Title of paper: 'Proyecto INTER-ES': An experience applied to language teaching

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Theme: Theme 4 – Innovative Methodologies and Learning Experiments

Keywords: moodle, learning experiment, Spanish language

ABSTRACT

This paper explains what INTER-ES project is, how it was designed, how it was implemented and what the results were. INTER-ES project is a learning experience based on the use of Moodle as a work platform and Spanish business language course, with the following aims: improving communication skills, promoting intercultural communication, implementing business knowledge and abilities, improving those specific skills for the information society, and developing negotiation strategies and teamwork.

The novelty of the project lies in the approach taken. For one thing, INTER-ES project is not based on a “teaching method.” It is a method of collaborative learning opportunities. Students put into practice the language skills and business knowledge acquired in the course of their respective degrees. Also, INTER-ES project is a business language course that combines the use of technology and distance learning with face-to-face activities, or "blended learning."

The assigned tasks and role-plays foster dialogue and negotiation skills. Oral abilities are practised first off platform among the team members of the same country, and then on the platform, where we find a communication structure that promotes intercultural dialogue while training written skills. The final result is a complex structure of interrelated tasks implemented in a way that integrates the contents of business/administration studies, the cultural standards of each country, ICT skills and foreign languages.
1. INTRODUCTION

The XXI century brings with it the presence of technology in all areas of life (business, health, economics, politics, etc.). The citizen cannot live without it, nor are the possibilities of technology outside the scope of education. One can see how the new tools of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) are being integrated into the classroom. Traditional models of teaching are being, if not replaced, then at least reinforced or supplemented with new tools. The teacher (digital immigrant) must adapt to the current technology and exploit the possibilities that this medium offers, not only because it opens a fascinating technological panorama, with cutting edge teaching tools, but also because the student feels comfortable in the digital realm and is especially attracted to everything that the Internet has to offer. In a way, the teacher finds in the developments of the web a way to build bridges to the digital natives (Prensky, 2001), thus bridging the gap that often exists between the learner and the teacher. Therefore it is vital that the teacher be able to leverage the familiarity and skill with which the student is able to handle the Society of Knowledge, and put that skill into practice.

But no less important has been the new world which contributed to the arrival of the Internet - or rather, the democratization of internet-globalization. With the internet, a new world political map has been created, where the borders are diluted and time is more flexible. This new international geo-political map has led to a change in interpersonal relationships, which significantly affected the ways of working at both local and international levels. The globalization that had been developed over the second half of the twentieth century has now been reinforced by new communication tools, tools that have arisen due to the establishment of the net. New modes of communication involve new relations, new ways of working and of course, new ways of learning and teaching a second language. On the one hand, globalization justified, more than ever, the creation of virtual transnational scenarios where students from different countries could come in contact with no space-time difficulties. Furthermore, new technologies applied to the world of education developed the tools needed to facilitate communication, interaction and international collaboration. But the teacher has to handle not only new technologies, developed from the last decade of the 90s. He also has to be alert to new pedagogical approaches and see how they improve the learning process. In this regard the new context of higher education which emerged from the Bologna Declaration (1999) is significant, that aside from important structural changes in the university, a new relationship between the teacher and the learner has emerged: the teacher yields his prominence, and the student takes the reins of his learning process through active participation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 The project comes supported, as we have announced, by the change of scenario that exists in university education, on the one hand, and on the other, by the use that university education makes of technological advances. Think for a moment about the new guidelines that govern the current European university. Before the start of the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the teacher had the prominent position, and the student was a passive recipient, a mere receiver of information. However, with the introduction of EHEA the learner is placed in a more...
prominent place in the learning process. He leaves the secondary role and starts a new relationship between the learner and the teacher, so that the dependence of the student on the teacher is modified, and it is the student who is given the task of converting information into knowledge, to assume the necessary skills for his future professional performance (Font and Masferre, 2010).

A brief description of the current university landscape should lead us, first, to the demands on education proposals for the 21st century by the Delors Report (back in the mid-90)\(^1\), which broke sharply with previous educational schemes. Learning to do, learning to know, learning to live with others and learning to be introduced certainly marked a change in what has been the main objectives of the education system. Designed in a linear fashion in the traditional system, they become complex and multidimensional, and so are reflected in different educational guides designed for college courses. In short, the educational challenges of the 21st century (defined primarily by the EHEA and the Delors report) also add a new component: the presence of Tics.

