# EXPLORING ONLINE EDUCATIONAL TOOLS TO ENHANCE THE ESP LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM AT "MIRCEA CEL BĂTRÂN" NAVAL ACADEMY

**Laura Diana Cizer, Mariana Boeru**

**Lecturer, PhD, „Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy, Constanța, Teacher of English, PhD, „Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy, Constanța**

*Abstract: Acknowledging the reality of the fact that English is the lingua franca of global defence, this paper stems from the necessity of revisiting the current setting of English language learning within the military context. Naval English terminology is part of the English language training curriculum for the midshipmen of "Mircea cel Batran" Naval Academy from Constanta throughout the four years of study. Although Naval Academy midshipmen do benefit from mainly face-to-face education on military English, there is still a shortage of interactive, engaging learning materials as the existing, print textbooks are rather traditional and therefore, limited in breadth and variety. Consequently, in order to enhance and diversify our students' ESP learning experience, the authors of this paper have set out to review a number of selected, online educational tools, which could be used to in order to incorporate ICT more into our current language teaching and learning context.*

*Keywords: e-learning, ESP, ICT, authoring tools, collaborative learning*

## 1. What is e-learning? A brief review of the main concepts.

The staggering advance of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the expansion of network technologies have made their application in the field of education an ongoing discussion among researchers and practitioners alike. Even if the recent global pandemic has propelled electronic learning to the forefront of academic forums, electronic learning or e-learning is a concept which has been defined and discussed by education specialists starting as early as the 1990s. Jay Cross is credited with having coined the term eLearning in 1998 when he wrote that "eLearning is learning on Internet Time, the convergence of learning and networks." (Cross, 104) Over the last few decades, several other terms have also emerged and circulated in connection to e-learning, such as computer-based learning, technology-based training, and computer-based training. The Association for Talent Development (ASTD) has listed the following definition of e-learning in their online glossary of terms: "a wide set of applications and processes such as web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration." (ASTD, 2020)

Sangra, Vlachopoulos and Cabrera endeavored to compile the relevant, existing



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definitions of e-learning in their 2012 article "Building an inclusive definition of e-learning: An approach to the conceptual framework". They identified four elements of e-learning which provided the criteria for classifying the selected definitions: 1) technology, 2) delivery, 3) communication, and 4) educational-paradigm. (Sangra, Vlachopoulos and Cabrera, 2012) For instance, focusing on the technology employed in facilitiating the e-learning experience, Guri-Rosenblit clarifies that "e-learning is the use of electronic media for a variety of learning purposes that range from add-on functions in conventional classrooms to full substitution for the face-to-face meetings by online encounters" (Guri-Rosenblit, 469).

Delivery and communication-wise, e-learning often takes the form of online courses which can be delivered either synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous e-learning involves teachers/trainers/facilitators interacting with their learners in real-time. This can happen through audio and video conferencing or in virtual classrooms. Learners can chat with their peers and trainers, can post their contributions (text, audio, pictorial, video) online, answer comments, follow discussion threads in forums, etc. Asynchronous e-learning means that the learners follow an online course at their own pace, by accessing materials and exercises online, whenever it is convenient to them. Learners choose when and where to learn and how rapidly they want to go through the course. In other words, "e-learning is the delivery of education (all activities relevant to instructing, teaching, and learning) through various electronic media" (Koohang & Harman, 77).

Online education is often delivered with the help of Learning Management Systems (LMSs). These are systems that educational institutions usually choose to implement with the purpose of managing the activity of learners and tracking their progress. Moodle or ILIAS are examples of LMSs.

In this context, another term closely connected to e-learning is blended learning. ASTD describes blended learning as "the practice of using several training delivery mediums in one curriculum. It typically refers to the combination of classroom instruction and any type of training that includes self-directed use of online resources." (ASTD, 2020) Blended learning has proven to be a very effective method of learning as learners can pace their own leaning but also benefit from the direct interaction with their fellow students and their facilitators.

