google sites, are more static than Wikis, whereas wikis are more collaborative than blogs. In terms of afordances, images and videos can be embedded in all of them, whereas PP and slide show presentations as well as other HTML gadgets can be embedded in wikis. The user-edited content in wikis allows the teacher to monitor the amount of times students engaged in cooperation and collaboration (Fig.1).

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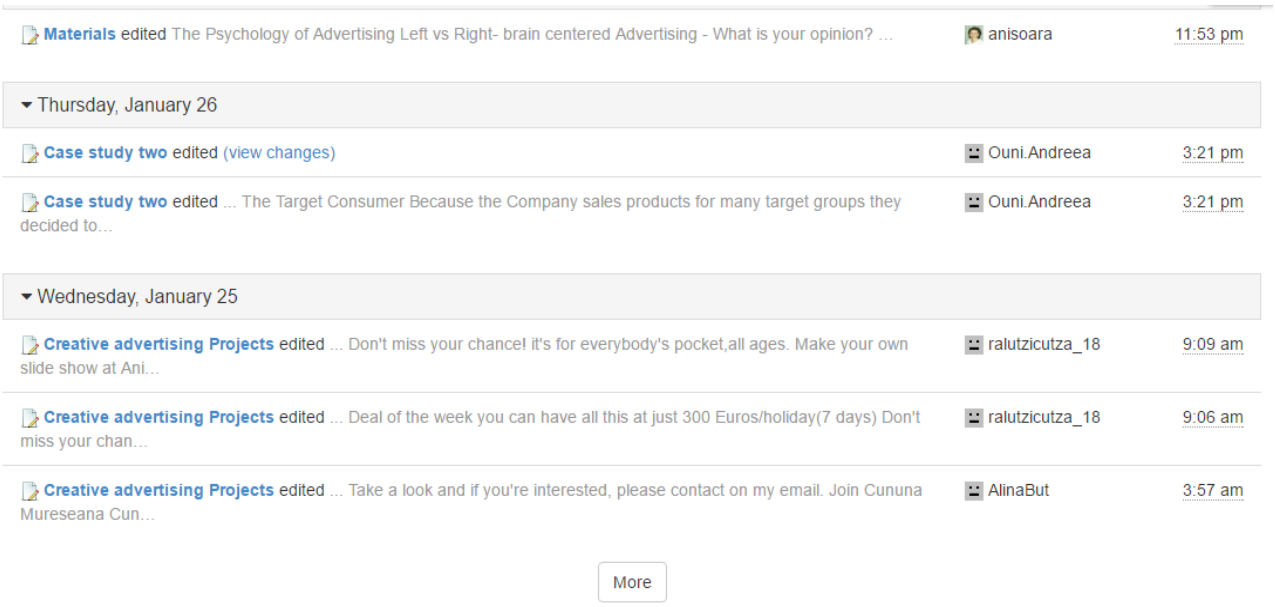


Fig. 1 Wikispaces – track changes feature

With blogs students seem to be responding more to the teacher's post rather than collaborating and only occasionally do they reply to another comment, unless the teacher chooses to make some of the students blog editors or students create their own blogs [7]. From this point of view, blogs are seen as more dynamic in content than sites but less cooperative and collaborative than wikis.

Google sites are one of the easiest to create free resources which any ESP teacher can employ for online course delivery or blended learning. All you need to have is a Google account and then follow the steps to Create a site. Fig.2 below is an example of such a site used with students in English for Cosmetics (https://sites.google.com/site/cosmetologyumftgm). Students use the site like a digital coursebook, class agenda, and dictionary but there is no trace of their visits, downloads, listening practice or connected activities.

