



Employing the Gitbook Platform in Creating Interactive Online Coursebooks for Profession Oriented ELT

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Abstract. The aim of the report is to share the experience of designing the coursebook “English through History Projects [The interactive online version of the “English through History Projects” coursebook is available at the GitBook platform: <https://english-historyprojects.gitbook.io/english-through-history-projects/intro/english-through-history-projects..>]” and its interactive online version that are a product of the university’s interdisciplinary team project, managed by the School of Foreign Languages NRU HSE, Moscow, Russia, in 2020–2021. The profession oriented coursebook for learning English is designed for university BA students (B1 + level) whose major or interest lies in history both as an academic discipline and a professional field. The coursebook introduces project-based framework that provides a variety of tasks and activities granting students’ an opportunity to learn how to use English as a tool for solving profession oriented project-based tasks. The article presents methodological aspects and survey results that shaped the conceptual framework of the coursebook. It compares several online services, used in ELT, focusing primarily on the GitBook platform that was chosen for designing the interactive online version of the coursebook. The GitBook platform makes the coursebook an interactive, user friendly and globally available online tool, that provides numerous benefits to learners and educators worldwide.

Keywords: coursebook design · profession-oriented ELT · online learning

1 Introduction

Teaching in a digital age makes educators and learners of foreign languages all over the world face a variety of challenges on an everyday basis. The fundamental changes in the way we teach and learn foreign languages at university today are driven by numerous social, economic, political and other factors that affect the requirements for preparing future specialists and shape learning environment. While trying to overcome the encountered difficulties, the world of education is becoming more open and flexible, introducing new practices and elaborating initiatives aimed at not only advancing the systems locally, but also sharing and promoting education available for all globally. In recent decades, such concept as “open education” has been rapidly developing and has already shaped as a trend and one of the main priorities in global education [3].

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The concept has multiple interpretations and can stand for a free or very low cost school, college or university education available to everyone within a particular jurisdiction, usually funded primarily through the state; an open access to programs that lead to full, recognised qualifications; an open access to courses or programs that are not for formal credit, although it may be possible to acquire badges or certificates for successful completion, e.g. MOOCs; open educational resources that instructors or learners can use for free; open textbooks, online textbooks that are free for students to use; open research, whereby research papers are made available online for free downloading; open data, that is, data open to anyone to use, reuse, and redistribute, subject only, at most, to the requirement to attribute and share; open pedagogy, a method of teaching and learning that builds on principles of openness and learner participation [ibid].

In 2020 the School of Foreign Languages (SoFL) of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (NRU HSE), Moscow, Russia, launched an interdisciplinary project aimed to design a coursebook for teaching English to history bachelor (BA) students. The team of the project included ELT lecturers and tutors, history consultants and students, FLT and IT specialists whose aim was to create an innovative product that would meet the modern requirements for preparing competitive specialists, as well as elaborate a professional interactive tool available to English learners and teachers worldwide.

As the result of the project, the team conducted a multi-staged survey and elaborated a profession-oriented coursebook for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) that is designed for university BA students whose major is history or whose interest lies in history both as an academic discipline and a professional field. The coursebook best suits those learners who have attained B1 + (an 'Independent user' level) according to the CEFR global scale of English language proficiency¹.

In order to make the coursebook an interactive online product that would comply with modern requirements for the ELT materials design, will meet students' needs and learning goals, as well as will be available globally, the team of the project explored the best practices in employing technologies in ELT.

The results of the analysis of the most recent publications on the use of various online services and tools in ELT suggest that the most popular practices include the use of:

- online educational platforms, such as Edmodo, Coursera, Moodle, Google Classroom, LMS etc. for MOOCs and classroom management [3, 9, 22];
- multimedia laboratories and electronic portfolios [19, 4, 15, 1];
- social media platforms and services, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube etc. groups and messengers [17, 18, 4, 10];
- mobile technology in mobile learning (M-learning) [7, 20, 24];
- e-books and smart books in e-learning and smart education [2, 16, 21, 8, 6].

