

UDC 378.094+37.091.33:8111.111

УДК 378.094+37.091.33:8111.111

DOI: [10.31475/ped.dys.2025.37.18](https://doi.org/10.31475/ped.dys.2025.37.18)

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Teaching Digital ESL Communication Skills for Remote Work Environments

Розвиток цифрових англомовних комунікативних умінь для роботи у віддаленому режимі

The research is aimed at investigating the need to specifically address the application of English language skills and using AI tools within remote professional communication contexts due to the growing shift towards remote and AI-enhanced work environments. The term “digital ESL communication skills” has been defined as follows: the application of English language skills for professional, task-based interaction in digital environments, including written and spoken communication through emailing, instant messaging, video conferencing, project management platforms and AI chatbots. Having applied such methods as literature review, a stakeholders’ survey of 116 students and professionals, document analysis and the analysis of leading Business English course syllabi, it has been demonstrated that there is a gap in current ESL education and the need to integrate English language learning with practical tasks that are required for asynchronous professional communication, video conferencing and intelligent use of AI tools in remote digital work environments. 7 core skill areas such as: slack-style messaging, digital professional writing, task management communication, video conferencing, AI tool usage, digital etiquette and soft skills development for professional success in remote settings, have been identified and described according to current real-world professional tasks within a remote, tech-integrated context (needs analysis). Recommendations on teaching digital English communication and AI literacy have been provided on each skill area. These included the lists of targeted vocabulary and grammar as well as recommended activities and resources aimed at contributing to the methodological aspect of teaching digital ESL communication skills. The research is a step towards modernizing ESL courses at college and university level for today’s remote or hybrid globalized, tech-driven workplace.

Keywords: *ESL, ESP, digital, AI tools, digital ESL communication, remote work, digital AI-enhanced work environments, English for digital work context.*

Дослідження спрямоване на вивчення необхідності цілеспрямованого формування англомовних комунікативних умінь для роботи у віддаленому режимі, де професійна комунікація відбувається у цифровому форматі з використанням інструментів ІІІ. Подано визначення терміну «цифрові англомовні комунікативні уміння» та визначено його 7 основних компонентів. За допомогою якісно-кількісного аналізу продемонстровано, що існує розрив між курсами англійської мови для професійних потреб на даному етапі та необхідністю інтеграції вивчення англійської мови з практичними завданнями, такими як обмін повідомленнями в стилі slack, цифрове професійне спілкування, комунікація з управління завданнями, відео конференції, використання інструментів ІІІ, цифровий етикет та розвиток м’яких навичок для ефективної роботи у віддаленому режимі.

Ключові слова: *цифрові англомовні комунікативні уміння, англійська мова, комунікативні уміння, спілкування в цифровому форматі, віддалена робота.*

Introduction / Вступ. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more companies across all major industries are moving towards a remote work policy (Statista, 2023). Remote work, especially in such fields as IT, management, marketing, finance and accounting, education and customer service, requires using English as a means of global communication. This substantiates the need to specifically address the application of English language skills and using digital tools, including AI chatbots (e.g., Google

Assistant and ChatGPT), within remote professional communication contexts.

Since AI is gaining a momentum, there has been a significant amount of research done in order to integrate its technologies into teaching English as a second language (ESL) courses. The research by Lai and Lee (2024) has examined 32 scientific papers on the subject and has demonstrated the effectiveness of AI integration into teaching ESL in terms of providing an active, engaging and personalized learning process. The implementation of AI tools into ESL education has led to significant improvements in grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing skills (Gutiérrez, 2023). At the same time scientists and educators have stated the limitations and considered ethical considerations of implementing AI tools into the educational process (Hockly, 2023).

However, there is a lack of research and specific methodology on how to teach students effective English language digital communication skills, including the use of chatbots, for remote professional communication. Most ESL and ESP courses do not include specific modules on how to use English and chatbots effectively in a remote work context. Thus, there is a gap between the 21st century job market requirements and the current ESL and English for professional purposes (ESP) education. There is a need to develop a methodology of teaching English specifically for remote work with a focus on using chatbots effectively for professional purposes. Here, let us define the term «*digital ESL communication*». It refers to the application of English language skills for professional, task-based interaction in digital environments, including written and spoken communication through emailing, instant messaging, video conferencing, project management platforms and AI chatbots.

