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Critical reflections on teaching ESP through constructivist, communicative and collaborative technological integrated procedures

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Abstract

According to the constructivist approach, that considers learning an active process of construction in which the student occupies a central position, this paper is an attempt to critically reflect on the approaches of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) carrying out real practices in internet and using different multimedia tools. Taking into account that the acquisition of a foreign language implies training in real contexts and social interaction, this study analyses the use of new pedagogical tendencies such as the Web 2.0. (Wikis, Blogs, Blackboard, etc.) and internet (online dictionaries, YouTube, Google search, etc.) as effective resources to carry out communicative and task-based activities for teaching ESP. This study, based on the impressions and experiences of developing constructive real tasks related to a professional subject using new technologies, reviews not only current language teaching paradigms related to social participation, but also how the technical integration of the different linguistic skills promotes communicative learning in real contexts. The findings from this exploratory study provide a better understanding on the efficiency of technology in teaching English for Specific Purposes.

1. Introduction

This experience shows a reflection on teaching English for Specific Purposes through communicative and

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collaborative activities to students from different professional disciplines making use of new technologies as an efficient means for teaching a second language.

Considering that the acquisition of a foreign language involves communication and social interaction, this paper explores the use of different technological applications (Wikis, Blogs, Blackboard, etc.), internet (on-line dictionaries, Skype, YouTube, Google search engine, etc.) and electronic dictionaries to carry out didactic communicative tasks.

This project reviews and proposes, therefore, a reflection on the development of real projects related to the field of study and professional profile of the student making use of technology as an ideal way to encourage English language acquisition and to enhance the four language skills while promoting collaboration in the target language carrying out communicative tasks.

1. Aims

This project aims to reflect on the acquisition and practice of the English language by using internet, web 2.0 and different media tools while developing tasks and activities related to the professional profile of the student. This reflection will be based on the achievement of the following objectives projected at the beginning of the course of several assorted ESP subjects, consisting on:

- Facilitating the acquisition of English by using internet and different media tools such as the Web 2.0 (Blogs, Wikis, Blackboard, etc.)
- Enhancing the technical integration of the four language skills (listening, writing, speaking and reading)
- Practicing the English language and the different skills by developing communicative tasks
- Promoting interaction and collaboration in the target language by working on texts, images, sound or other multimedia content
- Using technology to work out, edit, publish and share information

The acquisition of a foreign language involves communication and social interaction (Miller, 2007), therefore this experience focuses on encouraging collaboration between students and teachers using internet and various digital applications for working out information related to the acquisition of English as a Second language in different professional degrees such as Degree in Infant Education and Degree in Tourism and Business Administration. The integration and use of technology contributes to the development of active learning.

2. Methodology

This initiative is based on social constructivism and the communicative approach which, according to Dudeney and Hockley (2007), is developed with technological resources such as internet and Web 2.0 as they are completely adapted to the new educational trends and involve:

- Interaction; open and active participation of teachers and students
- The production and organization of reading and writing content in English in Blogs, Wikis, Forums, etc.
- The ability to share experiences
- Internet use in a personal, participative, collaborative and reflective way
- Dynamic learning
- Ability to collect information directly produced by the student
- Considering the Web as a useful resource not only to read, listen or watch contents in English, but use it to
  communicate using video and/or other multimedia content.

2. Development

According to Beatty (2003:79), opportunities for second language acquisition can be offered at the computer (with technology) as learners are exposed to new language and when learners are prompted to engage in collaboration that

promotes negotiation of meaning. Dudeney and Hockley (2007) also consider that social software supports the teaching of languages. According to the ideas of these authors, the main action of the project is based on developing communicative tasks and activities for learning English for Specific Purposes in different professional degrees –for example the ones previously mentioned- through the creation, management and use of various technological resources (internet, virtual platform, multimedia, web 2.0 and e-dictionaries) as it is described below:

a) **Internet (Web)**: to accede to specialized ESP resources

b) **Virtual Platform (blackboard):** to manage and organize the subject and its contents **Multimedia (video, audio, copyright programs, power point, etc.)**: to present ESP content: adverts, presentations, news, lesson plans, etc.

c) **Web 2.0 (Blogs & wikis)**: to develop, edit and publish personal tasks, projects and ensure a collaborative approach.

d) **Electronic dictionaries (e-dictionary):** to promote learning

Internet enables multimedia interaction and contains encyclopaedic reference resources, publications, movies, etc. that ensure learning and entertainment. Using the web, students can easily acceded to all kinds of information: from news reports and business articles in the subject *Business English (*Tourism and Business Administration) to countless resources and texts available at Google to work out English language. For the Degree *Infant Education,* the web offers some language teaching sites such as EFL / TESOL with discussion forums or interactive exercises on language, etc. as well as websites that allow teachers´ lesson plans or creating interactive exercises using authoring software: Hot Potatoes, Quia, etc. Additionally, internet allows using audio applications with text transcription (YouTube, RealPlayer, etc.) that students can include in their projects as required in Blackboard, the official virtual platform of Universidad de Alcalá.

The virtual platform (Blackboard) allows creating, managing and organizing content via internet. Blackboard can be used mainly as the formal student guide for all subjects including a printable teaching plan, activities, references, chat, forum & e-mail as well as links to other sites and resources (wikis, blogs, videos, etc.).

Subsequent tasks can focus on the establishment and development of multimedia and virtual activities that integrate the different language skills. These tasks comprise from writing and oral texts through videos made by the students, to listening and written peer interventions.

