PRELIMINARY DESIGN OF A PLE TO IMPROVE SPANISH EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS’ COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS

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Abstract

The main aim of learning English as an international language is to effectively communicate with people from other cultures Yan and Chen (1). Communication in English has been the major challenge of most university students throughout the history of Spanish higher education. Therefore, there is still a lot to be done in effective EFL teaching.

As a matter of fact, Spanish undergraduate students still struggle to be proficient in English when they have to take specific subjects in English Gómez, Solaz and San José (2), this being one of the major concerns in students' teaching quality evaluations. In this sense, distance learning universities can benefit from technology enhanced language learning (TELL) in order to promote a learner-centred approach.

Since flexible learning is learner-centred, TELL allows foreign languages students adapt their learning to their needs Gordon (3). Based on the students' learning experience, they may have more difficulty on one productive skill (speaking or writing) than on a receptive one (listening or reading). This drawback can be solved by providing flexible learning to students, where they can choose how, when and where to access learning materials as part of their teaching and learning process. Besides, TELL also enhances flexible assessment so distance learning universities can provide and added-value to students foreign language learning (3).

Thus, in this approach to flexible learning from a higher education perspective, we analyze how Spanish distance learning universities can benefit from TELL to bridge the gap on Spanish EFL learners communicative skills. We will provide examples based on the students' experience in two Spanish distance learning universities: one public (UNED), with a blended learning approach, and one private (Isabel I de Castilla), with an online approach, to show how a personalized learning process could significantly enhance EFL students' communicative skills. We will make a proposal for a case study on PLEs (Personal Learning Environments) to be implemented in the next academic course.

Keywords: EFL, learning, distance learning, flexible learning, higher education, PLEs, skills, TELL.

1 INTRODUCTION

As distance learning university professors, every academic year, we encounter Spanish undergraduate students who actually struggle to be proficient in English when they have to take subjects in English. Thus, this becomes a major concern for the University teaching community who sees that, in spite of being in the digital era, the online tools available for language learning are not well exploited, making the learning experience mainly course-centred instead of being learner-centred.

Accordingly, in this section we address the methodology of two Spanish distance learning universities: one public, UNED, with a blended learning methodology; and one private, Isabel I de Castilla, with a full online methodology, to prove that Virtual Learning Environment s (VLEs) do not help to bridge the gap on Spanish EFL learners communicative skills since students are not really engaged in their learning process. Finally, we propose a case study on PLE as a solution to enhance Spanish EFL undergraduate students’ communicative skills.

1.1 Experience from a blended learning approach

UNED’s distance learning methodology is based on aLF, a collaborative e-learning platform that allows imparting and receiving training, managing and sharing documents, creating and participating in thematic communities, as well as carrying out online projects.

Although, theoretically, aLF seems to be a powerful tool for distance learning, in reality it is not well exploited. UNED uses this platform for blended learning courses, where the learning materials are the
conventional textbook and, depending on the subject, some more additional online resources available in the virtual classroom, such as model exams in pdf format and vocabulary quizzes.

UNED combines face-to-face tutorial sessions once a week, where students may solve their doubts on the subject, with online learning materials, which are additional to the subject’s manual each semester, and a couple of fora to solve doubts.

In the case of English language subjects of the English Studies degree, students’ communicative skills are only addressed in the face-to-face tutorials once a week and the writing skill is practiced by submitting essays by e-mail or in the group forum. The practice of collaborative works or peer reviews of compositions is not encouraged, so there is no opportunity for collaboration among students.

1.2 Experience from an online approach

On the other hand, Universidad Isabel I de Castilla distance learning methodology is based on a VLE, Moodle, a platform where full online courses are given.

In these Moodle virtual classrooms, six didactic units (both interactive and in pdf format) are provided to students per subject and trimester. The platform permits the instructor deliver materials, assess students’ progress through tests and other assignments as well as it makes it possible to provide personalized feedback and manage record-keeping.

In the case of specific subjects in English, students’ communicative skills are addressed in each didactic unit. All the contents of the didactic unit and the virtual classroom are in English, and the continuous assessment activities include activities in the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Moreover, students are also encouraged to use the target language when addressing their questions to the instructor.

Besides, students are encouraged to provide feedback on their peers contributions to in the specific topic fora and have to fulfill a collaborative work in the middle of the trimester, what makes them active roles of their leaning process.

This approach is much more dynamic in terms of student-instructor and student-student interaction, but it still does not help students improve their communicative skills as much as needed since it is still much course-centred.