A final issue to be discussed herein is the added value brought by e-learning to the educational process. Not only is the medium different from face-to-face instruction, the content format varied, the interaction and communication between the main actors in the



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learning and teaching processes modified, but also, the very learning process facilitated by e-learning has come to be perceived as an evolution or an improvement on an existing educational paradigms. Aldrich (2005) claims that e-learning warrants the improvement of one or more significant parts of a learning value chain, including the management and delivery of educational content and pedagogical interactions. (Aldrich, 2005)

An encompassing summary of the varying perspectives on what constitutes e-learning is provided by Sangra and Vlachopoulos at the end of their review: "E-learning is an approach to teaching and learning, representing all or part of the educational model applied, that is based on the use of electronic media and devices as tools for improving access to training, communication and interaction and that facilitates the adoption of new ways of understanding and developing learning." (Sangra and Vlachopoulos, 2012)

## 2. Online Tools and Resources for teaching and learning. Enhancing the ESP program at "Mircea cel Batran" Naval Academy.

In order to create e-learning content, teachers can use Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS), which are sometimes also referred to as *authoring tools.* They offer a wide range of possibilities to create interactive content.

The English language training (including the ESP module), offered to Naval Academy military students (midshipmen) throughout the four years of study is exclusively face-to-face. Therefore, the authors of the present article would like to focus on online authoring tools which facilitate the design of online, interactive, teaching materials and activities to be accessed by our military students in our computer labs, during face-to-face, ESP classes. The following tools and resources have been grouped under two categories:

- Authoring tools - Creating interactive exercises online
- Sites which allow for online real-time collaborative class work.

Our review includes short descriptions of the authoring tools, their capabilities and limitations and practical application to the field of ESP, naval English in our case. As all ESP practitioners can confirm, ESP materials are bound to be personalized and tailored in order to cater to very specific and sometimes unique language learning objectives and requirements. Thus, such materials are rarely available in textbook format and need extensive customatization and permanent and sustained enrichment and updating so as to ascertain their relevance to the learners and the latter's high level of interest and motivation in the learning process. Moreover, as ICT has transformed the format of authentic learning materials, which



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are now mostly available in electronic format (video, audio, software, etc.) it has become essential not only to include ICT as much as possible in the language learning programs currently on offer to our students, but also to find ways of building personal online collections of interactive materials to be selected and used when deemed necessary during face-to-face classes. Moreover, such online interactive materials are readily accessible on any smart gadget and can, therefore, be assigned as homework and done outside the computer lab by students who want to self-study.

*2.1 Authoring tools - Creating interactive exercises online*

**LearningApps** at https://learningapps.org/

*What is it and what does it do?* LearningApps.org is a free application which allows you to create all different kinds of online interactive exercises such as quizzes, matching pairs, millionaire game, crossword, word grid, hangman, etc.

*Accessibility. Intuitiveness. Privacy.* Once you create your free account, you can save your activities and have them ready for access at any given time. You can create classrooms and invite your students. It is easy to share your work with your learners. You can send them the link, give them the QRcode, or you can integrate the interactive activities on your own site. It is completely free and learners do not need an account. Designing activates is extremely easy, using the existing templates on the site. Your classrooms and activities, as well as your students' work are private, unless you choose to make them public and publish them on the app site for all users to access.

*Variety of formats.* There is an extensive collection of different activity formats available on the site. Activities allow for text, audio, video pictorial, graphical input. You can also provide hints and feedback. Use one type of input such as a text, a video or audio, a map or picture, a graph, etc. and sequence a series of different types of activities on it. You can combine any of the activities described herein: matching pairs with text, audio, video pictorial input; grouping elements under different categories**;** putting elements in correct order on a given line; typing text; doing multiple choice quizzes and cloze tests; doing puzzles and crosswords, etc.

