

E-LEARNING TOOLS FOR E. F. L. TUITION AT UNIVERSITY

A Focus on Writing, Reading, Listening and Speaking Skills

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Keywords: E-learning, EFL, Writing, Reading, Speaking, Listening.

Abstract: This paper reports an ongoing experience integrating the use of e-learning in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) university tuition. Focusing on such skills for the language-learning process as speaking, listening, reading and writing, we discuss the teaching-and-learning strategies activated throughout the undergraduates' use of the virtual laboratory set up to allow EFL learners access the online lexical and grammatical resources designed to implement the programme.

1 INTRODUCTION

More and more experiences are currently attempting to integrate e-learning and blended learning processes in Spain not only within English Philology undergraduate studies, but also within English-language subjects taught in university degrees other than English Philology. Recent research on English-as-a-Foreign-Language (henceforth EFL) teaching and methodology is focusing on the use and benefits of Internet tools (Gitsaki and Taylor, 2000; Teeler and Gray, 2000; Warschauer and Kern, 2000; Dudenay, 2001; Stephenson, 2001; Pile, 2004; Lavid, 2005). This paper describes how the use of an appropriate self-study methodology may contribute to using Internet resources as an instrument for improving the language competence of university students of English. This paper has been produced thanks to the postdoctoral scholarship of the JCCM (Consejería de Educación y Ciencia), fellowship number 05/25.

The case study in point presents an ongoing experience developed with undergraduate EFL students from the English Department, University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain). After discussing the fundamental role of the multimedia language laboratory in this process, a selection of resources for the acquisition of listening, speaking, reading and writing are introduced. A methodology for the self-access use of such e-learning instruments is presented next. The results obtained to date are

finally considered, focusing on possible generalizations of the experience.

2 A CASE OF INTRODUCTION OF E-LEARNING TOOLS IN E.F.L. UNIVERSITY TUITION

2.1 Multimedia Language Laboratories and E.F.L.

Most English departments in Spanish universities are provided with multimedia language laboratories with access to the Internet. Although undergraduates are often encouraged to draw upon such online resources actively in order to improve their linguistic competence, they often claim to feel overwhelmed by the chaos and amount of available online resources.

The English-Department multimedia language laboratory at Castilla-La Mancha university includes different types of materials for language learners, to wit, traditional didactic materials; authentic materials more or less didactically-biased; teacher-created resources; reference works; assessment tests; documentaries; films; etc. Such materials and documents are in book-, video-, audio- or CD-format. In addition to such documents, the language laboratory has become a virtual laboratory and includes a selection of websites and online tools

specifically designed for EFL learners. Such websites have been placed on the screen of individual booths in the form of links, but may also be accessed from the laboratory web page anywhere else. Resources are thus accessed by clicking on their icons. Similarly, an online computerized database provides a catalogue of the resources in the language laboratory, considering – whenever it is possible – descriptive parameters such as: title; reference inside the language laboratory; format; author; publishing firm; and type of document.

By and large, users are undergraduates of the B.A. in English Studies, who need to achieve full proficiency in EFL on completion of their studies.

2.2 Compiling Online Resources

In an attempt to implement a profitable self-access process in the course of students' e-learning sessions in the laboratory, a range of online resources specifically designed for EFL learners have been selected. Online tools have been organised according to relevant factors for language learning-and-teaching processes. This classification is as follows: grammar resources; lexical resources; reading resources; listening resources; speaking resources; writing resources; pronunciation resources, and culture and civilization resources.

Nonetheless, online materials are currently undergoing thorough cataloguing, so that learners may direct their self-access activity by selecting materials in accordance with their personal needs. Online resources are consequently being catalogued on the basis of more detailed classification parameters, namely:

- Level: beginners; intermediate; advanced; (post-)Proficiency.
- Field/speciality: English for general purposes; English for specific purposes (business English / English for tourism / English for engineering / etc.); International exam preparation in EFL (Cambridge First Certificate / Cambridge Proficiency / TOEFL / Pittman / Trinity / etc.).
- Learning objectives and communicative skills: oral comprehension; written comprehension; spoken production; written production; grammar; vocabulary; pronunciation and intonation, culture and civilization.
- Type of exercises and activities: level tests; cloze tests; rephrasing; multiple-choice exercises; repetition exercises and drills; comprehension activities; dictations;

translations; guided activities; creative activities.