As the aim of the project team was to find the best solution for adapting the coursebook for web by creating an online interactive version of the print coursebook, the team focused on considering and comparing the key features and functions of the four main

¹ Common European Framework of Reference, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>.

options: Edmodo, Coursera. GitBook platforms and the creation of their own website. The main results of the comparative analysis are presented and discussed in Tables 1 and 2 in the “Findings and Discussion” section of this paper.

Thus, the main tasks of this paper are to share the results of the conducted survey that determined the choice of the approach to designing the coursebook, present the theoretical concept, structure and the contents of the coursebook, as well as to present the features of the electronic GitBook platform and share the users’ experience on working with the service.

The online interactive version of the coursebook “English through History Projects” on the Gitbook platform can be easily accessed by using the link <https://english-history-projects.gitbook.io/english-through-history-projects/> or the QR-code:



2 A Case Study

The case study focuses on designing the coursebook “English through History Projects” for profession oriented ELT and the use of the GitBook product as the platform for creating and using the online interactive version of the print coursebook. It explains the process of shaping the conceptual framework of the coursebook, creating and using its interactive online version in the EFL classroom.

2.1 Methods and Materials

Each stage of the coursebook creation and implementation (both in print and in interactive online format) was accompanied by the survey aimed at:

1. requirements and needs analysis – identifying what is vital to consider in terms of the concept and content for the developers of the coursebook for profession oriented ELT to history students;
2. tools and platforms analysis – finding the best solution for creating an interactive online version, available and beneficial both for learners and ELT specialists worldwide;
3. developers and users feedback analysis – collecting the experience of employing the GitBook platform for designing and using the interactive online version of the coursebook, shared by the developers and users.

2.1.1 Requirements and Needs Analysis for Designing the Coursebook for Profession Oriented ELT

“English through History Projects” coursebook is designed for university undergraduate students (BA) whose major is History or whose interest lies in history, both as an academic discipline and a professional field. This coursebook will best suit those who have attained B1-B2 level according to the CEFR global scale of English language proficiency².

The choice of the concept, structure and contents for the coursebook was determined by two main factors:

- a. complying with the regulations of the Russian Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education for Bachelor students 3 + +; the universal recommendations on the content and learning objectives of the main courses, spelled out in the university curricula for BA history students’;
- b. meeting history students’ academic and future professional needs, identified by the survey held at the university.

To outline the requirements for developing BA students’ professional intercultural communicative competence, as well as the guidelines on selecting the content that should be integrated in a profession oriented English language course, the project team analysed the following official documents and regulations: Russian Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education for Bachelor students 3+ + (History and Archaeology majors)³, syllabi of the core disciplines comprising the curricula of the history BA students⁴.

To identify students’ needs and goals in learning English for academic and professional purposes at university, the project team held a survey at three campuses of the NRU HSE (Moscow, Saint-Petersburg and Perm) in 2021. 114 students of the HSE “History” BA programmes and 29 historians, who are a part of the teaching staff at HSE, filled in specially designed questionnaires, where they shared their understanding of what is vital for students in learning to employ English in their academic and professional lives. The survey identified personal, academic and professional needs, aims and tasks, motives and interests that history students have in learning English at university level, as well as their opinions about what their current English class is lacking and expectations about the prospective course and coursebook.

² Common European Framework of Reference, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>.

³ Russian Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education for Bachelor students 3 + + for History and Archaeology majors (2020), <https://fgosvo.ru/fgosvo/index/24/96>.

⁴ Syllabi of the core disciplines comprising the curricula of the “History” BA educational programme (HSE University, Russia), <https://www.hse.ru/ba/hist/documents>.

2.1.2 Tools and Platforms Analysis for Designing an Interactive Online Version of the “English Through History Projects” Coursebook

To find the best solution for adapting the coursebook for web, the most recent scholarly publications on the use of online services and tools in ELT (from 2001 till 2021) were examined and as a result, the employment of such global educational platforms as Edmodo, Coursera, and GitBook, as well as the creation of the special website specifically for the coursebook operation, were considered in the comparative analysis.