2 METHODOLOGY

According to the Distance Education Survey (4), and an equivalent research of New Media Consortium/EDUCAUSE Johnson et al. (5), 71% of higher educational institutions base their e-learning program on some VLE; but, after a decade, VLEs seem to have reached culmination since they were developed under the web 1.0. There is the widespread belief that they do not respond to the real needs of students because of their rigid and hierarchical structure Coopman (6), Wilson et al. (7), Van Harmelen (8). Then, the ideal is to find strategies to integrate VLEs and PLEs, so that the gap between formal and informal learning can be overcome Marín et al. (9).

Since the main goal of language learning is effective communication, through PLE we can develop the educational technology necessary to reproduce the natural way people learn and thus create learning environments suitable for social interaction, informal and collaborative learning (Annetta et al. [10], Martindale and Dowdy [11], Godwin-Jones [12], Sclater [13]; Van Harmelen [8]).

As Panagiotidis (14) remarks, ‘regarding the subject of foreign language, the creation of personalized and adaptable learning environments that extend the traditional approach of a course seems to promise a more holistic response to students' needs, who, functioning in the PLE, could combine learning with their daily practice, communicating and collaborating with others, thus increasing the possibilities of access to multiple sources, informal communication and practice and eventually acquiring the foreign language’.

In other words, in the case of language learning, students can use the web 2.0 tools for their own benefit. That is, if they have more difficulty on one productive skill (speaking or writing) than on a receptive one (listening or reading), they can use the tools they need to improve that particular skill, something that has seemed somehow still unattainable with the VLEs.

Therefore, we propose a case study in which we describe the web 2.0 tools to be used to form efficient and easy to use PLEs for students in foreign learning distance learning universities.
2.1 What is a PLE?

Even though there is still no consensus on the definition of PLE (Attwell [16], Educause [16], Panagiotidis [14]), it is somehow clear that it is the future of e-learning [15]); but we are not going to address this issue here, since its discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

The future of online education is flexible learning Gordon (3), where students can choose how, when and where to access learning materials as part of their learning process. Thus, students organize their own learning based on their needs. In a PLE students are responsible for their own learning process at the same time that they can reflect on the tools and resources that help them learn best. In the case of language learning, PLE becomes a powerful tool since students can work more on the skills they have more difficulty with.

According to Chatti et al. (17), Martindale and Dowdy (11), Drachsler et al. (18), Severance et al. (19), Johnson and Liber (20), Lubensky (21), and others, PLEs present certain basic characteristics:

- PLEs are open systems that are controlled by individuals and function independent of the educational institution. They do not obey any standards and do not require the existence of a centrally controlled data storage space but take advantage of the knowledge which is distributed among various sources and communities. In this sense, PLEs do not share the concept of system administrator. Users should be able to create/discover the capabilities of the system themselves.

- PLEs are customizable, as they allow the user the use of a variety of web 2.0 tools, digital resources and digital services to which the individual currently subscribes (including the institutional VLE). The users can create connections with any systems and services they are interested in themselves and arrive at knowledge through aggregation, linking and metadata tagging.

- They concentrate all the tools users need in one place/environment and simplify their management. They also allow interconnection with other personal spaces for effective knowledge sharing and collaborative knowledge creation. Thus, users can cooperate with others building a temporary ecosystem without attaching themselves to a formal organization or institution.

- They promote informal and lifelong learning: Learning does not end when a course ends—like in an LMS—in PLEs learning continues and can connect formal, informal, and lifelong learning opportunities in a learner-centred way. They are a Bottom-up approach that is dictated by the users’ needs.

Thus, PLEs can become a digital substitute of the natural environment where students learn outside institutional space. Social networks and PLEs can reproduce the informal way of learning that people use in their everyday life, through study groups, discussions or collaboration with peers (peer networks or communities of practice) and substitute managed learning that takes place in a VLE (11).

As PLEs are not course-centred, students may adjust their learning environment to their needs so that they can develop the necessary learning skills. Consequently, in a PLE students can form their own personal learning space using a combination of tools, applications and services that can support them in the learning process (14).

2.2 A PLE Case Study

The Case Study will be conducted in the courses ‘Professional Communication in English’ and ‘Scientific Communication in English’, in the first and second course of Human Nutrition and Dietetics studies at Universidad Isabel I de Castilla, that will be held between September 2017 and December 2017, and January 2018 and April 2018 respectively.

Both courses use a Moodle virtual classroom. In both courses SymbalooEDU will be presented in a webinar on the tool. In this webinar we will explain to students how to use this tool to organize their PLEs. The use of the tool will not be part of the continuous assessment, so its use will be optional. The intention of the webinar is to make students aware of their learning process by reflecting on the tools they normally use to study the language, the webpages they usually visit, etc.

