ABOUT THE INTEGRATION OF B-LEARNING IN EPP[1] TO REINFORCE LEARNER AUTONOMY

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Abstract: *This article builds on one particular initiative that has been developed for over a year and brings b-learning to the English for Professional Purposes classroom within a learner-centred context. The first section is dedicated to the description of the conditions that have framed the experience. Then the steps taken to adapt the materials of the subject "Professional Communication" to the b-learning environment MOODLE are addressed. This part also examines the evolution of the subject towards autonomous language learning goals and a negotiated syllabus design more suitable for b-learning. The third part of the paper outlines the results from the actual learning in the virtual environment of a pilot group of students. Qualitative data concerning the benefits of MOODLE within an autonomous learning context are presented. To conclude, it is suggested that prior analysis of each particular teaching situation is very important to decide whether MOODLE will in fact fulfil previous expectations.*

Key words: *b-learning, MOODLE, autonomous learning, negotiated syllabus, material development.*

"Good teachers, like good parents, have always recognised that their students, or their children, are with them for a short time. Thus, their students must be equipped with the means to cope when they are no longer around." (McDevit, 1997: 35)

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been considerable interest in incorporating virtual environments into the university curriculum. At the EUIT de Telecomunicación (UPM), as at many other University Centres across Spain and Europe, teaching methodologies are being revised and changed to meet the requirements established by the new Higher Education system within the framework of the Bologna Process, in many cases, incorporating blended learning "which combines face-to-face and virtual teaching" (Coaten, 2003; Marsh et al., 2003).

Although obviously not every teacher has integrated b-learning into their routine, an increase in the use of virtual learning environments such as Moodle has been quite evident. Most recent literature on b-learning includes considerations concerning the advantages of integrating classroom teaching elements with e-learning (Hoffman, 2001; Driscoll, 2002; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005; Singh, 2003; Whitelock & Jeffs, 2003) and teachers who have incorporated Moodle into their daily class activities have also defended it in terms of helping to increase student participation, interaction and possibly motivation.

Having provided a brief overview of the starting point, this article focuses on one particular initiative that has been developed over a five year period to incorporate b-learning into the English for Professional Purposes classroom (EPP).

The first section is dedicated to the description of the conditions that have framed the experience. In the particular case presented, the integration of b-learning is formulated within a

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[1] English for Professional Purposes

language learning context which advances a more open syllabus and the promotion of learner autonomy, which is also called Self Directed Learning (SDL) (Benson and Voller; 1997; Holec, 1987; Little, 1990, 1991; Rubin, 1987). The main assumption is that an autonomous learner will be a *good learner* and that learning is best achieved, if students play an active role in the process (Holec, 1987).

The evolution of the subject towards autonomous language learning aims and a more nego-tiated syllabus design (Clarke, 1991; Cotterall, 1995) is briefly described in the second section. This experience wants indeed to be a good example of the synthesis of different approaches to syllabus design, a defence of eclecticism and the fusing of elements from various models. Then the steps taken to adapt the syllabus and the routine of the course to the b-learning environment Moodle are addressed: First, a brief revision of the extent to which existing language learning ma-terials were adapted for blended learning use and some examples of these are offered. Secondly, some other features required in the programme to make it suitable for b-learning are examined.

The third part of the paper outlines the results from the actual learning and the potential be-nefits of the virtual environment within a learner centred course. A group of third year students enrolled on the module "Professional Communication" tried and tested the adapted materials in the new b-learning context. From the information gathered, qualitative data concerning the ad-vantages of Moodle in a learner centred context is presented.

To conclude, it is suggested here that in this particular teaching and learning situation (points in the programme, sort of subject, students' and teacher' profile) Moodle has been more helpful than it was thought to be and that b-learning in fact fulfils previous expectations regarding the aim of promoting learner autonomy.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE CONDITIONS WHICH FRAME THE EXPERIENCE

As previously stated, this paper presents a strategy for promoting new methodologies and the integration of b-learning within a learner-centred context. Once the decision to conduct a student-centred language programme has been made the first and probably most important thought for the teachers is that they do not make decisions about the course alone. If students are really to be the centre of the learning process, a student-centred methodology must be principally fostered by means of dialogue between the teacher and the students in order to reach a mutual degree of motivation and engagement (Tudor, 1993).

