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A pioneer study on online learning environments following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

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Abstract

This paper shows the results of a pioneer study on how technology is used to complement face-to face teaching in universities following the directives of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The paper examines the students' and teachers' perception of the effectiveness of autonomous language practice. Findings reveal that while teachers value the incorporation of autonomous learning in traditional university classrooms, students don't seem to agree unanimously on the positive benefits of autonomous learning as an add-on to face-to-face teaching. The role of teachers in technological environments is also a controversial issue discussed in this paper.

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1. Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a project of The Council of Europe. The CEFR is the result of extensive research and work on communicative objectives. Published in 2001, the purpose of the Framework is to “provide a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility” (CEFR: 1). The CEFR is a document which describes:

- i) the competences necessary for communication;
- ii) the related knowledge and skills;
- iii) the situations and domains of communication.

Moreover, the Framework defines levels of proficiency which permit to measure learners' progress at each stage of learning on a life-long basis for several European languages. Thus, progress in language learning is calibrated according to six levels of attainment, which range from A1 to C2.

The main benefits of the CEFR in language teaching could be that it “seeks to make it easier for teachers, learners, publishers and testers to communicate across languages, educational sectors and national boundaries” (North, 2004). The harmonization provided by the CEFR is seen as a necessity by European governments and Higher Institutions. However, some voices have risen up against this harmonization enhanced by the CEFR and its institutionalization which may favour less diversity and less choice throughout Europe (see, e.g., Fulcher, 2004). In

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defence of the postulates of the CEFR, North (2004) posits that it is not mandate, it promotes language discussion, not directives; in his opinion, the CRFR:

... draws on theories of communicative competence and language use in order to describe what a language user has to know and do in order to communicate effectively and what learners can typically be expected to do at different levels of proficiency. It doesn't try to define what should be taught (content specifications), let alone state how it should be taught (methodology).

Thus, in North's postulations, the CEFR aims to stimulate reflection and discussion on content specification and methodology, leaving the taking of decisions to the professionals concerned.

These days, the Framework is gaining importance as The European Space of Higher Education has recommended the CEFR in setting up the reforms in higher education systems throughout Europe. These reforms have taken place after the changes in tertiary education known as the Bologna Process, i. e., the European accords that try to make academic degree standards and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe.

In this context, the implementation of the CEFR in higher education has implied a change in the teacher's role and changes in the learning methodology put into practice so far, as it promotes autonomous learning and tutorials (Martínez Lirola, 2007). Therefore, the impact of these new methodological considerations is in need of study. Along this line, this research focuses on the innovative learning and teaching strategies developed for the new curricula with especial attention to the activities carried out in the computer lab. The objective of this study is not to examine the adequacy of the activities carried out in the language lab but to observe whether learners and teachers perceive the same usefulness of lab approaches and tasks in language learning. A special attention is dedicated to the language teacher's role in technology enhanced language learning within the European educational framework.

2. Technology-Enhanced Language Learning

Research on Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) has been undertaken during the last 20 years through different approaches (see, for example, Warschauer & Kern, 2000). In most studies, the use of technology in language instruction for encouraging educational innovation and favouring self-study is underlined, as the activities in the language lab usually permit students to organize their learning in foreign languages autonomously with a high level of self-awareness (see, for example, Montero et al., 1999). Another topic of interest in the field is the teachers' role, since these emerging technologies are said to create constructivist learning environments which see the role of the teacher as a facilitator of information sharing among learners, rather than a provider of knowledge (e.g. Stepp-Greany, 2002).

In the last few years, research on educational technology has centred on the application of the Web in language learning. These studies have examined the use of online genres to promote language instruction; these genres being emails, blogs and more recently the tools allowed by the Web 2.0 such as social networking and wikis (Mindel & Verma, 2006; Kuteeva, 2011). As Battner and Fiori believe (2009: 17), e-learning tools are more salient than ever in tertiary education "as they have been acknowledged to meet the connectivity demands that today's students expect".

In this article, research on the use of a combination of traditional interactive, publisher-produced learning platforms with newer activities offered by the Internet is divulged. As Warschauer & Kern (2000) suggest, with the introduction of the new online genres in the classroom, language teaching has become more exciting but considerably more complex.

3. Methodology

The study presented in this paper shows the results obtained during a survey conducted by the author during the first year the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has been incorporated to the language teaching programmes of a Spanish university. In Spain, all universities must have adopted the new curricula developed after the Bologna Process during the academic year 2010-2011.

3.1. Participants

The students involved in the study registered in the subject English B1 (Intermediate level according to the CEFR). They were second year students of Computer Science at the Higher Technical School of Computer Science. Students attended face-to-face classes once a week for 15 weeks and lab sessions once a week during 10 weeks. The students that took part in the study were 75. Unfortunately, their level of English was not homogeneous, despite the initial placement test taken. Thus, at the beginning, a variety of levels of English was found in the same class ranging from A2 to B1, the level they were supposed to reach at the end of the course.

