

## BECOMING DIGITAL IN ESP CLASSES

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*Abstract: As constant Internet users who are also present on social media, today our students are the perfect audience to whom we can talk about digitalization even during ESP classes. English is the lingua franca of the Internet and our students have to be able to make the distinction between English as a medium of communication on the Internet and English studied for academic purposes. Moreover they have to start using the possibilities offered by the online medium in order to develop their English language skills. The aim of this paper is to show how the Internet can help the ESP teacher to use the benefits of the online technology in the students' advantage. They can thus learn the English language in the context of building their future careers.*

*Keywords: ESP, digitalization, Internet, technology, medicine.*

Today everybody goes online for a variety of things that makes us say we can hardly find a field of activity which is not present online. The younger generation is undoubtedly very responsive to the online technology. They are constant Internet users, they are also present on social media, managing to keep themselves updated with the latest novelties in the field. Being aware of all these, English teachers should try to find ways to bring technology in their classroom for didactic purposes. Students may find more attractive ways to learn the language. Likewise, they may more easily find ways to look at their future profession from the perspective of earning and using the English language. Our references in this paper will be mainly to the context of teaching English to medical students, at the "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iasi. This endeavor requires some new skills that English teachers should have. It is obvious that, in order to be able to bring technology in their ESP classes, they have to keep themselves updated with all the possibilities offered by the online medium: "The Internet has a lot to offer the teacher. There are authentic resources and materials, places where you can find prepared lesson plans, ideas and worksheets" (<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/using-internet-2?fbclid=IwAR10PdabzozYnLx7qAaHBoDi9SWwSUrEEExWpUj5408dZAIlo2Hvv1V1gpz8>). The same article emphasizes the advantages offered by the Internet in terms of *size* (the teacher has the ability to tailor lessons very specifically to the students' needs and interests – moreover, learners tend to respond better when they feel involved and engaged in the subject), *relevance* (much material is modern and up to date which help motivate students), *widespread use* (students enjoy using the net in their free time, and will appreciate its use in class), *nature* (it is a dynamic medium involving movement from site to site, promoting decision making and learner independence) (<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/using-internet-2?fbclid=IwAR10PdabzozYnLx7qAaHBoDi9SWwSUrEEExWpUj5408dZAIlo2Hvv1V1gpz8>).

Indeed, when studying English for academic purposes, students are the right audience. Nonetheless, it is important to mention from the very beginning that using the Internet for didactic purposes does not have in view the idea of going online for meanings of words in the dictionaries, or to check up the pronunciation of some words. These are undoubtedly useful tools online, that can be used by anyone, but the study of the English language at this level requires more complexity. Before going deeper into the analysis of the opportunities offered by the online medium, it is worth mentioning the fact that, although multilingualism is present on the Internet, English is the *lingua franca* of the Internet and nobody can deny its dominance in this respect. There seems to be a logical explanation for such an evolution of things: “In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, English expanded, becoming the national language not only of the British Empire, the United States, and their colonies, but a global language. The international exchange of information between academics and professionals, as well as the rise of the United States as a commercial and diplomatic hub also made globalization of English possible. As a result, many countries chose English as a language of education, diplomacy, science and technology, as well as to remain competitive in the global job market. The IT sector, for instance, is one of many industries that have adopted English as its mother tongue, and due to this position, English became the most common language on the Internet (Al-Kadi 2018). Moreover, the same article brings into discussion the fact that, once the Internet has penetrated our lives, a whole set of new words have been released, all of them being in English: “Linguists such as Crystal (2005), Herring (1996, 2001) brought to the foreground the term internet linguistics. Under the influence of the computers and online communication, it is remarkable that such computer-related words are very common today, such as *software, windows, monitor, motherboard, keyboard, inkjet, laser, printer, file, modem, the Internet, e-mail, formatting, mouse* and the list goes on. Not only have these additions enriched the English language, but have also affected cultural identities [...]. Social media has also been responsible for giving new uses to some existing words. For instance, today it is common to use the word “*friend*” – which is a noun – as a verb such as *to friend / to unfriend somebody on FB*. Other examples include “*google it*”, “*twit on twitter*” (Al-Kadi 2018). In this whole new context, the teacher’s role becomes very important. The Internet contains a lot of information, some sources being more reliable than others. Therefore the teacher’s role becomes determinant in making the student aware of the reliable sources of information. When it comes to using the Internet in the English classes, the teacher should assume the role of the guide in the intricate world wide web. Our role is to make the whole learning process easier for our students: “The Internet can be used in a variety of ways to support process writing as students develop their writing skills in various genres. Although the Internet is a naturally motivating tool, and many young learners are familiar with using information technology, it is important for teachers to be active facilitators when the Internet is used for language learning” (Boas 2011). Once we have established the fact that students need our guidance when we use the Internet for didactic purposes, we can see the main directions in which we can take advantage of this use. All the skills involved in the process of learning a foreign language could be practiced on the Internet. Reading and writing will go together, the same way listening and speaking will be practiced together. Reading will probably come first as people do get a lot of information from the Internet by accessing various webpages from where they read the information they need. It is a significant experience as most of the times people read information directly in the English language. Our students may be made aware of the way in which they could develop their reading skills just by reading information from blogs, health care professionals’ blogs or any other resources. They