Following the conclusions of Clarke's research (1989: 26) more than speaking of a negotiated syllabus as a pure model, it is here understood that negotiation can also be an important com-ponent within an external syllabus, which is in fact the predominant environment where students and teachers have to work in Spanish Universities. Consequently, in this case, the starting point is the conviction that students can bring creativity to the classroom through their knowledge and experience. However, the extent to which they are able to get involved in decisions concerning sy-llabus content, the materials to be used, or other course matters, depends on a number of factors and variables such as the student's level of proficiency in the foreign language or their cognitive development. This must be carefully evaluated by the teacher. Also following Clarke (1989:19) only a group with homogeneous goals (see our EPP context) is likely to approach consensus and so a stronger version of the negotiated syllabus can be more suitable in this case.

But this innovation experience aims also to further promote the advance towards learner auto-nomy by integrating b-learning in the EPP classroom. This final aim implies a process of arranging new materials, new tasks, and new learning goals and definitely has direct implications for the

entire curriculum. Connected with the former, another important aim is to present 'self-directed learning' as part of the structure and functioning of the Professional Communication course where it is being developed in a short period of time as, if it is to have any effect, it needs to be internalized during the first days.

3. SOME STAGES TOWARDS NEGOTIATION

The origin of the Professional Communication III syllabus some ten years ago was a subject originally organised around four modules or areas of content: a) socialising, b) telephoning, c) job interviews and d) presentations, where speaking skills (mainly aspects of accuracy and pronunciation) and listening for specific information and for gist formed the basis and main aims of the course. At this stage, a very rigid syllabus predominated:

a) The teacher was the centre of the teaching-learning process (the teacher dictated, the teacher asked students to repeat…)

b) The predominant interaction was among the group of students with the teacher.

c) All the activities were presented in a hand-book which guided the class routine.

d) The students completed the listening tasks in their books during the class and did not have access to the listening materials.

In a second phase, fluency in speaking and listening for general information were also added as general aims of the course. The number of topics for the speaking activities and of listening texts grew rapidly and after two or three courses there was enough material for the teacher to choose from depending on the particular group's needs, general level of language proficiency or preferences.

e) The students were given more responsibility for their learning process (the students decide, the students select or propose…)

f) The interaction was among students within the group and between the students and the teacher

g) Although most activities were presented in a hand-book, extra material was incorporated following the groups' needs. The students did not have access to the listening materials.

There was a third phase in which out of programme, students were also encouraged to give their opinions and feedback to the teacher as part of the course and were frequently asked to incorporate their own ideas. They were invited to participate in self-study tasks, in addition to the class activities. They were also given more responsibility when choosing and deciding about learning matters during the development of the course. The conclusions after these informal experiences were that giving students some control of the situation clearly resulted in greater motivation and better learning.

h) Feedback to the teacher was definitely incorporated into the routine of the class. The future changes in the programme would take into account the students' opinions

i) Some of their ideas were added into the course

4. THE NEW APPROACH TO *PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION*

One of the first and most important decisions that the teacher made concerning this formal experience was that students had to be given maximum responsibility for their learning process. Following Benson (1997: 33), there are a number of areas through which autonomy can be promoted on the scale of political engagement. These are:

1. "authentic interaction with the target language and its users"

Students would use English language in their daily class routine to address the teacher and other students and would have the opportunity to interact with invited lecturers, who were native speakers or speakers from other countries during the course.

2. "collaborative group work and collective decision making"

Students would work in pairs and participate in informal groups throughout the course and also would be part of a formal group to complete some central to the syllabus tasks.

3. "participation in open ended learning tasks"

Students would participate in both written and oral open ended tasks either proposed by the teacher or by other students.