Further proposals involve conducting presentations in English (e.g. introducing an international company, a Didactic Unit, etc.) using multimedia, PowerPoint, images, commercial videos, audio, etc. according to the methodology stated in the lecturer´s wiki.

A wiki designed for a specific subject is the ideal container for presenting tasks and examination materials, exercises to practice all language skills and resources for developing ESP such as writing business emails or carrying out audio phone tasks, etc. In addition, the wiki can be considered to include information related to the specific topic of interest of a particular subject and promote discussions and to enable the visualization of specific videos, presentations, etc. The wiki can also include links to professional sites, interactive activities, grammar references and an online dictionary like *Wordreference* to help students carry out the suggested tasks.

E-dictionaries usually contain searching tools, pronunciation practice with audio and transcripts of each word, thesaurus and synonyms. Some of them -as *Cobuild*- also include extensive database of contemporary texts, exercises, information about errors and bookmarks.

Finally, to enhance participation students will be required to create a blog and attach it to the wiki, as well as to write posts and discuss in the forum the specific content: from business news to lesson plans for *Infant Education*.

This resource promotes the development of the different language skills while working on content as it includes links to relevant information, images, forum, and videos with commentaries in which students present orally articles related to their topic of interest to be evaluated.

All skills (professional listening, writing and readings presented in Blogs and wiki) will be evaluated and self-assessed according to detailed guidelines. Concerning speaking, to be carried out in oral presentations, both oral skills and content can be individually and peer evaluated. Self-assessment will contrast the level of learning expected and the real achievements according to the criteria outlined in the curriculum and stated in Blackboard. It will serve to question the progress and difficulties of learning ESP in order to take corrective actions.

3. Reflections

Learning ESP with technological resources such as internet, virtual platforms, multimedia, the web 2.0 (Wiki and blog) and e-dictionaries can contribute to achieve effective results as it enhances the development of the four language skills carrying out interactive activities and it enables the development of multimedia tasks, processing specific texts as well as the practice of speaking and audio tasks through online activities and multimedia content.

The use of technology in teaching ESP enhances therefore the acquisition of the foreign language as each of the activities projected promotes the development of different communicative content. Multimedia and virtual activities promote constructive learning as well as collaborative learning as detailed below.

Searching, publishing and analysing information related to the field of study and professional profile of the student is a good example of constructive learning where students build up their knowledge autonomously and collaboratively through the exchange of real information extracted from internet. An example in English for *Infant Education* can be searching in the web for lessons plans for children to be published in a blog or video so that other classmates can post their comments about their peers´ use of specific written content and language. As these resources do not include grammar correction function, language errors have to be externally evaluated.

Presenting specific content in PowerPoint format with images, video and audio about current international companies carried out and analysed by groups of *Business English* students, for instance, can lead to the creation of a favourable pedagogical environment and a motivational collaborative climate while students develop speaking and communicative skills. However, it is not suggested to carry out presentations merely using multimedia (video recording, Skype, etc.) as technology does not solve problems of face to face oral communication.

Blog creation and using multimedia to work out specific content in the second language contributes to the development of independent learning. Learning is promoted not only by the individual search for information, but also by having to present factual information in the second language using innovative resources such as videos, wikis and Blogs. Technology has also been considered to enhance collaborative work assuring participation in forums and the analysis of information published in the web 2.0 by other authors and students.

Assessment and analysis of multimedia and virtual activities performed by students, consisting on evaluating language and content, involve a reflection not only on the factual mistakes carried out in the performance of the different foreign language skills, but also on the specific practice when carrying out, for example, an effective micro-teaching using multimedia, a good business virtual presentation, or writing an effective business blog. Virtual tools do not help, though, to evaluate proficiency in all its effects (accuracy, aptitude, etc.), which requires personal and proficient assessment.

4. Conclusions

As previously stated, technology promotes the acquisition of ESP with the use of multimedia tools, platform, internet, web 2.0 (blogs and wikis) as it facilitates the practice of the four language skills (speaking, writing, listening and reading) autonomously and collaboratively.

Exposure of students in real contexts by having to search for information in English on the web related to their professional profile and the publication in a collaborative environment such as blogs and Wikis necessarily implies the practice of English language and of the different skills. The aims of this proposal are achieved by requiring the students to read and discuss different current texts of interest to be reported published and commented both written and orally by video, which also implies peer listening and writing.

Multimedia presentations on content related to the professional profile of the student (e.g. microteaching in *Infant Education*), also favour the practice and acquisition of the English language as it integrates oral and listening activities by including links to audio or videos in English existing in different collaborative media like YouTube, websites, professional blogs, etc.

Participation in discussion forums related to the student professional profile provides opportunities for contact and interaction between students and teachers. This asynchronous context leaves time for students to read, understand and respond to texts –with the help of an electronic dictionary- in another language about specific vocabulary without the pressure of real-time interaction, which contributes to the development of the second language (Crystal, 2001).

As we have observed, the recognition of technology and the web 2.0 as facilitator of access to different media and provider of instruction and information, contributes to develop cooperative learning and social constructivism through the development of virtual tasks using social media (Blogs, wikis) at the same time as it facilitates interaction and real communication (e-mail, YouTube, chats, etc.) with a methodology focused on students' interaction and collaboration.

However, technology does not solve problems of face to face oral communication, doesn´t include precise grammar correction function and does not develop oral proficiency in all its effects, which implies the indispensable figure of an expert to point up errors and corrective actions. Despite these disadvantages, it can be considered that technology provides motivating quality situations that ensure language acquisition and ESP learning carrying out didactic constructivist, communicative and collaborative procedures.

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