Based on the results of the analysis, the team chose the GitBook platform as the best option for the coursebook adaptation. Then a part of the team, English language instructors and an invited IT specialist, were working on adapting the manuscript of the coursebook and designing its online version, using the GitBook platform, for two months, from November till December 2021.

2.1.3 Developers and Users Feedback Analysis on Employing the GitBook Platform for Designing and Using an Interactive Online Version of the Coursebook

Since January, 2022 the online version of the coursebook “English through History Projects” is available online on the GitBook platform⁵ and has been being used by the HSE university EFL lecturers and tutors within the course of English language “English for Specific Purposes. History” for the 1st and 2d year BA students.

To receive the feedback on the design and implementation of the online interactive version of the coursebook, the developers, who are also the current users of the coursebook, as well as two groups of students of the above-mentioned course, were asked to complete the questionnaire to share their opinions on the experience of working with the coursebook on the platform. Overall, 25 students and 3 ELT lecturers contributed with their responses and filled in the suggested questionnaire anonymously.

2.2 Findings and Discussion

The results of the documents’ analysis and the survey conducted shaped theoretical framework of the coursebook, its structure and contents, as well as its main features that are covered in this section of the paper.

To identify history BA students’ needs and goals in learning English at university level, we asked students of the History BA educational programmes in 3 campuses of the HSE university to complete the online questionnaire in 2021. 114 History BA students contributed to the survey by sharing their responses. The results of this survey, represented in the Figs. 1–3 below, enabled us to understand what is vital for students in learning to employ English in their academic and future professional life – their personal, academic and professional needs in learning English; learners’ aims and tasks, motives and interests in learning English at university; students’ opinions about what their current English class and the coursebook they were using lacked, as well as their expectations about the prospective coursebook.

⁵ The online interactive version of the coursebook “English through History Projects” on the GitBook platform, <https://english-historyprojects.gitbook.io/english-through-history-projects/intro/english-through-history-projects>.

2.2.1 Coursebook Rationale and Design

The analysis of the Russian Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education for Bachelor students 3 + + (History and Archaeology majors) has demonstrated that students during their studies at university are expected to develop two main groups of skills: universal (transferrable or soft) skills and hard skills, where the latter are divided into general professional skills and professional skills. What is important, all mentioned groups of skills require the development of students' ability to use English language for academic and professional communication and solving various academic and future professional tasks that are aimed to prepare students for developing and running projects; being team players and smart leaders; self-directed life-long learning; being engaged into independent and group academic and professional activities; applying modern information and communication technologies (ICT) while doing research and working on practical tasks related to their future professional activities; spreading and promoting historical knowledge among the academic and public audiences etc.

2.2.1.1. Profession Oriented Approach

Thanks to the results of the analysis of the requirements, it became evident that it is essential not only to help students acquire deep knowledge and skills that can be applied in the specific professional field, but also to teach them to deal successfully with concrete professional tasks in various situations of intercultural communication, thus enhancing their competitiveness on the labour market [11]. In order to help students to learn how to use a foreign language for solving professional tasks, it is necessary to develop their professional communicative skills and, in general, the ability for professional intercultural communication, that is to form and develop their professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC). To form and develop learners' PICC is considered as a global goal of professionally oriented teaching of a foreign language at university [13].

The need to meet the requirement of developing students PICC determined the choice of the profession oriented approach to foreign language teaching as a theoretical framework for designing the coursebook. Within the chosen approach, an integrative goal of the coursebook "English through History Projects" can be formulated as the modelling of the learning environment that plunges learners as active participants into the process of solving a variety of professionally oriented tasks with the help of the English language.

To build the required learning environment, the team was also guided by what students answered in the survey about future possible fields of future occupation, to design the structure of the coursebook (see Fig. 1).