4. "learning about the target language and its social contexts of use"

Students would use the language in a specific social context (professional) and would be able to identify different aspects which make it particular to this context.

5. "exploration of societal and personal learning goals"

Students would identify the companies' needs and their own personal needs either to meet the former or others more general goals.

6. "criticism of learning tasks and materials"

Students would give their opinion about externally imposed materials and learning tasks, their use and effectiveness and would propose alternatives.

7. "self-production of tasks and materials"

The students individually or in groups would propose new materials and tasks which after revision would eventually be included in the following course.

8. "control over the management of learning"

The students would agree to part of the programme with the teacher and would have access to a written partial and final task, an activities calendar copy and a list of expected results. Students would also get punctual and immediate feedback from their teacher or other students after having completed each task or activity.

9. "control over the content of learning"

Students would have a detailed learning guide where the specific contents of the subject were summarised.

10. "control over resources"

Students would have a copy of the reference text book, all the extra materials used including CDs and other listening material and unlimited access to the b-learning platform materials and tasks.

11. discussion and criticism of target language norms.

(Not to be included as it was considered more suitable in other contexts).

These areas of concern and their specific class approach will be later recovered when analysing the student's degree of involvement in accomplishing the aims of the course.

The second and not less important decision about the course concerns the use of Moodle and gives particular relevance to the extent to which the platform helps the student autonomy and increases their responsibility. It is also important to analyze if it actually covers specific needs of each and every single student enrolled in a group.

5. ADAPTATION PRINCIPLES AND BLENDED-LEARNING

Starting out from existing language learning materials and their eventual adaptation for blended learning use, the first logical step taken is to decide which activities, reading texts or texts for listening practice might be more productive for learners as self-access resources, that is to say, which of them are to be adapted to the platform. It is important for teachers to assess the objectives of the adapted materials and the reasons why they are considered to be more effective in the platform rather than in the classroom. Together with this decision teachers will need to think about how the gap created in the traditional course content will be filled. Secondly, classroom teachers will also need to think about how to prepare learners for self-access work and will need to decide how to exploit its outcomes.

Individual difference is one of the principles that guided the selection of materials for adaptation. There are several examples which may illustrate this personal variation in a language group but in the traditional course of Professional Communication, two were the most obvious due to the prominent oral nature of the course: variation in speaking and listening skills. The contribution of Moodle to the subject "Professional Communication III" lies in the opportunities it provides for students to use the language resources to learn, improve, revise or practice at their own pace. There are important advantages with regard to listening materials in Moodle: for students a better quality of the listening materials, their availability at any hour during the day[2], the possibility of listening unlimited numbers of times and with respect to the task the immediacy of the correction and feedback. Teachers on the other hand, are relieved from the obligation to play the listening tracks during the face to face classes and to correct the activities. However, the platform is also a good aid to prepare activities other than listening.

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[2] Although it is true that students need IT resources to enter the platform which could be considered a drawback, in our context (Telecommunications) it is very frequent to find students who have a computer and Internet ADSL coverage in their houses. Furthermore, the EUIT de Telecomunicación provides them with the necessary resources to work from 9 to 9 in the self access centre.

Nevertheless, apart from adapting previous materials, in this particular experience other newer commercially available materials were mainly used for adaptation to Moodle. As Dickinson (1987: 69) states, there is a great advantage with commercial materials due to their convenience and variety. Although they are not prepared for b-learning instruction they can be usable after adaptation. As for how to fill the gap created in the traditional class and given the fact that students would practice much listening by means of the materials in the platform, the starting point was that during the three hours of class a week (the most traditional part of the course) the students would be encouraged to speak and to put into practice the different functions and vocabulary or structures presented during the course both through the platform and in the classroom.

As the programme has not yet entered the ECTS, the workload in the platform was calculated in terms of estimated number of hours a student should devote to the subject, out of the three hours of class lessons without interfering with the rest of the subjects in the same course. It is also important to bear in mind that not all the homework is covered within the platform. This means a necessary control of the number of compulsory activities that are to be proposed in Moodle. The students also need a period to adapt to the new situation since some of them have never received b-learning training, neither have they worked within the platform.

