

Languages for Specific Purposes in the Digital Era

(Book review)

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Language for Specific Purposes in the Digital Era

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As the book states at the beginning, “research on CALL applications aimed at the teaching and learning of LSPs is a thriving area within the field of linguistics” (p. 5), and we agree that due to the enormous development of technological tools and applications, an analyse of the current situation and knowledge gained up to now from a better perspective is required. It would also allow us to reflect on the best way to make technological teaching and research innovation. In a way, this is what the book aims to do.

Despite of the wide range of different information covered in the book, it is clearly divided into four different parts, each of which comprising four chapters. The first part introduces some general issues about language learning and computing. The second part explains how language skills and therefore, linguistic competences, can be enhanced through computer-assisted experiences. The third part focuses on corpus-based applications for teaching and processing specific language domains. And finally, the fourth part deals with natural language processing.

Its sixteen chapters are -in general- easy to read and clear, making it an understandable book for people without a deep knowledge of programming or computer science. In order to get a more in-depth understanding of the contents of the book, a more detailed overview is given for each chapter, analysing the outstanding premises from a critical perspective:

Chapter 1 is an overview of the relationship between Information Technology and Languages for Specific Purposes identifying some areas of interest (Arnó et al., 2006). This part is extremely interesting, since it sums up the changes brought about by the Bologna Process resulting in the new European Higher Education Area, presenting in a nutshell the options and challenges for the knowledge society and showing the Quantum LEAP Project as an example of how to take advantage of these opportunities. Chapter 2 introduces the InGenio online authoring shell, as a tool that overcomes the difficulties found by the teachers when creating online language learning materials. According to Blin’s statement (2005, p. 33), “language learning environments [...] does not require the constant intervention of a teacher”, and being aware of the important role of independence in online learners, the authors provide some examples of initiatives that promote autonomy in the online learning process. Chapter 3 defends online blended learning -combining online and face to face work (Sharma, 2010) -, as exemplified by the efficacy of the I-AGENT Project, especially in the development of the foreign language learners’ oral skills. A classification of the different Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) is presented establishing the difference between Content Management Systems (CMS) and Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as Moodle, Blackboard and WebCT. Chapter 4 states how assessment is a specific phase within the whole language experience (p. 69), and must be taken into account in online language learning as well, as InGenio System does with two different modalities (tutor/self-assessment).

Part 2 begins with the attractive chapter 5, which explains some of the requirements - the advantages were explained by Gasparetti et al. (2009, p. 287) - for specialized dictionaries as a pedagogical tool, and wonders if web-based

systems are appropriate for educational environments considering some of their features. It concludes, interestingly, that “Internet pedagogical dictionaries are much more than electronic versions of printed dictionaries” (p. 103). Chapter 6 details two different university activities carried out in the context of Teaching Legal English using Moodle glossaries. This chapter outlines the importance of motivation in collaborative tasks among students which enhances the learning process, and such motivation may be reached through online writing (Breeze, 2005; Davoli et al., 2009). In chapter 7, the author argues that in contrast to former times, vocabulary learning is receiving increasing attention in the foreign language learning process and “address the challenges of ICT-based pedagogy to the English for Specific Purposes classroom in general, and the ME [Maritime English] classroom in particular” (p. 139). Chapter 8 focuses on the use of Wikis as a collaborative and educational tool for Business English learning.

Part III starts with chapter 9, which states that a corpus of specialized full-text discourse documents can be a useful tool in the LSP class (Tribble, 1997), as the authors show by presenting the genre-based GENTT experience. Chapter 10 presents the use of corpora in a Russian Business class, and acknowledges that using corpora allows tuition to be offered in several LSP domains and curricula to be tailored to the industry requirements, thereby increasing future opportunities of graduates (p. 198). However, as the authors make clear, tutors need to create materials and develop corpus-based exercises. Chapter 11, begins with the following question: “Is it possible to find specific characteristics in specialized text different from their discourse conditions or terminology they have?” and goes on to provide a consistent answer (p. 224). The last chapter in part III introduces the idea of teaching as being flexible in the sense that should allow students to cope with unexpected future situations since the amount of technical knowledge and tools around grows exponentially (Kastberg, 2002), and in combination with this idea, it also explores how efficient the use of corpora in the design of Danish translation courses is.

The first chapter in part IV, explains very clearly how knowledge can be represented in a user-friendly tool such as EcoLexicon. Chapter 14 shows to what extent corpus-based studies are useful for the teaching of dubbing and subtitling, an activity which is likely to continue to gain research prominence in the future, since audiovisual translation is already a subject at Spanish universities. Chapter 15 introduces OntoLingAnnot, an useful annotation tool for linguists with a “comprehensive, global, detailed and general” approach (p. 340) since it covers the pragmatic level in a deep way and considers six different ontologies. The final chapter, written by the editors, plays its role as a conclusion. One of the weaknesses of such a compilation is stated here, and we agree with the idea that the real state-of-the-art in a field such as applied technologies can never be reached due to their steep evolution.

The book has a pedagogical approach, from an experiential teaching and learning perspective, always trying to adopt a communicative approach to language learning. One of the strengths of it is the list of recognized contributing experts, who have carried out both applied and theoretical research in this field. It is not only oriented to academic readers, or even to readers interested in technology applied to Languages for Specific Purposes, but to anyone with an interest in the way in which technology and the process of language teaching and learning have become almost inseparable. Furthermore, it will be found to be essential for all of those working in the defined area of specific linguistics domains.

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