Building up an equilateral language learning triangle through innovation and pedagogic improvement: the example of an educational innovation project

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Abstract

In recent years, several initiatives relating to pedagogical innovation have been implemented at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), Spain, in order to integrate ICT into current teaching practices by means of combining the efforts made by teachers, students and the institution itself in terms of the support it provides. These three core elements reflect the main theme of the EuroCALL 2011 Nottingham Conference, i.e. the CALL triangle. The paper focuses on the role played by each of these three elements or sides of the equilateral triangle that has been set up in our particular research context. The authors will refer to one of the projects funded by the UPV, known as the Innovation and Improvement in Education Project (Proyecto de Innovación y Mejora Educativa – PIME), which aims to encourage academic staff to engage in projects that provide an added value to a subject by renewing methodologies, rethinking teaching strategies, that is, on innovation. It was this funding initiative that allowed the authors of this paper to complete the final design, development and implementation stages of the recently published *InGenio FCE Course & Tester,* an online preparatory course and exam simulator for learners wishing to acquire a B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) of competence in English or take the Cambridge First Certificate in English Examination. The authors will refer to the courseware and illustrate how the CALL triangle has been formulated and sustained.

Keywords: Online courseware development; educational innovation; learning objects.

1. Introduction

Currently, Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) have an important impact on education, and multimedia resources are constantly being created, updated and shared with users worldwide through different tools, online platforms and databases. ICT have not only changed what is taught and the way it is taught (Warschauer, in Arnó et al., 2006) but they have also "furthered the need for people to communicate in an international lingua franca and strengthened the position of English in that role" (Warschauer, 2001). This shows an important connection between ICT and English, resulting in the fact that in an increasing number of higher education institutions, CALL normalisation - understood as "the stage when the technology becomes invisible, embedded in everyday practice" (Bax, 2003; Bax and Chambers, 2006) – seems more achievable than ever thanks to the efforts of and the collaboration among teachers, students and their institution. An example of the construction of this equilateral triangle is the "PIME (Educational Innovation and Improvement)" funding programme at UPV, which frames a number

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of initiatives aiming at favouring the emergence of innovative educational models for the improvement of the teaching/learning experience, achieved by means of integrating ICT into the educational process. This project has allowed the authors of this paper to complete the design, development and implementation stages of the materials mentioned above.

2. The CALL Triangle

Moore and Kearsley (1996: 2) consider distance education as "planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching" requiring as a result "special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements", an idea that could also be relevant when addressing the blended learning approach. Thus the idea of a CALL triangle cannot be reduced to the simple fact of distinguishing between three separate and isolated sides, the sides being the institution, the teachers and the students. It is far more complex than this, because of the different intertwining relationships and bonds that can be established among the different elements and participants. Moreover, there is a fourth component right in the centre of the triangle: Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), playing a key role in CALL integration and normalization. Furthermore, ICTs are capable of effectively connecting the different sides which make up this polygon. The process of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) materials design usually takes place in several steps in which it is important to make the right decisions on different task-related aspects such as topics and actions, participants and mode (Chapelle, 2003). Therefore, materials developers usually start exploring additional contexts for learning as well as new ways, roles and responsibilities of the participants who will finally take part in the entire process (White, 2009). This is the case of the design and development stages prior to the implementation of the online B2 level materials *InGenio FCE Online Course & Tester.*

The complexity of all research surrounding the three main elements in the process can be better understood when considering the four "key areas" mentioned by Guichon and Hauck (2011) when discussing the teacher's role in such a process: "assessment of the use of technologies in teachers' practices, identification of pre- and in-service teachers' attitudes towards technologies, definition of a repertoire of techno-pedagogical competences, and reflections on training content and experiences" (*op. cit*. 2011). These categories could also be applied and analysed in relation to the figure of the student as well as connected to the way in which an institution can contribute towards enriching the learning and teaching processes. Throughout these processes, language awareness and language learning strategies are also considered to play "a key role in examining ways to raise levels of curricular relevance, motivation and involvement of learners in their education" (Coyle et al., 2010: 3). Language learning tasks would be conducted within what is known as the "knowledge triangle", another concept based on three equal sides, which in this case is described as the need to integrate education, research and innovation in a "Knowledge Age Society" (*op. cit*. 2010: 4).

Bearing in mind the theme of the EuroCALL 2011 conference, the authors decided to explore the way in which this particular triangle is conceived in the context of a research group immersed in the multiple tasks involved in online language learning materials design, development and implementation. These tasks are being carried out with a view to complying with the regulations set forth by the University, whilst allowing this institution to benefit from the outcomes of the whole research and development process. Exploring the relationship established among the three key participants taking part in the design and implementation stages is especially relevant at this particular moment. This is so because UPV students have already started using the afore-mentioned materials, which means that the authors are at this stage involved in the assessment and validation phases, aimed at offering some clues regarding the way students are reacting towards them, how they interact with them, and last but not least, possible options and suggestions about how they could be improved. This fact highlights the importance of exploring each of the three different sides as well as the relations established among them, all of which are integrated into this equilateral triangle with technology at its centre.
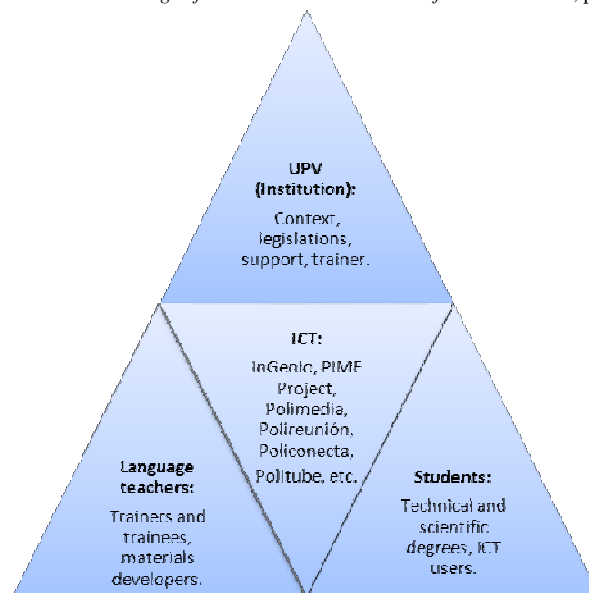
Figure 1: The CALL triangle at the Universitat Politècnica de València.