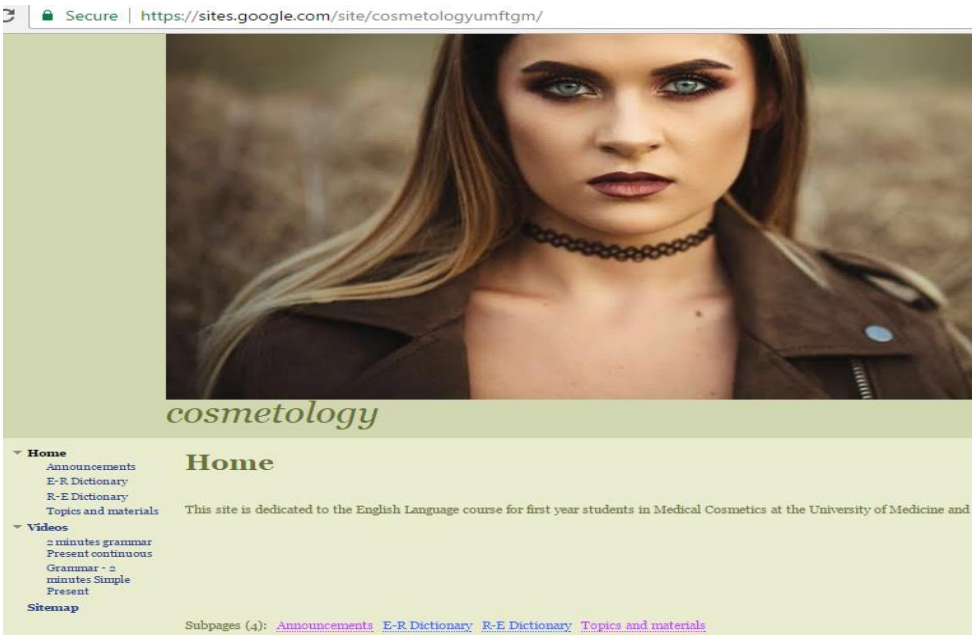


Fig. 2 Google site – English for Medical Cosmetics

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Writing tools

Google docs is the simplest free tool for cooperative writing, and it can be either embedded or linked to sites or virtual platforms. Creating and sharing a joint project, presentation or survey with Google Docs that can be accessed from anywhere, edited and worked on from a distance, is coupled by editing facilities, adding or deleting a comment, sending a comment to a specific contributor or managing comment notifications. One of the most striking tools of Google docs is Voice typing: students can check if their pronunciation is appropriate by using this feature by simply plugging in their microphone and the doc will write what they have dictated. The Doc can be made public (anyone can find and edit it), anyone with the link can view, edit or comment upon, or sharing can be restricted to certain people. Likewise, if an expiration date is set, the *edit access* to a Doc will be turned into *can comment* after the deadline. For the FET-ESP online course, Google docs (Fig. 3) was used for needs analysis – i.e. collecting information about the participating teachers, diagnostic survey about what they could do or had used before, in terms of teaching ESP with technology, as well as their expectations about the course. Support and feedback on progress and encountered difficulties from the online course participants is critical not only at the beginning of the course but also during and after the course and if it cannot be obtained orally in the live sessions or through forums, it can be provided/collected through Google docs.

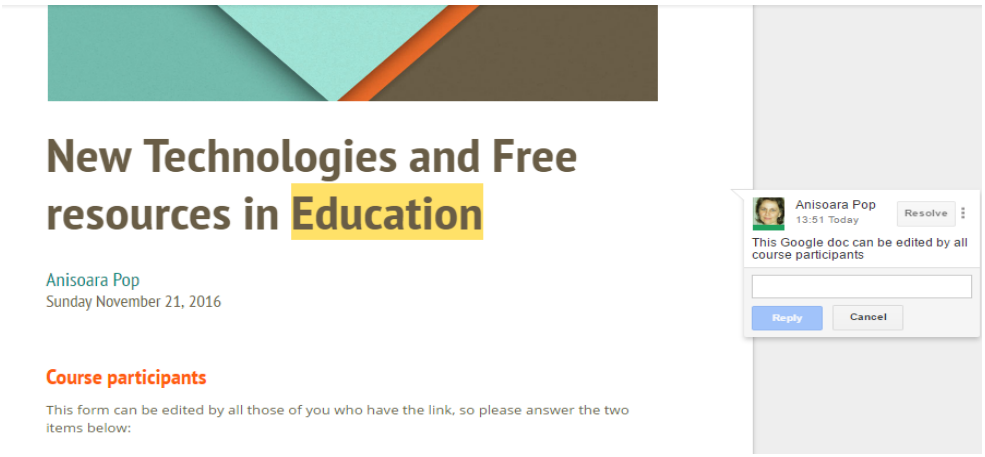


Fig. 3 Google doc

For a larger scope writing project and integration of skills, blogs represent the second rank option after wikis (e.g. a four-year integrated writing for Business English http://www.English4usdc10.blogspot.ro).

Voice tools

Voice tools are essential in forming the speaking productive skill in ESP, although there are few free voice tools available, some excellent ones having been discontinued (eg. Voxopop, Vaestro). **VoiceThread** (VT Fig. 4) is a classical voice tool with two VTs available for free/account. What is great about this tool is the possibility to see all the students' voices grouped around a unique topic/theme, rather than as isolated contributions. Comments are allowed by webcam, text and voice only. The teacher can upload images, PowerPoint presentations, videos or documents on which students comment. Comments can be moderated, but they cannot be edited, once uploaded on the Thread. For podcasts, Audacity is the best free recorder and editor.

