

INTRODUCTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ON-LINE STUDY SUPPORT MATERIAL FOR AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

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Abstract

This article deals with the teaching model of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) for students of the first year of Viticulture, Oenology and Pomology. The model is based on blended learning to assist students in successfully mastering the course. It is realized as a combination of a face-to-face environment and online learning in the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) on the B2 level of the Common European Framework of References for Languages. An ESP coursebook has been designed in collaboration with specialist professors, based on a needs analysis with special emphasis on developing the skills needed for mastery in ESP.

Online study support material is focused on the development of agricultural terminology, reading and listening comprehension, grammar activities and work with up-to-date authentic audio-visual materials with the aim of developing students' language competences and support the professional growth of future viticulturists, oenologists and pomologists. Online support material can serve not only the students it was primarily intended for but also the students and academic staff of other polytechnics and universities with similar curriculum.

Key words: E-learning, English for Specific Purposes, Agriculture, Croatia

Introduction

In recent years E-learning has been introduced as an established field to support or substitute traditional forms of teaching and learning. Language teachers have realized the huge potential of technology for providing linguistic and interactive content for their learners.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a kind of English language teaching that is focused on developing specific skills of the learner. Dudley–Evans and St. John (1998) claimed that the ESP practitioner embraces multiple roles, such as teacher, course and material developer, collaborator, researcher and evaluator.

At present the situation of learning a foreign language at a tertiary level in Croatia is the continuation of language teaching from secondary school (students leaving school around B2 level of the Common European Framework of References for Languages) and starting tertiary English at this level.

The English language instruction program at the Agricultural Department of the University of Applied Sciences in Požega amounts to 60 hours, distributed in the first two semesters of studies. The language groups differ not only in size but also in ability.

Today's students are named as the New Learners, the Digital Native or the Next Generation which suggests a fundamental difference in the way they approach knowledge acquisition, problem solving, and moving into the workforce (Dobbins, 2005, Dziuban & Hartman, 2004). Having this in mind the teacher must be cautious in choosing content, materials and methods. This article will share local Croatian experience of developing and creating electronic teaching aids and assessment materials to improve the quality of study and self-study within the LMS Moodle software.

Background and Objective

Teaching English for Specific Purposes involves the same set of skills as learning General English and it also focuses on acquisition of specialized lexicon and registers. All the students have to be familiar with specialized vocabulary and they have to be prepared for some common situations such as going for an interview or making presentations. In addition, they should be proficient enough to do research for their thesis which means that they should be able to find, read and evaluate various English language sources. Therefore, the teachers must be very careful in choosing content, materials and methods that would motivate students not only to participate in the lectures but also to work on their own. Modern online technologies are a great potential for teachers who have to adapt to new trends and incorporate them into their lesson plans.

Hutchinson and Waters (1989) suggested that teachers follow four basic precepts when they start developing their ESP materials. They are: suitability for the proficiency level, relevance to learners' needs, creativity in tasks/activities and discursive strategies, and stimulation of the target speech acts. Such materials do not teach, but facilitate the learning process; present a clear and coherent unit structure; are in consonance with pedagogical approaches; and offer problem-solving tasks, as well as lay down models for language use. Having in mind the four concepts we compiled the material which was used in a face-to-face environment. After that we started planning the course with online support material for closing the possible knowledge gap, testing and evaluation assessment that would enable the blended teaching approach which depends on the needs of students and the expected learning outcome. Hinkelman (2005) points out that the aim of blended learning is to span this continuum, define or describe tasks that encompass a multitude of venues: classroom, home, laboratory, and field.

The main objective of our blended learning model is creating complex online study support material for the English Course for Students of Viticulture, Oenology and Pomology. The course is designed to support an interactive form of teaching by means of multimedia application. The use of information and communication technologies will enable the students to fulfil specialist demands in English at the qualitatively higher level.

Design and development of material

At present English Language for Students of Viticulture, Oenology and Pomology is taught in the form of contact teaching (once a week for 90 minutes) with the use of coursebook (developed in collaboration with specialist professors, based on a needs analysis with the focus on developing the skills needed for mastery in ESP), handouts and additional audio-visual materials. The large number of students in a group as well as the available time for lessons does not enable the use of authentic materials and additional grammar exercises which are presented in the online study support material which motivates students to improve their knowledge by doing extra work in weak areas, to do their homework and gives them an increased sense of autonomy. Computer technology enables them to complete additional tasks, check their progress and get their feedback. The course is focused on the development of agricultural terminology, on reading comprehension, listening comprehension and work with up-to-date authentic audio-visual materials. It is composed of fifteen module courses available in the Learning Management System (LMS) Moodle with the following topics:

Meeting New Needs of EU Farmers
Genetic Engineering
The History of Grapevine Cultivation
Grapevine (Grape Varieties, The Annual Lifecycle of Grapevines)
The Art of Winemaking (Turning Grapes into Wine, Fermentation, Aging, Barrels, Bottling, Cork)
Wine Laws (Wine Law of the Republic of Croatia, Wine Labelling)
Secrets of Senses (The Smell of Wine, The Taste of Wine, The Colour of Wine, Aroma Wheel, Wine and Health)
Serving and Drinking Tips (Bringing Wine to the Correct Temperature, Decanting Makes a Difference, Content Determines the Shape, Wine Glasses)
Fruit (How Botanists Classify Fruit)
Instructions for Planting an Orchard
Propagation (Vegetative Propagation, Whip Grafting, Cleft and Bark Grafting)
Caring for the Crop (Beneficial Insects)
Harvesting (Manual or Mechanical Harvesting, Winter Harvest of Grapes)
Marketing Fruit
Fruit Mosaic (The Apple, The Big Apple, The Plum, The Pear)

The content of the course is as follows:

Lead-in

Understanding vocabulary (exercises with key words and definitions)

Before you read (reading, connecting, making predictions, quiz)

Reading authentic material concerning the topic (a follow-up to the unit and work with the textbook)

Autocorrective exercises such as filling in the gaps, true/false, multiple choice, word formation, matching, synonyms/antonyms, homonyms/homophones etc.)

Listening comprehension exercises for recycling specialist vocabulary

Video transcript with corresponding exercises to understand spoken English better

On-line handing of written assignments (translations, letters, mind maps etc.) in some modules

Grammar activities (review and recycling of grammar corresponding to tasks from the textbook)

Self-testing exercises (exercises for training purposes with limited or unlimited number of possibilities or a credit test with just one try and time limit)

Final assessment

Read on (list of additional available resources)

Each module serves as a support to the coursebook lectures. Supporting the lecture means that some topics for repeating or deepening are optional, the others are an integrated part of the lecture and therefore, their use is mandatory.

Online study support material development is an on-going process with teachers who are constant learners and our experience, our views, teaching concepts and methodological knowledge is constantly changing in order to meet the needs of the new generations of students. Equally important is the course evaluation which is the last, but not the least important stage because it helps to improve and promote the effectiveness of the online study support material.

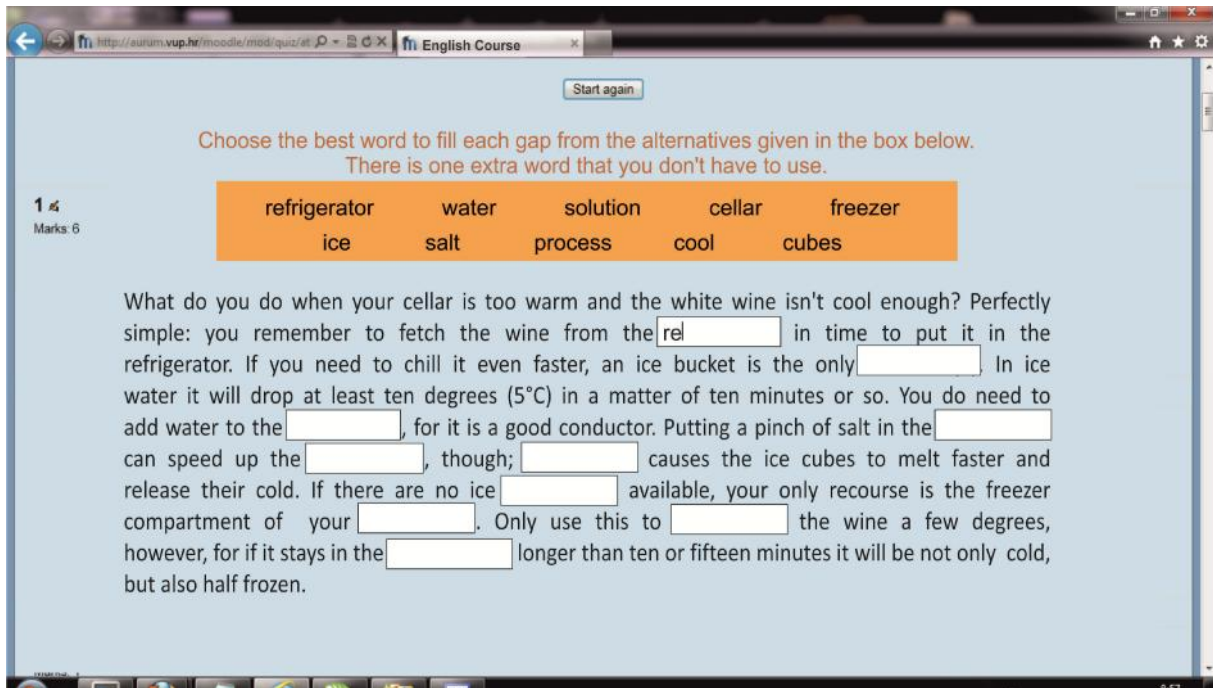


Figure 1: A page from Moodle English Course for Students of Viticulture, Oenology and Pomology showing a fill-in exercise intended for students' vocabulary practice