The aim to introduce digital ESL communication practice at college and university level aligns with the key principles of second language acquisition, i.e. language learning should be active, task-based, personalized, engaging, meaningful and contextual (Godwin-Jones, 2021) and corresponds to the main methodological principles of effective language acquisition developed in recent years that focus on interactive, technology-driven, student-centered task- and scenario-based learning (UNESCO, 2022).

The quantitative improvements across grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing skills all point toward the efficacy of ChatGPT as a learning aid.

Aims and Tasks / Мета та завдання. The research is aimed at substantiating the need and the methodology of teaching specific digital English language communication skills, including training students to use chatbots effectively, for remote work. In order to achieve the stated aim, the following tasks have been concerned:

1) substantiate the need to teach digital ESL communication skills to meet the current trend for remote and hybrid work, including: literature-based research to ensure that there is a current need to specifically address digital ESL communication; stakeholders' surveying to determine the actual skills needed to function in digital workspaces; the analysis of ESL for Business courses in order to understand the gap between the current available teaching materials and the ESL skills needed for remote and hybrid work;

2) determine the main components of digital ESL communication based on needs analysis;

3) contribute to the methodology of teaching digital ESL communication by discussing the main vocabulary and grammar focus, the effective methods and activities as well as suggest on the teaching materials in order to practice these skills.

Methods / Методи. In order to understand the role of digital English language communication skills in remote work and identify a gap between the ESL skills currently taught based on the available educational materials for business English and the ESL skills needed for remote work, the following methods have been applied:

– *literature review*, including scientific articles, policy documents and workplace studies, in order to establish relevance and discuss the theoretical gap in the curriculum;

– *a quantitative-qualitative survey method* using a questionnaire (Appendix 1; 116 respondents, including 67 students and 49 professionals) in order to demonstrate the practical gap between learners' professional needs and the current state of their ESL preparation;

– *document analysis* on the content of currently available Business English courses, including Pearson Market Leader, Cambridge Business Benchmark, Career Paths: Business English, ESL and ESP courses offered at 6 major Ukrainian universities, in order to determine whether they address remote work and AI-enhanced communication.

– *Task-based needs analysis* for contributing to curriculum design and define the relevant ESL content and the key ESL skills needed for remote and hybrid work.

Results / Результати. First of all, literature-based research was conducted in order to substantiate the importance to specifically address the need to teach digital ESL communication at college and university level. There has been a rise in remote and hybrid work since 2020 for over 20% of employers, especially in such sectors as information technology, education, management, accounting, customer service, and freelance digital work (Statista, 2023; International Labour Organization, 2021).

Remote work is no longer an emergency measure due to the COVID quarantine, but a permanent shift, a new trend that requires digital communication proficiency and AI literacy in order to improve employability and productivity (McKinsey, 2022).

In order to further investigate the need to teach ESL specifically for remote and hybrid work environments and modernize ESL programs, that is to say, understand if there is a gap between what ESL learners are taught and the actual skills needed to function in digital workspaces, a survey was conducted. The assumption that remote and hybrid work relies to a great extent on text-based communication and intensively involves daily professional interaction using digital and AI tools was substantiated by surveying 67 students (Master's level) and 49 professionals working remotely, including 12 employers – 116 respondents in total (Appendix 1). The findings show that 83% of respondents use English for written communication (e.g. emailing, instant messaging, platforms, reports, presentations) daily or weekly, specifying that having received some instruction in professional writing, they don't feel confident in this type of communication (72%). 91% of respondents use video platforms for work or study. Here, 68% of respondents indicated that they need to improve their skills for participating in video calls. As for using AI tools (e.g. Grammarly, Chat GPT, DeepL), 77% of respondents use them regularly. However, 84% have never been taught how to prompt or evaluate the AI output, and 88% of respondents would like to take a course on digital ESL communication and using AI chatbots. The obtained data support the need for modernizing ESL courses at college and university level in order to specifically teach the use of English in remote and digital contexts.