6. CHANGES IN CONTENT AND METHODOLOGY

One important issue that must be addressed is how far the content in the classroom is affected by the adaptation of the syllabus to the b-learning mode. With respect to the methodology, blended learning implies a commitment to exploit the resources of Moodle and the ones in the classroom in a complementary way. As previously said, another important aim is to encourage learner involvement in the learning process even within the scope of a fairly traditional syllabus design.

Therefore, in this innovation experience autonomous learning is viewed as an end goal and a task-based approach (Nunan, 1993) with emphasis on communicative competence is followed in order to effectively integrate all the resources offered both by the traditional classroom as well as by the virtual environment to reinforce the learner autonomy. In what follows, the adaptation of the subject "Professional Communication III" to blended learning is presented, the departure point being the four modules or areas of content: a) socialising, b) telephoning, c) job interviews and d) presentations.

6.1. The learning components

With respect to the learning components, the following have been considered to be some of the most important in order to achieve the objective of encouraging both teachers and learners to take more responsibility for their teaching and learning respectively.

• Learning guide

The learning guide is an outline of the course. Apart from precise information about some aspects: who the teachers are, their e-mail addresses and telephone numbers, students can also find information about general and specific aims, estimated number of hours per lesson and of students work out of the classroom, assessment methods and calendar.

• Tutor advice

Every learner is interviewed by the class teacher at the beginning, midpoint and end of the course. Coterall (1995: 221) states that the first interview is the basis for establishing a personal relationship between teacher and learner; the second provides the students with the opportunity to discuss their progress and the teacher to offer advice; the last meeting is for further advice (feedback should also be added).

• Integration of the Learning Virtual Environment (LVE)

- Forums for general course discussion or to complete communicative activities are an effective tool for collaboration and to help motivate students.

- Assignments over the course encourage students to keep up with the lessons. The students work on their task for submission and also learn from the evaluation of others.

- The glossary and the wiki can be used to promote collaborative and active learning.

- In a large class the use of groups can be the key to success: it provides students with opportunities for collaboration and cuts the number of tasks that the teacher has to correct.

- The activities which are corrected in the platform are also helpful for the students and reduce the workload of the teacher. This tool is suitable for exercises on discrete aspects of language.

• Tasks and materials

Although the adaptation of materials to virtual environments has been the aim and centres on previous research (Argüelles Álvarez, 2005 and 2006) this is the first time steps have been taken to adapt the materials of the subject "Professional Communication III" to the b-learning environment, Moodle. In order to help students follow the course, especially those who are less confident or less autonomous, a course book would be the basis of the course. What is unusual about the use of the course book is that students had a copy of all the listening material and tape scripts that was used during the course.

6.2. The adapted syllabus

As previously said, classroom teachers will need to think how to prepare learners for self-access work and will need to decide how to exploit its outcomes. In the case presented, immediately after the first week of class the students are asked to complete their first activity in Moodle. One of the advantages of the platform is that the access to the different activities is controlled by the teacher and the student only sees the activities or parts the teacher wants them to see.

Figure 1. Module 1 "Greetings"

Overloading students with too much information may be self-defeating; therefore, a good idea is to present an open ended task with simple and clear instructions where peer revision and interaction among the whole group are needed. This first contact is motivating and helps students adapt to the virtual environment. Only little time in the traditional course is enough to solve possible doubts and to encourage students to participate. After a couple of weeks the group has had contact in the virtual environment and is ready for further work.
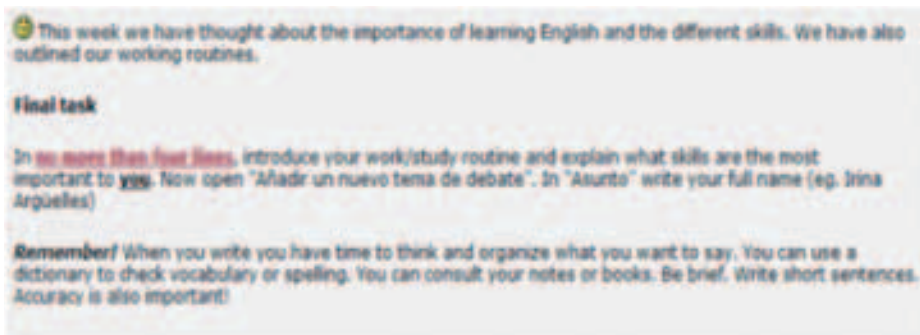

