Microsoft Teams as a potential asset in teaching English for the Air Force: Activities and skill-specific task types where permanent use may entail long-term benefits

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As the current international context has forced a faster integration of technology into teaching in general, a hands-on assessment, based on the tutors' experiences, of the benefits and shortcomings brought about by remote (online) learning tools in FLT is already feasible at this point. Based on the said premise, but with a narrower scope in view, the article focuses on the potential advantages of teaching ESP to Romanian air cadets via Microsoft Teams. The primary point of interest is to overview the situations (teaching/learning activities and skill-specific tasks) in which using the above-mentioned (business) communication platform may represent an asset in everyday teaching.

Keywords: *online teaching, ESP, Air Force, STANAG 6001, radiotelephony (RT)*

1. Introduction: Air Force English [AFE] as ESP

I have termed 'Air Force English' ['AFE'] or 'English for the Air Force' ['EfAF'[2]] a variation of ESP which combines what is generally referred to as 'Aviation English' (see, for example, Moder 2013 or Emery 2008), with elements of what is broadly termed 'Military English' (see, for instance, Bowyer 2001) or 'English for the Military' (see, for example, Mellor-Clark 2006) and is characterized by a series of specificities. To understand and assess the potential benefits online teaching might entail for this particular discipline, the general objectives and peculiarities of 'Air Force English' must be first briefly overviewed.

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[2] I have decided to include the lower-case initial of the preposition 'for' in the abbreviation proposed here for the phrase 'English for the Air Force' (EfAF) in order to avoid potential confusion with the common abbreviation for 'Expeditionary Aerospace Force' (EAF).

1.1.   AFE versus Aviation English

As shown by Carol Lynn Moder (2013, 227), Aviation English as a type of ESP is a rather diverse discipline, encompassing a variety of approaches to teaching EFL with the goal of achieving multiple (and sometimes divergent) objectives. FLT may (or rather, must) cover, in this case, a wide range of broad teaching objectives, from the hyper-specialized jargon and the phraseology used in radiotelephony [RT], to the so-called teaching of 'plain' "English for General Purposes" [EGP] (Hutchinson and Waters 1987).

In addition to these two essential lines of work taken into account by Moder, a number of detailed semantic fields should be mandatorily taught, such as the semantic field of airplane, helicopter and airdrome parts, weather phenomena and atmospheric conditions affecting aviation, cargo-related issues, the specific medical terms referring to pilot incapacitation, potential flight incidents or delays… in a word, what I will call here 'the specific vocabulary' (including the right terminology and the linguistic structures around it) the pilot or ATCO must be able to smoothly integrate in communication at all times.

Even so, it must be considered that teaching Air Force English (referred to as AFE from now on) is still different from what Moder describes, as it has further specificities, as well as further dimensions or 'facets'. Let us, for instance, consider RT English: in the military, a significant number of specific military codes and procedure words must be added to the linguistic arsenal, while other aspects might be treated as less specific (e.g., ATIS information), and yet other structures that students will have to be familiarized with might look rather different in the military (e.g., call signs). The same goes for the 'specific vocabulary' to be taught, where the particularities of military aircraft, airdromes, equipment, specific actions etc. must be added to the specific vocabulary of aviation in general. As far as EGP is concerned, the tutor[3] must note that general politeness and military courtesy might sometimes differ, for example, or that everyday routines, or garments, or accommodations, etc. might have their own specific denominations and traits in the military. That is, the tutor must also focus on what I will call here 'English for General Military Purposes' (to build on Hutchinson & Waters' phrase) or 'General Military English' [GME].

Thus, it becomes readily obvious that as far as military aviation is concerned, further subsequent directions should be taken into account, besides the already mentioned subdivisions of Aviation English (which are still not to be ignored), and

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[3] I will generally favor the term 'tutor' here, as the person teaching AFE is not necessarily a university professor – they may just as well be a teacher or an 'expert' (if they are employed by military language centers).

that EfAF is both a hyper-specialized and a more diverse English than sheer 'aviation English'. This is why, in order to be able to look into the advantages (and disadvantages) that the use of Microsoft Teams might bring on the long term, what needs a closer look is EfAF as a discipline, with a focus on the objectives that the tutor (professor) must consider accomplishing.

