BUSINESS ENGLISH LITERACY AND LEARNING BY RESORT TO CLOUD-BASED TOOLS MEASURING INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS' LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

Mariana COANCĂ[1]

Abstract: *This article aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of Business English literacy and learning through cloud-based tools. It outlines the scholars' approach to literacy and showcases the traditional methods for language teaching integrated in our methodology for business English literacy through visuals and mobile learning. Furthermore, we analyze the use of technology in the classroom to improve our students' phonics, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension and whether it enables us to assess the level of student engagement more effectively. We conclude that videos and mobile apps influence our students' attitude about learning in a positive way in the sense that they became motivated and self-confident. We increased their level of engagement by becoming facilitators and transforming the learning environment into a creative and flexible classroom to keep them engaged.*

Keywords: *Business English, literacy, intermediate students, cloud-based tools, engagement*

1. Introduction

Research has shown that literacy skills in a variety of domains increase the students' potential for employability and integration in a multicultural organization. According to The Merriam Webster Dictionary, the term *literacy* is "the quality or state of being literate". The Cambridge Dictionary provides two entries for the term *literacy*: the first one is "the ability to read and write" and the second one is "knowledge of a particular subject, or a particular type of knowledge".

The first expert report of the EU level was published in September 2012. It includes five chapters on the level of functional illiteracy in Europe and recommendations for reducing it. The vision of the expert group is summarized in the following statements:

• All citizens of Europe must have literacy skills that enable them to reach their aspirations at the individual, family, professional and social levels;

[1]Associate Professor, Romanian-American University, coanca.mariana@profesor.rau.ro

• Improving literacy skills leads to innovation, prosperity and social cohesion, increasing the standard of living of the population, reducing unemployment and active participation in society;
• EU member states need to understand that it is their legal obligation to provide all the support needed to achieve the group's vision.
Since the technological change occurs at an exponential rate, our society has increasing demands on the ability of the person to cope with the challenges of an extremely dynamic and globalised world, thus the concept of literacy encompass three dimensions which are outlined by the Romanian Association for Literacy:
• Basic literacy - the person's ability to read and write, which generates self-confidence and motivation for further development.
• Functional literacy - the person's ability to read, write, understand and apply in practice the information extracted from the text, which allows him/her to function in society, at home, at school and at work.
• Multiple literacy - the person's ability to use reading and writing skills to produce, understand, interpret and critically evaluate multimodal texts (texts that use multiple semiotic systems).

Building on previous research conducted by experts who have worked on various European projects on functional literacy, we use the concept of literacy into foreign language acquisition thereby we define the Business English literacy skills as follows:

• The student's ability to read an economic text;
• The student's ability to understand the respective text;
• The student's ability to make connections with what he or she saw and knew before reading the text;
• The student's ability to formulate a point of view on what he/she has seen and read;
• The student's ability to express his or her point of view in writing or orally;
• The student's ability to apply the information/knowledge obtained in future real life and work contexts;

Since there are different types of literacy which overlap and are evolving in the digital age, researchers coined the term *multiliteracies* (Cazden et al. 1996). Another significant study (Dudeney et al. 2014) identified sixteen distinct literacies that are required today, which fall into the category of filtering literacy (based around information) and the category of remix literacy (the ones associated with digital creation).

The phrase *Cloud computing* is defined in the Merriam Webster Dictionary as "the practice of storing regularly used computer data on multiple servers that can be accessed through the Internet" whereas in the Cambridge Dictionary, it is defined as "the use of services, computer programs, etc. that are on the Internet rather than the ones that you buy and put on your computer".

Computer science students use this term frequently and are aware of its influence on the education generally speaking. Obviously, it requires a great deal of effort on the part of the teacher to select the appropriate applications and integrate them in class activities so that they could meet students' needs and expectations. This work should be aligned to the principles of the Bologna process:

- Students must be partners in their own education and not consumers of a pre-packed product;
- University education must be flexible focusing on the needs of every student;
- University education must be relevant to the labor force market and especially connected with it.

Through cloud computing teachers create innovative classrooms formats, such as blended or flipped classroom. Teachers can connect their students to many applications, having easy access to a myriad of resources across multiple platforms.