*Integrating activities into your language setting.* The interactive activities which can be designed on LearningApps can be used during the presentation phase of language lessons to introduce new vocabulary or content in a new and attractive manner or during the practice phase to revise language content or practice receptive skills (listening and reading). Here is a screenshot of an activity taken from the authors' classroom on LearningApps:



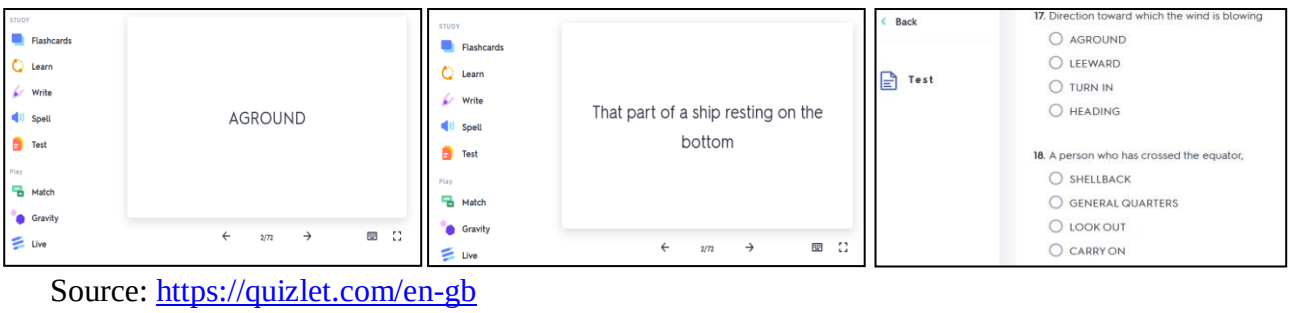

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**Quizlet at** https://quizlet.com/en-gb

*What is it and what does it do?* Quizlet is an online application which allows you to create study flashcards, which are then automatically transferred into different games for learning.

*Accessibility. Intuitiveness. Privacy.* Teachers register for free and can save their own sets of flashcards in their account or even other teachers' work. You can create a class and assign quizzes to your students. In order to save the progress, students need to be registered. You can also embed the activities in your blog or webpage. Quizzes can be private or public.

*Variety of formats.* Students are provided with the list of terms/concepts and their brief explanations. Then they can use flashcards to further study the terms. Flashcards can be flipped so that they can find the definition of the term, an answer to a question, etc. Students can also practice typing in the words with help and hints provided at each step. In the Test section students can do a variety of test activities such as answering open-ended questions, matching terms, answering multiple-choice questions, etc. Here is a screenshot of the authors' collection of flashcards on Quizlet.




Source: https://quizlet.com/en-gb

*Integrating activities into your language setting.* Our students use the flashcard activities saved in our class on Quizlet mainly to study ESP vocabulary (naval terms) in an interactive and engaging way during face-to-face ESP classes in our computer labs. As such, frontal teacher-student interaction based on print materials alternates with individual online work. In addition, students can use the flashcards to revise before exams in a more flexible manner, at their own pace and at a time and place of their choice.

*2.2 Sites which allow for online real-time collaborative class work.*

One of the biggest advantages provided by the integration of ICT into your face-to-face classes is that you harness the powers and enjoy the benefits of "both worlds" at the same time. On the one hand, language learners interact with their peers and teachers directly and thus are able to receive instant, complex and compelling feedback from the other participants in the teaching and learning process. Moreover, the language productive skills of speaking and writing can be more readily developed and practiced in a traditional classroom setting.



