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Fostering general and specific competences through online language learning materials

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Abstract

This paper addresses how general and specific competences are dealt with and fostered through the *Online First Certificate Course* and *Tester*, designed by the CAMILLE Research Group in Spain. The debate and research on the role of competences is an ongoing issue within the field of higher education. Moreover, the new framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has made it more visible and has contributed towards designing and implementing new educational curricula based on a competence-based approach.

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1. The implementation of a competence-based approach

The implementation of a competence-based approach, as a part of the process aimed at developing a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA), is inevitably affecting planning, methodology and assessment (Cano García 2008) and is bringing about a wide range of innovative approaches such as the one followed in designing the *Online First Certificate Course* and *Tester* developed at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (UPV) by the CAMILLE Research Group. These materials aim to be part of the steps implemented by the University to ensure that its students become independent speakers of English and graduate from University with a level equivalent to B2 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFRL). These new learning materials comprise a preparatory course and a programme related to tutor-assessment and self-assessment. The authors in charge of designing these learning resources are bearing in mind students' strengths and limitations in order to provide them with opportunities for real learning and acquisition of general/transversal competences apart from the specific linguistic ones. These new learning options have been developed and will be implemented by making use of the resources, tools and templates offered by the *InGenio* online authoring tool and content manager, developed by the CAMILLE Research Group at UPV.

Among the main goals of the Bologna Agreement, there is not only a need to achieve convergence and harmonization of the European higher education system, it has also been planned as a reform which will devote efforts to “preparing students for the multifaceted challenges of the marketplace” and has put pressure on

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universities to foster “general competences and qualities such as professional and ethical responsibility, critical thinking and accountability for one’s own learning, communication skills, etc.” (Räsänen & Fortanet-Gómez 2008). These are some of the competences which have been classified as general competences. This paper addresses some important issues concerning competence-based learning and assessment and some of the strategies and tools which have been taken into consideration while designing and developing the methodology and contents comprised by the materials which have been already mentioned. The goal is to guide students’ global learning and training, by drawing special attention to the way these preparatory tools (*InGenio FCE Online Course* and *Tester*) contribute to delimit and foster both general and specific competences.

As early as 1995, Alison Wolf took into consideration the need to specify a set of learning outcomes allowing each participant to know what their tasks would be right from the very beginning in order to favour the accomplishment of the ultimate aims effectively. The interpretation of what outcomes are the most important ones, however, is not an easy task. The fact of facing an official exam, such as the FCE exam, would make it easier to delimit the contents to be dealt with and the competences to be assessed, as the exam criteria have been already set by the University of Cambridge, the institution that it depends on. Assessment, which is usually considered as the stage which requires that “the candidate demonstrates successfully that he or she has met every one of those criteria which were previously fixed” (Wolf 1995), would not only take place during the exam, but also during the training stage when following the course and when practicing with past exams through the materials provided in the *InGenio* online platform. This idea is closely linked to the concept of formative assessment (Zúñiga 1997). In this particular case, the assessment which would take place when sitting the official exam would be considered as summative assessment, whereas the assessment which enriches the training stage would be considered as formative assessment. Zúñiga (1997) takes into account Stufflebeam’s idea that “the aim of formative evaluation is not to prove, but to improve”, always trying to favour the acquisition of the pre-established set of general and specific competences. The *InGenio* feedback utility, which enables authors –that is, content providers– to adjust the messages, hints and other pieces of information that the student receives while progressing through the course, contributes to enrich the continuous assessment modality.

General competences are usually linked to the capacity of resolving problems while expanding the learners’ knowledge and skills. This viewpoint has recently led to major reviews in higher education curricula and has also stimulated important changes regarding teaching methodologies. Villa and Poblete (2007) see the implementation of the competence-based approach as being closely linked to the idea of fostering attitudes while learning: the attitude of autonomy, personal responsibility and collaboration. These authors also provide a classification for competences: instrumental, interpersonal and systemic. Instrumental competences would be the ones which have a channel role, that is, those used to achieve an ultimate goal, combining both manual and cognitive skills. Interpersonal competences are those which are related to personal skills and allow learners to collaborate with each other to achieve a common goal. Finally, learners would have acquired systemic competences when they are able to manage skills relating to an entire system, combining imagination, sensitivity and the capacity to find common links among different and distant elements. The main criteria underlying the foundations of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are based on the importance of scientific achievements, especially concerning Information and Communications Technologies (ICT); the economic changes which have taken place in the past few decades and the redistribution of occupational services; the internationalisation of different societies and global economies, and the higher levels of education in today’s more advanced societies (Villa and Poblete 2007).

