

## SHOWCASES OF ICT DURING THE COURSES AND SEMINARS ON THE GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

ALEXANDRA COTOC<sup>1</sup>, DORIN CHIRA<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** *Showcases of ICT during the Courses and Seminars on the Grammatical Structure of the English Language.* The digital tools and practices are a fundamental aspect in our students' activities and preoccupations and integrating them in the teaching-learning process triggers and keeps our students' engagement and motivation. Our study focuses on the educational context provided by the academic environment and it illustrates the use of three digital tools and activities during courses and seminars on the Grammatical Structure of the English Language taught to first year students at Babeş-Bolyai University, the Faculty of Letters, specialisation English Language and Literature.

**Keywords:** *ICT, structuralist approach, English Language, digital tools*

**REZUMAT.** *Utilizarea TIC la cursul și seminarul de Structura Gramaticală a Limbii Engleze.* Instrumentele și practicile digitale constituie aspecte esențiale ale activităților și preocupărilor studenților din ziua de astăzi, iar folosirea acestora în procesul de predare-învățare determină și menține implicarea și motivația studenților. Studiul de față se axează pe contextul educațional oferit de mediul academic și ilustrează folosirea a trei instrumente și activități digitale la cursul de Structura Gramaticală a Limbii Engleze predat studenților de an I, la Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, Facultatea de Litere, specializarea Limbă și Literatură Engleză.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *TIC, abordare structuralistă, limba engleză, instrumente digitale*

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<sup>1</sup> **Alexandra COTOC** is a senior lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature and a collaborator of the Department of Languages for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: alexandra.cotoc@gmail.com  
<sup>2</sup> **Dorin CHIRA** is Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Letters. His primary research areas are lexicology and lexicography, morphology and sociolinguistics. E-mail: d\_chira@msn.com

## **Introductory Remarks**

Students have access to a vast array of information and communications technologies (ICTs), using them both for leisure activities and for educational purposes. As students consume media all the time, their learning behaviour has changed as well and the teaching-learning process should be adapted to suit their needs and expectations in order to keep them motivated and engaged. Students have access to information about everything and the course tutors have the role to help them select and critically assess content, to provide the content in an appealing, interactive and up-to-date manner, diversifying the teaching techniques and strategies, collaborating with the students. In this educational context, we consider that the digital tools are a useful component for the acquisition of the content taught and for the improvement of the teaching strategies in higher education.

### **1. Project Motivation and Objectives**

Embracing a structuralist approach in teaching courses and seminars on the English Grammar is considered by some linguists to be an obsolete approach unless under the framework of current linguistic trends. Nonetheless, the theoretical background offered by the structuralist perspective on the English language offers students the technical apparatus necessary to broaden their linguistic knowledge and understand more complex matters treated in other linguistic trends. It also constitutes an essential background for any English language student and for a (future) language instructor, offering the students a practical mechanism for understanding the structure of the English language. As such, we consider that an up-to-date approach and an extensive use of ICT and online tools in teaching this kind of linguistic course favours our students' engagement, making them feel more motivated and helping them benefit from the application of theoretical concepts and theories.

Taking into consideration the mindset of today's students, their needs and expectations and the essential role that this course plays for a student in English language and literature, we blended the frontal teaching course format specific for a lecture with a more collaborative and interactive environment in which students could, at times, use their smartphone devices in order to access various applications. Our objectives were to determine the engagement of our students in this new teaching-learning process. Moreover, the integration of ICT in both our courses and seminars gives us the possibility to gather useful corpus built together with the students.

## **2. Theoretical Considerations**

Our approach during the courses and seminars needs to take into consideration three fundamental elements: a general perspective on ICT in Higher Education, a new pedagogy within the current sociocultural context and the idiosyncrasy of the courses and seminars taught.

### ***2.1. ICT in Higher Education***

The specialised literature on ICT focuses primarily on the use of technology in the foreign language courses and to a lesser extent on the use of new technologies in courses and seminars that imply the acquisition of abstract linguistic terminology, theoretical perspectives and explanations of complex language phenomena. Regardless of the nature of the course, we consider that ICT provides the students the opportunity to become autonomous learners and they facilitate the acquisition of content. In addition, ICT gives us the opportunity to design our classes in such a way as to insure that we no longer rely only on the transmission model of the field-specific information, but also on transversal skills (see Păcurar, 2019: 316) and this constitutes a requirement for the higher education environment as it should pave the way to a better employability chance. By the same token, recent studies show that there are some common key competences for life-long learning and among them, experts enumerate Communication in a Foreign Language, Digital Competence, Sense of Initiative and Entrepreneurship. All these are important for the digitalization of education (see Rosén, Billore, 2019: 100) and this latter element is an essential condition for the future of education in general, but even more in higher education as it is the scenario in which our students should be tailored for the job market which requires digital know-how.