Civil service	7%
Science	45%
Media	31%
Education	17%

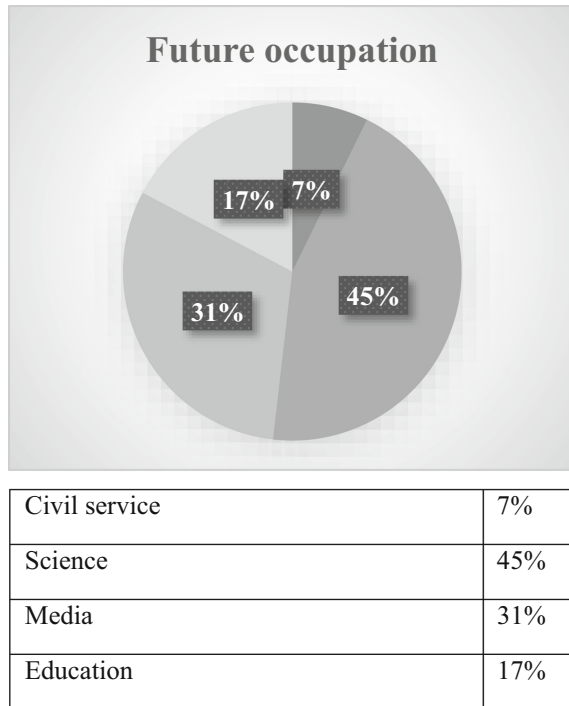


Fig. 1. Possible fields of future occupation of history BA students

2.2.1.2. Context-Based Learning

The examination of the curricula and the syllabi of the core disciplines of the “History” BA educational programme enabled the team of the project to outline the main fields of academic and historical knowledge that BA history students explore, as well as the genres of texts, types of tasks and sources they should learn how to work with during their first years of studies.

Thus, the analysis allowed to select and integrate in the coursebook the authentic text-, audio- and video-materials that correlate to the topics and issues studied by the BA History students within the core disciplines of their curricula: Introduction into Profession (research seminar); Auxiliary Disciplines of History; History and Source studies; History of Geography / Literature / Art; History of the Ancient World (Ancient East, Mesopotamia, Egypt etc.) and Medieval Europe; Archaeology; Social studies; Philosophy, Digital Literacy etc. When working with the coursebook, students learn how to deal with academic and professional texts from academic and popular scholarship books, collective volumes, scholarly and publicist articles, as well as to create their own academic, historiographical essays, books and articles reviews, reaction or response papers, motivation and cover letters, give open talks and academic presentations, participate in discussions, debates, etc.

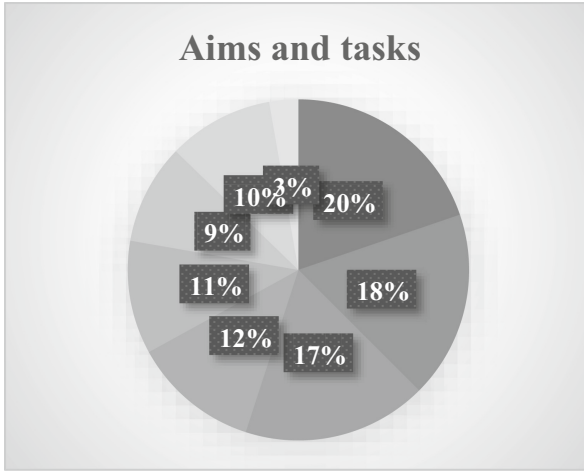


Fig. 2. Aims and tasks of history BA students in learning English at university

When selecting the content and elaborating activities for the coursebook, the team also aimed to follow students’ personal aims and tasks in learning English at university (see Fig. 2).

To deal with professionally relevant information sources	20%
To deal with academically relevant information sources	18%
To create personally meaningful information products autonomously	17%
To practice informal communication	12%
To master public speaking	11%
To work in a team	9%
To develop projects	10%
To learn business communication	3%

Therefore, each unit enables students to work on solving communicative tasks that model a broad and diverse ‘quasi-professional context’ which is defined by A. A. Verbitsky as a “a link between educational and professional activity, which is carried out in parallel with the educational process on a continuous basis through experience and related problems of future employment” [23]. Thus, the tasks of the coursebook based on real-life problem-based project cases, encompassing various communicative tasks, that design the quasi-professional context of history students’ activities, are educational in their form and professional in their content.