Figure 2. Forum 1 "Introductions and learning skills"

The learners have been encouraged to explore issues such as their language difficulties and needs. At the same time the teacher has had the opportunity to evaluate both in the classroom and by means of the activities in the platform the potential learning problems, language proficiency and the interests of the students in the group.

The second module is opened about three weeks later. Students are still accessing the forum but the frequency of participation has decreased. It is the moment to upload first some lessons and listening material and later what were called "autonomous learning activities". The basis of these two final tasks is to involve students in the process of materials adaptation. In both cases students are asked to prepare activities based first on a written text and individually and next on videos and in groups.
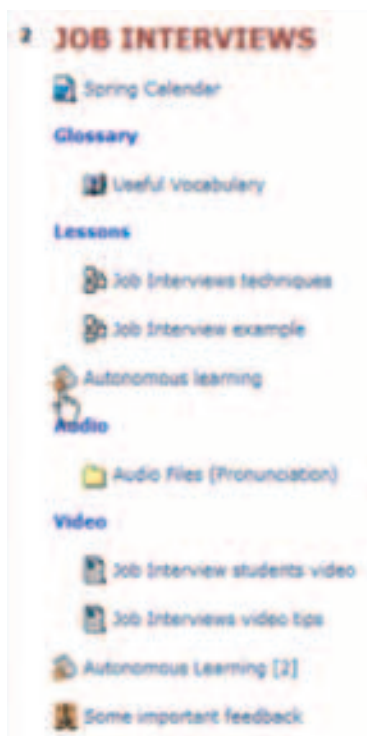
Figure 3. Module 2 "Job interviews"

Both compulsory and voluntary, revision and amplification activities for different levels of proficiency are proposed. These kinds of activities greatly differ from the ones students are used to completing both in the traditional classroom and in other virtual environments. Through them, learners are encouraged to reflect about their own proficiency level and the purpose and relevance of tasks to their needs. Furthermore, students are engaged in a creative process working on the teaching materials and a greater degree of commitment is generated.
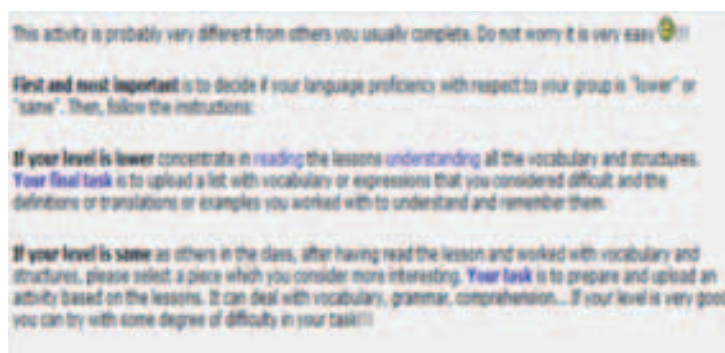

Figure 4. Final task "Autonomous learning"

When the third module is uploaded the students are accustomed to visiting the platform regularly in order to keep their homework and in fact the whole course, up to date. It is in fact surprising and very motivating to confirm that very few of them forget to consult the forum, activities, results or messages at least once every three days. An almost perfect involvement in the course has been achieved. The number of activities increases and almost all (if not all) are self corrected in the platform. The teacher, who was very present during the first weeks to control participation and give feedback moves to a secondary plane to let students continue on their own in the virtual environment.