On the other hand, the teachers engaged in the subject have been teaching English in higher education for more than 20 years. The number of professionals involved in lab teaching was four.

3.2. Materials used in the language lab

Before the CEFR was part of the curricula in our school, the activities carried out in the language lab were designed by the teachers themselves with the help of students in their final degree project on computing who helped in the programming tasks; but, for the subject English B1, a commercial English language learning package was chosen to meet the communication needs of students as defined by the Framework. The learning package consists of a coursebook and self-access extensive materials calibrated to this CEFL level. The course uses a broadly communicative methodology and a text and task based approach. These general English learning activities have been complemented by tailor-made Internet activities developed to provide language practice in the specific orientation of computing.

The tasks carried out in the language lab were conceived as an addition to face-to-face teaching used in the classroom. They contain further practice of areas covered in the corresponding coursebook. The exercises in the lab give online feedback to students, assess their progress and provide immediate feedback of task performance to the teachers. The students can repeat the exercises the times stipulated by the teacher. Students receive credit which is included as a percentage of their grade in the course.

3.3. Method of study

The data analyzed were gathered through a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Firstly, a questionnaire, designed by the author, was administered at the beginning of the semester to the students and also to the teachers of the subject. At the end of the semester, a second test was administered to both groups. These form the quantitative data of the study. On the other hand, the open-ended questionnaire responses in these tests plus the weekly interviews with the students carried out in the lab constitute the qualitative data observed. The information gathered in the regular meetings with the teachers also makes up the qualitative data of the study. It is important to mention that the questionnaires for students and teachers were developed to be answered in a maximum of 8 minutes; they were short and straightforward. The interviews with students and teachers were also structured to be answered in a few minutes. Notes from these interviews were taken for further analysis. The classroom observation analysis was provided by the online platform used, as statistics on students' performance is available activity by activity and lesson by lesson.

Following Felix (2001), this study does not attempt to investigate language effectiveness in terms of achievement; instead, it tries to focus on students' and teachers' view of the language lab as a viable tool for language learning in the context of the CEFR. The questionnaires were conducted to examine the difference in the ratings of several categories dealing with the following aspects:

1. Ease of use, enjoyment and usefulness: whether the lab resources are useful and enjoyable according to students and teachers, and how user friendly the online activities are.
2. Practice of language skills: the practice of which skills both teachers and students consider more rewarding in the computer room. A special section has been dedicated to speaking, how teachers and students perceive the adequacy of these activities in the language lab.

3. Teacher/student interaction, the role of teachers as facilitators of language learning: whether the teacher should be permanently available in the lab, students' study preferences, individual or group study.
4. Advantages and disadvantages of language learning online resources.
5. Open-ended questions about opinions on the tasks performed and on the experience.

4. Speaking

The Framework points out that productive activities such as speaking are important in the academic and professional field as “social value is attached to them” (CEFR: 14). In the language lab, as suggested by Montero et al. (1999), speaking is one of the skills that poses greater problems to teaching with computers. Research on speaking activities and the language lab is based on Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) speaking methodologies that imply interaction instead of machine centred. James (1996), for example, proposes that an on-screen form could be the basis of a speaking activity that will force students to communicate their ideas to others (James, 1996). Other scholars, such as Beauvois (1994), talk about the increase of confidence in speaking expressed by many students thanks to the promotion of automatic structures through the computer. However, as suggested by James (1996), much CALL software is unsuitable as a basis for oral work. As an independent learning tool, at present, speaking is beyond the computers' working possibilities as they are not able to fully comprehend the students' input (Montero et al., 1999).

Moreover, in technological environments, Stepp-Greany (2002) commented that students, especially low achieving students, complained about the lack of student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction; in her opinion, students' perception of teacher caring behaviour correlated positively to the students' sense of efficacy.

Taking these drawbacks into consideration, some activities, which include teacher-student interaction, have been devised by the teacher in order to follow the recommendations of the Framework for practising oral skills. These activities consist of a weekly student-teacher interview about the topic developed in each unit. Students prepare a short speech using the grammatical and language constructions seen in each unit; in a follow up interview, the teacher interacts with the student about his/her opinion on the topic dealt with. These activities try to solve the two main problems posed by technologically enhanced learning environments: lack of teacher-student interaction and speaking practice. Besides, this activity fulfils the Framework recommendations for speaking: spontaneous interaction and prepared production (CERF: 179). The findings will reveal whether students and teachers find these strategies not only useful for language practice but also enjoyable.

5. Findings

In this section, the most outstanding data obtained from both the initial and final questionnaires administered and the interviews with teachers and students are commented. Some exemplifying opinions of students in the interviews and the open-ended questions are included in each section.