1.2. AFE as a multi-faceted and multi-layered approach to ESL teaching

For one, the general vocabulary of 'Military English' – or 'General Military English' [GME] – must represent a constant preoccupation for professors teaching ESP in military academies, especially under the form or (correctly) contextualized spoken and written performance involving both lexical structures and related semantic fields. But there are, in fact, two main reasons to legitimate such preoccupation.

The first is an end-objective in teaching AFE: since 21st century warfare is first and foremost an international, joint endeavor, especially for countries such as our own, which are among the signatory states of various international political and military treaties, (US) English has rapidly earned the status of 'the' international language of international operations and organizations, becoming at the same time one of the major challenges of interoperability.

The second reason is a secondary (or meta-) objective, meant to ultimately serve the former: just like the service members of the other state militaries holding NATO membership status, Romanian Air Force Academy [AFA] graduates have to pass what the official NATO document describes as a "general English proficiency (non-military specific)" Test of English for International Communication – or TOEIC – (Tannenbaum & Baron 2013, 1). The test is based on what is commonly referred to as STANAG 6001 – a Standardization Agreement describing the six language proficiency levels of military personnel: "0 (no proficiency), 1 (survival), 2 (functional), 3 (professional), 4 (expert), and 5 (highly-articulate native)" (Tannenbaum & Baron 2013, 1). Even if the test is described as non-specific, the official level descriptors as defined in *STANAG 6001 Language Proficiency Levels*, 5th Ed., issued by NATO's NSO(JOINT)1530(2014)NTG/6001 (December 2014) and the indications provided by such official guidelines as the *STANAG 6001 Overview of Language Proficiency Levels (5th Ed.)*, issued by NATO's Bureau for International Language Coordination [BILC] in February 2019, provide specific "Examples of military tasks", annotated by means of a reference stating that "Some military tasks require specialized training in addition to language proficiency" (BILC 2019), by virtue of the job-specificity displayed by certain tasks. Therefore, if indeed the degree of specialization does not extend beyond basic military-specific vocabulary and knowledge for the target levels to be reached by Romanian air cadets

(respectively, levels 2 and 3[4]), a certain degree of mastery is necessary in order to successfully carry out job-related tasks. The tutor also has to remember at all times that periodical TOEIC tests will have to be passed by service members during their entire career, and that the results may affect career progression.

Additionally, besides the said preoccupation for STANAG scores, and even though GME is supposed to cover the basics for all military careers, job profiles and specializations, and in spite of the fact that air cadets are supposed to prepare for joint and combined operations – the latter term implying that they have to acquire basic knowledge about the minimal specialized vocabulary of all military service branches and fields – an overview of the common core curriculum is still not sufficient: advanced operational language elements need to be studied as far as the various military aviation job profiles are concerned. In other words, each of these job profiles' linguistic specificities need to be thoroughly taught. It is true, on the one hand, that only two of these specialties, which are basically related to aviation management and air traffic control, have (and share) their own, proper jargon (understood as a specific profession-related functionality of language): (military and civilian) RT is to be used by AF pilots and air traffic control officers [ATCOs]. Thus, if the "specific" English competencies of AF pilots and ATCOs must bridge the jargon and specific functionalities of radio telecommunications and the adjacent vocabulary (e.g. lexical items associated with aircraft and airdrome configuration, specific equipment and actions etc.), the other specialties' learning objective mainly revolves around the specific operational lexicon and its typical semantic and syntactic associations – the 'specialized vocabulary' I have mentioned before.

Nevertheless, special vocabulary or language skills are involved with each of the other specialties typically trained in the military academy. For instance, the subtleties of military writing, the vocabulary of leadership, decision management or planning are mostly the province of staff officers; weather officers are supposed to be aware of the denominations and descriptions of weather phenomena and atmospheric conditions, their effects on military aviation management, to be knowledgeable when it comes to the specific abbreviations used by standard meteorological codes; in their own turn, just like air defense [AD] officers, EW and radar officers are supposed to master the technical terminology related to their equipment, to calculations and measurements, to master elements in the vocabulary of sciences such as engineering, physics, IT, etc., which they might need to use in professional communication. Thus, a special interest must be shown in finding ways to teach the specialized vocabulary and necessary skill arsenal for each sub-branch.

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[4] Proficiency levels 2 (or 3, for specific job descriptions) in TOEIC constitute a base, position-specific, mandatory requirement for Romanian Commissioned Officers.