The courses methodology will be based on projects. In the case of ‘Communication in English’, students will have to design a prototype for a course in a virtual environment, an IT strategy or virtual
community in groups. In "Scientific Communication in English", students will have to elaborate multimedia material in groups too.

2.2.1 Questions to be posed

With this case study we want to find out some issues related to PLEs in students' EFL learning:

− What tools can foster the construction of a PLE in EFL learning?
− Do you consider building your own PLE at university useful?
− What is the user experience with this kind of environment?
− What kind of tools form part of a student's PLE?

2.2.2 Case Study Methodology

For this case study, an intentional sample of 50 students in each course will be used. Most of these students are expected to be men or women in their mid twenties and thirties, with family and employed, as they are the typical profile at Isabel I University. Knowledge on technologies and web tools is assumed since this university is fully online based.

As we have stated above, SymbalooEDU is the web service we will use. It allows the customization and configuration of one's own homepage - called webmix - by building it with visual blocks to access preferred services and bookmarks. It can be used to create one’s own PLE but it is also interesting, for instance, as a student or teacher's tool or repository for a course.¹

To obtain information on how students customize their PLE we will follow the three data-gathering procedures established by Marín et al. (9):

• Student questionnaires in two stages. Their objective is to collect data related to the students' experience with this prototype of PLE. For example, items such as usefulness for learning, personalization possibilities or ease of use will be taken into account;
• Observation of the screenshots of the students’ environments. For this, students will be asked to send us a screenshot of their PLEs in SymbalooEDU through the questionnaires;
• Interviews with the course instructors and with some students. This procedure will be applied so as to triangulate data and to represent graphically what learning processes were performed and what tools were used to do them.

Then, the case study will be conducted in three phases, as follows:

• First phase: Design of a preconfigured environment with SymbalooEDU. This will contain basic institutional services and some generic ones.
• Second phase: Student's webinar on the use of SymbalooEDU. The previously designed environment will be shared with the students in the webinar. During this session, students will be encouraged to use the tool to organize their own PLE by modifying the initial elements. Use of the tool will not be included in the course continuous assessment, so its use will optional and voluntary;
• Third phase: Appraisal of the students’ experience. Data collection will be conducted through students questionnaires, observation of student PLEs and interviews with the instructors and some students.

3 RESULTS

Since this is a preliminary design for a case study to be implemented in the next academic course, we present here based on Marín et al. (9) the data-gathering procedures that we will use to collect data.

The information will be retrieved with two questionnaires and students interviews. Between the first and the second questionnaire, students will be asked to answer some questions related to the following issues:

a) Usefulness of the environment (both questionnaires);

¹ Some other uses of SymbalooEDU in education can be seen at: http://www.symbalooedu.com/
b) Ease of use (both questionnaires);
c) Customization and adaptation to the preconfigured environment (both questionnaires);
d) Use of other tools different from SymbalooEDU (only second questionnaire);
e) Use of the SymbalooEDU tool (only second questionnaire);
f) Overall assessment of the case study and the suitability of the tool (only second questionnaire).

The data collection will be enriched by asking the students to provide screenshots of the PLEs questionnaires, in order to analyse the new content included. Then, we will examine the information retrieved. Environment customization, new blocks and their typology, and degree of adaptation to the preconfigured environment will be considered.

Last but not least, interviews with some students and instructors will also be conducted. In the interviews, the instructors and students will be asked questions to obtain more information about their PLE components. After the interviews, Cmaps will be designed to graphically represent the types of elements included in both the instructors and students PLEs. This representation will follow the classification of tools proposed in Wheeler (22).

4 CONCLUSIONS

SymbalooEDU seems to be an interesting tool for fostering the building of a PLE, especially due to its ease of use and its customization possibilities. It is also considered useful for language learning and we believe it can bring positive results in Spanish EFL undergraduate students improving their communicative skills.

Regarding the possible limitations of this case study, we should highlight the strategy we pretend to follow in the introduction to this tool. As stated above, the use of SymbalooEDU will be optional and not compulsory for the continuous assessment of the course. This can become a strength because students will be free to use it and even give it a personal touch. Another point is that the courses are short: they only last three months, so the case study runs the risk of being considered an isolated case and being reduced to this type of courses.

As for the continuation of this work, we expect to collect more long-term data from this study and to carry out this case study in the first courses of other degrees, as we believe that configuring their own PLE – with SymbalooEDU or other tools – can be helpful for students to track their university studies. Finally, we may also consider the usefulness of other types of tools such as Netvibes to build the PLE by carrying out similar case studies.

REFERENCES