The content of the most-widely used ESL courses for business, namely: Pearson (Market Leader), Cambridge (Business Benchmark), Career Paths (Business English) have been analyzed in order to justify the need of syllabi improvement for providing remote-specific communication practice. The conducted analysis shows that the courses mentioned above focus on teaching job specific vocabulary and communication skills for communication at a workplace, including negotiations, presentations, meetings, business correspondence (Market Leader); interviews, presentations, business writing (Business Benchmark); office routine conversations, telephone communication, meetings and business writing (Career Path: Business English). The courses provide profound practice for using the English language for professional purposes but they are focused on physical workplace situations and are not adapted to digital workplace realities. They lack materials and communication activities to practice slack-style messaging and asynchronous updates, to work with AI writing tools and chatbots, including prompt writing, using and evaluating AI-generated texts, to practice remote collaboration through Zoom, Google Docs etc. The conducted analysis shows that implementing digital ESL communication, AI literacy, and remote work training can fill the gap in current ESP education.

Having substantiated the need to introduce digital ESL communication skills practice at college and university levels to meet the needs for remote and hybrid work environments, let us formulate the main objective of this method – to develop students' ability to communicate in English professionally in remote or hybrid digital environments, including AI collaboration.

Let us determine the main components of the method in order to achieve the main objective.

Based on the conducted surveying of the stakeholders presented above and the literature review for needs analysis, the main components of the method can be formulated as follows:

1. *Slack-style massaging* to practice tone and structure of short formal writing in chats, including sending check-ins, micro-updates, assign and acknowledge tasks, participate in informal small-talk.

2. *Professional writing* in remote conditions, including writing project status updates, respond to clients' inquiries and employers' questions via email, writing project summaries and meeting follow-ups, writing progress reports, team task updates and reminders.

3. *Video call participation*, including practicing presenting slides and data, delivering verbal updates, spontaneous speech, timed speaking, participating in brainstorming during virtual meetings, feedback exchange, screen-sharing talk and such soft skills as clarifying questions, interrupting politely, agreeing, disagreeing, reactions, reporting other technical issues.

4. *AI tool literacy*, that is to say, teaching how to use AI tools, e.g. GhatGPT, Grammarly, Copilot, in order to graft emails, reports, replies, ask chatbots to summarize texts, data, meeting transcripts, prompt AI for brainstorming ideas as well as outlining own ideas and documents, assess and edit AI-generated output, clarify and adjust according to goals and tasks.

5. *Task-management communication*, teaching how to create task description, write comments on tasks, delegate tasks by mentioning team members in comments, ask for help or clarifying, change task status, write brief notes to explain the added file attachments and updates.

6. *Digital etiquette*, including adapting the tone of a message based on the audience, using neutral English to avoid misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication, balancing between conveying a direct message and politeness in feedback, respecting time zone differences in by mentioning this in comments, being culturally sensitive when using emojis, humor and video call behavior.

7. *Soft-skills for remote and hybrid work*, including practicing to plan communication according to schedules, to send polite reminders, to ask for clarification, to prioritize tasks, to keep the team informed through updates.

In order to contribute to the methodological aspect of teaching digital ESL communication skills, let us determine the relevant vocabulary and grammar as well as activities and teaching materials according to each component described above.

When performing asynchronous communication and slack-style messaging, employees often feel unsure about the tone and structure in chats and lack experience with writing short informal messages in that way that they sound professional. Thus, it is to the point to introduce key vocabulary (e.g. ASAP, FYI, ETA, blocked, ping, heads-up, tag, cc, thread, feedback) and grammar (e.g. imperatives, abbreviations, phrasal verbs, shortened grammar structures) and engage learners into interactive activities, such as slack message simulations, speed feedback tasks, thread reconstruction, paraphrasing formal messages into casual yet sounding professional. For example, «ETA on the report?» (check-in), «Draft uploaded, waiting for review» (update), «on it», «thanks, noted» (acknowledge a task), «Alex please proofread this» (assign a task), «Morning team! Working on the mockups today» (small talk). Teaching materials may include slack screenshots and mock Slack channels.

