

## Designing a Blended Learning Course to Teach English for Specific Purposes at Università degli Studi di Milano: *Let it roll!*

Annalisa Canzi; Alessia Folcio; Manuela Milani; Simona Radice; Elisabetta Santangelo; Elena Zanoni

All the authors:

CTU – Centre for Learning Technologies, Università degli Studi di Milano – Via Celoria, 20 - 20133 Milan, Italy

[annalisa.canzi@ctu.unimi.it](mailto:annalisa.canzi@ctu.unimi.it) [alessia.folcio@ctu.unimi.it](mailto:alessia.folcio@ctu.unimi.it) [manuela.milani@unimi.it](mailto:manuela.milani@unimi.it) [simona.radice@ctu.unimi.it](mailto:simona.radice@ctu.unimi.it)  
[elisabetta.santangelo@ctu.unimi.it](mailto:elisabetta.santangelo@ctu.unimi.it) [elena.zanoni@ctu.unimi.it](mailto:elena.zanoni@ctu.unimi.it)

**Abstract:** The paper describes how a Basic English Course - *Progetto Matricola* developed into English for Specific Purposes - *Let it roll!*. The project was for the University Degree Course in Communication and a blended learning methodology was used to create it. The paper details: the didactic development from *Progetto Matricola* to the online platform design and the *Let it roll!* Course; and the cooperation between the instructional designers and the software engineers.

### Progetto Matricola

An experimental blended learning project to teach Basic English called *Progetto Matricola* was started in the academic year 2001-2002 for the Università degli Studi di Milano. The Basic English Course presented two different modalities of interaction: online and face-to-face. Attendance was compulsory. Since

The adoption of a blended learning model allowed the tutors to deal with a high number of participants. The Basic English Course, in fact, involved 1000 freshmen (about 50% from Humanities; 50% from Scientific Fields). The students took part in the Course voluntarily and were constantly guided by the *real* and *virtual* presence of five tutors. The level of competence reached at the end of the course was certified by the PET (Preliminary English Test) Cambridge Certificate.

We chose a platform to teach the English language from among those available on the market. The students could thus access directly the contents needed to follow a guided learning path toward the acquisition of the English language. The platform provides seven courses from Basic to Advanced. The levels are ascertained by an online placement test offered by the platform itself and submitted by the tutors in an introductory lesson before the beginning of the course. The platform offers additional resources and activities for further in-depth study.

Generally an online course is learning-flexible, offering students autonomy and self-pacing according to their interests and needs. Instead, with our course students were required to do two assignments before each face-to-face lesson held every fifteen days. Furthermore, since learning a foreign language means mastering oral skills, after an initial placement test small groups (10-12 students) were organized. The small size was chosen in order to optimize interaction and to stimulate active participation. It must be pointed out that in our course there was neither online community nor peer interaction and that the online communication was only between tutor and student.

### From *Progetto Matricola* to *Let it roll!*

In the academic year 2003-2004, the University felt the need to offer students a Specialised English Course for each Faculty. The Communication Degree Course was the first to ask the CTU (Centre for Learning Technologies) to design and develop such courses. The plan of studies of the Communications students includes an English laboratory. So our course was recognized as a lab granting university credits.

The idea was to offer 100 students (volunteers) an experimental English course on the language of Cinema, Advertising and Journalism. It was a completely new challenge.

We started our designing process by self-evaluating the previous experience and taking into consideration the students' opinions expressed in a questionnaire given at the end of the course. Since the blended learning approach worked well in *Progetto Matricola* (the students' assessments confirmed it), we wanted to adapt it to the new course as well. We noted that what the students appreciated most were: time flexibility in the use of the online course (26%), the opportunity to quickly communicate with the tutor via e-mail (18%), less time spent attending classes (18%). This is also confirmed by

the fact that the vast majority of the students would attend another blended learning course after this experience (83%) (Canzi, Folcio, Milani, Radice, Santangelo, Zanoni , 2003).

Our idea was further strengthened by the excellent results obtained in the first two sessions of the PET exam (Canzi, Folcio, Milani, Radice, Santangelo, Zanoni , 2003):

	<b>November 2002</b>	<b>March 2003</b>
	%	%
Pass with merit	35	50
Pass	52	34
Narrow Fail	7	3
Fail	2	4
Absent	4	9

**Table 1:** PET results in November 2002 and March 2003

In light of this we decided to apply to *Let it roll!* the same mix between online and face-to-face interaction. For this course too, each student will meet the tutor and the rest of the group every fifteen days after autonomous online study, following a guided learning path suggested by the tutor. Each tutor will deal with only one group of about 20 students.