will soon notice things that are related to the way in which writing is performed in the online medium. More than 30 years ago nobody would have thought that written communication would have a virtual form or an electronic format. It is self-understood, therefore, that written communication designed for such purposes will have to be adapted to the new context. Skills that may be required for texts in printed form may prove to be inadequate for the online medium. During the ESP classes, teachers may emphasize such important details, as that of the convention established between the reader and the writer may no longer be the same if we make the transfer from one medium to another. Medical students need to become aware of all these things especially since nowadays the Internet has also become a tool for scientific research. A lot of electronic journals offer the possibility to read their articles online. These articles contain recent information belonging to the field of healthcare, so students will need to know how to approach them and, also, at a certain point, especially for those who want to follow an academic career, how to produce such academic texts themselves. Students will soon realize that the Internet has changed the way in which people communicate today. And we do not refer only to written communication. Video communication, even if it is in real time, it will be a different experience than the face-to-face communication of simply because it is the “barrier” of the so-called “screen” which separates the interlocutors. Speaking about all these in the context of medical English is a good opportunity to remind our students that online communication with the patient, in health care system, will bring about its challenges. Telemedicine is already perceived as a virtual branch of medicine, and, without a doubt, by the time this generation of students graduates from the University, things will have progressed significantly even in this respect. Bringing such topics into discussion (e-health, telemedicine) during the ESP classes is worthwhile and the best example we can find at this moment is probably the US example where telemedicine has registered significant progress in the field. During ESP classes teachers can show students various websites of online clinics who carry out such online services, in order to notice how the doctor-patient encounter may undergo some changes.

These are, however, only some general aspects of using the Internet in the ESP classes. Teachers should not be afraid to do that in their classes. Basically we do not change anything in the academic curricula. Studying a foreign language will always imply the development of the 4 skills (reading, speaking, listening and writing), but along with that, we always have to keep pace with what technology has to offer, with the realities of the world around us. This teachers have to see where technology has something to offer in the advantage of learning English more easily, especially when we speak about English for specific purposes. Thus we should not forget that the Internet means variety and diversity from a cultural point of view. Being online equals the idea of being exposed to a variety of cultures and a diverse world. At this stage students already know that language and culture are interrelated so they will take the benefit of using the Internet as another opportunity to learn about the diverse world we live in today. Being online has its rules and conventions. One mandatory skill one has to have when being online is *cultural competence*. Medical students have to understand that cultural competence is not only about language use. Looked at from the perspective of their future profession, this competence becomes of major importance. Medical choices are always culturally determined and the concept of culture will influence the nature of the relationship with the patient. Likewise, the Internet is about *communication*. First and foremost, the Internet meant the breaking of all the barriers in communication, including distance. Communication is now possible among people who would have not been able to “connect” more than 30 decades ago. Thus social networking, i.e. the