Last but not least, as mentioned before, military 'airspeak' (Robertson 2008) itself is not identical to the civil aviation jargon. In fact, it would be more precise to say that military RT includes it, but also adds its own specificities to common radiotelephony English (e.g. it includes specific phrases and coded indications, such as, for example, a variety of brevity code words[5] never used in civilian RT).

To sum up, AFE must be understood both as a (paradigmatically) **multi-faceted** discipline – i.e., a discipline taught with rather dissimilar hyper-specialized purposes in view (such as those to be considered in military aviation and air traffic management, as opposed to those to be considered in the AFE taught for air defense and air surveillance systems, or for weather officers or, again, staff officers) – and as a **multi-layered** discipline (at syntagmatic level), i.e. a discipline that bridges EGP, GME, and the specificities of the various branches of AFE meant to cover for the needs of a range of different air force job profiles and/or fields. Thus, one should have in mind all the multiple 'facets' and 'layers' of EfAF in order to provide a thorough analysis of the potential benefits technology might bring along in this particular subdivision of EFL teaching.

However, on a 'horizontal level', what the tutor must ultimately consider teaching comes down to the tasks and activities that may serve either two or three different types of end-objectives, namely: 1) teaching EGP and GME through skill-oriented activities and tasks, so as to best answer level 2 [L2]/ level 3 [L3] STANAG 6001 requirements and exigencies; 2) teaching 'specific vocabulary' (as defined previously) through a combination between the same skill-oriented activities (whose practice must remain a constant part of ELT) and (specific) vocabulary practice; 3) in the case of AF pilots and ATCOs, RT teaching and practice must be additionally integrated into the learning process, and the ways in which RT can be associated with or can partially replace speaking and listening practice must be considered. Under concern number three, mention should also be made that if, as listening tasks RT exchanges meet and perhaps surpass STANAG L3 exigencies, it is rather disputable whether (or to what degree) the practice of standardized spoken exchanges can be considered equivalent to or relevant for STANAG L2 or L3 speaking tasks. This is why I will consider in what follows that in the case of AF pilots and ATCOs, RT practice is used alternatively with STANAG-oriented L2 and L3 training in listening and speaking carried out separately, since it is also the way in which I chose to deal with the diversity of teaching objectives in my actual professional practice.

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[5] Multiservice tactical brevity codes are voice procedure words designed to convey complex information synthetically, in a concise and specific manner.

This is why, in what follows, I have structured my analysis according to the four language skills as defined by NATO standardization documents (Skill L – Listening; Skill S – Speaking; Skill R – Reading; Skill W – Writing), including RT Skill L and RT Skill S practice under the same sub-section, and I have referred separately to (specific) vocabulary teaching and practice, tutorial-specific activities, and eventually, to certain relevant aspects of class-management, course materials management and evaluation.

2. Analysis: Teaching AFE through Microsoft teams

One of the choices professors have been provided with at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as an alternative to both in-person classes and more specific, but more cumbersome learning management systems [LMSs] (Navas apud Luna and Taillefer 2018, 79) such as Moodle, was Microsoft Teams (further referenced here as MT). It was also my alternative of choice, and I have used it to teach AFE for three semesters, as a complete surrogate of face-to-face, in-person teaching. The following remarks and analyses are based on my firsthand professional experience with Microsoft Teams virtual classrooms.

2.1. Listening Practice(s)

As shown before, two different types of listening tasks are essential in AFE: STANAG-type tasks and RT-type tasks. A third type of listening activities can be associated with the recognition, memorization, contextualization and practice of specific vocabulary elements, but since such listening tasks do not differ significantly in procedure from the former category mentioned above, the two types will be discussed together under the same sub-section. And since the practice of the above-mentioned task categories is typically separate (successive and/or alternative), but plain English and vocabulary-focused practice may also overlap on occasion (e.g. L2 STANAG-type tasks, where job-related specificities are frequent), while RT-type listening skills are (for the most part[6]) to be separately trained, the analyses will follow in the same line, i.e. they will be separated into two corresponding sub-sections.

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[6] i.e., even if they are implicitly a way to competitively train listening skills, due to their general features and level of difficulty.

2.1.1. STANAG 6001-Type Tasks and Vocabulary-Focused Listening Practice

As far as STANAG-type and vocabulary-focused listening practice are concerned, the use of MT to replace classroom environment provides three major advantages to be considered.