Innovative experiences, as well as literature and encounters are numerous (Alsic, LLT, Recall, Call, Calico, e-FLT, WorldCALL, Eurocall, Jalta Call, Coltt, Interact, OfficeInterActors) and show the effort being made by university faculty to adapt to new educational and technological challenges (Feixas, 2000). For its part, the University of Navarra has been venturing into a department of Educational Innovation. Every year it promotes the implementation of educational projects that demonstrate concern for planning and innovative developments, among other objectives. Encouraged by this initiative, last September the ISSA-School of Management Assistant presented INTER-ES project to the department, the educational idea of which reflected the work carried out for several years in ISSA, whose faculty has developed different active methodology-based courses supported by the use of ICT and Web 2.0 technology. In this case, INTER-ES project was born as an educational project designed to teach Spanish for business, therefore, the aim of this paper is to explain what the INTER-ES project is, and how it was developed. We believe that we have an example of how foreign language teachers can use the tools that ICT offers, how one of the learning management systems (LMS from now on), in this case Moodle, can create a suitable educational background and be potentially useful to the teacher of any foreign language.

2.2. Why Moodle as a platform?

Moodle, created in 2002, now manages some figures that speak for themselves. It is used in over 200 countries, has been translated into over 70 languages, and has over 20 million users, this suggests that this is a valuable tool (www.moodle.org). Without a doubt, one of the great advantages of Moodle comes from being an open source platform. In contrast to private platforms, e.g. Blackboard or WebCT (Bradnl, 2005), which seek personal gain achieved through licensing, the open source LMS are made available to all educational communities free of charge (GNU GPL)\(^2\). In this sense, Moodle and other LMS such as ATutor\(^3\), are an open social community without borders, and a multilingual service to scientific and educational training.

Another great advantage of Moodle is the ability to upload the activities created by any user in a simple and almost intuitive manner. Moodle offers a module for tasks such as

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1 Delors 1996, 34
2 For more on GNU GPL, see http://www.gnu.org.
3 For more on Atutor, see http://www.atutor.ca.
activities, forums, wikis, and glossaries, which not only guarantees effective access to information, but also involves the teacher and the learner in the course development, improving the results obtained, the acquisition of skills and increasing motivation.

Collaborative and interdisciplinary learning is another possibility that learning with Moodle involves. We have in mind the debates that students will engage in so they will have to do the tasks individually, but instead are generated after a thoughtful and serious negotiation. In these previous meetings, the learner has to implement not only the language skills learned in language classes. It is also necessary to promote and apply the knowledge of the business world acquired in the remaining areas, which make up their studies.

Since Moodle is an online learning platform, it captures some of the advantages it had achieved with distance learning, its immediate predecessor at the classroom level. Noteworthy in this regard is its easy accessibility (which reduces spatial and temporal barriers), its extraordinary flexibility (weaving personal planning and respect for individual tempo with the corresponding reserves for the course), the possibility of course diversification (non-hierarchical construction of knowledge), and the disappearance of the emotional dimension of teacher-student contact, a feature of the class sessions. But undoubtedly the most important aspect, taking into account the new European framework, is the fact that in Moodle the learner is central in the process of learning, building knowledge itself.

2.3. But once the work platform has been selected, some methodological-didactic reflections for any educational project should be considered. To design an adequate and effective e-learning stage, it is essential to have clear and predefined elements: the given starting point and the objectives to be achieved. In the INTER-ES project, our participants are students with a B1\(^4\) in Spanish, plus related degrees from the area of business and administration, which will allow us, with a moderate effort, to work in a virtual environment similar to any real business situation.

Secondly, it is essential to consider the needs of students. INTER-ES project is not a Spanish business course which replaces the teacher-student class, which presents the linguistic tools necessary for written and oral communication in business world. INTER-ES project is designed as a support tool, complementary to "traditional" classroom instruction for students who wish to reinforce what is learned in the classroom through the use of role-play that emulates the life of business. We understand, therefore, that our project is to be presented as a collaborative tool that utilizes the different educational models (traditional and virtual, blended learning), intending first that the learning process be stimulating and motivating for students, especially if we take into account that he will take charge of his learning.