building of the relationships or connections among people, should be seen from the same perspective. Today healthcare requires new ways to communicate. The online medium gives us several opportunities by means of which we can communicate: written text, audio messages, video messages or simply images. Except for the video messages (that is, still, very different from the real life experience), all the other ways to communicate lack the nonverbal element. In healthcare settings (and not only) the nonverbal cues help the doctors understand more than the patient says so students have to be prepared to deal with these means of communication in the absence of an important element of the communication process. Another element in the process of communication is the so-called feedback that, in the online medium, may take different forms. These new forms are specific to the online medium and they require another type of behavior than in real life. Thus feedback may take the form of the number of likes, followers, shares, but also people's comments on your posts. For a doctor, the online presence has become mandatory (according to some American specialists' opinion, a doctor's online presence equals his / her own reputation). By visiting and analyzing various webpages devoted to the idea of e-health in the United States (that offer the best example in the field), medical students may learn about the need to be able to adapt themselves to the different context they might find themselves in. Depending upon the platform you are using, you have to be able to send the appropriate message to your target audience.

It is true that some of these opportunities are not offered by the Romanian system. But our students may learn in advance how these things work. They may even be the ones to introduce these online possibilities in our healthcare system. They should be prepared to build a social media presence for themselves, to develop a website and for that they would need to know what skills to acquire, just by looking at these examples offered by the English-speaking environments. This comes with some extra pressures for the Romanian doctor. In order to build an online presence or simply an online business in the field of medicine, doctors cannot be on their own. The American example shows how, behind the doctor's online presence sometimes there is a whole team of social media analysts that is hired exactly with the purpose of taking care of the doctor's image. In the absence of financial means, especially in the beginning of a doctor's career, these things may look impossible, so, by discussing about these things early in their careers, our doctors may envisage ways in which they could achieve all these things without putting their careers at risk. Most of the times, dealing with the online duties after their office hours, would lead to exhaustion. Nonetheless, our students have to learn how to be open to new ideas, to find the right tone and voice in the online medium and last, but not least, to be authentic. Being authentic in what you do will always be the key to success on the Internet as well.

The Internet is no longer what it used to be in its beginning. When people started to use the Internet, it seemed the perfect space in which you could hide your identity, pretend to be someone else. Nowadays people have learned that the notion of privacy no longer exists as you are online. There is a sort of vulnerability that one needs to be able to manage when being online. The Internet does function according to some rules (*netiquette* describes the conventions, rules and responsibilities for online behavior – [www.futurelearn.com](http://www.futurelearn.com)) that need to be learned and observed in order to survive in the online medium. Practicing all these details in ESP classes may prove to be very useful for medical students and not only. Classes become more interactive, students are engaged in activities that require team work. Moreover, students and teachers may keep in touch even outside their classes by creating online groups on various social networks that allow such possibilities. Likewise teachers can ask students to perform all sorts of

activities that can be carried out online. The assessment of such activities could also be performed online. Most of the universities nowadays offer the possibilities of using a shared virtual space, the so-called e-learning platforms, but most of the times these platforms are strictly used for teachers to upload the content of the topics they teach and, at the end of the academic year, to register the students' grades. Thus, by creating groups on various social platforms with your students, though coming with its challenges and negative outcomes (therefore it requires good management skills), by and large, the benefits outcome the drawbacks and it is a good opportunity for teachers and students to keep in touch outside their classes. Because after all nowadays becoming digital in learning foreign language classes implies the very idea of *blending learning* as nowadays education continues outside the English classes as well.

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