Since emails, reports and updates are dominant for remote and hybrid work, professional writing in remote conditions needs further specifically-targeted practice. The target vocabulary includes such terms as report, deadline, update, status, summary, attached, postponed, clarification etc. and grammar may focus on modals for politeness (could, would), passive voice, past simple and present perfect, time markers etc. The suggested activities include practicing writing emails to inform status updates and ask questions or inform progress, rewriting from informal into formal and case study reporting using sample emails, Grammarly, business email templates, authentic workplace scenarios.

Video conferencing is an essential part of remote work. The active vocabulary may include the following words and word combinations: process, agenda, mute/unmute, screen share, clarify, follow-up, recap, interrupt, connection issue. The correspondent grammar topics, such as present continuous for updates, polite requests/questions, reported speech should be considered. The suggested interactive activities may include Zoom or Meet role-plays (e.g. status updates, team briefings), screen-share presentations and talking based on data and visuals, timed speaking, drills on interrupting politely, agreeing or disagreeing, clarifying etc.

As for AI tool literacy, it is to the point to introduce the key vocabulary (prompt, generate, refine, input, output, accuracy, bias, summarize, rephrase) and grammar (infinitives, gerunds, conditionals, reported commands) and practice prompt writing, comparing original and AI-generated texts, editing and adjusting AI output using AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, prompts bank etc.

When working remotely, employees need to describe tasks, comment clearly, and assign responsibilities using correct phrases, that is to say, perform task-management communication. It is advisable to introduce the key vocabulary (e.g. task, due, assigned, backlog, update, blocked, completed, checklist, priority) and grammar material (e.g. passive voice («was assigned»), sequencing words, gerunds after prepositions) and provide practice in the form of simulating projects, creating and updating tasks, writing task comments. For example, students may create a Trello with group projects and add comments, update statuses, assign tasks, tag project team members, practice phrases such as «due by», «in progress», «needs feedback», «let me clarify...», «please review» etc.

Considering digital etiquette, it is important to understand that communication is often multicultural and requires neutral, appropriate and respectful communication. It is to the point to discuss whether emojis and humor are appropriate in professional chats or analyze the cases of misunderstanding with further paraphrasing of the message. Students can also be offered to study polite modals, softening phrases, polite indirect questions and to practice the tone and etiquette by rewriting inappropriate messages, emails and discussing cross-culture communication videos. The key vocabulary may include the following: tone, direct, polite, indirect, emoji, time zone, reply-all, hierarchy.

Finally, there is a number of soft skills for remote and hybrid work that has to be paid attention to. They include initiative, active listening, clarity in communication as well as tone awareness in digital ESL communication. The key vocabulary may include the following: deadline, self-manage, follow-up, update, clarify, independent, prioritize. As for grammar material, it may include practicing first conditional, time expressions and reported speech for updates. Let us give the examples of activities to practice these soft skills. For example, students may be offered to write and present a remote work schedule in English. Another task is aimed at practicing clarity in communication: being given an unclear instruction, students ask for clarification and confirm understanding.

Thus, having conducted the analysis of the job tasks employees do in remote and hybrid work environments, 7 main skill areas have been identified followed by contributing to the content and the methods of digital ESL communication teaching process.