First, with a maximum file upload limit of 100 GB/per file, the availability for each individual team Online Share Point site to use a 1TB document library capacity and up to 25TB upload per "site collection or group"[7], the possibility to upload large audio or audio-video content makes MT a much more competitive tool than many learning platforms (e.g. Moodle). This impressive online storage space constitutes a tremendous advantage as far as general listening practice is concerned, since practically any type or size of audio or AV content can be used. The enabling of live video content (just like that of live audio content) which can be shared (as well as interrupted or replayed) in real time by the tutor or by the students themselves is a great asset, since it allows for diverse and (whenever necessary) attractive listening activities that would benefit from potentially enhanced and to some extent personalized sound quality (e.g. the use of headphones can be encouraged) and volume. In-built video and audio players allow the tutor using MT to easily control the material, much in the same way as in a real classroom environment, but with the students being able to personalize basic sound and video features the way they would in a digital language laboratory (using such technology provided by platforms like Optimas School or ProLang). Of course, the 'Files' section of a given 'Team' can be used to distribute STANAG-type or vocabulary practice worksheets.

Second, MT provides the tutor with the possibility to use classroom management in order to enable differentiated instruction – a tremendous improvement as compared to real classroom conditions. By simply uploading differentiated material – e.g. L1, L3, as well as vocabulary-focused listening materials and worksheets – and by providing students with the necessary instructions allowing them to download and time-manage their assigned recordings and documents (while answers are to be checked when the common time-limit expires by means of uploaded answer sheets and/or discussions), the tutor can create an environment which easily permits students to do different individual or group work simultaneously, without perturbing others in the process. Under this respect, MT is literally able to generate an (almost) ideal classroom environment.

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[7] As specified on the online page referring to the "Limits and specifications for Microsoft Teams" provided by Mirosoft, available at https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoftteams/limits-specifications-teams [27.11.2021].

Third, by means of the students' self-management of basic sound quality features such as volume and/or the tutor's management of common tasks and tests, useful (relatively) lifelike STANAG 6001 testing procedures can be efficiently simulated.

In spite of all these decisive advantages, there is one (rather minor) drawback to using MT to be taken into consideration: the potentially cumbersome simultaneous management of worksheets and audio materials, especially by inexperienced students. A workable solution, however, is the provision of clear policies and/or instructions concerning the synchronized management of multiple windows and paper sheets or notebooks together. Great improvement in this sense can also be achieved if the teacher possesses the technology and skill to perform basic editing actions on the audio/video content to be used, when necessary (e.g. cutting or pasting selected sequences might come in handy at this point). Such operations are fairly easily manageable by means of free sound and video editing software tools available online as well as offline.
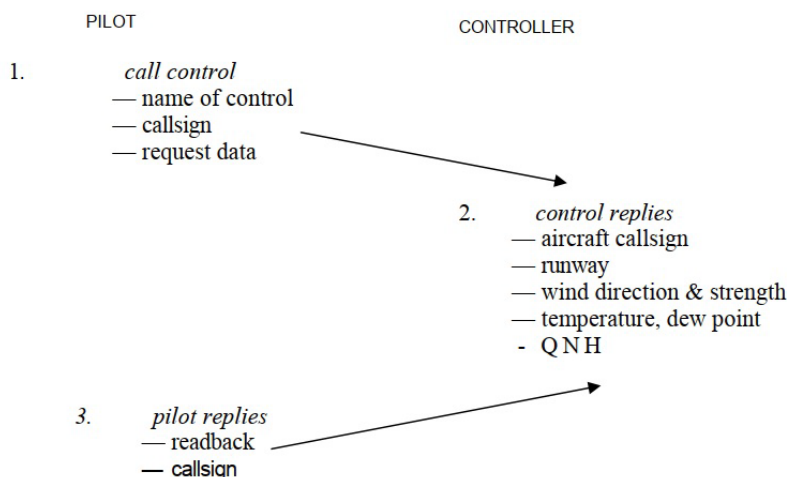
2.1.2. RT-Type Listening Practice

Some of the major benefits, as well as the shortcomings described under the previous section (2.1.1) also apply in the case of RT-type listening practices. More specifically, if differentiated instruction or test format simulation are not pertinent in this case, the possibility to upload sizable files and to simulate real-life audio conditions (often, but not always provided on-tape) remain an asset, as final practice sessions often involve lengthy, full-flight procedure recordings, while in other cases short RT signal failures (interruptions) may be simulated live by the teacher to enhance the difficulty and/or veracity of the exercise.