The cloud models are "Infrastructure-as-a-Service", "Platform-as-a-Service", and "Software-as-a-Service". Each model has its functions as presented in the figure below:

Iaas "Infrastructure-as-a-Service"	Paas "Platform-as-a-Service"	Saas "Software-as-a-Service"
Host	*Build*	*Consume*
Affordable expenses	Rapid time-to-Market	Eliminates capital
Accessible Everywhere flexibility	Cost Effective Development	Supports
Ready-to-Use Deployment	Scalability	Simple

Fig. 1: The three cloud computing service models (source: paranet.com)

The ability to master modern technologies for education is one of the major challenges of this century. Our experience has shown that teachers and young generations can contribute to the progress of the knowledge society and can become effective partners in the teaching-learning process.

Cloud-based tools have been around for a while and their use in the classroom has impacted student's motivation and achievement. It is important to establish which cloud model suits language teachers' and students' needs the best. A recent report shows that the global cloud-based language learning market is driven by the need of technology-enabled tools that facilitate user engagement, motivation, and collaboration. More precisely, the global cloud-based language learning market will reach values of around $8 billion by 2024 (Research and Markets, 2019).

The Digital Age has changed our lifestyle and the way we do our work. Most people enjoy living in a visual world. The ubiquity of mobile devices allows us to

capture still and moving images while the video-sharing platforms and social media networks allow us to upload visual content which harnesses the power of visual communication.

Therefore, we can enhance students' phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension by adopting innovative tools for learning and literacy which are presented in the Methodology section.

2. Statement of the problem

So far we have enhanced our students' participatory culture through resources or materials from our practice books, course books elaborated by native speakers and other authentic materials (e.g. economic texts that appear in particular contexts which need to be interpreted critically and creatively). The language of economics has been very dynamic in the past years and the vocabularies of the economic sub-domains have enriched considerable due to the economic and social changes at the global level. Literacy practices for language acquisition have changed in the past years due to technological developments and we are aware that students should be encouraged to introduce their own content into the classroom and become active contributors of their own digital experience. One can argue that there is a plethora of Course books on the market or in libraries nowadays.

Despite this notable presence, some of them focus on the reading comprehension of texts/articles written years ago, so they do not contain terms which describe current economic aspects/situations/trends. For example, a text about the impact of bitcoin on financial markets and why governments are afraid of it would be appropriate in the English class, because some students are interested in current articles/topics which answer their questions. These students are active and show behavioral involvement in learning persevering and facing the challenges. Other students are passive and disengaged as they refuse to answer questions based on texts, are bored, nervous and sometimes they give up easily, especially when they have to translate from Romanian into English a text/sentences using key economic terms explained in class.

Sometimes the material on offer in our practice files cover language that our students already know or it might deal with topics that they are not interested in. Then we have to look for supplementary resources that challenge and engage them in a variety of topics that focus on their academic activities and future job roles. Not long ago two tasks based on the extra material brought in class were to read about Steve Jobs' life, analyze his speech at the graduates' ceremony organized by the University of Stanford, and then write a biography of a person who drove his/her business to international success.

3. Methodology

The students selected for this study are enrolled in the Economic Informatics bachelor program and their level of English is intermediate. Fifty students participated in this study and the investigation spanned a period of one semester.
According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, intermediate students are able to:
- Communicate with a degree of spontaneity and fluency that allow the standard participation in a conversation with a native speaker of the respective language. They can also present clear and detailed descriptions on a large number of topics in their field of interest and express a point of view on a current topic;
- Read reports and articles on concrete or abstract contemporary topics, as well as literature written in contemporary language;
- Write texts, essays, reports in which they transmit information or argue a point in a meaningful way;
The knowledge society requires a more evident connectivity between individuals and communities. Mastering new technologies has become a matter of individual security, personal or collective progress.
From the students' point of view, the use of cloud technologies creates premises for:
- Personalized and cooperative learning (students report individually, interact with their peers and the teacher);
- Continuous learning (the computer integrated in a network brings a permanent flow of information, in accordance with the latest evolutions in the field of knowledge and socio-cultural practice);
- In-depth understanding from several directions;
- Promoting the interest (if students are really interested, they become more motivated to acquire the information);
- Enhancement of solidarity on a global level, by connecting with people located spatially-culturally at remarkable distances.