Discussion / Обговорення. Let us explain and discuss the findings of the conducted research. It has been proved that, due to the current raise in remote and hybrid work engagement, there is an increasing demand to improve ESL course curricula at college and university level. According to the results of the conducted survey, employees use digital means of communication and work with AI tools regularly. However, they often feel unprepared and unconfident because they lack training in this specific skill area. Since the existing ESL and ESP courses still focus on practicing face-to-face synchronous communication at a workplace, it is urgent to introduce digital ESL communication skills practice into the preparation of future employees. Based on needs analysis, the main skill areas for remote work have been determined: professional asynchronous writing, slack-style messaging, video conferencing communication, AI literacy, task management communication, digital etiquette and soft skills for remote work. Each skill area has been specified according to current real-world professional tasks within a remote, tech-integrated context. Based on understanding the nature of professional communication in remote environments, the research has contributed to the development of digital ESL communication courses and modules in terms of specifying the key vocabulary and grammar in each skill area and suggesting on the methodology of teaching such skills. The research reveals the importance of integrating language and digital skills for effective collaboration in remote work environments and contributes to the development digital ESL courses. As for the limitations of the research, the main include rapid development of new tools and platforms and somewhat different remote contexts for various industries. Further research is needed on testing the method in learning settings and measuring learning outcomes.

Conclusions / Висновки. The research has identified a gap in current ESL education and the need of practicing the skills that are required for asynchronous professional communication, video conferencing and intelligent use of AI tools in remote digital work environments. The term «digital ESL communication» has been defined and the key skill areas have been specified based on needs analysis. The proposed method is able to bridge the gap and integrate English language teaching with practicing practical tasks in remote work context, for example status updates, chatbot prompting and slack-style messaging, online etiquette and collaboration and many other, which are too numerous to mention, i.e. train both digital fluency and language proficiency. This is timely and necessary in order to prepare competitive and adaptable employees in current job market conditions. The research is a step forward towards developing new ESL and ESP courses that can meet the demands of remote, hybrid and tech-integrated working conditions.

Appendix 1. Survey Questionnaire **Section A: Background Information**

1. Are you a: ☐ Student ☐ Working Professional

2. What is your field of study or work?

3. What is your current level of English?

☐ A2 (Pre-Intermediate)

☐ B1 (Intermediate)

☐ B2 (Upper-Intermediate)

☐ C1+ (Advanced)

Section B: Use of English in Digital Communication

1. How often do you use English for writing messages, emails, or reports?

☐ Daily

☐ Weekly

☐ Rarely

☐ Never

2. Which tools do you use for professional or academic communication? (Select all that apply)

☐ Email

☐ Zoom / Google Meet

☐ Slack / Teams / Discord

☐ Trello / Asana / other task managers

☐ Other: _____

☐ I don't use any tools

3. Have you received any instruction or training on how to write clear and professional messages in English?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Section C: Use of AI Tools

1. Have you used any of the following AI tools?

☐ ChatGPT

☐ Grammarly

- ☐ DeepL
☐ Notion AI / Google Duet / Microsoft Copilot
☐ Other: _____
☐ I have not used any

2. Why do you use these tools?

- ☐ To generate ideas
☐ To improve my English writing
☐ To translate or summarize texts
☐ To save time
☐ I don't use them

3. Have you ever been taught how to use AI tools effectively in English (e.g., prompting, evaluating answers)?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Section D: Self-Assessment

1. How confident are you in your ability to write professional messages in English (emails, chat, reports)?

- ☐ Very confident ☐ Somewhat confident ☐ Not confident

2. How confident are you in your ability to use AI tools for work/study tasks in English?

- ☐ Very confident ☐ Somewhat confident ☐ Not confident

3. Would you benefit from a course that teaches English for digital communication and AI tools?

- ☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No

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Дата надходження статті: «22» травня 2025 р.

Стаття прийнята до друку: «12» червня 2025 р.

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Цитуйте цю статтю як:

Дзюбата, З. (2025). Розвиток цифрових англomовних комунікативних умінь для роботи у віддаленому режимі. *Педагогічний дискурс*, 37, 131–136. doi: 10.31475/ped.dys.2025.37.18.

Cite this article as:

Dziubata, Z. (2025). Teaching Digital ESL Communication Skills for Remote Work Environments. *Pedagogical Discourse*, 37, 131–136. doi: 10.31475/ped.dys.2025.37.18.