Additionally, a specific diagram meant to emphasize the presence of standard dialogue structure and phrases may be displayed simultaneously on the common screen, as the students listen to the RT fragments. Such diagrams are specific for learning activities in the field of RT and provide beginners with the basic framework according to which each exchange type must (or should) be organized. An example of such a diagram, extracted from a specialized coursebook (Robertson 2008, 3) and representing one of the simplest standardized exchanges is shown in Figure 1.

Typical exchange

PILOT   CONTROLLER

1.   *call control*
           — name of control
           — callsign
           — request data

                    2.   *control replies*
                              — aircraft callsign
                              — runway
                              — wind direction & strength
                              — temperature, dew point
                              - Q N H

       3.   *pilot replies*
               — readback
               — callsign

Figure 1. RT exchange diagram by Fiona A. Robertson (2008, 3).

2.3. Speaking Practice(s)

Just like in the case of listening practices, STANG-type speaking tasks, specific vocabulary-focused speaking tasks and RT-type speaking tasks differ to an extent which justifies two separate analyses, with the first discussion regrouping the first two activity/task types under the same subsection.

2.3.1. STANAG 6001-Type Tasks and Vocabulary-Focused Speaking Practice

There are several visible benefits to using MT for STANAG 6001-type task practice, but there are also several drawbacks which are significant enough to be mentioned.

Under the category of beneficial aspects, perhaps the first to be mentioned is the possibility to record (and replay) spoken performances. As Thinh Van Le shows in his 2018 article on voice recording in second language acquisition outside the classroom (130-132), several researches conducted between 2009 and 2016, among which one has been targeted at Romanian users of English (Pop, Tomuletiu and David 2011), have shown that voice blogging and voice recording have noticeable constructive results. But the instrumentation of voice recording as in-class practice is now made possible via the use of MT (and other platforms), with several major potential benefits: the possibility for students to self-assess their own performances with increased precision, the possibility for quality peer, student-to-

student feedback as defined by Sackstein (2017); an increased tutor-to-student feedback quality due to the electronic enhancement of teacher memory (i.e., the teacher's ability to memorize mistakes and inadequacies).

Of course, in the case of voice recording, there are specific legal provisions which must be observed: the expressed accord of all the parties involved must be explicit. However, in my experience, students tend to express their accord almost unanimously when asked. The few refusals I have experienced were all related to the emotional tension felt as additional pressure either during the first activity of this type, or for tasks they felt were extremely difficult and required their full concentration. Furthermore, the emotional stress of being recorded seemed to fade in most cases after their colleagues' first tries, as students gradually realized that the exercise of replaying such recordings gave them a better sense of the mistakes that they were inclined to make without consciously realizing that they did so. Basically, the sense of efficiency rather swiftly overcame any tendencies to shy off from the practice.

Another advantage to take into account is the fact that online speaking activities make timing answers easier for teachers, which also results in more accurate feedback and evaluation of performance. The simple fact that a digital clock is displayed at the corner of the screen results in the more precise and user-friendly timing of speaking activities, with the student being virtually unaware of the instances where the tutor checks whether or not time concerns have been met, which also results in less stressful, more detached performances.

A high degree of feasibility characterizes the online displacement of such speaking tasks into MT. The "Files" section is appropriate for distributing STANAG 6001 task cards (prompt cards) or card-like assignments and tasks. It is also an environment fit for the specific Q&A sessions, as headphones or other hardware may be used to perceptibly increase sound quality and performance. The fact that this software uses remote internet servers is also a plus in terms of the speed and quality of the connection, making video and audio communication quite accessible. However, the fact that the software wasn't originally designed as an educational environment has a tendency to show in the case of larger (20+) groups and may count as a slight drawback, as the quality of video and audio communication evidently drops on occasion in such cases (vision may become blurred, sound may become unclear, there may be echo effects or sudden interruptions which may occur as the connection temporarily fails). This problem can be solved to a certain extent by only using one/two camera(s) and microphone(s) at a time – typically, the camera and the microphone used by the student performing the task and those used by the teacher – while the other students are supposed to listen and watch the speech/dialogue with muted microphones and cameras turned off. This also

means that the teacher cannot see his/her other students during the spoken interaction, which may result in poor class management. Nevertheless, let us remember that many of us experience similar problems in face-to-face educational environments when working with large groups of students – there is a reason why speaking practice, as we are all aware, is not recommended as an activity when student groups are numerous.

