

Introducing Specific English for Business

A semantic web enhanced course by Powtarzanie.pl

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Abstract:

Powtarzanie is the Polish word for revision or repetition. The Powtarzanie.pl citizens range from Polish Gimnazjum and Matura students, Business English students, and general English. To serve them better Powtarzanie.pl has developed a set of course materials that target each group separately. The course books are built on a synthetic approach which employs different methods and techniques to achieve the specific tasks and skills required by the CEFR², and Powtarzanie.pl Can Do lists. But in general it is based on L2, specific, student based approach. This paper presents a demo of the Specific English for Business, and describes its methodology, products and services.

Introduction:

In this paper I would like to introduce you to the first blended course produced by powtarzanie.pl. The course is prepared for business English classes, and is intended for the school year 2010 / 2011. The online version is divided into two sections: student's portal and teacher's portal. Both versions are on private beta now.

The course in dates:

- **22nd November 2009:** introducing the course at BESIG Poznan
- **15th December 2009:** A preliminary online demo.
- **1st February 2010:** Teacher's portal, Beta.
- **1st June 2010:** Student's portal, Beta.
- **1st September 2010:** First edition release.

¹ <http://www.powtarzanie.pl> , please check appendix 1 for more information about the **semantic web**.

² http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp

First I will highlight the methodology we use. Then we will go through our approach to the semantic web. Finally we will use a demo to present our model of using semantic web technologies in the course. I will show what we have done so far, and I will also share with you the challenges we are facing in applying the semantic web in the field.

Powtarzanie.pl:

Powtarzanie.pl³ is a moodle based e-learning portal designed for learners of English as a second language. It is run by Mantra School in Grudziadz, Poland. The portal has been online for about two years now. One generation has graduated; almost all of our users come from Grudziadz and the areas around it.

Mantra, the firm:

Mantra is a small business deals in language education, e-learning services, and Web 3.0 technologies and solutions.

Our language department is tasked with developing methods and publishing teaching materials. Our internet department is tasked with developing third internet generation services. This department is built on top of Webmark⁴ project, which was nominated to the second semantic web technologies contest in Vienna in September 2008.

The method:

Mantra school has developed the blended **Specific English Method**. It is a much modern and more specific version of the direct method. We built our method on top of selected aspects of other main TEFL methods. Basic characteristics of our method include, teaching students the specific language they need, and giving them much more chances to practice and work in the target skills and structures. This is done through blended lessons and activities facilitated by Powtarzanie.pl.

The first course:

Specific English for Business is our first course for Business English students. The course is designed to address the everyday vocabulary, grammar and communication needs at work place and social interactivities. It is based on direct method research with a focus on

³ <http://www.powtarzanie.pl>

⁴ <http://webmark.atspace.com/>

speaking fluency and accuracy. It is prepared to provide much specific approach for teaching beginners as well as learners preparing to take the BEC Vantage exam. The course is ideal for direct method schools.

Some features include:

- Grammar topics are taught mapped to exam specifications
- Vocabulary is introduced logically and by units
- BEC and telc preparation (speaking / listening / reading)
- Designed for moodle integration
- Linked data ready

Please check the attached demo material for more details about these features.

The teaching material:

We use public domain resources, and we also link to other sites when appropriate. Sometime we cannot find the right material or the right license, so we modify public domain materials to suit the purpose. This happens very regularly with, of course, Business English students and classes. They come with different levels and require English for different fields and sectors of economy. So we need to reorganize, modify and simplify many lessons and resources to suit our students' needs and levels.

Our public domain sources include:

- Wikis: mainly wikipedia.org⁵
- Voice of America special English program⁶
- Gutneburge project⁷
- librivox⁸

... and so forth.

⁵ <http://wikipedia.org/>

⁶ <http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/index.cfm>

⁷ www.gutenberg.org

⁸ <http://librivox.org/>

And sometimes, when the copyright allows, we just use ready reusable material, for example the Eurochance - Language Courses for Visually Impaired People⁹

We also use teaching notes from, and link to, third party sites. The main sites we link to are:

- ello.org¹⁰ for listening and reading.
- British Council¹¹ for listening, reading, writing, grammar and so on ..
- BBC learning English¹² for listening, reading, writing, grammar and so on ..
- Spotlight radio¹³ for listening and reading.
- Youtube TEFL publishers; Misterduncan¹⁴, The Daily English Show¹⁵ ... etc.

We use Powtarzanie.pl to give our students and teachers access to these resources.

Obviously, these are very diverse and rich educational sites, with loads of lessons and information. To make our work easier with these huge resources we created the smart directory which is built on top of semantic web technologies.

The way to the semantic web¹⁶:

This is a work in progress at our school. We apply an annotating¹⁷ bottom-up¹⁸ approach in providing semantic web technologies. However this approach requires availability of domain vocabularies¹⁹ and ontologies²⁰ which are not handy yet for TEFL. So we needed to create from scratch the vocabularies required to make Powtarzanie.pl semantic web enabled and linked data ready.

⁹ <http://eurochance.brailcom.org/>

¹⁰ www.ello.org

¹¹ www.britishcouncil.org

¹² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/>

¹³ <http://www.spotlightradio.net/>

¹⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/user/duncaninchina>

¹⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/user/thedailyenglishshow>

¹⁶ Please check appendix 1 for more information about the **semantic web**.

¹⁷ <http://annotation.semanticweb.org/>

¹⁸ http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/semantic_web_difficulties_with_classic_approach.php

¹⁹ <http://vocab.org/>

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_Ontology_Language

However we were able to give Powtarzanie.pl a GoodRelations²¹ file and of course to give our staff FOAF²² files. We were able to annotate our course with Dublin Core²³ statements, as well.