Third, it is important to overcome one of the most common problems of student e-learning: loneliness and isolation. In this regard, we believe that the structure of INTER-ES project, where participants are organized into three teams, becomes vital so that the learner does not feel alone, but an important member of a group, his team, and also part of a virtual community – INTER-ES project. Overcoming this problem is essential in language learning, because if there is no social interaction it is impossible to develop communication skills. Therefore, there is not only the student/student relationship, but there is also that of the student/tutor, which we will develop later.

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Finally and probably the most important element to keep in mind is to clearly define the objectives. In the INTER-ES project the main objective was to create a work environment that would reproduce a business cycle: three fictitious companies that have transactions with each other would work together. At first, students discuss how to resolve a given situation in accordance with the knowledge of the acquired company, and then produce appropriate written records. Then, they produce a written agreement, on one hand, about the communication situation, and secondly, according to the instructions suggested and language skills acquired in the classroom. Each of the answers would determine how business relations started. It is not simply producing a text -an exercise that usually arises in class- but the student and other team members analyze the different existing views regarding the information to be provided, how it must be provided, maintain a critical and open attitude, and see how it is enriched with the proposals of their peers.

3. PROJECT DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF INTER-ES

We have developed this eight-week project for the 2010/11 academic year, with students from four countries: Germany, Spain, Finland and Romania. In the first week and to avoid any problems arising from the platform management, part of the tasks are related to Moodle familiarization (shipping documents, changing passwords, tests, etc). The project, as has already been mentioned, is intended as a complementary activity, which is optional outside the strictly academic schedule. Therefore, students do not get ECTS, but a Diploma if they complete more than 75% of the planned activities.

Participants are organized into three teams, each supervised by a tutor. It is essential for proper functioning of the project that the members of each team be in the same place. It is fundamental that each of the teams come from different countries, since one of the goals we have set is to raise intercultural awareness to see how the training in each country influences the selection and content approaches.

The center of the project presents a fictional scenario that recreates a typical situation in the world of business: three firms are contacted to respond to each other’s needs. In the first edition of INTER-ES project, we propose the following scenario: a hotel chain (Team 1) wants customized Spanish wine bottles. They request information from a Spanish winery (Team 2), who in turn must notify one of its suppliers of bottles what the customer is requesting (Team 3). Each of the companies -hotel chain, warehouse and bottler supplier- is represented by a team. They must establish a communication triangle in which each team must contact his supplier or customer. Each week activities are established that each team has to address. There are two phases. In the first phase, the tutor explains his team’s objectives, reviews certain linguistic structures that appear in practice and lists the tasks to be solved, whether individually or by the group. In the second phase, without the supervision of the tutor, the team discusses the activity and begins drafting documents that will later be uploaded to the platform.

It is worth remembering that every week, at least one activity per team and one per individual must be uploaded to the platform. Through the following weeks, negotiations between companies will progress to the completion of a business cycle: brochure design, information requests, response, orders, receipt, and payment. The structure of each week is roughly the following:
• a document related to the business world (letter, email, brochure ...), done as a team.
• personal involvement also related to business life, personal appearance for an interview, job description in the company, etc.
• a glossary, where each participant will be placing new words every week. It is also possible that the tutor will include words he considers relevant to the document being worked on.
• a forum where the participants is free to talk about himself, his concerns, hobbies, projects and recommendations. A relaxed place such as a cafe where participants can ask questions, share information, etc.
• a personal blog, where each participant will assess the development of the week: strengths, weaknesses, improvements.
• a technical forum to resolve any questions (technical, methodological, linguistic).

The proposed activities combine knowledge of business and administration, corporate communications, marketing, intercultural communication, ICT, and of course the B1 communication skills in Spanish. This will generate a structure very similar to what may occur in real life, aimed at achieving the following objectives:

1. Integrate cultural differences arising from international communication between corporate entities in different countries.
2. Improve knowledge related to the area of business and administration, particularly those related to the countries involved (market functions, business organization, human resources, etc.).
3. Improve the skills and techniques for understanding and writing technical and professional writing in Spanish, as well as oral skills.
4. Apply knowledge of software and new applications that have emerged in Web 2.0.
5. Develop key skills for career success: capacity for teamwork and negotiation skills, personal growth and a continued desire for learning.