Considerable effort has been made during the design stage of the *InGenio* online autonomous preparatory materials to incorporate several strategies, methodologies and teaching-learning approaches to foster the students’ level of autonomy and to allow them to acquire significant knowledge. The addressees of these materials shall be provided with two learning and assessment options: facing the contents in a completely autonomous way (self-assessment) or being monitored by a tutor, i.e. a language teacher who would have access to the students’ global performance reports generated while following the course contents. Villa and Poblete (2007) point out some of the crucial issues concerning the teaching-learning process to successfully acquire the pre-set group of competences: strategies and methodologies, modalities, monitoring, and assessment.

2. Classifying and fostering competences

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the general competences of learners or users consist of “their knowledge, skills and existential competence and also their ability to learn” (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). Knowledge is addressed as declarative knowledge, understood as knowledge resulting from experience (empirical knowledge) and from more formal learning (academic knowledge), and a considerable amount of importance is given to the relationship between knowledge and the communicative competence, the components of which are linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic.

The choice and classification of the competences to be included in and fostered through these language learning materials has been partly based on the work of Villa and Poblete (2007). These authors have defined generic competences as competences closely linked to human values and principles, to the capacity to finally achieve and keep a good quality and successful life and the aim of respecting individual and social diversity. Among these generic competences, there is a need to foster the students’ autonomy, a task that may be favoured by the high level of autonomy provided by the *InGenio* online platform. Knowing how to use and take advantage of ICT while learning has also been classified as a generic competence. Students who are immersed in learning through online didactic materials are supposed to be already competent in the use of these technologies. However, learning by using a tool such as *InGenio* proves very useful for students who wish to continue practicing and improving their technological skills.

Other important competences to be developed have to do with the students’ capacity to work autonomously, to solve problems, to plan efficiently taking into account personal goals, priorities, methods, etc., and to manage time in order to make the most of it and be as productive, effective and efficient as possible. This course has been designed to be part of the English lessons delivered by a teacher who follows a blended learning methodology or to be completed voluntarily by students in a completely autonomous way. Therefore, the students at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (UPV) who will follow the course, either as an integral part of a regular English subject or through self-access learning in order to prepare for the official exam or to achieve the required B2 Level (CEFR), are supposed to be mature enough to work responsibly. This issue favours the acquisition of another competence: knowing how to guide your own learning in a strategic and functional way, depending on each student’s personal particular aims.

The materials provided through a learning management system (LMS) such as *InGenio* help sustain students’ “active knowledge” by trying to engage them in their own learning process (Gimeno-Sanz 2009). In her article Gimeno-Sanz points out that the materials designed to be used by completely autonomous learners should “include as many tools as possible to support self-access learning”. Learners should also be provided with more reference materials, additional explanations and hints, further reading, offering the appropriate feedback according to the student’s performance, communicating the results automatically through progress reports, offering printing-enabled screens, etc. These and other resources are the ones that enable the *InGenio FCE Online Course* and *Tester* to be considered as useful tools which allow learners to foster their own autonomy during the learning process, although they also provide the opportunity to be combined with other means based on asynchronous and synchronous communication with other learners and tutors in order to make the whole process more enriching. In the case of blended learning, the teacher’s task would be to facilitate personal and subjective corrections or provide additional or updated materials.

According to Villa and Poblete, students should finally acquire –throughout the learning process– an analytical, critical and also a systemic mode of thinking. The contents included in the tasks and texts that are part of the exercises incorporated in the learning materials are aimed at helping and making students think critically and analytically and have a justified or well-founded opinion about some of the world’s most important or interesting facts and events, also developing the skills to understand and try to face them through several global patterns (Villa and Poblete 2007).

The competences dealing with creativity have a dominant role in the practice of writing and speaking, as these are the sections which give students more freedom to write and speak about topics that concern them or that they find more motivating and attractive. The tasks which are being designed do not only fit the official exam criteria, but also try to present these training sections in a more innovative way through more open and reflective approaches. The

students would also have access to some useful recommendations in order to finally respect the limits fixed by the construct of the official exam.

The development of oral and written communication skills and the need to speak at least one foreign language are usually considered to be part of the generic competences to be encouraged. However, as this article deals with the design and creation of linguistic preparatory materials, the authors have borne in mind the definition of these specific competences according to the skills and aims that suit the CEFRL's B2 (independent user) level (table 1). This framework is presented as a tool which “provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” and also provides “an explicit description of objectives, content and methods”. Moreover, the framework presents “what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively” (CEFRL, Council of Europe 2001) in a comprehensive way.