2.3.2. RT-Type Speaking Practice

The remarks under 2.1.1. are also applicable in the case of RT-type speaking task practice, during which air cadets are supposed to mimic real-life radio exchanges between AF pilots and ATCOs.

One major difference justifies a separate analysis of such specific speaking activities, and that is the fact that if potential unexpected interruptions, poor sound quality, interference and lack of video contact are to be avoided for as much as possible in the case of STANAG-type task practice, the same isn't true in the case of the former. First, video contact is to be suppressed either way, since it is not available in radiotelephony – and the software provides us with the possibility to easily allow or deny video referencing. Alternatively, the tutor may even be interested in considering the possibility to simulate such conditions himself/herself while the dialogue takes place to mimic specific alterations of sound quality (e.g. interference, noise etc.) by superimposing various sound effects or even instructing the students to simulate interruptions by intermittently turning their microphones on and off as they speak while performing the role-play. Such minor, unforeseen communication problems or even failures are rather typical of real RT exchanges, which may add to the realism of the entire setup to the point at which the environment may turn into a real-life simulator. Also, the fact that the students may be encouraged to use headphones and microphones that they are supposed to switch on and off according to procedure also provides a plus of realism to the overall student experience, and the tutor may consider turning these conditions into an asset. Briefly, choosing to turn off video communication may result in a more realistic simulation of the actual environment specific for RT, while minor communication failures can also be used to simulate real-life RT-specific syncope, to which ATCOs and AF pilots must attempt to adapt by using standard phraseology and procedures.

Another benefit is the possibility for students to be simultaneously shown a diagram to guide them in their first exchanges while they articulate their messages, by means of an image shared on the common screen by the teacher while the exchange takes place.

In sum, as far as this hyper-specialized type of speaking practice is concerned, MT provides major benefits as a more lifelike classroom environment as compared to in-person teaching, mainly due to the fact that both real RT communication situations and the virtual classroom environment provided by MT are typically mediated by similar technologies and equipment (computer, headphones, microphones, control panels for volume control or switching between interlocutors etc.) – an advantage which may be speculated by the tutors to their own advantage.

2.4. Reading and Writing Practice(s)

As far as reading and writing practices are concerned, we must first note that unlike in the case of listening or speaking skills, there are no specific RT tasks to consider, which leaves us with only one bipartite category to retain, i.e., the category of STANAG 6001 and vocabulary-focused tasks, among which the latter category can be assimilated (as practice) to the more general reading and writing activity types centered upon the assimilation, interpretation and correct usage of newly acquired specific vocabulary items in context – especially since the numerous essential researches conducted during the last three decades of the 20th century and more recent approaches alike (Schmitt 2000; Nation 2001; Nation and Meara 2002) have unequivocally demonstrated that the role of context in vocabulary learning remains vital.

However, both reading and writing training conducted with specific vocabulary acquisition in view can be easily supplemented or reinforced by means of specific exercises such as gap-filling or matching exercises, sentence construction practice, semantic field or word-family construction tasks, vocabulary collection through reading and online reading, or more particular EGP versus ESP oriented differentiation practice achieved by means of similar strategies.

2.4.1. Reading Practice(s)

As shown above, reading practices in AFE can be considered to fall under two main categories: STANAG-type and vocabulary-oriented practice, respectively. As activity types, the two differ mainly in terms of format – i.e., while both open-ended and closed-ended solutions and grids are all practicable with the latter category, the former category implies grid-test practice of a specific format only.

Thus, the use of MT as a surrogate classroom environment essentially affects both types of reading practice much in the same way, and that is, almost not at all, for the better or worse equally. But if readability, time management, worksheet distribution, just as well as the teacher's effort to edit materials in order to improve

suitability are, basically, the same in MT and real classroom environments, there are still a few specificities to mention before moving on.

First, MT provides the tutor with a material advantage: the printing of hand-outs and copies of lengthy texts is no longer necessary, while the use of high-resolution images and colorful fonts is greatly facilitated. Second – and more importantly – just like with listening and speaking practices, group work and differentiated instruction are also enabled and/or enhanced in MT.

