Collegial evaluation of online English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses

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Abstract

This paper reports on a joint pilot study project between two universities in Ecuador and Sweden to develop a practical working framework for the evaluation of each respective institution's online/blended courses in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The basis for the evaluation is the Conversational Framework (Laurilland, 2012), later developed in the form of a MOOC course in online and blended learning. This course is offered by the Future Learn social learning platform, which offers a large variety of online courses from a consortium of universities worldwide. The teaching and learning of ESP is characterised as the development of learner concepts and practice through interaction between the instructor and learner peers through collaboration and interaction. The learning process in ESP is envisaged using the Conversational Framework in terms of six basic learning types: acquisition, collaboration, discussion, inquiry/investigation, practice, and production. Our work reports on the process of assessing each other's online courses in terms of the extent to which opportunities are provided for students to engage in these learning types. Results from this pilot study suggest that the Conversational Framework can provide a simple, robust, and transparent basis for the initial evaluation of online courses.

Keywords: ESP, teacher assessment, collaborative work, Conversational Framework, online and hybrid learning environment.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the efficacy of using a well-established course design framework as the basis for institutional colleagues to compare and benchmark online courses in English. The purpose is to work towards improvements in quality assurance and harmonization of design standards. Our work concerns a joint project between Linnaeus University in Sweden and Casa Grande University in Ecuador during Spring 2023. We follow Lindqvist (2019, p. 505) in referring to collegial learning as, "*learning by means of teachers teaching other teachers within work groups, programs, institutions, and between universities.*" The project makes extensive use of Laurilland's (2012) *Conversational Framework.* In our case study we use this Conversational Framework to review each other's online/blended *Moodle* courses. From the Swedish side, the course reviewed was the blended *English for Administrators* course. The Ecuadorean course was called *Contemporary Society: Conflicts and Consensus,* designed as a B1-B2 proficiency level content course in English. In this course, students were presented with course content in the form of contemporary issues in the realms of international politics and global themes.

Within both Linnaeus and Casa Grande universitities respectively, faculty deans have pointed towards the need to harmonise online content around a core of learning activities and structural/navigational commonalities. Drawing

on recent research and initiatives in digital literacy (e.g. Pegrum *et al.*, 2022), there is an important faculty agenda for teachers to develop and update their learning design skills.

The Conversational Framework (Laurilland, 2012) offers an accessible outline for the practical design of online and blended courses within the contexts of formal higher education, using a VLE such as *Moodle*, *Canvas,* or *It's Learning,* etc depending on the institution. The six types of learning identified in this Conversational Framework are included below. Each learning type, with examples using conventional and digital technology, are also presented here in condensed form. The table has been adapted from Laurilland (2012, p. 96):

Table 1. Laurilland's (2012) Conversational Framework learning types with conventional and digital examples.

Learning through	Example: Conventional technology	Example: Digital technology
Acquisition	Reading books, listening to teacher presentations	Reading multimedia, website information
Inquiry	Using text-based study guides	Using online advice and guidance
Practice	Practising exercises and projects, field trips	Using models, simulations, virtual labs
Production	Producing statements, essays, reports	Producing and storing digital documents, e-portfolios
Discussion	Tutorials, seminars, classroom discussions	Online tutorials, seminars, forum discussion threads
Collaboration	Small group projects, discussing others' outputs	Wiki collaborative writing projects, chat

It is suggested that a successful online or blended course should offer participating students as many of these six activities: *acquisition*, *inquiry*, *practice*, *collaboration, and production* (Table 1) as possible, although in practice it might be somewhat difficult to encapsulate all activities within a single course. Conventional activities might be thought of as more traditional oral discussion or 'pen and paper'/print activities which do not require any form of digital tool, resource, or environment. Digital activities in contrast make use of computer hard/software and digital tools and resources such as wikis, online forums, and chat rooms, etc.