2.2.1.3. Developing Transferable Skills and Activating Metacognitive Processes

As the analysis of the official requirements and regulations, as well as the survey of students needs and goals have shown, the development of transferrable skills through

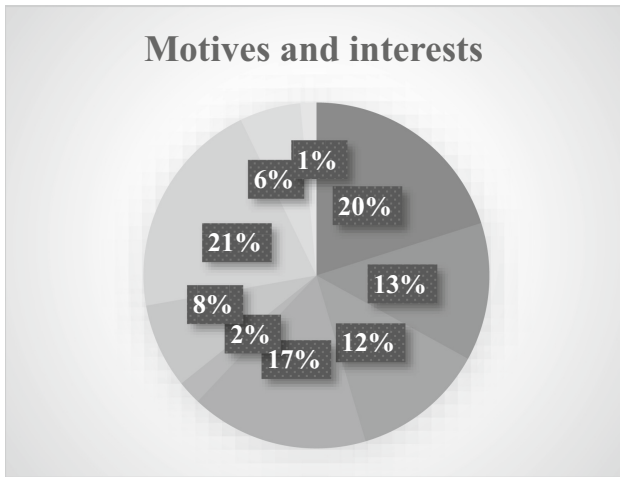


Fig. 3. Motives and interests of history BA students in learning English at university

learning a foreign language becomes a necessity and the main priority in profession oriented ELT.

These findings also correlate with what students' motives and interests in learning English at university (see Fig. 3).

Thus, a major portion of each unit of the coursebook is dedicated to the tasks focused on the development of vital transferable skills, necessary for any modern competitive specialist, that can be grouped into three major categories: *thinking, informational and interpersonal skills*. Metacognitive skills stand for activating prior/background knowledge, generating and organising ideas with the help of brainstorming activities such as free writing, storyboarding, mind-mapping, note taking, group sketching, word banking, etc. for formulating a hypothesis; negative / positive, descriptive / problem explaining / supporting / arguing, opening / concluding statement etc. Information skills include analysing, categorising, allocating, explaining, interpreting, etc. of various types of information using relevant sources for creating information products. Interpersonal skills imply creativity, decision-making, teamwork, leadership, autonomously creating.

The rubric, "Helpful Techniques and Strategies", equips students with tips and guidelines on searching, understanding, evaluating and presenting the information in various genres, styles and formats, relevant to the case tasks, such as: reading and listening techniques (skimming, scanning, detailed and critical reading; reading hypermedia texts with charts, diagrams, illustrations etc.; justifying the reliability of the sources, etc. for academic and professional texts), speaking and writing techniques (signposting, argumentation, literary techniques for talks, debates, presentations etc.).

Brainstorming, critical reading, researching, analysing and interpreting of the information presented in various modes and formats, teamwork, reflection etc. are examples of activities that teach students to be flexible and creative, think "outside the box", try different roles, be responsible and make decisions, autonomously and as a team.

Academic development	20%
Raising their level of competitiveness as specialists at the labour market	13%
Self-development	12%
Ability to work with various information sources	17%
Development of interpersonal skills	2%
Professional development	8%
Development of creativity	21%
Learning teamwork and developing leadership	6%
Diversifying personal experience	1%

2.2.1.4. Project-Based Framework

In order to ensure students motivation and engagement in the learning process, the project-based framework was applied to design the coursebook. The project culture lies at the heart of the coursebook, shaping both its structural and conceptual framework. The coursebook introduces learners to the universal project management ideas and shows how they can be applicable to an historical professional environment.

The coursebook “English through History Projects” contains four modules: ‘Why History’, ‘Study History’, ‘Work with History’ and ‘History Projects’, each of which consists of three units that develop the topic of the module. When working on each project case, students master their skills in reading, listening, speaking and writing while learning and revising new case-related vocabulary and grammar.