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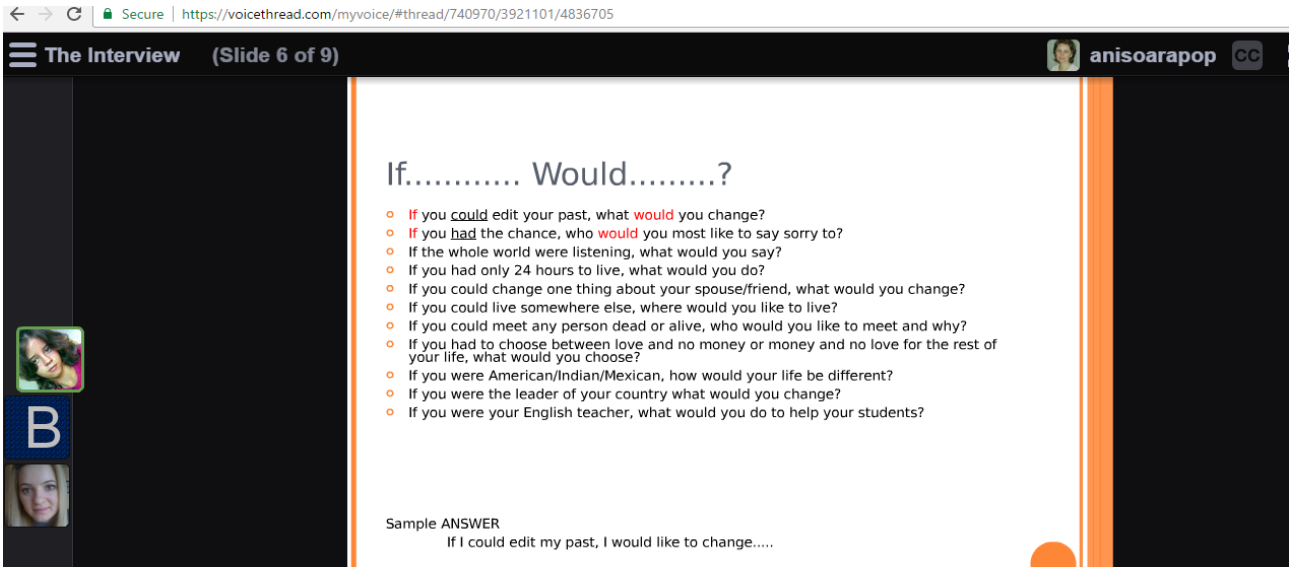


Fig.4 Voice Thread – The Interview

Quizzes

Online quizzes are used for summative or formative assessment as well as in evaluation. **Photopeach** is a free resource for quiz creation as long as productions remain available online. However, due to introduction of new features, already created quizzes can be downloaded only under premium paid version. The principle of Photopeach creation is simple and is based on uploading a relevant/attractive picture for each assessed item, with a choice of three response options, of which only one is correct. The quiz items roll automatically according to the established timing per question against a musical background, after which the correct response is displayed. Since students are not given a proficiency score at the end nor any clues or final explanations, Photopeach is better suited for group class revision of vocabulary or grammar items, which can be administered during the roundup, filler or warmup stage of the assessment (Fig.5). The only interactive feature of this quiz is the comment section at the end.

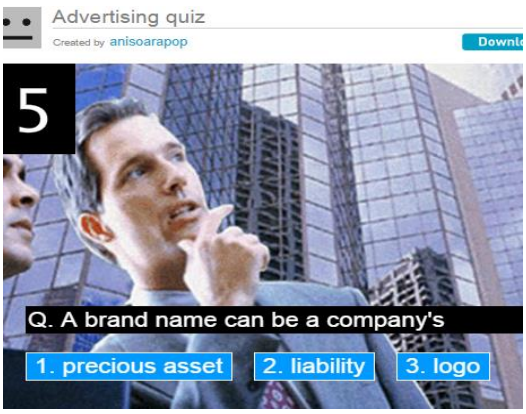


Fig.5 Photopeach Quiz for advertising language

Other free applications for online assessment are Kahoot, Socrative and Zapion, Kahoot interaction being more fascinating (can be played classically or as a team) and Socrative more formal.

Moviemakers

Dvolver (Fig. 6) movie maker is the simplest free version, which allows written interaction in the form of short dialogues. The creator can select a scene background, sky, soliloquoy, chase or rendez-vous exchange. For each scene/character there is a set of pre-defined character

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features such as his/her traits and likes and background details, which are helpful, expecially for beginner students. Each character's lines are typed within a limit of 100 text characters per character's line. The drawback of this tool is the background music which starts playing if the movie is embedded in a site or wiki. Dvolver movie maker is suited for grammar or vocabulary assessment in the more cognitive rather than the creative/affective stage of ESP learning, with lower level students for whom creation of several exchanges can be a challenge.



Fig. 6 Dvolver movie maker

A complex movie maker version including voice interaction but also more difficult to realize professional animated videos is Goanimate (Fig. 7) – a video creation platform, which offers a 14 day trial period. The characters' replies can be read by a synthesized voice or recorded through microphone. Sound effects, music, props, entrances, exits, and downloads are available.



Fig. 7 GoAnimate video

This is a short list and an evidence-based review of some simple free FET-ESP tools that can be included in ESP learning and online teaching. Teaching them online presupposes that enrolled ESP teachers are given the opportunity to experience with the tools themselves and create their own productions before they start using them with their own students. The participants' productions can be either stored on the asynchronous platform for course delivery, or if the case, participants can be asked to create their own blogs, which will serve as portfolios and reflections on learning and progress.

Conclusion

To conclude, with minimal knowledge and effort investment every ESP teacher can become a modern online trainer or at least stay current with basic elements of online education while boosting their students' ESP learning experiences. The reasons for using technology in teaching/learning ESP are many and they pertain first of all to the learners who were born in a

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technology-rich environment where multitasking and learning by recreating are a rule, but also to the motivation, engagement and empowerment that technology-based exploitation for language learning entails.

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