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# TEACHING ESP IN THE VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: USING ILIAS ONLINE EDUCATIONAL PLATFORM TO FACILITATE THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH SPECIALIZED LEXICAL CONTENT

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*Abstract: This paper will describe and discuss the experience of creating an online, interactive, multimedia course aimed at facilitating the acquisition of military terminology in English by the Romanian naval personnel. This initiative stemmed from the desire to cater to the linguistic needs of the aforementioned professional group for specialized English language content while acknowledging the practical challenges of bringing them in for extensive, in-house, face-to-face education. This course constitutes the main envisaged output of the Research Project nr. 151/ 2018 conducted by the authors of this paper at "Mircea cel Batran" Naval Academy. While face-to-face, content-based instruction is a widely spread practice in the field of ESL, especially in ESP, the novelty element of our present endeavor lies in its making use of the generous and diverse course design features offered by ILIAS, which is an open source web-based learning management system. In brief, this platform allows for both synchronous and asynchronous teacher-leaner and learner-learner interaction in a highly customizable virtual learning environment. In the field of education, ILIAS supports course designers in managing their learning content and offers tools for evaluation and assessment as well as collaboration and communication. This paper will discuss the course design process and its main online features to show how professional development courses such as this can exploit online education resources in order to grant professionals such as the Romanian naval personnel better access to lifelong learning opportunities.*

*Keywords: ESP, online language learning, course design*

## Introduction

Starting from the premise that English is *the lingua franca* of global defence, this paper discusses the necessity of reconsidering the traditional setting of English language learning within the military context. Unlike NavalAcademy students who benefit from mainly face-to-face education, navy personnel need to reconcile their professional obligations on the one hand with their need for acquiring English language military terminology on the other hand. Since extensive face-to-face language training is challenging to organize due to practical constraints, the option of online learning seems to open more possibilities for accessible and flexible professional development for our naval personnel.

**Online language learning vs. face-to-face language learning**



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- *Flexibility*. Studying online offers more flexibility to fit the learners' work schedule around the coursework more in the case of asynchronous classes;
- *Convenience.* Taking an online course means that learners need not travel to class. It saves time and money;
- *Self-direction.* Studying online requires a large amount of self-motivation and time-management skill. When lacking, these can easily convert into hurdles on the path to achieving success with e-learning;
- *Lack of face-to-face feedback.* Online courses suffer from the lack of face-to-face feedback. Especially in the field of language learning, direct interaction either among peers or between teachers and learners is definitely conducive to a more productive and efficient communicative use of the language;
- *A larger variety of online materials*. Traditional face-to-face courses tend to be a bit more limited in the choice of teaching materials used in class. Online courses, on the other hand, offer a huge variety of options in terms of input and provide instant feedback on covered coursework which can be very motivating for some students;
- *The availability of coursework materials.* Even organized learners who have kept all face-to-face, course-related handouts in good order might appreciate the easy availability of materials in the online environment. The possibility of listening to audio input, of viewing pictures, of watching videos, of searching for information, all at hand at a click away, anytime and anywhere, as many times as desired, puts online course ahead of traditional courses with most learners.

**Needs Analysis**

Thus, the presentauthors have taken the initiative of running a needs analysis (NA) questionnaire administered to a significant number of selected navy personnel (40 respondents) in order to determine how to cater best to their English language training requirements.

First, the questionnaire aimed at identifying *the topic areas* which ranked highest on the list of immediate needs for English specialized content. Not surprisingly, the respondents indicated *damage control* as the subject area with the largest applicability across all naval specialties. It is a well known fact that the two greatest dangers facing all naval personnel at sea are fire and flooding onboard a warship. Whether induced by combat or through accident, the smoke from fires and the icy water of a sinking ship are all deadly. Therefore, acquiring and maintaining both the theoretical knowledge and the practical skills pertaining to the field of *damage control* is an absolute prerequisite for the safety of all hands on and below decks. What is more, considering the fact that Romania is a full-fledged NATO member, all the professional interactions of the Romanian Naval Forces, within this context, take place in English. In an effort to align their procedures so as to ensure that the allies' coordinated efforts are made in complete safety, NATO requires its members to refer to shared standard agreements, textbooks and regulations all written in a single operational language, namely English. Hence the necessity for content-based instruction, in our case about *damage control*, in English. Naval personnel need to possess knowledge of both the English terminology related to *damage control* and of the respective procedures in force throughout the Alliance.

Another informative finding of the NA is related to *the type of language learning s*etting considered to be the most viable option for the naval personnel in need of such training. By correlating the NA respondents' most widely and frequently encountered difficulties in



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participating in English language training, i.e. time constraints due to professional engagements, with their bias for distance learning rather than face-to-face learning, the present authors have brainstormed on a type of an English language course that would satisfy both aforementioned requirements. What is more, when polled about their favourite types of language input, a significant percentage of the respondents selected the visual-audio formats (video, audio, pictorial, graphic) from the provided list.