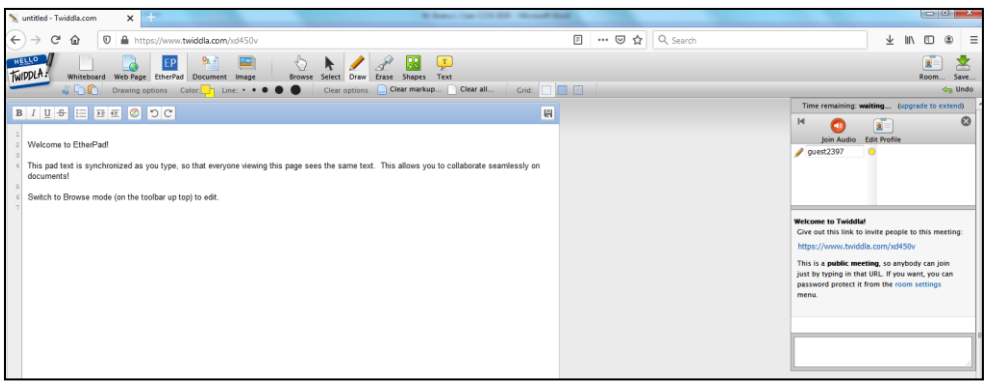
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On the other hand, ICT allows students not only to access learning content in a variety of interesting and relevant formats (maps, training videos, equipment pictures, etc.), but also to cooperate while carrying out online cooperative tasks using online platforms such as **Twiddla** at https://www.twiddla.com/ .

*What is it and what does it do?* Twiddla is a real-time online collaboration tool. It can be used as an online whiteboard. It incorporates real time chat and voice.

*Accessibility. Intuitiveness. Privacy.* Twiddla is free and requires no account. You can send your students the link to a whiteboard page which can be generated with one click. Once the students join they can interact with you and each other via chat and voice and access all the input you provide (links to pages, videos, texts, images, tests etc.) in order to solve the tasks you assign there. Pages can be saved by taking a snapshot, embedded in other pages or returned to whenever you feel like. There is no limit to the people which can be present on the page at the same time. Given that access is provided by link, the privacy of your lessons is ascertained. One of the most beneficial features of

Twiddla is the Etherpad incorporated in its whiteboard. Basically, Etherpad is a real time collaborative writing pad. Students can all type on it at the same time. Here is a screenshot:




Source: https://www.twiddla.com/

*Integrating activities into your language setting.* The present authors intend to provide a practical example of how to facilitate collaborative learning among students while accessing online resources, using Twiddla as a platform for interaction.

*Practical activity* title: "Compare and contrast military forces"

*Level*: B1

*Objectives:*

1. Revise vocabulary pertaining to types of military forces, missions and capabilities.

2. Produce written paragraphs in which students use compare and contrast structures correctly.

3. Provide peer feedback and self-correct.



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Time: 30 minutes

*Materials:* A Twiddla whiteboard page on which an Etherpad has been generated.

2. *Procedures*: The teacher sends the students the whiteboard link where there is a generated Etherpad. The teacher has already posted the task and resources on the Etherpad. Students read the task and access the sites provided: Task 1: Watch the following video about two of the branches in the US armed forces, the navy and the marines and type the missing information. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ss8nYrgjCEo min 2:30-6:20. Students work together to type in the missing information after having watched the video. Students self-correct any factual or language mistakes. The teacher supervises the activity and only intervenes if the students have not self-corrected thoroughly. Task 2: Using the information from the previous activity write a paragraph in which you draw a comparison between the two branches highlighting the differences and the similarities. All students type their paragraphs on the same Etherpad. It is essential to be able to see each other's work in real time because this will create the opportunity to provide feedback on each other's work, correcting language and factual mistakes, a precious learning activity in itself. After all paragraphs have been corrected, students can resume their frontal, paper-based activities.

Such an activity has received enthusiastic feedback on the part of the students, who have appreciated its interactive and collaborative features, the up-to-date leaning input and the possibility to practice writing in a new and innovative way. Working both individually while watching the video and writing the paragraphs and collaboratively while typing in the missing information and providing peer feedback, students reap multiple benefits. They combine self-directed learning and self-reflection with online collaborative and cooperative learning. Moreover, they develop their critical thinking skills and digital skills at the same time.

**Conclusion**

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. The authors of this article have herein explored a variety of e-learning tools which could be used in order to create more engaging, interactive, interesting and efficient ESP lessons for our Naval Academy military students. In addition, our hope is to provide an example of good practices in order to encourage and inspire other



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language professionals to incorporate ICT as much as possible into their language teaching settings.

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