A rather mild drawback might be the fact that the conversion (digitalization) of printed materials might involve a (slightly) greater effort than with the use of hand-outs and physical copies, even though, in theory, the latter category should also be carefully designed to provide user-friendly displays of text and essential information.

2.4.2. Writing Practice(s)

In the case of writing practices, again, the opposition between STANAG 6001-type tasks and vocabulary-oriented tasks is not pertinent enough to justify separate approaches, if one considers contextual use as the core of lexical acquisition, and the supplementation of contextual approaches by means of specific written exercises.

The benefits of MT are, much in the same way as with reading activities, mostly material (as printed copies need no longer burden the professor's teacher bag), but also a matter of graphic design and readability: bad/difficult handwriting becomes a non-issue, text legibility increases, including for corrections (for which Microsoft Word's Review tool is an extremely suitable instrument). Thus, we could sum up the advantage analysis of MT as the provision of increased readability and comfortability for students and teachers alike.

There is, on the other hand, a major disadvantage to be taken into account here, especially since it can (at least to some extent) be turned into an asset: Microsoft Word and MT spellcheckers and proofreading tools can work for the students' benefit when used to actively (and diligently) improve spelling and grammar as part of self-assessment processes, but may result in unrealistic end-results and feedback in writing tasks, with the tutor being virtually unable to check whether or not such tools have been used to undeservedly enhance student results.

Another mild inconvenience may be constituted by student worksheet and homework organization. More specifically, it may typically reside in the unorderly use of document titles by students, in the sense that if documents representing practice or tests are not titled properly or are inaccurately managed, establishing authorship may also become an issue. And even if the issue is usually not impossible to solve, the potential solutions are rather exhausting and time-consuming.

2.5. Tutorial (Lecture) Activities and 'Specific Vocabulary' Teaching

What we have been looking into so far were mostly activities and tasks meant for either seminars or laboratories, as most skill-oriented teaching (and learning) is recommended as small-group educational practice. Specific vocabulary-related activities have also been referred to mostly rather under the dimension of hands-on training than tutorial-type teaching. This choice was mainly motivated by the fact that as a discipline (as well as in terms of its recommended practice[8]), AFE teaching has a dominantly practical (pragmatic) character as opposed to a rather implicit theoretical dimension. Nevertheless, a number of tutorials (or more specifically, lectures) is also included in the Romanian AFE curriculum. It is manly directed at introducing the 'general specific vocabulary' of GME and the profile-'specific vocabulary/vocabularies', terminology/terminologies and/or phraseology of hyper-specialized 'languages' and jargon, as well as the necessary structural specificities of certain discourse features such as the modes of discourse or military writing styles etc.

In the case of such activities, MT can demonstrate again its specific utilities: just like any specific leaning platform system, it allows for spoken lectures to be supported by PowerPoint presentations, images, videos and all sorts of materials, as the tutor's desktop can be shared with the entire student group at any time, while a cursor or mouse pointer can be used to indicate specific sections or points on the screen. This feature enables an increased visibility and legibility for word-lists and phrase lists meant to define/outline essential semantic field elements, for instance.

Furthermore, lectures can be recorded (of course, the tutor's consent is mandatory) and replayed by students if necessary. The possibility for students to re-access course materials, spoken and/or written, is especially an asset when paperback copies of coursebooks and manuals are not readily accessible (such as during the restrictions imposed by the current pandemic).

At the same time, the possibility to upload a basically unlimited number of audio and video files directed at vocabulary tasks results in the increased attractiveness of lecture-specific activities for students, as well as in the less cumbersome management of material resources (i.e., the use of projectors, projector screens, speakers, cables and other hardware is visibly reduced).

Last but not least, the use of MT for tutorial (lecture) activities represents a major advantage when large groups of students are involved, in the sense that both the tutor and the students need to make lesser efforts in order to

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[8] Typically, it is the AF Senior Staff or its subsidiaries that are involved in issuing such recommendations, whose applicability is not compulsory.

communicate: lower voice volume can be used to deliver the necessary knowledge, visibility and sound clarity is increased at an inversely-proportional rate to the distance between the students and the teacher's voice or visual materials. With video cameras turned off (which, of course, means lower control over student focus and participation, especially if the activities do not include any interactive elements), MT can enable about 100 participants at once, while the issue of maintaining control can be relatively easily solved by regular checkups through short or complex, unannounced spoken interactions between the teacher and randomly selected students in the list.