The coursebook guides learners on their way to solve the project-based tasks as they progress from the ‘Project Case Overview’ section, where the ultimate goal is set, to the ‘Project Case Resolution’ section, where this ultimate goal is achieved. Each of the twelve units begins with scaffolding exercises to introduce the topic to learners and activate their background knowledge. These tasks engage students into a dialogue and help them understand how the topic or issue discussed in the unit is relevant to their personal and professional fields of interest. Having reached the ‘Project Resolution’ section, learners find themselves equipped with necessary the knowledge and guidelines to apply newly-acquired skills to produce a new, personally and professionally meaningful, information product.

The Module, ‘History Projects’, shows the diversity of educational, research and applied projects that history specialists can design by introducing the real cases of the projects, developed both in Russia and abroad (“Arzamas”, “Future History”, “History of You”, “University History Museums” etc.). While working on this Module, students create their own history projects which could be easily brought to life in the future.

2.2.1.5. Reflecting on the Learning Experience

The ultimate goal of the coursebook is not to instruct students on current issues in History or English by providing readily available answers, but to encourage an autonomous learning process, to find a solution by challenging these issues. These questions should motivate students to initiate an internal dialogue between the learners they are and the professionals they would like to become.

Therefore, each project case developed in the coursebook, culminates with the tasks in the “Project Case Resolution” section, that fosters the students’ creation of ‘personally meaningful knowledge-products’ in speaking and writing, and the “Reflection” task that aims to develop their *autonomy*. Such ‘productive learning activities’ help students “create something new in material or ideal dimensions, including new methods of acting”, not just automatically consume the provided information [12]. Motivated learning and engagement in the creation of ‘personally meaningful knowledge-products’, in its turn, enhances the development of students’ autonomy, not only as ‘learners’ autonomy’, but also their autonomy as individuals.

Thus, developing the ability of students for problem-solving, decision making, self-improvement, self-development and self-identification, with the help of the coursebook’s tasks, contributes to shaping their future personal and professional autonomy (Table 1).

2.2.2 Interactive Online Format – the GitBook Platform

The comparative analysis of the key features and functions of the platforms, valuable for coursebooks developers and users, are presented in the Tables 1 and 2 below. While the Edmodo and Coursera have proved themselves as successful educational platforms, allowing mainly to manage students’ learning activities, create and share open courses (MOOCs), the GitBook platform is “a modern documentation platform where teams can document everything from products to internal knowledge-bases and APIs”⁶. The aim of the service is to help teams to work more efficiently by creating a simple but yet powerful service for them to share their knowledge. They see their mission as “to make a user-friendly and collaborative product for everyone to create, edit and share knowledge through documentation”.

2.2.3 Feedback from the Developers and Users on the Design and Use of the Online Interactive Version of the Coursebook on the GitBook Platform

25 Students and 3 ELT Lecturers Filled in the Designed Questionnaire and Shared Their Experience of Working with the Interactive Online Version of the Coursebook on the Platform.

The majority of the respondents (91%) have admitted that they benefitted from using the online interactive version of the coursebook at the platform, having outlined the following benefits:

“I’ve loved that I can open the book at any time, using different electronic devices, and the book just automatically adjusts to my screen”

“I’ve found this version of the book both convenient and engaging. I can easily click the necessary tasks and even complete them online without using a pen and a sheet of paper”

“I was pleasantly surprised when for some of the tasks the book directed me to the google forms and documents, I could take notes of my ideas and save or download them during the class. And then I got an automatic feedback and saw how many correct answers I had for the tasks!”

