Chapter 84

Teaching English for Academic Purposes Through the Use of Digital Tools

Tal Levy
Ruppin Academic Center, Israel

Leslie J. Cohen
Ruppin Academic Center, Israel

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses an ongoing seven-year Digital Development Program (DDP) which has trained and encouraged English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors to teach digitally. As leaders of an EAP team at Ruppin Academic Center, and as proponents of the idea that mindful use of technology enhances both teaching and learning, we adopted the Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge model known as TPACK (Koehler & Mishra, 2008), as our guiding. We used Moodle as the virtual learning environment (VLE) platform for our program. In our attempt to achieve as paperless and digital a classroom as possible, we continue to introduce numerous online programs and activities via our VLE. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the transition from face-to-face English and content teaching to blended and flipped learning at our institution. Feedback has been positive. We also offer suggestions to other institutions which may be seeking to make similar changes. The appendix lists the websites, resources, software, and applications, which are mostly free or open source.

INTRODUCTION

Ruppin Academic Center (RAC), a medium-size college in the center of Israel, serves a population of more than 4,000 students annually. It is comprised of four schools: The School of Marine Sciences, the School of Economics and Business Administration, the School of Social and Community Sciences, and the School of Engineering.

The center strives to cultivate a new generation of leaders who possess moral conscience and environmental awareness. All undergraduate programs include English for academic purposes (EAP) courses, in

which students are placed according to their psychometric exam score. In addition, the center conducts various pre-academic programs in which English serves as a main subject area of study.

The EAP program at RAC complies with the guidelines of the national Council for Higher Education (CHE). The CHE views EAP instruction as a means for students to cope successfully with the demands of the contemporary academic world. The CHE encourages the activation of all four-language skills, focusing mainly on the ability to read academic texts and research papers effectively. In addition to the courses mentioned above, the center offers courses labeled as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). These courses are more practical in nature and mainly focus on writing and speaking.

Approximately 17% of the undergraduate students who enroll are exempt from EAP courses due to their relatively high scores on the psychometric exam. The remainder, over 80%, is placed at various course levels according to their proficiency. The weakest students are expected to complete 310 academic hours of EAP instruction before obtaining an official exemption from the requirement to study English. All students are expected to complete their English studies by the end of their second academic year. The average number of EAP courses offered annually is around one hundred, and more than 2,000 students study EAP and ESP annually. All students are required to possess a personal digital device (PDD) or at least have free access to a computer on- or off-campus, as all courses rely heavily on technology delivered through a virtual learning environment (VLE).

The majority of students at our institution are in their twenties – an age group that could reasonably be expected to be familiar with the digital universe. However, some of them come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have had little digital experience. Furthermore, most of the digitally fluent students primarily use social networking sites, and are unfamiliar with the use of digital technology for study purposes. We also have older students whose digital fluency skills have a broad range. Therefore, our program incorporates lessons to familiarize all students with the specific digital tools and programs that we use.

The EAP staff consists of twenty instructors, each of whom holds a relevant degree in the field of language instruction or a TESOL certificate, in addition to an MA in their field of study. The majority of the teachers are teaching associates who work at a number of institutions. Every new instructor who is hired must demonstrate full competence in technology use in general, and must be able to use Moodle (our VLE) in particular. Although the unit for the professional (and staff) development at our institution offers courses in Moodle, the level at which the EAP department operates dictates the recruitment of technology-savvy staff, who are highly inclined to continue their on-the-job-training in these areas.

The head of the English department (Tal Levy, since 2011) is fully in charge of recruiting, monitoring and conducting performance reviews of all EAP staff. This is in addition to being fully responsible for the quality assurance (QA) of all taught programs, the development of new courses, as well as the efficient integration of technology and the successful execution of pedagogy. The English department holds work meetings twice a semester with college heads and administrators to ensure successful implementation of CHE requirements along with effective work procedures and etiquette. The EAP department at RAC is an active member of the overall organization of all EAP instructors in the country, H-INET. It is seen as a leader in the field of EAP instruction and a pioneer in the field of blended and online instruction. The RAC EAP staff conducts annual workshops for EAP professionals from various institutions who seek to expand and consolidate their knowledge of Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge (TPACK).

In 2008, the leaders of the EAP department at Ruppin Academic Center initiated a project to encourage language instructors to incorporate digital tools into their teaching. Because there was no digital platform

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