Experts mention a few elements that bring success in the classroom, regardless of the subject under focus: structure, flexibility, feedback and formative assessment, student-centeredness, research on learning, building metacognitive skills, making student thinking visible (Scott and Maier, 2010: xvi-xvii). ICT accommodates all of these key elements and, in this course, it provides the language instructor the milieu for a new approach in teaching a linguistics course, it reveals new possibilities for teaching and learning in order to revive the students' interest and give a very practical approach for a technical and theoretical content.

### ***2.2. A New Pedagogy***

“Web 2.0 has transformed the teaching and learning process, enabling youths to collaborate and share information online via social media, blogging

and Web-based communities” (Pace, 2019: 405). Students have a lot of information at their disposal, they are always hyper connected and use multiple devices. For this reason, “a transition from the traditional, teacher-centered instruction to an instructional strategy that puts active student engagement squarely in the middle of the teaching and learning process” is considered to be beneficial (Novak and Patterson, 2010: 20). We argue that this format constitutes an efficient teaching technique even during courses which are more-lecture oriented and which contain a high number of students in the audience. This is due to the fact that the digital world contains a vast plethora of apps and sites which could be integrated to serve various purposes, without affecting or changing the informational content. Of course, this process requires a lot of time for preparation, reflection on what is suitable and what is not and practice, at times even trial and error events.

### ***2.3. The Grammatical Structure of the English Language Courses and Seminars***

The Grammatical Structure of the English Language is a compulsory course composed of courses (theoretical lectures) and seminars (interactive and practical) addressed to the first year students at the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University. The course takes place every week, whereas the seminars take place every two weeks.

This course provides or builds upon basic knowledge necessary for any English language teacher/specialist. It focuses on providing detailed and relevant explanations for day to day language structures and phenomena. As future specialists of the English language and literature, students are offered the technical apparatus needed for the English grammar alongside with Phonetics, Lexicology and the other branches of linguistics studied during the Bachelor years. In terms of content, the course covers the following topics:

<b>Course</b>	<b>Seminar</b>
1. The Noun Phrase 2. The English Verb. Mood. Aspect. Tense. 3. Modal Auxiliaries 4. Non-Finite Forms of the Verb	1. The Noun Phrase 2. Determiners: The Article 3. The Adjective 4. The Adverb 5. Sequence of Tenses 6. Past Tense

Undergraduate students need this course in the first year for a number of reasons. Firstly, many of them still have problems with providing explanations for various language structures and phenomena. Thus, this subject and the structuralist framework embraced helps our students understand why some structures are correct and others are incorrect. Secondly, this approach paves the way for the more complicated linguistic courses that they have in the curriculum in the Bachelor programme and later in the Master and PhD studies, in case they are interested in linguistics. Last but not least, this course is fundamental for the students at this faculty as one of the specialisations that these students prepare for is English language teaching, especially in pre-universitary settings.

### **3. Target Group**

At the Faculty of Letters, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, undergraduate students benefit from a dual bachelor's degree programme of language and literature for two foreign languages. Students who major in English study this course in the second semester of the first year and students in English minor take this course in the first semester of the first academic year. This study focuses on the second category of students, during the first semester of the academic year 2018-2019. Having roughly 250 students enrolled in English minor, the group is divided into two time slots for the courses and in four time slots for the seminars.

### **4. Analysis of ICT in the Course and Seminar. Showcases**

ICT in our courses and seminars is two-folded: the communication with the course tutor and with the other students takes place on a social networking site (Facebook) and we use new technologies to present and practise specific linguistic content (during the courses and seminars and at home, for homework activities).

#### ***4.1. SNS Communication and Community of Practice***

Students are avid users of social network sites, creating profiles and connecting with users worldwide. Even though Facebook is a less popular social network site (sns) for our students as they migrated to other digital spaces (Instagram, Snapchat), we still use this platform with our students because its affordances allow us to create announcements, multimodal posts and comments, without having length constraints and being more text-oriented than the other

platforms. Moreover, unlike a platform like Edmodo, Facebook allows the creation of a group that can last over time and also a learning community in which students can keep up-to-date with information about the courses and seminars, but also interact with other students “providing a digital space in which our students can find useful information, but also seek help for various projects and collaborate with their peers” (Cotoc, 2019: 310). We also use this group to share the content necessary for the course and seminar and, very importantly, we use it to hyperlink the platform to other games and sites used for teaching-learning purposes. Hence, students can solve some of the classroom tasks and exercises at home as well.