- Genres: films; documentaries; short stories; newspaper articles; reviews; etc.
- Further categories of practice: British and American English.
- Register (formal and informal English / slang / spoken English / etc).
- Internet collaborative tools: e-mail; chatrooms; forums and newsgroups; distribution lists; search engines; etc.

2.3 Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking Online Resources

The range of online resources available in the virtual language laboratory comprises, among other materials, the following ones:

2.3.1 Reading

Interactive reading-comprehension and use-of-English exercises abound on the Internet, for example:

- <<http://www.eslwonderland.com/activities/index.htm>>
- <<http://home.earthlink.net/~eslstudent/read/read.html>>
- <<http://www.rhlschool.com/reading.htm>>.

2.3.2 Listening

Listening-comprehension activities are designed on the basis of recorded conversations and dialogues, e.g.:

- <<http://www.esl-lab.com>>
- <<http://www.eslwonderland.com/activites/index.htm>>
- <<http://englishlistening.com>>.

2.3.3 Writing

Writing-practice material takes advantage of the possibilities of delayed talk online provided by the Internet. There are sites where students may send compositions by e-mail, which are either sent back via e-mail or published on the notice board of a newsgroup once corrected by a teacher (e.g. <<http://www.etutors.virtualave.net>>). Moreover, there are also websites (e.g. <<http://www.cyberjourneys.net/efl/efl.htm>>) for the self-student to contribute to collaborative-writing projects involving other learners around the world. Furthermore, there is a great amount of

pronunciation practice in sites such as <<http://soundsofenglish.org>>.

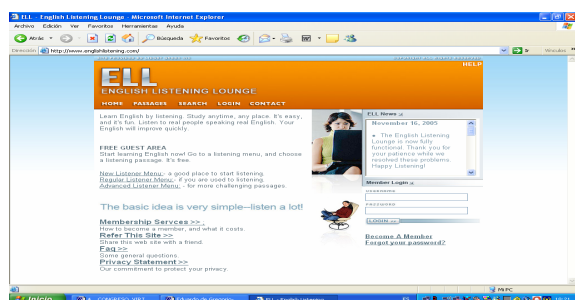


Figure 1: one of the listening websites used.

2.3.4 Speaking

Live talk online in the form of voiced chat-rooms specifically for EFL learners allows them to practise their speaking with other students in real time. That is the case of <<http://www.study.com>> or <<http://www.thesecon.com/aloud/home.htm>>.

2.4 Self-Study Framework for the Use of e-Learning Resources

Students' use of e-learning tools in the multimedia language laboratory is carried out by following a self-study perspective. Therefore, learners draw upon online materials within an autonomous-learning process allowing them to face individual learning needs in order to achieve overall linguistic requirements within their degree studies.

Following the approach to self-access developed at the University of Nancy-2 (France) by various authors (Carette, 2000; Gremmo, 1995a, 1995b; 2000; Gremmo and Riley, 1995; Riley, 1995) at the CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues [Centre for Research and Pedagogic Applications in Modern Languages]), undergraduates' autonomous work is based on a negotiation process between the self-student and the counsellor which considers a number of dimensions defining the learner's self-study programme. Such dimensions include: (1) individual objectives and learning needs; (2) materials and resources to use; (3) methodological approach to follow, chiefly, activation of appropriate teaching-and-learning strategies; (4) timing of personal work; and (5) self-assessment of work undertaken. Personal counselling interviews are often articulated in the form of e-tutoring interactions via e-mail, and help students as a guide for their autonomous

activity in the multimedia language laboratory, ensuring that they employ online resources and collaborative tools in a satisfactory and profitable manner for their self-directed learning process.

