MODERN TECHNOLOGIES IN COURSES OF ACADEMIC WRITING FOR PH.D. STUDENTS

VYUŽÍVANIE MODERNÝCH TECHNOLÓGIÍ V KURZOCH AKADEMICKÉHO PÍSANIA DOKTORANDOV

ALENA HRADILOVÁ, LIBOR ŠTEPÁNEK
Czech Republic/Česká republika

Key words: Videoconferencing, forum, Skype, soft skills

Abstract
Academic writing for postgraduate studies (Ph.D.) students is often a neglected category of language teaching at university level. We would like to offer an insight into the organization of our new courses which train students from various academic backgrounds in writing skills.
We will illustrate how the typical features of high quality academic writing suitable for the particular fields of study are discussed and practised with the help of modern technologies, how students engage in publishing and reacting in the subject forum, take part in videoconferences with experts from other countries and discuss their writing styles with teachers on-line.
We argue that this helps the whole class not only to focus discussions and maintain their continuity but also to view the problems of academic writing from the perspective of various academic cultures, thus practising, besides academic writing as the core subject, also other soft skills in English.
The presentation of the course syllabus, organization and materials will be amended by practical examples of how modern technologies in courses of academic writing for Ph.D. students work.

The progressive entrance of multimedia and interactive information and communication technologies (ICT) in education of the recent years has brought the necessity to focus on their use in the academic environment and to identify its new features and characteristics. Different sectors within higher education reflect the situation in different ways; language learning is one of those that explore possible solutions which can make the process of acquiring foreign language skills more effective, accessible and encouraging.

Although most academic institutions have a relatively easy access to ICT and multimedia facilities, not many use them as a creative, collaborative and interactive environment. A great number of universities still use safe traditional methods of teaching and training, which could be limiting to the current educational needs. Implementation of new technologies is, therefore, both conditional and problematic. While, on the one

hand, the use of new interactive methods is often promoted and motivated with the vision of their potential benefits, on the other hand, their "effective utilization entails a profound restructuring of the existent systems and processes in cultural, economic, social, political and even technological terms" (Pettenati, 2000). Another inhibiting factor that prevents some teachers and educators from a wider use of ICT tools in education can be seen in the abundant diversity of approaches, methodologies, theories and technical solutions for ICT enhanced learning (Young, 2006; Basogain, 2006; Ramírez-Martinell, 2007).

This paper presents a case study of the academic language learning environment which has been undertaking such restructuring and whose learning programmes have become truly collaborative and dynamic within the interactive multimedia and ICT based setting. As we feel that academic writing for postgraduate studies students is often a neglected category of language teaching at university level, we will use the new Academic Writing for PhD Students course as an example.

Academic Writing is an interdisciplinary course whose aim is to prepare PhD students and young researchers for high quality writing and current science communication needs. Students develop a net of creative cooperation where they peer review, analyse and comment writings of their colleagues. Via videoconferencing, they discuss publishing industry market needs with publishing experts, and watch and/or join analyses of their texts presented by text analysts from abroad, thus practising, besides academic writing as the core subject, also other soft skills in English. All study materials, including recordings of VC sessions are available on-line for future students' reference. These activities match the required high standard of university graduates language skills.

The basic course structure is divided into three face-to-face blocks organized at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the term. The contact blocks are based on online text materials that are complemented by short videos from speeches of experts or from conferences, and also by sessions given by British experts (delivered by Skype, videoconference or personally by a visiting professor). Full versions of the speeches are recommended to be watched individually. Similarly, interactive online materials are only party presented in class while the rest is recommended to be studied outside the block sessions. This "publicity style" is encouraging the individual approach to learning as students are motivated to learn exactly what they need and to search recommended web pages; therefore the process of learning is made more effective than if all the work was done in class.

Between the block sessions, students deal with an asynchronous part of the course that consists of individual text production and collaborative discussion in the form of a peer review. Students are required to post their texts as well as comments in the subject discussion forum. In the Spring and Autumn Terms 2009, 46 course participants posted, for instance, 157 comments concerning a title, sentence and abstract quality. Most discussions were realistic and the interdisciplinary environment proved to be useful as offered perspectives from diverse disciplines:

"- Hello, I'm posting title of an article … 1) title: „Social Network Facebook as an Event Promotion Platform subtitle: Intial Reasearch Targeted at Czech Students in the 17-24 Age Group" …

- Hello Lukáš, … I found it quite long. I do not know if it is possible but can you define the 17-24 Age Group with one word e.g. Young Czech Students? Silvie

- Thank you! I agree. I would even take your suggestion bit further by cutting it down to „Social Network Facebook as an Event Promotion Platform: Intial Reasearch Targeted at Czech Students …

- Hello Lukas, I like your title, but I also find it quite long and I also see some posibility how to shorten it. Do you find necessary to have there "social network"? Maybe it would be enough today to leave Facebook without that description …

- Hello Lukas and Jana, I have to say, that I really agree with Jana. Just the word Facebook is enough, today everybody know what is going on. …"