3. Conclusions and further considerations: Class Management, Course Materials' Management and evaluation

In the analysis articulated under section two, I have pointed out several major arguments to favor MT as a viable alternative (or, more likely, as a permanent complement) to the in-person, traditional teaching of AFE, among which the strongest are likely to be the possibility to improvise language lab specific strategies, to simulate real RT communication situations and conditions, and to successfully practice differentiated instruction and deploy advanced class-management techniques.

As previously shown, MT is basically a great help in matters concerning class management, enabling typically unavailable options such as differentiated instruction and prominently enhancing the possibility of group and pair work, by providing such simple options as the possibility to mute microphones or cut sound volume. Discipline is not necessarily a problem either, since student involvement can be checked at all times by the simple, regular elicitation of answers or feedback from randomly chosen students in the participants list. On the contrary, MT is rather a plus especially when working with large groups (e.g., for lecture-specific activities): it provides better acoustics, better video quality and written material visibility and / or legibility than traditional equipment. In the meantime, the 'Posts' section in MT can be very efficiently used as a forum for further discussions or announcements.

The software also provides great freedom concerning the owner's (tutor's) ability to organize materials posted online. Displayed as folders, sub-folders and individual files posted under the 'Files' library section assigned to each particular team, teacher materials are easy to identify, access and use. A virtually unlimited number of teams can be 'owned' by the same user. Folder and file names can be changed, documents and other files can be moved from one folder to the next,

individually or as bulk, all materials can be quickly and easily uploaded, modified and re-downloaded, as well as re-organized according to the 'team owner's' preference. This provides teachers with the possibility to showcase course materials in an orderly fashion, update them and ultimately improve on their content, arrangement and structuring, on-the-spot or in view of later imports. Even classic paperback coursebooks and manuals can be used by means of scanned pages or book/chapter sections.

Another major advantage is the possibility of live or online improvement, as the correction or modification of already uploaded materials is enabled for all Microsoft file types (e.g. MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel documents). But the best thing about it is that both the 'team owner' and the other 'team members' may modify uploaded documents, whenever such options are not restricted to owner privilege. Individual rules can be set up for individual files, folders as well as entire team file libraries, according to the tutor's teaching interests (he or she may enable general access and modifications for a document meant for group work or brainstorming notes, but may just as well restrict student access to task prompt cards, for instance, within the same folder).

Ultimately, the fact that MT uses Internet storage space results in the overall avoidance of network saturation and failure, as well as in financial and environmental benefits – or, in short, in the efficient and sustainable use of time, space, money and natural resources.

In opposition, just like with other similar platforms, but perhaps less than in the case of institution-managed e-learning systems, the mild risks which are the province of online teaching platforms in general are also a fact in MT: technical/connectivity problems or Internet speed issues cannot be fully overcome; much in the same line, the tutors' lack of ability to establish the truth behind connectivity issue claims is also a stress; the necessity for relatively expensive technical support (teacher and student laptops or PCs mandatorily endowed with video cameras, strong Internet connection are *sine qua non*) may also constitute a major impediment as far as implementation is concerned. And of course, the social-relational aspects of learning and teaching are nearly completely eliminated, from nonverbal communication to the complex sociability of the various participants involved in academic activity.

Besides, if there is a major drawback to be mentioned – with MT as well as most online/virtual learning platforms and tools alike – it is the disadvantage of not being able to perform proper assessment, in oral examinations as well as in written exams. The risk of potential technological failure and/or fraud are facts of life in a context where set deadlines, time limits and dates are to be strictly observed, while students are virtually free to communicate to professionals, peers or to simply

google answers over the Internet for ultimately irrelevant solutions. Of course, fraud can be reduced to some extent by the provision of individualized written exam tasks, by favoring oral examinations over writing, and by thoroughly checking similarities between student productions and Internet content to (discouragingly) identify and disqualify plagiarism. However, none of the said potential strategies is workable in the case of sizeable student groups.

Thus, in sum, a rather sensible conclusion would be that Microsoft Teams is an unexpectedly versatile tool in teaching AFE, but it is at the same time rather suitable for skill practice or for lecture-specific activities, than for evaluation purposes, which ultimately indicates that a combined, traditional-virtual approach, where MT could successfully replace basic language laboratory technology might still be the ideal middle ground for Romanian air cadets' foreign language training.

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