Without being an exclusively applied method, an open teaching supported by cloud technologies would support the student's ability to access specific information, filter it and use it in real time, developing his/her ingenuity and creativity in using learning tools. I believe that the main result of learning should not be the ad-literam reproduction of impressive amounts of data, but the proof of understanding and assimilation of information that prepares the student for real life (e.g. to accomplish certain work tasks).

In reference to all the points expressed above, our study aims to answer the following question: Does the use of cloud-based tools for language acquisition enable us to measure the students' level of engagement more effectively?
The most important aspect in the use of economic language is related to the mixture of interpretations and theories about the economic environment. In this

respect, loans from other fields of knowledge and spontaneous or deliberate reform have produced the most significant changes in the economic language.
Our discipline pursues the students' acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities corresponding to the current stage of language acquisition, in order to ensure for them, new prospects for employment on the domestic and international labor market. We consider the following specific competences:
- Mastery of economic language to ensure efficient written and verbal communication;
- Economic and organizational communication according to international standards;
- Internal communication and external communication (the communication activity carried out at the level of a company);
- Correct use of economic language and fundamental economic principles to improve the clarity of economic messages;
- Implementation of different communication activities and tools.

It is always good practice to adapt to students' approach to tasks and diversify the resources and activities regularly to match their interests and meet their needs more closely. In order to respect the trends in the field of Business English and to adapt to the learning style of our students, we reshaped the ways of learning to make them more attractive and interactive, so that the learner could remain involved and active.

Our strategy for improving Business English literary and learning focused on the following elements:

3.1. Literacy through visual learning

Mobile technologies can be used in the educational process both in day-to-day and, in particular, in distance education. M-learning apps offer flexibility in terms of difficulty and number of exercises to solve. The training is based on several audio, visual and animated sequences. Students are very attached to the smart phone, which is why this practical and creative approach to learning gives them a space to play and motivates them to achieve great results.

Researchers investigated language learning through mobile technology and texting and found that students' vocabulary enriched with the help of mobile phones (Cavus and Ibrahim, 2009). However, the most important element was the selection of an effective mobile app. Our selection was based on user activity, ratings, and its experiential value.

We wanted to bring the "outside of the class activity" in the class, so first we tested the features of Business English free app and decided that it met the needs of our intermediate students mainly due to the 5 game types - challenge, timer, daily, practice and feedback. Students could see the answers after practice games and play feedback games by clicking on their feedback at the end of practice games. Moreover, daily questions were brought to the learner every day. Students could

test their business vocabulary and grammar (questions per level), answer to quiz questions using the settings button to start or to stop (see Fig. 2). A Scoreboard displayed their score thus motivating them to try again and do their best to get a higher score.

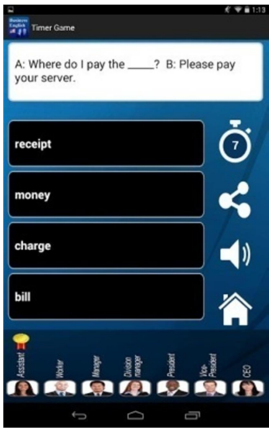

Fig. 2: Business English Free App (source: https://appcrawlr.com/)

The mobile app instruction enhances the creativity and flexibility because students are digits and like to acquire new knowledge through the appealing games. We welcomed questions throughout the class and explained to the students that obtained a low score what went wrong and how to avoid mistakes in the future by reviewing and writing on the board examples to help them understand grammar structures and by providing contexts that mirror the difference between the terms. Additionally, we designed tasks for individual and pair work which focused on synonymy, antonymy, and collocations including the economic terminology used and displayed by the Business English app and encouraged them to make up sentences using derivatives of the economic terms already encountered.

3.2. Movie scenes

Movies have a great impact on our lives. To spark improved participation we decided to integrate movie scenes. To introduce the overall idea of the scene, we divided the class into groups and encouraged them to discuss a short problem in a mini group session thus giving students the possibility to provide input and interact with colleagues. For example, participating in a business meeting requires preparation, openness, clarification, active listening, etc. We explained to the students the stages for organizing a business meeting, the phrases used in each stage and asked them to watch a short instructional video to see how the participants in the meeting interact with one another and express their views.