2.5 Some Notes on Curriculum Design

The use of e-learning tools may be implemented in an independent way in the multimedia language laboratory with no relation whatsoever with further face-to-face learning processes in institutions like university. The multimedia language laboratory will thus become a resource centre where a team of counsellors will assist self-students in developing their independent-study programmes by monitoring their correct activation of learning strategies in this process.

However, this experience accounts for a *blended-learning* programme integrating e-learning and conventional face-to-face full-time learning, so that English-Philology undergraduates may improve and consolidate their lexical and grammatical competence in a wider EFL-acquisition process. Therefore, two thirds of the total tuition time will be devoted to conventional face-to-face teaching, the remaining third being devoted to the self-access activity developed by students in the language laboratory completing e-learning work. Considering the global EFL learning objectives of the class as a whole, students will draw upon online resources to improve their knowledge of English according to individual needs and personal deficiencies within such general framework, whose basic learning goals are to be achieved by all of the students of EFL at a certain level. This autonomous work will have been supervised by a counsellor after a negotiation process.

3 AN EXPERIENCE IN PROGRESS: RESULTS

For two years now, this integration of self-access use of online resources with face-to-face tuition in EFL subjects has produced positive results. A virtual language laboratory has been set up including an online database facilitating students' personal use of Internet resources designed to develop their lexical and grammatical competence. The multimedia language laboratory has thus been conceived of as a resource centre for the students' autonomous activity. Such independent work guarantees

individual coverage of personal deficiencies and requirements within the broader group-work framework of learning objectives in EFL subjects within the B.A. curriculum in English Studies.

Listening, speaking, reading and writing websites have been chosen as adequate for individual self-access work. This incorporation of self-access use of e-learning tools into the overall face-to-face teaching practices has been institutionalised in the degree curriculum in terms of (i) tuition time in the language laboratory, (ii) students' attendance, (iii) personal-work reports, or (iv) counselling sessions. Secretariat statistics about students' academic results reveal an improvement of undergraduates' results in EFL subjects over the past two years. Thus, average course results were 6.2 in 2003; 6.7 in 2004; and 7.1 in 2005.

Moreover, as substantiated by a number of opinion polls and surveys conducted among students during academic year 2004-2005, this approach evidences a remarkable satisfaction and motivation on the part of learners. By way of example, at the end of year 2004-2005, 71% of interviewed users emphasized the opportunity which they are offered to compensate for individual weaknesses within the overall learning framework of EFL subjects. Also, at the end of the same period, 82% of interviewees claimed to appreciate the guidance provided by counsellors helping to define their e-learning activity to fit in with overall group-work learning goals.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A GENERALISATION OF THE PROJECT

The experience described proposes mechanisms for the creation of e-learning and blended-learning programmes in foreign language tuition at university by drawing upon Internet tools. Such online resources are exploited by means of systematic working methodologies under the broad supervision of counsellors monitoring learners' self-access activity. This use of Internet to consolidate the written and spoken comprehension and production competence of EFL learners happens to be particularly adequate for students who are unable to commit themselves to traditional full-time face-to-face tuition programmes. Focusing on grammar and vocabulary within larger processes of EFL learning at university, this experience has shed light on the new roles that teachers and students may perform

when actively drawing upon e-learning tools for learning EFL and other foreign languages.

This model may therefore be applied in further areas of EFL teaching-and-learning processes, such as grammar, vocabulary, civilization, etc. Similar e-learning processes may be set up for modern languages other than English as well, not only in degree studies specialised in such languages, but also in the foreign-language teaching offered as a complement for other degree courses (e.g. medicine, law, engineering, science, etc.). Such an institution as university may also offer similar tuition projects in programmes of continuing and adult education for individuals whose main objective is not obtaining a university degree but updating their knowledge of foreign languages or starting learning new ones, taking full advantage of e-learning or blended-learning programmes developed by universities.

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