When learning through the first of the six activities, *acquisition*, the framework envisages learners passively listening to an online lecture, reading a book, etc. *Inquiry* activities involve learners actively formulating a question which they seek answers to from a library or the internet among course participants. Alternatively, learners can develop their understanding of concepts through the learning type *discussion,* involving the exchange of information and ideas in discussions amongst each other. In learning through *practice*, learners generate an action in response to course goals which are then refined through practice. *Collaborative* activities involve the learners coming to an agreement in producing a shared output. Finally, in learning through *production*, the shared/agreed output from the learners is evaluated by the teacher. The claim is that the six learning types offer a practical, concrete, tangible taxonomy of learning activities to permit colleagues to quickly and easily offer feedback on each other's courses prior to their delivery or following a revision of the course on the basis of course evaluations from previous student groups.

2. Method

2.1 General comments on methodology

The project can best be seen as having closest affinities with a comparative case study given the limited focus on two *Moodle* courses designed and taught by the Swedish and Ecuadorean instructors respectively. The use of the term '*case study*' might be defined as the study of the *"particularity and complexity of a single case"* (Stake 1995, p, xi). In this project, however, the study is effectively a comparison of *two* cases using the Laurilland's (2012) Conversational Framework as a comparative basis. Case studies are seen in this sense as a means of comparing two complex institutional virtual learning environment contexts with "clearly defined boundaries" in Dörnyei's (2007, p. 151) terms. Following Stake (1995, 2005), such a study constitutes an intrinsic case study of the inherent qualities and attributes of the phenomena under consideration.

As with all comparative case studies, one of the main considerations is the generalization issue - the extent to which idiosyncratic features of the courses concerned can be generalized for the purposes of incorporation into a faculty checklist of learning activities (Dörnyei 2007, p152). In this sense both courses being compared here in their Swedish and Ecuadorean contexts are very probably unique. The use of the Conversational Framework with its more general learning type categories can serve as the basis for making generalizations useful to all instructors and course designers of online and blended courses. Table 2 below sets out a brief overview of the two courses.

Table 2. Comparative overview of courses.

Course	English for Administrators	Contemporary Society
Instructor	British native speaker, 35 years' teaching experience PhD applied linguistics	Spanish native speaker, c. 40 years' teaching experience MA degree in TEFL
Course type	ESP (standalone, in-service)	ESP (part of BA undergraduate degree in English)
Delivery mode	Blended/hybrid	Online
Course length	3 months	2 months
CEFR[1] level of participants	C1	B1-B2
Content	English for the higher education sector	Contemporary political and global issues discussed and reported on in English
Number of participants	20	30
Number of classroom sessions	6 (blended/hybrid)	-
Number of online sessions	2	9

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[1] Common European Framework of Reference levels, A1(beginner) to C2 (advanced)

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2.1. Context and participants

The Swedish course *English for Administrators* was a hybrid/blended/online course with 12 hours of face-to-face plus two Zoom meetings (4 hours in total), combining classroom tasks and online activities with submissions of writing tasks and oral video presentations on site. Both the Swedish and Ecuadorean courses were selected on the basis of their specialized content. Course participants were civil servant employees who worked as administrators at Linnaeus University and generally had a high level of proficiency in English (at least C1 in the CEFR framework). This course focused on the terminology of higher education in English (in broad terms, including the vocabulary relating to academic titles and degrees, admissions, credit transfer, study financing, and research, etc) and revision of practical grammar and usage applied to formal report writing for the public administrative sector, with a focus on higher education. The course also focused on a revision of contrastive practical grammar to improve the participants' ability to write formal, standard British or American English depending on their preference in a variety of job-related contexts. The *Contemporary Society* course with 30 students at B1-B2 level in English was worth three ECTS equivalent credits with a total of nine timetabled sessions, and further hours of synchronous and asynchronous interaction online involving specialist terminology, discussion of six main topics dealing with current global and societal issues and research projects as a platform to master content, to become aware of local/global problems and propose solutions. Synchronous content involved instructor-led discussions and presentation of language proficiency issues arising from the discussions while the asynchronous course activity involved reading of texts, watching external video content related to the themes, and forum postings.
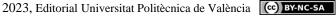
2.2. Collegial reviewing

The instructors met online using the video conferencing tool *Zoom* on one occasion in June 2023 for approximately one hour (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Zoom session Part 1 (of 4 sessions) with instructors comparing the courses.