Watching movie scenes in class helped students to enhance their knowledge, get information and analyse the situations and ideas communicated by other

persons.We explained to the students that watching could be considered effective or productive if they respect the following stages:

- The pre-watching stage when they prepare themselves to watch a scene. Basically they set a purpose for watching the movie scene, anticipate messages and make predictions.
- The during watching stage when students check their understanding, make connections, interpret and summarize.
- The after watching stage when they reflect and analyze, evaluate and create being given the possibility to respond critically and creatively.

In this regard, we selected ten movie scenes used in class throughout the semester, but we describe only two of them, the teaching approach and the student tasks:

- Margin Call (2011)

John Tuld, CEO and Chairman of the Board, has a meeting in which he gives lessons to everyone - from the young executives to seasoned C-suite managers. Tuld proves to be an intimidating and powerful business leader. He doesn't give the impression that he is a warm person, but he is very determined and tells exactly what he expects from the people around him. After watching this scene, we asked students if they met intimidating people and how they would continue the discussion in the movie scene. We also asked open questions to stimulate students' thinking encouraging learners to construct longer answers. As for the writing activity, we instructed them to work in pairs and write a paragraph about IT leaders whose vision led to innovation and high profits (e.g. developing products that improved our life, getting involved in charitable activities, investing in research, etc).

- Gung Ho (1986)

In this scene, Hunt Stevenson is delivering a presentation to a Japanese board of directors. He makes some jokes during the presentation with the purpose to create a relaxing atmosphere. Since the directors had a different cultural approach to business meetings, feedback did not occur after Hunt's presentation. The speaker should have known the meeting etiquette in Japan to craft relevant messages and connect with his audience. Asking divergent questions and nominating students to answer, we managed to elicit more language from them as a form of guided oral practice. To enhance students' awareness of the meeting etiquette in other cultures we brought supplementary reading material followed by reading comprehension activities. Then, we divided the class into groups and asked each group to improve Hunt Stevenson's speech taking into account the words and phrases from the reading material.

Visual and Mobile Learning tools for learning business English are designed to enhance the business communication skills, considering diverse communication situations which occur in today's company. We exposed them to real communication situations and encouraged them to participate in these situations as well. The application of the traditional audio-lingual method in tandem with the

modern methods of teaching through visuals and mobile cloud has led to an active and responsible participation by the students due to the fact that they have been exposed to the authentic English language. Thus, the students watched videos about the etiquette of a business meeting and cultural differences arising from a presentation in a meeting, we transmitted the knowledge that they should use (words, expressions, intonation, and gestures) so that they can acquire this knowledge and continue the communication or build other communication situations. Communicative competence is another traditional method that we have used effectively, without insisting on grammar rules and correct pronunciation. Specifically, we encouraged students to communicate fluently, considering not only the accuracy of the language used, but also the ability of the student to handle specific communication situations (which register should be used in communicating with foreign people, colleagues, a human resource specialist and which is the appropriate tone in these communication situations, etc.).

4. Results

Student engagement in language literacy and learning has multiple dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks at al., 2004). In our case, the first dimension consists of students' involvement in academic, social and extracurricular activities (e.g. participation in courses taught by foreign guest professors). The second dimension, emotional engagement, shows the extent of positive and negative reactions to teachers, colleagues and school (e.g. positive or negative reactions to colleagues from other cultures, to the teacher's methods employed in class, etc.). The third dimension, cognitive engagement, refers to the student's level of participation in language learning. In this regard, students enjoy collaborative work, put in the necessary effort to grasp new economic concepts to enhance their vocabulary and to be purposeful and sensible in their approach to the required tasks.

In order to measure the student level of engagement, we analyzed three types of measurement methods, the psychometric properties of measures (Fredricks et al., 2011). Eventually, we decided to apply two methods:

- "Student self-reports" - measures in which students responded to items, using the Likert scale which contains specified response formats (McLeod, 2019):
  Strongly agree (5), *agree (4)*, *undecided (3)*, *disagree (4)*, *strongly disagree (5)* for statements of agreement;
  Always (5), often (4), sometimes (3), rarely (2), never (1) for statements of frequency;
  Very important (5), important (4), moderately important (3), slightly important (2), unimportant for statements of importance;
  Excellent (5), good (4), fair (3), poor (2), very poor (1) for statements of quality;

Scores were summed across items to form total scores to describe the students.