⁶ About the GitBook platform <https://docs.gitbook.com>.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the key aspects of online platforms (educational platforms, self-developed and owned website) for designing an interactive online coursebook for profession-oriented ELT

For coursebook developers	Educational platforms			Self-developed and owned website
	Edmodo	Coursera	GitBook	
has an already developed user-friendly interface with basic functions	+	+	+	-
does not require programming language	+	+	+	-
provides all necessary for creation of a coursebook functions even with a free plan / account	-	-	+	-
preserves the original layout of a coursebook	-	-	+	+
allows to integrate other learning tools (e.g. Wordwall.net, Learningapps.org, Google Forms, Quizlet, Tubequizard, TBD etc.)	+	+	+	+
guarantees free maintenance and 24/7 professional technical support	+	+	+	-
automatically saves and keeps a record of all changes made to the content of a coursebook	+	+	+	-
is not able to delete content or stop functioning without the permission / decision of developers of a coursebook	-	-	-	+
requires constant financial contribution from developers of a coursebook	-	-	-	+
automatically ensures safety of the content and protection of copyrights	+	+	+	-

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the key aspects of online platforms (educational platforms, self-developed and owned website) for using an interactive online coursebook for profession-oriented ELT

For coursebook users	Educational platforms			Self-developed and owned website
	Edmodo	Coursera	GitBook	
gives a free direct access to a coursebook to the users all over the world only by clicking a link	-	-	+	+
functions as an interactive online adaptation of a coursebook without transforming it into an online course	-	-	+	+
enables to navigate through the units of a coursebook and easily switch from one activity to another at one's own pace	-	-	+	+
creates user-friendly environment for autonomous learning by solving the tasks online, collect the answers and get immediate feedback with the help of the other online learning tools integrated in a coursebook, such as Wordwall.net, Learningapps.org, Google Forms, Quizlet, Tubequizard, TBD etc.	+	+	+	+
allows to access the online material from various sources, using the hyperlinks and watch the embedded videos and listen to the recordings without being redirected to external sources	+	+	+	+
provides an opportunity to jot down ideas and save the progress of the learners, to make copies of the necessary tasks and guidelines in the online documents and print as required	+	+	+	+

While, some of the respondents (12%) have shared their concerns, mainly connected with adaptation to the platform at initial stages of its usage:

“When creating the online version, I couldn’t adjust to the interface at first. It was absolutely new for me, but then I quickly adjusted, as it works basically as a constructor, very similar to making tables and writing texts in Word doc. Format”

“Sometimes the platform is a bit slow, especially when loading the illustrations and the embedded videos and recordings. Still, you can adapt to it”.

“I couldn’t really quickly understand how the platform works, and it confused me a lot when we just started, so I still preferred the print variant for some time. However, the platform appeared to be quite intuitive and now I’m working with the book online”.

3 Conclusions

The study implies that modern challenges of the digital world that English language teachers and learners face call on the developers of teaching materials to design coursebooks for university students that would be engaging, both academically and professionally, user friendly and easily accessible, contributing to the openness of language education. Creation of the online interactive coursebooks with the help of various online resources, such as the GitBook platform, not only facilitates the foreign language learning process locally, but also contributes to international accessibility, exchange and development of educational practices.

Modern coursebooks for teaching English to bachelor students should be designed applying the profession-oriented approach to ELT that is aimed at developing learners’ PICC – the integrative ability of solving professional tasks with the help of foreign language. To ensure the development of the PICC, the project-based framework can be used as a structural and conceptual framework for designing coursebooks for profession-oriented ELT, as it enables to model the quasi-professional context that engages students in motivated English language learning.

The interactive online version of the coursebook created on the GitBook platform enables to make it student-friendly and teacher-friendly and ensures freedom and flexibility in time, place, pace, and individual mode. The interactive and profession-oriented nature of the coursebook allows to offer a wide range of engaging tasks which inspire students to use English in an academic and professional context and ensure their professional and personal growth.

Although the GitBook service introduces some difficulties at initial stages of its usage and implementation to its developers and users, it can be still effectively used as one of the platforms to create online interactive coursebooks for ELT and promote “open education” concept, as it provides all necessary functions and user-friendly interface to learners and educators around the world.

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a senior lecturer at the School of Foreign Languages (HSE, Moscow) and Tatiana Znamenskaya, a lecturer at the Department of Foreign Languages (HSE, Saint- Petersburg).

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