Our semantic web service is constructed around building a smart directory which is able to room all the resources we collect online into structured datasets. The directory is built from the desktop web-links databases and online bookmarks²⁴ we have been creating for our work.

Under the smart directory, each resource we add, use or link to is RDF-annotated with its corresponding CEFR level, skill focus, grammar topic, vocabulary topic, and content provider. We also add license²⁵ information when appropriate.

That way teachers and students can run semantic web aware applications to pull the exact needed data from the smart directory. That saves time, and gives the learning experience a new taste.

The ontologies:

As mentioned above, we faced a lack of ontologies suitable for annotating our Business English course. It seems to us that there are no domain-specific ontologies out there for TEFL. We are also not aware of any planned TEFL vocamps²⁶ to be organized by the community.

So we went on and started creating some vocabularies to describe the BEC specifications, and the CEFR levels and the other properties around which TEFL resources differentiate. That way we can easily locate each resource in place, and we can then give educated online and offline recommendations concerning course material and more online practice.

²¹ <http://www.ebusiness-unibw.org/tools/goodrelations-annotator/en/>

²² <http://www.foaf-project.org/>

²³ <http://dublincore.org/metadata-basics/>

²⁴ at www.delicious.com, www.twine.com, and www.readitlaterlist.com.

²⁵ <http://creativecommons.org/>

²⁶ http://vocamp.org/wiki/Main_Page

The vocabularies we have created, so far, are:

- School Centers OutLined (SCOL) – for describing schools
- Language Attributes Numbered Generally (LANG) – for describing languages
- Code of a dialect (COAD) – for describing a dialect
- Goals Of A Lesson (GOAL) – for describing a lesson
- Focusing On Course Semantics (FOCS) - for describing a course
- Methodology; The Handy Description (MTHD) – for describing a methodology

And special lightweight vocabularies to describe resources from each content provider:

- Cbello – content by ello
- Cbvoa – content by voa
- Cbspot – content by spotlight

And finally, some specific lightweight vocabularies to describe resources by their linguistic properties.

- Grmr - for describing grammar resources
- Vcbl - for describing vocabulary resources
- Spik - for describing speaking resources
- Lstn - for describing listening resources
- Read - for describing reading resources
- Rait - for describing writing resources

The documentation of these vocabularies together with examples will be available all with the first online demo on the 15th of December. The demo will be available at www.powtarzanie.pl/specific-english.html.

The tools

Semantic Web technologies has experienced an observable quality and quantity growth in the last tow years with browsing tools, semantic services and semantic web platforms announced every now and again. There is a considerable amount of annotators, RDF / ontology authoring tools and semantic browsers which one can use. Most of the tools we

use are listed on the linked data site²⁷. We are still experimenting with tools to process our data (datafeeds, data integration, search, semantic web recommendation system, and so on).

Recommendation

We invite you to have a look at our online demo on the 15th of December 2009, we also invite you to try the service in February when it is open for beta users. We also recommend that the TEFL community start developing domain vocabularies, because we believe that the semantic web technologies out there, though not at their maximum potential, are mature enough to make a difference in the teaching classroom.

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²⁷ <http://linkeddata.org/>

Appendix 1

What is the semantic web:

Allow me to cite from Wikipedia.org, this quotation gives brief information about the semantic web²⁸.

The **Semantic Web** is an evolving development of the World Wide Web in which the meaning (semantics) of information and services on the web is defined, making it possible for the web to "understand" and satisfy the requests of people and machines to use the web content. It derives from the Web inventor and World Wide Web Consortium director Sir Tim Berners-Lee's vision of the Web as a universal medium for data, information, and knowledge exchange.

Tim Berners-Lee originally expressed the vision of the semantic web as follows:

"I have a dream for the Web [in which computers] become capable of analyzing all the data on the Web – the content, links, and transactions between people and computers. A 'Semantic Web', which should make this possible, has yet to emerge, but when it does, the day-to-day mechanisms of trade, bureaucracy and our daily lives will be handled by machines talking to machines. The 'intelligent agents' people have touted for ages will finally materialize."

– *Tim Berners-Lee, 1999*

At its core, the semantic web comprises a set of design principles, collaborative working groups, and a variety of enabling technologies. Some elements of the semantic web are expressed as prospective future possibilities that are yet to be implemented or realized. Other elements of the semantic web are expressed in formal specifications. Some of these include Resource Description Framework (RDF), a variety of data interchange formats (e.g. RDF/XML, N3, Turtle, N-Triples), and notations such as RDF Schema (RDFS) and the Web Ontology Language (OWL), all of which are intended to provide a formal description of concepts, terms, and relationships within a given knowledge domain."²⁹

And from altove.com – a leading semantic web company we read: "In the Semantic Web data itself becomes part of the Web and is able to be processed independently of

²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_Web

²⁹ *ibid.*

application, platform, or domain. This is in contrast to the World Wide Web as we know it today, which contains virtually boundless information in the form of documents. We can use computers to search for these documents, but they still have to be read and interpreted by humans before any useful information can be extrapolated. Computers can present you with information but can't understand what the information is well enough to display the data that is most relevant in a given circumstance. The Semantic Web, on the other hand, is about having data as well as documents on the Web so that machines can process, transform, assemble, and even act on the data in useful ways.”³⁰

Googling “semantic web” will bring you many links and sites to read about the topic. However, the wikipedia article on the topic is a good place to start.

³⁰ http://www.altova.com/semantic_web.html