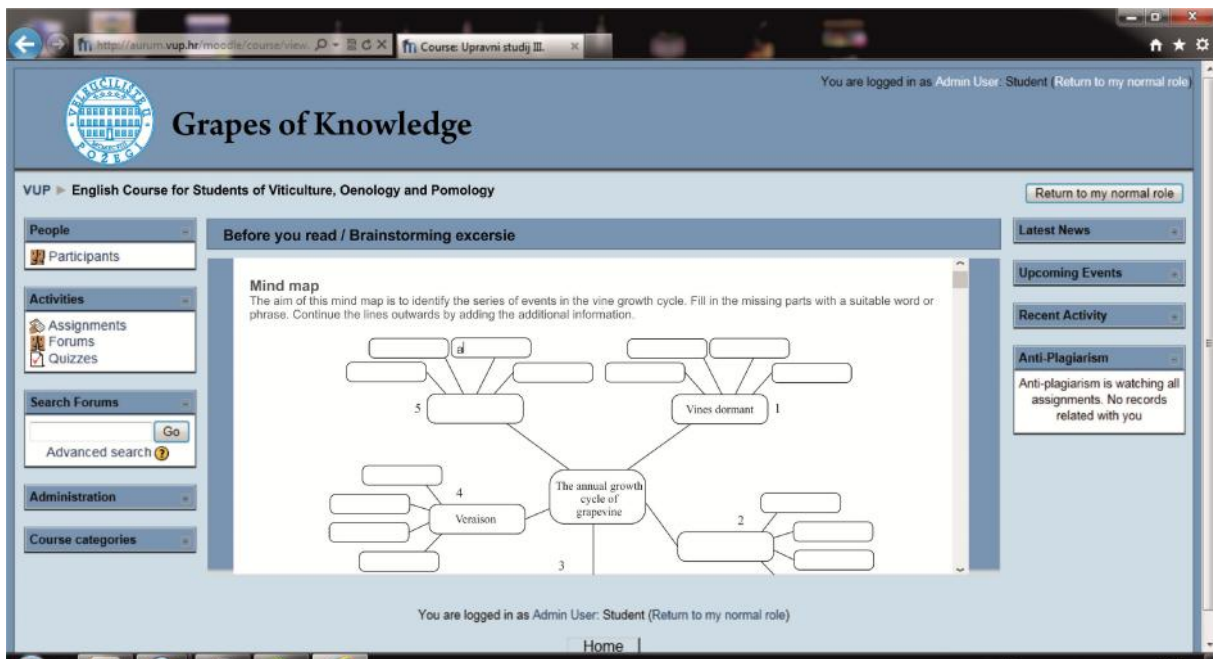


Figure 2: A page from Moodle English Course for Students of Viticulture, Oenology and Pomology showing a before you read brainstorming exercise