The final month's lessons in the traditional class are devoted to preparing a final presentation which will be given by students in groups of three. First, the students propose and select the topics of the presentation. Then and with the help of the activities in Moodle and in the classroom they revise grammar and useful functions and phrases. Finally they prepare their presentation by means of collaborative work in the classroom. The final presentation is evaluated in collaboration with an external teacher[3].

Figure 5. Module 3 "Presentations" (First part)

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[3] For the last two years a lecturer from the University of Leeds Language Centre, Mr. R. Herington, has collaborated in the evaluation of the students.

7. THE STUDENTS' RESPONSE

7. 1. Self assessment
When in the course: after the first month of class and virtual environment work.
Aim: to help learners to oversee and regulate their learning. They individually complete a brief questionnaire and give it to the teacher (see Appendix 1).

Results: Students are forced to evaluate their performance in relation with different specific aspects which concern their learning process. When their score is low they immediately recognise they should have done better and are able to analyze the reason why they did not get better results. They can also reach some conclusions concerning their immediate future behaviour as shown in their comments written in the space provided below the questionnaire.

7. 2. Feedback of the course
When in the course: after the second month of course the students are asked to write some feedback ideas about the course so far.

Aim: this is conducted as a course forum in order to promote discussion. Assuming that not self learning trained learners have intuitions about their individual needs, the externally chosen materials and other components of the course are likely to generate a response (positive or negative) on the part of the students.
Results: Based on the students' commentaries it can be concluded that they are very satisfied with the course. The aims of gaining spoken fluency and improving listening skills have been fulfilled. The collaborative work in the classroom receives a positive response as it is a necessary skill for the students' future careers, as well as the final presentation task, which is highly praised because it is considered to be an essential way to acquire the necessary skills to make presentations in the future. Furthermore, face to face interviews or extra activities with films are also positively evaluated. The materials both in the classroom and in Moodle are also evaluated with very positive results. Most students find it very difficult to answer the question "What would you change in the course?"

7. 3. Promotion of autonomy
When in the course: near the end of the course

Aim: the areas concerning autonomy are here recovered to study students' awareness regarding the achievement of the autonomy aims of the course. (See Section 4)

Results: In a chart where they have to tick "yes" or "no" to the items starting "I have had…" "I have produced…" students mostly tick "no" for "I have self produced tasks and materials" or "I have criticised the learning tasks and materials" although they were able to give their opinion about externally imposed materials and learning tasks at different points during the course and have successfully proposed new tasks. On the other hand, students mostly choose "yes" for the rest of the prompts given. They recognise to have had "authentic interaction with the target language and its users", "collaborative group work and collective decision making", "participation in open ended learning tasks", "learning about the target language and its social contexts of use", "exploration of societal and personal learning goals", "control over the management of learning", "control over the content of learning" and "control over resources".

8. CONCLUSIONS

This course-wide strategy for fostering autonomy has been productive and encouraging. First, the adoption of a negotiated component although within an external syllabus provides the students with opportunities to further intervene in their learning. It is new for students to reflect on their own needs and much more to propose alternatives to achieve different aims. Second, the task based syllabus is a good basis where to establish a more interactive relationship among students and between the group and the teacher. This approach and the programme in four modules have shown to be very adequate for the syllabus. Third, the virtual environment has proved to be of help to promote learner autonomy and has implications for the entire curriculum. At this point, it is worth emphasising that b-learning must be fully understood as completely integrated, if it is to be successful. Finally, teachers will need specific programmes (and substantial amounts of time) to improve their own skills to adapt to all these methodologies aimed at the promotion of learner autonomy.

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APPENDIX 1
Self assessment questionnaire

	0-25%	25-50%	50-75%	75-100%
1. I attend regularly to my lessons				
2. I consult the platform and complete the activities				
3. I have revised the units seen in the classroom				
4. I always prepare my homework				
5. I consult a dictionary or a grammar when I have doubts				
6. I listen to the CDs regularly				
7. I have an active participation in class				
8. I always speak English in class				
9. I try to help my partners and address them politely				
10. I ask the teacher to repeat or make a question if I do not understand				