The „peer review" task simulates one of the processes students´ texts go through before they are published. Each student sends their text to the teacher, who sends it (anonymously) to two other course participants for analysis. The analyses are sent back to the teacher, who at the end of the course sends each student two (anonymous) reviews of their texts produced by their peers. Apart of this peer review, the teacher reflects students´ ideas mentioned in the analyses. This reflection summarizes key thoughts and groups of thoughts, such as:

(1) Description – giving information on the text content:
   - "The review of the text is divided into six paragraphs. … the author of the review tries to introduce the theme of the original paper to a reader in the first paragraph. …"

(2) Analysis
   - "The author of this text use quite simple, synoptic style of writing. He employs short single sentences with a view to be easy intelligible to the reader. …"
   - "The author of the text did not take the trouble with writing it grammatically and stylistically correct."

(3) Details – analysing particular mistakes or simply bringing evidence of mistakes
   - "… At some points, the language of the text is too close to spoken form („The last strong point of the text, which I am going to say here…"). "
   - "…the second paragraph starts with the sentence "First is the structure of the text". I was wondering: first of what? …"
   - "… The second and the third paragraph is the one sentence paragraph. "
   - "…The piece is called „Baldessari sings Lewitt" and it is basically what it is called…"

(4) Recommendations – where students offer their improvements
    - *"…I would find it better to divide it into more paragraphs."*
    - *"I would prefer to replace the sentence in quotation marks with another, descriptive verbal explanation. It is the easiest way how to explain the author's opinion but not enough academic."*

Although students understand the importance of both the theoretical and practical collaborative exercises which help them to practice and develop their writing skills, they regard videoconferencing as the most attractive part of the course. Videoconferencing brings an important international aspect to the subject of academic writing. The students meet the real world of business during their discussion with publishers (Routledge, OUP) and get lectures and reviews of their writing delivered by academics from various universities (Aberystwyth University, University of Birmingham, SOAS London and Universidad Jaume I, Castellón). These international experts analyse students' texts, express their points of view, suggest changes and possible improvements and engage in a professional debate with individual students. The community of practice of academic writing is thus stretched even more across various discourse communities (Morgan, 2008) enriching Czech set standards of appropriate communication and academic writing from the perspective of various academic cultures (Antes, 2006).

Current emphasis on interactive and flexible forms of education together with the implementation of multimedia into education suggests that many ICT tools could become a common part of language learning and calls for a clear methodological approach that would enable the institution to set a complex framework within which learning programmes could be created. We concentrate on an inter-disciplinary methodologies environment that enhances effectiveness of language teaching and learning by promoting an innovative learner-centred environment; creating both independent and collaborative learning opportunities; supporting application of multimedia and social networking in language learning, while paying special attention to the effective use of complex ICT tools. The realization of the process of evolution towards such flexible, interactive ICT supported language learning environment has to take into account basic methodological concepts that will provide effective patterns and standards of communication in the newly created setting. In this respect, it is useful to consider the constructivist framework that offers second language learners' links to the external world by means of learning through doing or learning and not merely teaching and that opens way to the community of practice communication patterns that are supposed to create more creative environment among learners.

References

[1] Basogain, Xavier. *EHU: Case Study of Videoaktiv Project*. 2006. DIVERSE Conference, Glasgow, UK

[2] Ballenger, Bruce. *The curious researcher: a guide to writing research papers*. 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001. xxviii, 35. ISBN 0-205-31911-4.

[3] Bhatia, Vijay Kumar. *Analysing genre: language use in professional settings*. Harlow : Longman, Pearson Education, 1993. xvi, 246 s. ISBN 0-582-08524-1.

[4] Pettenati, M.C., Abou Khaled O. & Giuli D.: *Technology and Pedagogy: Developing a Webagogy.* 2000. Journal of Interactive Learning Research, AACE.

[5] Ramírez-Martinell, A. *Approaches to teaching with a video rich discussion enhancer: a comparison.* 2007.DIVERSE Conference, Lillehammer, Norway

[6] Swales, John M. (John Malcolm). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1990. xi, 260 s. ISBN 0-521-32869-1.

[7] Antes, Peter. Scientific Writing: English, French and German Compared http://profil.muni.cz/02_2006.php [26.3.2010]

[8] COMPACT project – Akademické psaní v angličtině pro doktorandy http://lingua.muni.cz/article/3/ [27.1.2010]

[9] De Haaff, Janice. Methodology Quick Guide. INVITE projekt Leonado da Vinci http://invite.lingua.muni.cz/ [27.1.2010]

[10] INVITE projekt Leonado da Vinci http://invite.lingua.muni.cz/ [27.1.2010]

[11] Morgan, John. Methodology -Theoretical background in English. INVITE projekt Leonado da Vinci http://invite.lingua.muni.cz/ [27.1.2010]

[12] Young, C.: Top Ten uses of Video Education. 2006. /http://www.videoaktiv.org/ [20.12.2007]

Contact data

Alena.hradilova@law.muni.cz
lstep@fss.muni.cz