Table 1: CEFRL's Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid. B2 Level.

Understanding	Speaking	Writing
<p>Listening: I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affair programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.</p> <p>Reading: I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes and viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.</p>	<p>Spoken interaction: I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.</p> <p>Spoken production: I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.</p>	<p>I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.</p>

According to the framework, the contents to be learnt when facing a foreign language are not only linguistic, but also socio-cultural, and the use of technology for educational purposes opens up a myriad of opportunities when designing creative learning environments, for instance, by using authentic video or audio excerpts which could also bring students closer to a particular language speaking context (Gimeno Sanz 2009). Moreover, in the case of written skills and competences, course designers may need to take into account the type of texts that learners need to write and read in their L2, which could markedly differ from the texts that they write or read in their L1 (Ferguson 2007). According to Ferguson (2007), the practice of writing skills “involves setting goals, generating ideas, organising information, selecting appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures, marking an initial draft, reading and reviewing it, and then revising and editing”. For this reason, the process is certainly non-spontaneous. This cognitive process has also been taken into consideration by the designers of the *InGenio FCE Online Course* and *Tester* when developing the tasks devoted to practicing writing, not only taking into account the final product but also the whole writing process when learning these skills.

As for oral skills and competences, the authors have borne in mind the fact that teaching and evaluating oral skills in today's Spanish educational context is usually considered as a utopia (Bobb Wolff 2007). However, this idea contradicts current European needs and demands since oral skills are considered as basic tools for communication and a basic component of language learning. Leslie Bobb Wolff (2007) also alerts about the need to teach and evaluate the communicative competence and not just the oral production. One of the main purposes when designing these preparatory materials is to provide students with a corpus of exercises that allow them to be familiarised with the typologies of exercises and tasks included in the FCE examination and also with its evaluation criteria. Another aim is to facilitate social and cultural-specific contexts so that other channels of practice and communication can open up for students in order for them to establish relationships with other candidates preparing for the Cambridge FCE at the same time or to be in contact with authentic English accents or different national cultures. To achieve this and favour the expansion of communicative skills, the *InGenio* preparatory materials have not been planned to be devoted uniquely to practicing through written channels and static texts, but to expand communicative skills by introducing tasks and scenarios aimed at fostering the real practice of oral skills. This is done through corpora of

audio excerpts (listening) and voice recording systems (speaking) which can be uploaded onto the system for a tutor to assess and subsequently provide appropriate feedback. This kind of learning environment allows the materials writers and test designers to include constant updates and improvements as well as small adjustments to the course contents in real time, and to adjust to the users' real and specific requirements and needs.

3. Conclusions

The authors who are currently developing these language learning materials have adopted this parallel process of research which helps them define the contents, parameters and competences to be included in the resulting materials in a far clearer way. They are also trying to select the most adequate templates in order to take full advantage of the most appropriate *InGenio* utilities. These utilities may contribute to accomplish the aims of the course in particular and the requirements established by the new EHEA in general in an attempt to present a varied, coherent and consistent corpus of exercises and also attractive, interactive and dynamic additional contents that shall make the practice of English as a second language and the acquisition of a well-defined set of general/transversal and specific competences, more agile and far from the repetitive grammar clusters of traditional materials.

InGenio offers a large variety of tools and resources which allow materials writers to achieve all of these aims as the templates to create exercises facilitate several interesting and useful options. Some of these are: the automatic correction and feedback utility, which is very useful to allow students to follow the materials in a completely autonomous way; the possibility to include reference materials, glossaries and links to external sites that allow learners to obtain more information about a particular topic or linguistic issue; the incorporation of hints and windows that open up instantly to reveal relevant explanations so that students may infer contents more effectively while progressing through the course; immediate progress reports that allow students to monitor level of success and even about their weakest points or personal limitations for which additional practice might be required; limitation of the number of attempts (especially useful for the tester tool), providing exercises that accomplish different levels of difficulty; the combination of text, audio, graphics and video in order to create a wider and more attractive variety of learning options, etc. In conclusion, the authors of these learning materials are concerned with each and every detail when drafting the global structure of the course and when trying to determine which activities or competences are included. An analysis of the results achieved by students after conducting the validation stage will allow the authors to discover more about the effectiveness of the materials, about the appropriateness or not of the competences included, and about the tools and options implemented to practice and acquire them via the *InGenio* preparatory materials.

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