In carrying out the tasks the student or team should not feel alone, because there is an accompanying key figure at all times: the tutor. The tutor is a key component of the smooth operation of the e-learning course. His role is goes far beyond simply the technical supervision of the proper management of the platform. He is there to facilitate, guide, support, encourage, assist in conducting activities, anticipate the problems that may arise, evaluate and analyze the activities, in addition to meeting each and every one of the team members in order to get the best out of them (Pampaloni, 2005).

In short, the student should always be advised and made to feel comfortable with the jump into Moodle, which does not mean that the tutor takes precedence over the student role in learning, but rather helps him make the best of himself. Therefore, first, the tutor must be an expert in the content, i.e. has to meet communicative content provided and the reasons for the activity. Second, he must be a specialist in Moodle, anticipating the technical problems that the student might find - the tool should not block him. And thirdly, he must monitor the behavior of students, encouraging them and urging them to follow the expected rate, intervening if necessary. There must be an element of socialization, creating an appropriate climate for learning, facilitating interpersonal relationships, keeping track of student activities, and keeping the discussions focused on the most relevant aspects. In short, although not participating in the platform, the tutor will be largely responsible for the success of the project.
Finally, the concepts of monitoring and evaluation are essential to the success of the project. Monitoring activities provide regularly collected information, while the evaluations are intended to give an assessment to each of the activities. To evaluate each of the students, we concentrate first on the level of participation and second on level learning. To monitor the first (participation), the following data were collected: number of connections made, number of messages sent to the forum, number of activities, number of posts in the blog.

It is interesting to highlight the usefulness of data collection through monitoring, both for the evaluation of the participation of each student and the assessment of the course structure. In fact, analyzing the data of the total connections of the course, the total number of messages sent by all pupils during the activities, you can reach conclusions about the quality of the project and the overall process. Also in this regard we have prepared a questionnaire for each week in which students reflect on the values and knowledge as if it were a portfolio.

We have also believed it appropriate to use the assessment tool that each activity provides to measure the level of learning, on the basis that the rating that the tutor gives must be an incentive for students to continue to improve. Both the evaluation and the questionnaire should be performed for every student, and all or part of the following criteria will be considered, depending on the activity:

- New knowledge and awareness of Business & Administration culture in different European countries, experience in management information systems.
- Spanish language skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing.
- Computer skills, including use of Internet and Web 2.0 technology.
- Ability to work in a team, negotiation and persuasion skills.
- Intercultural awareness, confidence building, entrepreneurship.
- Motivation for lifelong learning and time, and stress and change management.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS

Our experience with Moodle with the First Edition of INTER-ES project leads to the following conclusions:

1. The Moodle platform is suitable for building an international business environment where it is possible to develop intercultural awareness.
2. This platform combined with an adequate methodological design offers students the opportunity to practice their communication skills in an environment of authentic communication.
3. Moodle is adapted to new learning models, enabling teamwork and communication. From this perspective the students share information, build knowledge, generate skills and attitudes, always from previous experiences (in the classroom or in real life), to the extent that they engage in the acquisition of new proposals and interact. Therefore, the platform enables a type of joint student-centered learning.
4. Unfortunately, we have identified some limitations especially in regard to real-time communication. Moodle offers only text and not audio chat or video, so it is necessary to leave the platform and use other tools like Skype to get in touch with other groups. Even so, oral production is done mainly in the negotiation team.
However, talking only of the platform in these conclusions is insufficient. Any effective methodological approach must be able to incorporate an appropriate technological tool. In this case Moodle has shown that it is, along with an adequate methodological design, interesting and motivating. Therefore, if we want to advance in the process of educational innovation, it is imperative that two distinct areas, technology and pedagogy, come together in order to build effective learning methods, whose motto is to be Docere, Movere, Delectare: Teach, Excite, Delight.

References


Biography of author

PhD in Classics from the University of Navarra. She has taught at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Navarra for 7 years. Currently she is an assistant professor in ISSA-School of Management Assistance, where she teaches subjects related to the area of Communication in Business and Spanish as a foreign language. Her areas of research include new technologies related to the world of education and communication, as well as Spanish for specific purposes.