#### ***4.2. Showcases of Digital Activities: QR readers, Padlet and Mentimeter***

During our courses and seminars, we integrated a number of apps and sites in which students were asked to work individually or in teams. In this way, we managed to provide formative feedback and to encourage their active participation through attractive, hands-on activities. In most activities, we also asked our students to use their smartphone devices because this allowed them to be active protagonists. We choose to use digital applications also during courses because we consider that students are more involved in this way and they learn more through methods that combine passive teaching methods (reading, hearing or seeing) with participatory teaching methods (learning by doing) because “today’s youths have become multitaskers but at the same time find it difficult to concentrate on a specific task; they have become more autonomous and prefer active participation to being passive recipients” (Pace, 2019: 405).

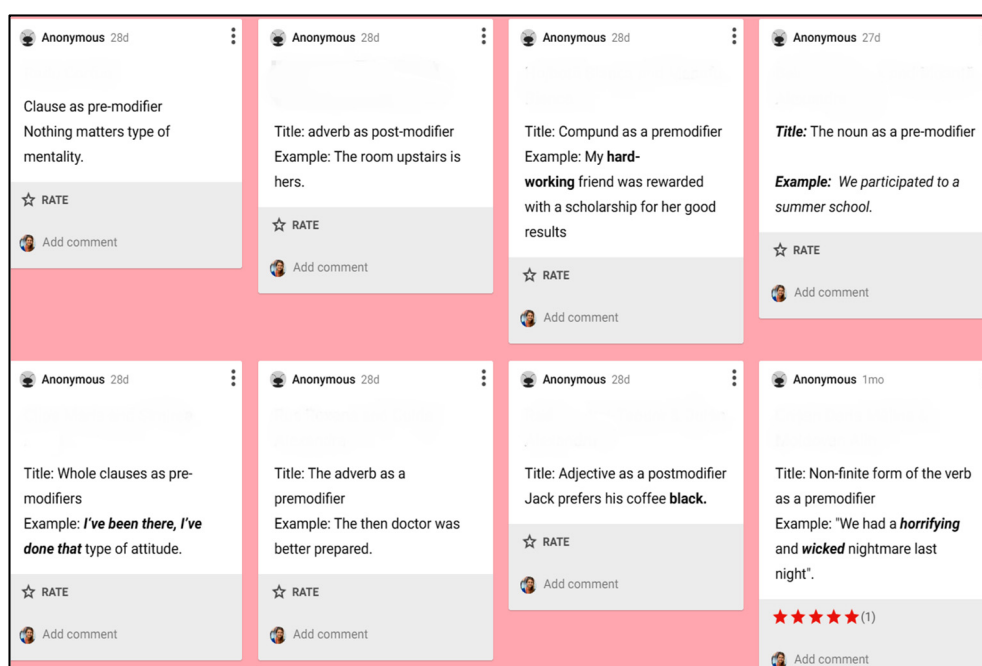
To prove the usefulness of integrating digital tools in the classroom, in this study, we illustrate three open-source digital tools that we integrated in both our courses and seminars: QR codes, PADLET and Mentimeter.

We announced our students our hands-on practice and intentions from the introductory course when they were asked to install a QR code reader in their smartphones so that they could have direct and immediate access to their course syllabus and useful bibliography. Also, the QR reader is used from time to time to ask students to access various sites where they find further information about a topic and examples of the theories presented. The QR readers very often constitute gateways to various games or quizzes used together with the students. The students who do not have a QR reader can work with a partner, but we also provide links as alternatives to QR readers.

The second tool that we used is PADLET. This tool allows for easy collaboration and organisation, the developers describe it as:

- “a digital canvas to create beautiful projects that are easy to share and collaborate on” (App Store);
- “an online noticeboard, which means it can be used for making announcements, keeping notes and online brainstorming”.

