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Exploiting the learning resources offered by the Online Multimedia Module for Practicing Speaking Skills in English. Focus on STANAG 6001 Level 2. A practical demonstration

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Exploiting the learning resources offered by the *Online Multimedia Module for Practicing Speaking Skills in English. Focus on STANAG 6001 Level 2*. A practical demonstration.

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Abstract. The present article aims to illustrate the teaching and learning possibilities as well as the benefits offered by the judicious and comprehensive exploitation of the available ICT online resources when aligning them to the objectives specific to one's own language learning context. This presentation is articulated on two lines: the dissemination of the practical outcomes of a recent research projected conducted by the authors at "Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy and the demonstration of how the online learning tool emerged as the result of capitalizing the findings of the aforementioned research project can be realistically used in a classroom setting with a help of sample lesson plan. Key words: *ICT, ESL, testing speaking*

1. Introduction. Contextualization.

The learning tool entitled *Online Multimedia Module for Practicing Speaking Skills in English. Focus on STANAG 6001 Level 2* is the practical outcome of an initial study carried out by the present authors as part of the *Sectorial Research and Development Project no.150*, which was conducted at "Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy in 2018.

 Background. STANAG 6001 is a set of standardized descriptors which outline a candidate's performance in English on a scale from 0 to 5, across the four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. These standards have been put forth so that all NATO countries could test and certify the language proficiency of their military and civilian personnel, who are involved in a large spectrum of the Alliance's activities such as international operations and exercises, in which linguistic interoperability is a condition for professional efficiency. In this context, Romania administers its own language proficiency test in accordance with STANAG 6001 and issues English proficiency certificates for levels 0-3, with level 2 being the most common job description language requirement across the branches of service and appointments. Romanian navy officers are first tested

shortly after they graduate from the Naval Academy as ensigns. In order to support the Romanian Armed Forces' linguistic commitments to NATO, "Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy provides midshipmen with comprehensive English language training programs (both general and naval) throughout the four years of their undergraduate studies.

Research aim. The research team involved in the *Sectorial Research and Development Project no.150/ 2018* set out to carry out an investigation which targeted the identification and systematization of the most common errors occurring when students attempted to tackle the linguistic functions listed by the STANAG level 2 descriptors for the speaking section. The research findings were intended to substantiate and facilitate the subsequent design of a remedial program aimed at rectifying recurrent errors in speaking and developing the students' general proficiency and communication skills in English.

Research methodology. The research project was articulated on the methodology of Error Analysis. Thus, a set of speaking tasks testing the production of STANAG level 2 language functions was created and administered to 100 respondents selected from the Academy student population. The speaking samples were recorded, transcribed and then corrected. As a result, the research team was able to collect empirical data on the students' most recurrent speaking errors which were subsequently systematized in lexical, pronunciation and structural categories.

From theory to practice. Once the research team have obtained a clearer picture of the linguistic weaknesses undermining the successful performance of the Academy students in the STANAG level 2 language examination, a complex remedial learning program was designed. It was entitled *Online Multimedia Module for Practicing Speaking Skills in English. Focus on STANAG 6001 Level 2* and posted online at https://anmbstanag6001.wixsite.com/pscd.

Aims and objectives of the Online Multimedia Module. The module was designed to provide students with an online learning tool meant to support them in developing their oral communication skills, while increasing their awareness of the language requirements at STANAG level 2 – speaking. On completion of the module, the students are expected to be able to use a variety of language strategies and functions in order to readily and accurately answer all test questions at the envisaged level. Moreover, students are expected to enhance their fluency and accuracy in English, as well as organize their discourse more coherently while expanding their lexical, structural and functional repertoire. Due to its format, the module also promotes the development of the students' digital skills and encourages autonomous learning.

Format of the Online Multimedia Module. The module has been primarily constructed with a view to ensuring easy and permanent access as well as adding flexibility to the learning process. Moreover, an electronic module allows for the exploitation of inputs available in a variety of formats such as audio, video, pictorial, textual, etc., thus boosting the students' interest and motivation. Being posted online, the module can be accessed from any location, on a variety of gadgets such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, etc. at any given time, on multiple occasions. The online format has been the authors' number one choice for several reasons. First, the students are naturally biased towards technological devices and seem to appreciate interactive materials which are visually attractive, intellectually stimulating and current in both content and presentation. Second, the Internet has become an inexhaustible source of high-quality, ready-made ICT resources which are worth exploiting for language learning purposes. Third, once the resources have been selected and organized they become a collection which is not only readily accessible but also updatable.

Approach and Components. The module is designed to be used autonomously as a self-study resource as well as part of a blended learning format with classroom face-to-face activities conducted in a multimedia lab combined with distance learning activities. Students can work individually or in groups and can receive instant feedback while doing interactive activities online or teacher/ peer feedback when practicing in a classroom environment.