Consequently, the NA findings have laid out *the premises for a specialized English language course* deemed to be both beneficial and easily accessible to most naval personnel: an online, interactive, multimedia course aimed at facilitating the acquisition of military terminology related to the topic of *damage control.* This course constitutes the main envisaged output of the Research Project nr. 151/ 2018 conducted by the authors of this paper at "Mircea cel Batran" NavalAcademy.

**Course format**

*The main beneficiaries* of this course are all the naval personnel working onboard Romanian warships, no matter the rank or speciality. In addition, the NavalAcademy midshipmen (military students) are to benefit from a blended approach by having the *damage control* course as a module included in their military English classes. They can do the coursework during their specialized English language classes, in the Academy computer laboratories, under the supervision of their English teachers.

*Access*. As a stand-alone online product, this course is to be hosted by the ILIAS online educational platform and made available to our prospective course-takers, free of charge, by means of online enrolment. Moreover, the NavalAcademy students are to be granted access by their course teachers. The content is to remain online indefinitely, managed mainly by the course developers, namely the present authors, who will then allow other naval Academy teachers to use it in order to run their own groups. In addition, the course can also be made available to the naval personnel responsible for organizing periodical *damage control* trainingevents in order to be exploited as theoretical support for the practical sessions. The course content can be periodically reviewed and improved in the light of received feedback and it can also be updated to reflect possible changes in the procedures in force at any given time.

*Course duration and structure.* The course is organized in six thematic units, with a final revision unit and a final evaluation. There are 30 hours of online coursework in total. As far as the naval Academy students are concerned, the online content can be spread over the course of a semester.

*Course aims and objectives.* The course aims at facilitating the acquisition of English lexical content pertaining to the area of *damage control.* Upon completion of the coursework and of the final evaluation, students will have been exposed to and actively practiced with essential vocabulary describing lexical areas such as "causes of fire and principles of extinction" , "fire prevention", "raising the alarm in case of fire", "fire fighting organization", "fire fighting equipment", "personal protection", etc. All specialist vocabulary is contextualized within authentic materials in textual, audio, video, pictorial and graphic format to ensure an efficient content retention. Consequently, by the end of the course, learners are expected to have also developed their receptive skills by being able to understand the gist, the main ideas and specific details of complex authentic written and spoken input. The practical outcome of this course, which is basically a form of content-based online instruction, is the enhanced ability of naval



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personnel to participate in real-life international professional activities in which such a topic is being discussed. The clear and immediate connection to real-life professional situations is expected to boost the learners' motivation, thus maximizing the efficiency of the course.

*Course platform: What is ILIAS?*ILIAS is an open source web-based learning management system. In brief, this platform allows for both synchronous and asynchronous teacher-leaner and learner-learner interaction in a highly customizable virtual learning environment. In the field of education, ILIAS supports course designers in managing their learning content and offers tools for evaluation and assessment as well as collaboration and communication. What is more, ILIAS is open source software which can be used without having to pay licence fee.

ILIAS facilitates the creation of learning and teaching materials by putting authoring tools at your disposal with the help of which you can edit learning materials such as learning modules, wikis and glossaries, etc. In addition, by using the powerful instrument called 'Test & Assessment' you can offer online exams and assess learning progress.

There is a central repository in which all teaching materials and communication tools are stored. Content can be brought in via import or be created from scratch on the platform. Course designers benefit from an array of integrated tools for authoring learning modules, glossaries, and exercises. What is more, teachers and learners can cooperatively author content online like in a wiki.

The individual working space of each user of the platform is called the Personal Desktop. From there you can work through a learning module or stop by one of your study groups. It is up to you which learning resources you want to add to your personal desktop for easy future access.

The desktop has a calendar application to help you manage deadlines and appointments. There is also the possibility of contacting other users via mail or chat. Plus, ILIAS also offers a very useful tagging function with the help of which you can describe learning resources for yourself and others.

*Types of tasks.* Our course will expose our learners to a large variety of task types in order to cater to their different learning styles and also to help them to perform at different levels of thinking from the simple listing or classifying tasks to critical thinking and values clarification complex tasks. ILIAS offers a wide range of question types: single choice, multiple choice, matching, fill-in-the-blanks, true/false, drag-and-drop and essays among others. The option of filling question pools makes it easier to reutilize ready-made questions. Plus, all types of questions can be combined freely.

*Interaction and communication.* The course is mainly articulated on the premise of asynchronous, self-directed learning. Course-takers move through the course content at their own pace and are given the choice to interact with the course instructor and peers via messages, assignment feedback, chat, etc. There is an internal news system with the help of which instructors can inform course participants about changes in program or coursework. Forums can be used for course-related discussions or for organizational purposes.

## Conclusions

All in all, e-learning in the field of language teaching, especially, but, by no means, limited to ESP, is here to stay and can only be expected to evolve into even better and more efficient forms of educational settings in the near future. Recognizing both the practical limitations and training needs of our naval professionals, the authors of this paper have herein



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presented ideas as to how to create professional development opportunities by harnessing the tools existent in the virtual world.

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