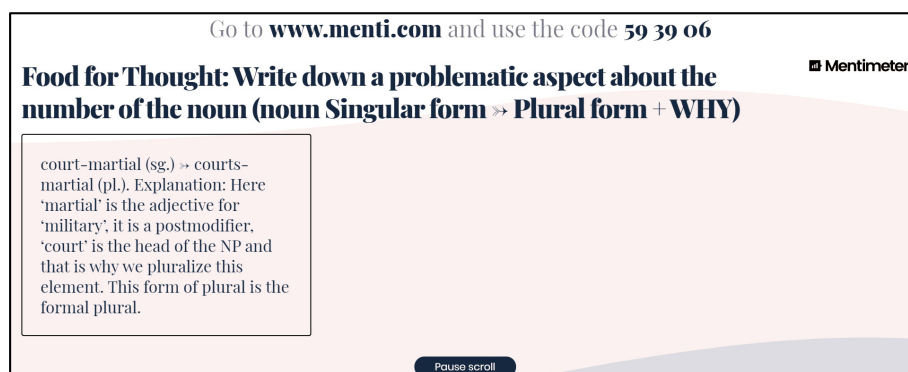
Padlet is included in the Top Tools for Learning 2019. During our course we used padlet.com in order to collect students queries at the end of the course or to reinforce classroom content. For the second purpose, they were asked to create posts with specific grammar issues and to provide their own examples. One such teaching-learning scenario took place during the course dedicated to teaching the Noun Phrase and its components (premodifiers and postmodifiers) where students were asked to work in pairs and write a post illustrating different grammatical categories functioning as modifiers (see a sample of their posts in fig. 1 below). This kind of productions are very useful for reinforcement purposes, to check students’ understanding, correct possible mistakes and consolidate learning through collaboration. The posts can also be used in a revision class in which students come across a previously produced content and they can be asked to rate the best production or produce comments to already existing posts.



(Fig. 1)

Mentimeter is another recurrent tool used in our courses and seminars, it is an interactive presentation software and it allows the presenter to interact with the audience (students, in our case) using real-time voting. It doesn't need any installations or downloads. In order to access mentimeter, students are asked to use their smartphones, to go on the mentimeter site and write the code generated by the software. On the site, they receive a question that they can answer in many different ways: multiple choice, image choice, word cloud, scales, open ended, 100 points, ranking, 2 x 2 Grid, Who will win? Q&A, Quick form. They answer the question and the answers are stored and shown to the entire audience in real time, creating also statistics when the type of answers selected allows.

One example of using the interactive slides from mentimeter is illustrated in fig. 2. The slide was used with students during a seminar dedicated to the number of nouns. At the end of the seminar, students were given the task to write down a problematic aspect about the grammatical issue under focus.



(Fig. 2)

While students write their answers, all the answers appear on the screen that the instructor projects so that the entire audience can see. The answers are stored and can be saved in pdf format and printed. Hence, this affordance allows the creation of a further teaching material, allowing the instructor to create a handout that could be used with students in order to discuss the items that they selected.

#### ***4.3. Preliminary Results***

Students took part actively in the courses and seminar taught and they enjoyed the activities performed. Given the fact that we work with very large



groups of students, they were all given the possibility to participate and this would not have been possible without the help of new technologies. Moreover, as these courses and seminars contain very practical and technical aspects of the English grammar, the new technologies have provided a suitable environment for the creation of items and collection of data as the content is easily adapted to the format of the online exercises and practices offered by the chosen software. Using these tools also allowed us to collect relevant data produced by our students in a collaborative and interactive manner.

### **5. Conclusions**

The use of new technologies is a practice that can be used for the acquisition of a very technical academic content like the Grammatical Structure of the English Language, facilitating the teaching-learning process and engaging the students in interactive and collaborative activities which imitate the format of the online activities in which they participate on a daily basis. These new technologies also pave the way for further research, by allowing the storage of the data produced by the students, giving the researcher the possibility to analyse the problematic issues and the most frequent mistakes and misunderstandings, the aspects requiring further clarifications and the aspects that the students acquire without impediments. Moreover, this new approach on a fundamental subject like the one under focus keeps the students motivated by providing practical and relevant content and by developing up-to-date skills through a new teaching format.

The courses and seminars on the Grammatical Structure of the English Language and the new technologies are actually essential for the practical skills needed by a student at the Faculty of Letters as many current jobs and positions require the content and know-how covered by our course: communication and foreign languages combined with digital skills.

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**Online sources**

<https://www.toptools4learning.com/padlet/>  
<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/padlet/id834618886>

**Digital tools:**

<http://padlet.com>  
<https://www.mentimeter.com/>