- "Observational measures" which involved our direct observation of behavior of students during the learning activities. However, it is difficult to employ observational measures systematically and to collect the data accurately if the teacher is not trained or lacks experience.

We created a semester questionnaire (twenty questions) to assess student level of engagement during the leaning process over a period of one academic semester. The sample was composed of 50 third-year students enrolled in the Economic Informatics Program who filled in the questionnaire at the end of the semester. We also observed students in class and registered data about their active learning behavior.

If an instrument produces consistent results then it could be considered highly reliable. However, reliability is not sufficient because a measure can be reliable but not valid. The validity of our instrument showed that the results obtained from using the student self-reports actually measured the student level of engagement in our class in which we combined traditional approaches with modern ones through activities focused on the use of visual and mobile learning.

To measure the behavioral engagement we asked students to report on their attendance, preparation for class, attention, concentration, participation in technology-based activities, effort and persistence. To measure the emotional engagement we included questions about students' emotional reactions to class such as expressing interest and enjoyment, reporting fun, having the support of teachers, and having positive relationships with colleagues. As for the cognitive engagement, we included questions about the use of innovative strategies to learn, remember and understand the class material, the importance of Business English literacy and learning and their future aspirations.

The extent to which students responded one way to one item responded the same way to the other items intended to measure the same thing. The results showed that forty-two students enjoyed technology-based activities, appreciated the teacher's effort to apply modern methods of teaching, mentioned that their level of concentration increased when solving multiple choice questions provided by the mobile app. From their point of view, movie scenes were motivators which made learning more entertaining and enjoyable that is why they felt confident when answering open-ended questions related to the movie scenes. The other eight students refused to fill in the questionnaire arguing that they were absent throughout the academic semester due to work or personal problems.

5. Conclusions

We strongly believe that the importance of technology in education improves the outcomes of both students and teachers and increases the three types of engagement – behavioral, emotional and cognitive. Our study focused on the use of

cloud application to improve students' Business English literacy and learning and how the applications integrated in the classroom benefited students and increased their level of engagement. Through the movie scenes and the mobile app students could obtain the information they needed and to critically relate to it, combining it through adaptability, critical thinking and collaboration with colleagues. There is no golden rule to assess the level of student engagement. However, we tried to assess the level of engagement of fifty intermediate students over the period of one semester. We noticed their level of engagement increased because the teacher understood that the class needed more flexibility and put in the efforts to harness a new classroom structure through cloud technologies aiming to improve their cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and technical skills. The use of cloud applications, in addition to providing the ubiquity and flexibility of the learning process, increased collaboration, participation and creativity due to the co-creation of content and knowledge.

6. References

[1] Cavus, N., & Ibrahim, D. M-Learning: An experiment in using SMS to support learning new English language words. British Journal of Educational Technology, 40(1), 78-91, 2009.
[2] Cazden, C., Cope, B., Fairclough, N., Gee, J., Kalantzis, M., Kress, G., Luke, A., Luke, C., Michaels, S. and Nakata, M. (The New London Group). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. Harvard Educational Review, 66(1), pp. 60-92, 1996.
[3] Dudeney, G., Hockly, N. and Pegrum, M. *Digital literacies*. London: Routledge, 2014.
[4] Fredricks, J., Meli, J., Montrosse, B., Mordica, J., and Mooney, K. *Measuring student engagement in upper elementary through high school: a description of 21 instruments*. (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2011–No. 098). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast, 2011.
[5] Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. Review of Educational Research, 74, 59-109, 2004. doi:10.3102/00346543074001059
[6] McLeod, S. A. Likert scale. Simply Psychology, 2019.
[7] Paranet.com. The three cloud computing service models, 2019.
[8] The Cloud-based Language Learning Market – Global Outlook and Forecast 2019-2024, Research and Markets, 2019.

Online Dictionaries
Merriam Webster https://www.merriam-webster.com/
Cambridge Dictionary https://dictionary.cambridge.org/