The module consists of several components each meant to help students reach the aforementioned learning objectives. The *Home* section provides an overview of the STANAG speaking examination, with information about its structure, duration and procedures. It also describes the language functions

as outlined by the STANAG descriptor for level 2 (speaking) [1] as well as the marking scheme provided by the Participant's Guide [2]. In addition it offers the example tasks that were used in order to obtain the speech samples exploited in the Error Analysis section of the research project. In this section, there are also strategies and guidelines offered by the authors with a view to enhance the students' chances of success at the speaking examination. Familiarizing students with the examination requirements and procedures will help them be more aware of their own responsibilities in delivering a top performance. It will also inform and guide their learning process which is facilitated by the *Learning* section. This section consists of a meticulously organized collection of numerous online resources to help students develop their oral communication skills with a focus on the language functions and topical areas targeted by Level 2 Speaking descriptors. The variety of methods and approaches caters to the students' different learning styles. The *Connecting* section allows students to listen to as well as read the transcripts of some sample recordings. The respondents' errors are collected in this section allowing students to discover them in context and learn by seeing them corrected. In addition, each transcript is accompanied by the examiner's feedback thus providing students' with an unprecedented insight into the realities of a STANAG 6001 speaking evaluation and an opportunity to reflect upon the test experience, thus benefiting from a precious *lessons learned* opportunity. Finally, the *Practicing* section provides more sample tasks for students to practice the language strategies and knowledge that they have acquired so far in the module

2. Sample lesson based on the module.

The following sample lesson is presented in the hope that it will encourage teachers to further explore the possibilities offered by the online multimedia module discussed herein. The idea of providing a sample lesson echoes the concept of adopting best practices and aims at promoting a more inclusive and comprehensive exploitation of the ICT means and resources readily available on the Internet.

Sample Lesson

Title: Describing Places

Level: Intermediate B1-B2

Aim: to expand the students' repertoire of vocabulary and structures on the topic of *describing places* and raise their awareness of the speaking strategies employable when tackling the task of *describing places*.

Objectives: by the end of the lesson, the students will be able to:

- identify *describing a place* as the appropriate language function required by a given test task;
- identify and correct errors in given sample descriptions of places;
- select lexical items on the topic of *places* and contextualize them correctly in own oral descriptions of places;

Time: 60 minutes

Venue: Multimedia Lab

Teaching aids: computers with an Internet connection

Teaching materials: *The Online Multimedia Module* at https://anmbstanag6001.wixsite.com/pscd

Procedures:

Stages:

Warm-up:

Activity 1: 5'

Students are asked to consider the following questions and share their answers orally in plenary:

a. What were some of the difficulties you encountered when you took oral exams in English?

b. How did you prepare for oral exams in English?

c. What do you know about the STANAG 6001 oral examination?

Teacher collects answers and summarizes frontally.

Presentation:

Activity 2: 5'

Students are directed to click on *The Online Multimedia Module*. They are instructed to go to the *Home* section where they work individually in order to verify the accuracy and completeness of the following pieces of information:
- *the duration of the exam*: 10 minutes
- *the Level 2 language functions are*: describing people, places and/or objects; comparing and contrasting activities; giving instructions; giving full accounts in the past; dealing with every day communication situations;
- *the marking scheme* is: grammar and vocabulary.
Teacher checks frontally. Teacher discusses the information about the exam and provides further clarification if necessary.
Activity 3: 15'
Students are directed to click on the Language Tasks button and identify the task which targets *describing a place*.
Students are directed to the *Connecting* section where they have to listen to the recordings under Task 1. At the same time, in another window they can read the transcripts and the examiner's feedback.
Students work in pairs and using the marking scheme discussed n Activity 2, analyse the speaking samples for task 1. They brainstorm possible ways in which the answers could be improved.
Teacher collects answers and summarizes frontally.
Practice
Activity 4: 10'
Students are directed to the *Learning* section where they have to click on the *General Conversation*. A separate PDF document will open and students scroll down to page 3. Students click on the provided links and do the first two activities individually.
Activity 5: 5'
Students are directed to the video entitled *An Impressive City* and work individually to solve the task.
Production
Activity 6: 15'
Students think about their hometown and answer the following questions.
Where do you live? Is it a village or a city? • What's it called? How big is it? • What's your hometown famous for? Can you think of some words you could use to describe your hometown? How long have you lived there? • What's good about your hometown? What do you like most about it? • What don't you like much about it? • What was your hometown like ten, twenty or fifty years ago? How has it changed?
Values Clarification. Reflection: 5'
Students are asked to imagine that they are helping a colleague who is getting ready to take the STANAG 6001 speaking test. They have to provide their colleague with 2 tips on how to best tackle the task *describe a place*.
Teacher collects answers and summarizes frontally, concluding the session.

3. Conclusions
The present article has attempted to disseminate the outcomes of the *Sectorial Research and Development Project no.150/ 2018* which have been concretized in the form of an online multimedia learning tool intended to assist Naval Academy students as well as Naval Forces military and civilian personnel who are preparing to take the STANAG 6001 language proficiency test. The sample lesson provided herein is designed to demonstrate only one of the numerous possible ways in which teachers and students alike could explore and exploit the resources collected by the *Online Multimedia Module for Practicing Speaking Skills in English. Focus on STANAG 6001 Level 2*. It has indeed become undeniable that the Internet is an enormous source of interactive, online learning resources which can no longer be avoided or ignored and that it is certainly to our students' benefit to find inspiration and motivation in existing projects and initiatives so that we can both capitalize on current best practices and build upon that experience to open new and exciting perspectives.

References

[1]   The National Military Foreign Language Testing Center on DGMRU offficial page: https://dmru.mapn.ro/pages/view/102

[2]   NATO official webpage: https://nso.nato.int/nso/nsdd/listpromulg.html