Each of the participants could be discerned separately but each one is at all times interconnected to the whole triangle. As illustrated in Fig. 1, a pyramidal relationship can also be constructed by placing the institution at the top of the triangle. This layout would be a graphic way of showing the multiple roles of the institution. These roles range from acting as the element in charge of defining the general frame and context in which the rest of the participants interact, to setting up the general guidelines and requirements while providing the resources necessary to accomplish the different tasks. This highlights the importance of the role that the institution plays when it comes to making the whole system work effectively. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the fact that the institution also provides training programmes for the academic staff willing to improve their ICT skills in order to be able to apply them successfully as an essential component of their teaching practices (i.e. teachers as trainees).

3. Students, teachers and the Universitat Politècnica de València

In 2008, UPV policy set a new requirement to be fulfilled by all of its students in order to graduate; i.e. they should be able to prove a B2 level of competence in a foreign language. This illustrates the growing awareness of the importance of foreign language learning in a technical environment such as the UPV's, as well as an attempt to comply with the Bologna Process. However, the role of the institution goes far beyond this by providing funding schemes such as the one described here (PIME), in addition to providing academic staff with a considerable amount of freely available in-service courses, a clear indication of the institution's awareness of the need to offer appropriate training in the efficient use of educational technologies. Due to these two factors –the B2 level of competence and the technical character of the degrees offered by UPV–, the development of the *FCE Online Course & Tester* necessarily had to comply with these two basic requirements. The materials writers have designed activities that are based on contents pertaining to the student's degrees as well as complying with the format of the FCE examination. Because the tool which has been used to create the courseware (the *InGenio* authoring tool[1]) is flexible and allows any existing standard networked tool to be integrated, the authors have also been able to create and link into the courseware a number of supplementary resources in the form of learning objects, called "Polimedia" and "Polimedia Plus", also as part of the teacher-institution cooperation scheme and shared internationally through "RiuNet" and "Politube" (UPV's repositories) and OCW (the Open Courseware international platform launched by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology). These learning objects, which address theoretical and specific contents to make them more dynamic and effective, typically comprise 10 to 15-minute sequences, recorded at specially designed recording studios, to be shared with the language learning community at large. Some other tools provided by the UPV have also played an essential role during the initial stages of the first pilot experience, aimed at starting the assessment and validation of the materials included in the *FCE Online Course & Tester*. These include the CMC videoconferencing platforms and Virtual Learning

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[1] See Gimeno 2008 and 2009 for further information on the *InGenio* authoring tool and learning environment.

Environments (VLEs) known as "Polireunión" (*Polimeeting*) and "Policonecta" (*Policonnect*). Both platforms, based on the *Adobe Connect* technology, enable teachers and students to communicate and perform different tasks online, while interacting orally and/or visually. They also enable participants to share audiovisual and written materials and resources for practice thanks to some of the utilities and tools provided. An application with similar features is being developed and will soon be integrated into the *InGenio* Platform, fulfilling the functions that are now being performed by external systems. The use of those platforms allows the equal treatment of both written and oral contents and provides students with opportunities to practice speaking and listening skills, these being two of the five skills included in the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) official examination; the other ones being reading, writing, and use of English (grammar and vocabulary). In this respect, we agree with White (2009: 53) who firmly believes that computer conferencing systems are advantageous, since they do not require fixed times for study, help maintain a record of all interactions and allow everyone to be heard. In these situations, the teacher would adopt the role of "effective facilitator" and the group could develop a "sense of community". This has also been our ultimate aim.

4. Conclusions

The design, development and implementation of the materials described in this paper could be regarded as a valid example of the use of technology to achieve effectiveness and efficiency in the learning and assessment processes of basic linguistic skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). These different stages also show the roles played by the four participants involved in the process, an interrelation represented by a triangle with a very important central and interconnecting section, that of ICT. In this sense, students can be seen as the addressees of the materials, their demands and needs being a central component in the entire design and development process. Teachers are the trainers, but also the trainees when it comes to the usage of technology. However, their tasks are far more complex, as they also play the role of content providers, adaptors and facilitators, as well as tutors monitoring the performance of the students completing the materials via *InGenio's* online tutor facility. And last but not least, the institution, playing a key role as the policy-maker and definer of the educational context, and also as the provider of the resources, tools, funding and support, without which a lot less advancement in education would be possible.

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