Immediately after this decision we had to define the target. Going from Basic to Specialised English Course necessitates a higher starting level of English. Therefore we needed to ascertain students' language level— by the students presenting an official certificate or by their taking an internal placement test.

The next step that we had to undertake was to choose the platform for the online study and, considering the three areas of interest for the Communication Field, we decided to create a completely new tailor-made platform. This represents the most innovative element of the new Course in comparison with *Progetto Matricola*.

### **The design of the online part of *Let it roll!***

#### **Materials**

The objective of *Let it roll!* is to improve the knowledge of the specific vocabulary of the three areas: Cinema, Advertising and Journalism.

To create the contents for the online course we mainly used materials taken from original sources specialised in these topics. We used the resources in different ways according to the topics we were dealing with. We especially used audio-visual materials. For the cinema module we focused on those parts of DVDs concerning: making of films, interviews with directors, cast and crew; and printed and online materials from specialised magazines and websites - film reviews, details on the movie staff, etc. For the advertising module we selected: commercials from websites; advertisements from magazines; extracts from books regarding theory and figures of speech; articles from newspapers and websites, materials from radio and tv. The choice of any material is justified by the need to present specific vocabulary in its real context of use.

#### **Structure**

In the online course the topics were organized in a hierarchical structure with the three modules corresponding to the three main areas. Each module consists of an introductory assignment; four assignments dedicated to the development of the topics; and a review assignment aiming to test the student's language acquisition. Moreover, each assignment is divided into activities containing exercises that covering reading, listening and writing.

The choice of exercises takes into consideration the passive and the consequent active phase of the process of language acquisition. The student is introduced to the specific vocabulary initially, through the reading and listening of texts with exercises aim at passive familiarization with new words and phrases. For this phase we chose texts to be read or listened to, sometimes presented with audio-visual slides. In this very first step the student can, therefore, autonomously deduce the meaning of new words from the specific context in which they are presented, supported too, by the multimedia tools, very useful for the intuitive acquisition of the language.

In the active phase, through exercises, the student has to verify what he has previously acquired. The typologies are with closed answers and exercises with open answers.

The closed answer exercises are mainly: fill-in, multiple choice, true/false and matching. Here, the student only has to choose the appropriate answers among those given. The student can, therefore, have immediate feedback regarding mistakes and correct answers.

The open answer exercises – questions and forum activities – focus on written ability since the student is asked to actively contextualize the new expressions and terms learned before. The feedback is given by the tutor who corrects the exercises and also evaluates the participation of each student in the forum.

It's important to point out that participation in the forum was not present in *Progetto Matricola* therefore students didn't have the opportunity to interact with each other. Moreover, and more importantly, Forum is an assessed activity connected to the topic of each assignment.

Furthermore for each assignment, we provide additional tools such as a contextualized glossary, accessible both as a general linked list of specific words connected to the module, and as a help to understanding reading or listening texts. Difficult terms, on the other hand, are explained in a dictionary reached by holding the mouse over them. We also tell students where to find further online materials to broaden their knowledge of each specific topic.

One aspect that was highly appreciated by the students was the opportunity to communicate quickly with the tutor via e-mail. For this reason we decided to keep using the medium of the e-mail boosting it by adding a tool called *Instant message*. This tool is accessible directly from the online course and it is contextualized in each activity (the tutor or the student will send and receive the message with the number of the activity indicated on it). Our idea is to guide students to the correct use of the tools of communication. The E-mail both in *one-to-one* and *one-to-many* modality, is used to provide the general information students need, such as calendars, additional materials etc. The Instant Message is used to give explanations or clear up doubts concerning specific online exercises.

### **Activity Report**

Another important tool available on the platform is the activity report, useful both for tutors and students. For the creation of the report data we again took into consideration *Progetto Matricola*.

The website report tool used on that occasion was specifically designed for the students' self-assessment. However, the tutors could also access these data through the 'administration' link. Here the tutor found useful information concerning: the time the students spent doing the activities; the number of activities they did; and the assignments they completed. Moreover, it offered information about the number of correct answers out of the total of the questions given. But though the reports provided a wide range of quantitative information we needed to have access to more qualitative details of the history of students' activities. In designing the *Let it Roll!* Website report outline, we examined possible additional information to enable the tutor to monitor the linguistic progress and problems not only of the single student but also of the group. The analysis of the reports provides hints to the tutor on how to plan the activities for the classroom in order to focus on the needs highlighted by the reports.