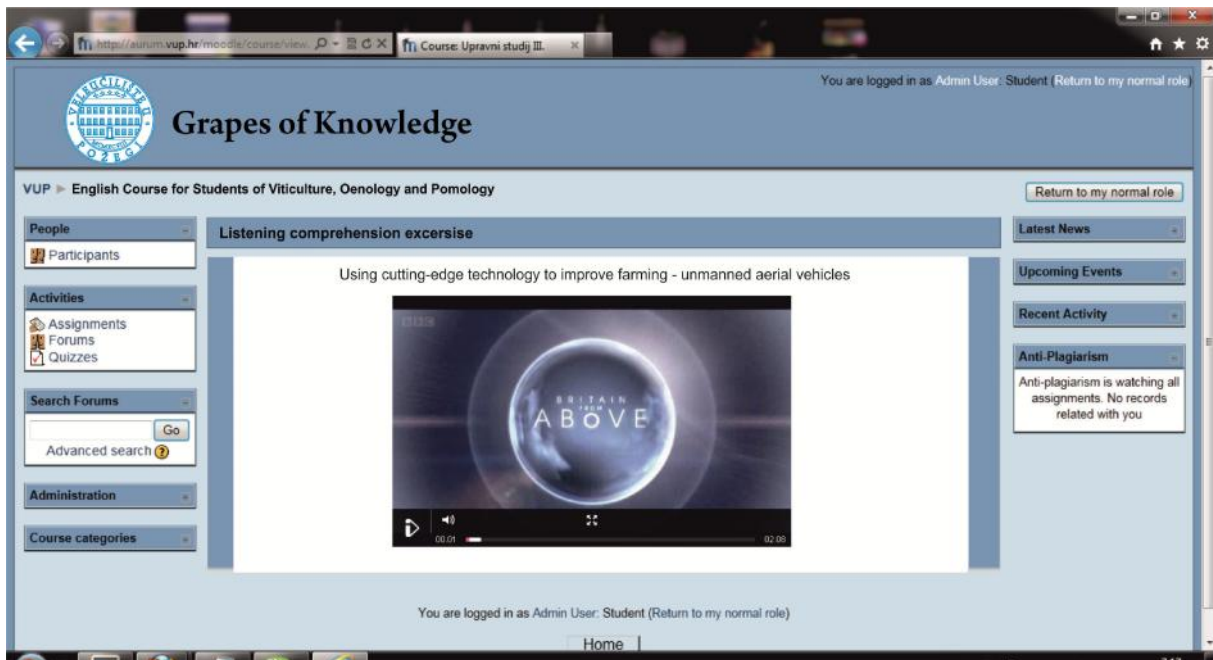


Figure 3: A page from Moodle English Course for Students of Viticulture, Oenology and Pomology showing a link with a video on the Internet with a listening comprehension exercise

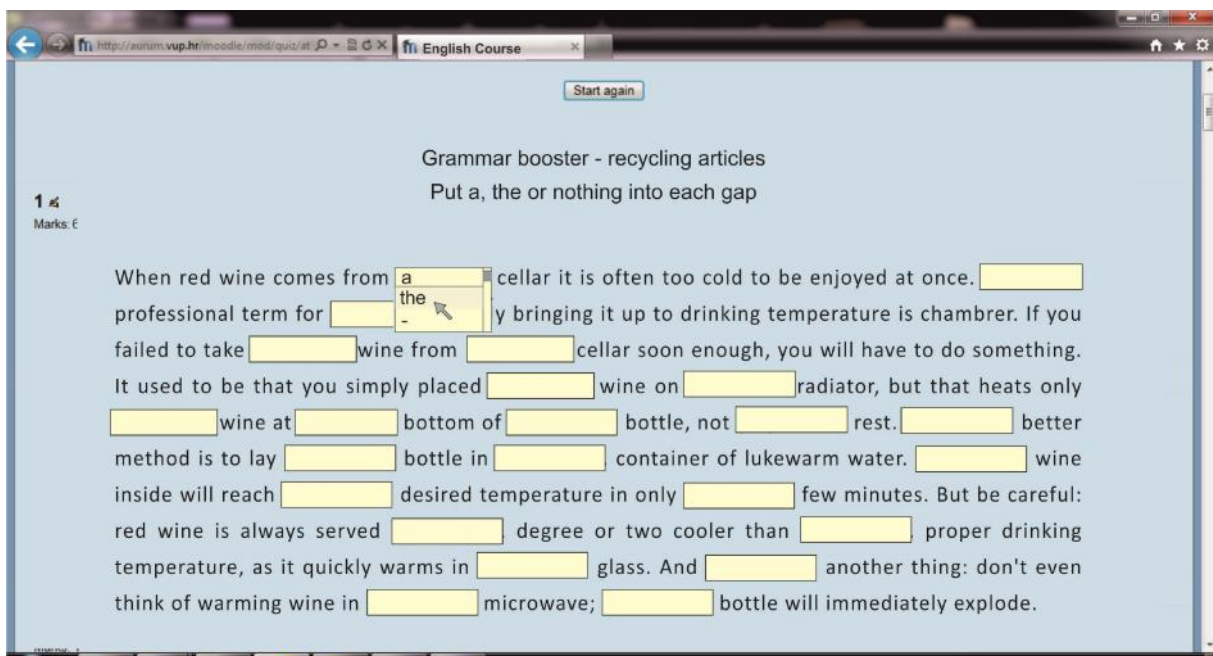


Figure 3: A page from Moodle English Course for Students of Viticulture, Oenology and Pomology showing a grammar booster exercise to recycle articles

Conclusions

On-line study support components for Students of Viticulture, Oenology and Pomology at the University of Applied Sciences in Požega, Croatia have been designed to complement the coursebook, deepen and extend contact with and among students. Teachers can distribute some of the course activities throughout the semester, with students accessing course material and completing certain tasks online. Various exercises with immediate feedback give students an insight into the areas they need to practice more. They can access a range of interactive activities, tasks and tests when they are online at home or in the computer lab whenever and wherever they have access to the Internet.

This paper has attempted to explain some issues for on-line study support material preparation, design, development and evaluation. It is an on-going process in which the teacher makes changes to meet the students' needs and interests and helps them to become more independent with flexible solutions in a learning environment.

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Other resource

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