The tool allowed the sharing of screens, enabling each author to describe in detail the course outline as it is presented on the *Moodle* site. This session was recorded in four parts to provide a permanent record of the discussion and comparison; approximately 30 minutes each of presentation and then discussion was devoted to

each respective course site, totalling one hour. During the course of the presentation, each author went through a protocol based closely on the Laurilland (2012) learning types as defined in the Conversational Framework.

3. Results and discussion

The results of the review are included in Table 3 below. For the *English for Administrators* course, the examples are taken at random from one particular topic on practical grammar and writing, focusing on present simple vs. present continuous tense confusions which can be significant for some Swedish writers of English. The examples from the *Contemporary Society* course are taken once again randomly from the separate topic areas of *Language and Us*, *Wealth*, *Gender* and *Environment* issues used as focal points for fostering oral and written forum discussion in English.

Table 3. A comparison of the two courses using Laurilland's (2012) Conversational Framework of six learning type activities.

Activity	English for Administrators	Contemporary Society: Conflicts and Consensus
Acquisition	accessing information about uses and forms of present simple and present continuous in a PPT.	accessing information in the Unit I *Moodle* book, introductory material to activate existing knowledge of topic
Inquiry	identifying simple present and present continuous examples in a PPT taken from official university documents	watching Mark Pagel lecture (*TED Talk*) and main notes to identify salient points in the talk
Practice	analysis of form and function for simple and continuous aspect in example sentences taken from the Swedish higher education sector and practising both tenses in oral interaction	creating a glossary of key terms; identifying facts from opinions in Mark Pagel's lecture
Discussion	in talking about their workplaces, course participants used tense forms to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of working from home/on campus	course participants discussed Mark Page´s proposal, *One World*. One language in breakout rooms and in an online class forum
Collaboration	based on PPT presentations in *Moodle*, course participants collaborated in *Moodle* wikis and in video recordings to describe future challenges facing the university	Sharing opinions about the question, "Are language and culture separable in an opinion blog?"
Production	course participants produced example sentences contrasting simple and continous tenses to describe their job as university administrators. Task of job description submitted for evaluation by the teacher	writing vocabulary definitions, publishing research project findings in a collaborative wiki, including idenfication of a problem, a demographic group affected by this problem, the causes of the problem, one effective way of solving the problem, an approximate overall cost of the solution and how the solution will be implemented.

Table 3 above gives examples of digital learning tasks from both courses. Both courses have a focus on the learning category of *production* involving teacher evaluation of shared output. For the *Contemporary Society* course, this is reflected in the use of the *glossary Moodle* tool where students are tasked with writing definitions of vocabulary items in the reading texts. The defining of vocabulary items using simpler English is similar to a dictionary's use of a defining vocabulary and may be considered as a good example of an activity drawing from CLT as opposed to translation. The module makes good use of writing summaries from online sources such as *Ted Talks*, which is an important academic skill. The module also involves the writing of blogs and collaborative writing activities using the *Moodle* wiki.

4. Conclusions

Our initial reflections point towards the efficacy of using Laurilland's (2012) Conversational Framework as a 'surface' checklist of learning activities which teachers can use for collegial reviewing of online and blended courses. Although broadly coming under the heading of ESP courses, the courses reviewed differed in terms of educational context, content, level and background of students, and course aims. Nevertheless the activities for both courses could be accommodated within the framework. It is obviously difficult to define what is meant by a 'good' course purely in terms of the Conversational Framework's six categories. A more detailed answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper and would presumably involve the question of whether there is a convergence between languages skills linguistic and specialist content criteria and the course syllabi respectively. Furthermore, the framework says nothing about other important aspects of successful ESP Moodle course design, such as site navigation and logical structuring of course elements either on the basis of thematic or chronological ordering. Nevertheless, we feel encouraged from the initial results of this pilot study to recommend the framework as a basis for collegially developing online courses in our respective institutions.

Acknowledgements

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