The data provided to the tutor regard the results obtained by the student in each activity. In detail the tutor monitors the number of attempts, the first successful attempt, the best result and the history. The history represents the innovation in comparison to the previous experience since it gives an overall view of the feedback obtained by the student, in every attempt in chronological order. These qualitative data in conjunction with the quantitative ones give a general idea of each student's progress, monitored either by the student or by the tutor.

### **Cooperation between teams**

What we have described so far is the result of the cooperation between the instructional designers and the software engineers. At the beginning of the design process the tutors as instructional designers worked autonomously and creatively on the selected material in order to choose the content of the online platform. Our aim was solely didactic: we wanted to teach specialised English vocabulary that could be used by the students in their future career. All the exercises aimed at contextualizing a specific language in the related professional sphere by practising listening, writing and reading skills. The speaking skill was delivered during the face to face lesson. To reach our aim we designed a heterogeneous range of exercises, as already described, to cover different learning approaches and to make the online course more appealing. Considering our idea of the "perfect" activity report, all the results obtained in these exercises were to be evaluated both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, since this represents a link between the online study and the face-to-face lesson.

During the creative process the instructional designer staff had to meet the software engineers in order to give to the created material an online format. The available platform at the CTU, in fact, was suitable for web-enhanced courses whereas in *Let it roll!* the online is not only a support but it is the main tool for delivering the contents. The difficulty was

that all the designed heterogeneous exercises were to come together in an homogeneous structure. The software engineers had to create a structure meant to be the scaffolding for different hierarchical elements such as modules, assignments, activities and exercises, representing several boxes whose contents can vary in accordance to the course it is applied to. In this context dealing with the exceptions (eg: a new kind of exercise) required an effort to redesign it in order to lead it back to the standard patterns. The same procedure was followed in handling the report data.

The different backgrounds of the two teams who cooperated on the same project led to an enrichment of both know-hows and contributed to the creation of an effective final product.

## Conclusions

The design of *Let it roll!* fulfilled all the needs for our blended learning project, from the points of view of contents, didactic purposes and technological support. On the contrary, in *Progetto Matricola*, we perceived all the limitation of using a given platform without having the opportunity to change what we thought were negative aspects or to improve it according to our requirements.

After an initial phase in which the instructional designer staff designed the didactic contents of *Let it roll!*, a second phase followed in which the software engineers implemented the technological support by cooperating with the instructional designers. This is the most innovative aspect of our second experimental project.

The blended learning course started in February 2004 and will be constantly monitored to find weaknesses and strengths. We will examine:

- how well the technological support works both on the part of the tutors and that of the students
- how effective the blended learning methodology is in the context of an English for Specific Purposes Course
- how effective the different means of communication (e-mail, instant message) are

On the basis of the results of these analyses, the tutors will still play the role of instructional designers. They will be involved in resolving the problems that inevitably come up in order to improve the didactic contents of the platform. As far as the technological support is concerned the software engineers will be in charge of implementing additional tools, in an ongoing cooperative process.

## References

Benedetto, I., "Dalla valutazione dell'apprendimento alla valutazione dell'ambiente di apprendimento. Un sistema di indicatori per valutare la qualità della formazione online."

[http://www.erickson.it/erickson/formare/archivio/settembre/2\\_benedetto.html](http://www.erickson.it/erickson/formare/archivio/settembre/2_benedetto.html)

Bocconi, S., Minoro, V., Sarti, L. (2000) Valutazione della qualità nella formazione in rete, Ed. Etas.

Canzi, A., Folcio, A., Milani, M., Radice, S., Santangelo, E., Zanoni, E. (2003), A blended learning experience at Università degli Studi di Milano, in ICETA 2003, 2nd international Conference on Emerging Telecommunications, Technologies and Applications and the 4th Conference on Virtual University, 11-13 September 2003, Kosice, Slovak Republic, 195-199.

Strambi, A., Bouvet, E., (2003) Flexibility and Interaction at a distance: a mixed-mode environment for language learning, in Language Learning and Technology, Vol. 7, No. 3, Sept. 2003, 81-102.

Tamburini, F., (2002) On-line templates for the production of web-based multimedia language learning material, in 4th International Conference on New Educational Environment, 8-11 May 2002, 21 Poster Section