5.1. Ease of use, enjoyment and usefulness

In the initial test carried out during the first week of the course, most students (90%) pointed out that they had never used a language lab before although all of them had used a laboratory as a learning tool in the other subjects of the degree. Students of computer science are not only “digital natives” (Premsky, 2000), the computer is the object of their study. Thus, when asked about their likeliness for the tasks carried out in computer rooms, students commented that they liked working in the lab: 65% of the students agreed or strongly agreed and 60% considered learning in the lab enjoyable. However, in the final test, only 48% like the activities carried out in the computer rooms and 40% consider the activity enjoyable. Despite these not very positive opinions, 86% of the questionnaires agree on the usefulness of the language lab in learning English. In their opinions, the content, objectives and feedback of the tasks are clear and meaningful. However, 25% think that navigation through the commercial

program used is not easy; computer science students are usually very demanding as far as program design and interactivity are concerned.

5.2. Practice of language skills

As for the skills practised in the lab, students' feedback shows that in the initial test, they were looking forward to practising all of them, with very favourable evaluations of all the language components. Teachers were also looking forward to the practice of all the skills with a little reluctance about reading. Surprisingly, the second questionnaire reveals that 17% of the students think that they haven't improved their listening skills in the activities performed, 37% neither agree nor disagree and 45% consider that their listening skills have improved with lab practice. In contrast, teachers rank listening the highest in the skills to be improved in the computer room. A high percentage of students agree that grammar and vocabulary are the most adequate skills for lab practice, such as Jorge, aged 22, who comments that "these programs are especially useful to practise grammar and vocabulary".

One significant finding related to the speaking activities is worth mentioning. The speaking interviews with students have been ranked very positively by the teachers in charge of the subject, they think that students have improved and gained a little more confidence. As for students, the initial questionnaire showed that 67% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that the weekly interviews with the teacher were going to be profitable. Similar results have been obtained in the second test: 71% of the students like the experience and consider it useful, although teachers have ranked speaking more positively than students. This may be due to the fact that in tertiary education students are not used to methodological innovations that imply a close contact with their instructors, not even in a non-conventional learning environment such as a computer room. As Anson & Miller-Cochran (2008) suggest, firmly established and constantly perpetuated practices in higher education are so entrenched in our students' consciousness that transformations in the educational model are sometimes hard to be assumed; traditional lectures are still the most common methodological approach in Spanish universities.

5.3. Teacher/student interaction

Within the European educational Framework, the role of teachers in foreign languages is seen as a facilitator and motivator of learning; the importance given to autonomous learning favours this change in teaching practice (Martínez Lirola, 2007). In technology enhanced instruction, this teaching approach is the predominant model these days. The findings of this study show that the teachers' role in computer language learning has posed some problems to students: while they enjoy self-study in the computer-room, they consider the teacher as a valuable source of information, whose presence is strongly perceived as an important instruction factor. Thus, in some cases, students mention their preference for face-to-face instruction. Jose, aged 21, remarks in this regard that "I prefer to learn with a teacher because in self study programs there is no one to fix your mistakes".

5.4. Advantages and disadvantages

5.4.1. Advantages

As to the perceived advantages, teachers say that a language lab is particularly important for slower students as it gives them the opportunity to study at their own pace. For teachers, it is also very positive that the activities can be completed and practised outside the computer room for reviewing and revising. Time flexibility is also highly valued by teachers as time pressures may play a negative role in learners' perception of the effectiveness of computer language learning (Stepp-Greany, 2002). This is the reason why a long deadline was assigned to each session by the teacher, the tasks had to be finished in 6 days at the most.

Similarly, the absence of time constraints is esteemed by 55% of the students but 20% regards this as a disadvantage. A possible explanation of these divided perceptions may be that for some students the fact of being able to finish the tasks at home gives them more time to perform the activity, while for good students, time flexibility is not necessary as they finish the activities in the time assigned in the lab. On average, students need an

extra half an hour to complete the tasks assigned for each practical session. Therefore, from the data it may be inferred that, as suggested by Stepp-Greany (2002), teachers should accommodate the time assigned to that of low achieving students in the following years so that no extra time is needed to complete the tasks.

Another advantageous aspect commented is the ability to repeat exercises, an advantage for both teachers and learners. The program allows students to review the exercises, although this reviewing process has a limit of access times added to each task for assessment. The Internet activities, though, have no access limit.

The qualitative aspect of the survey offers commentaries on this matter such as Pablo's, aged 20, who points out that "I like online exercises because they are more comfortable than traditional ones, if you have a doubt, it is much easier to find it out in the computer".

5.4.2. *Disadvantages*

According to most students, the absence of the teacher is something particularly mentioned: 40% agree on the fact that teacher's absence is a clear disadvantage of online learning. Besides, another common complaint is the lack of speaking practice provided by computer learning activities, in accordance with the study carried out by Felix (2001). On the question of study mode preference, students complain that these activities prevent them from working with a classmate or in groups, also a disadvantage mentioned in Felix (2001).

In the students' words, e.g., Daniel aged 20 says that "it is more interesting to practise the language with people than with a computer". Along this line, some prefer to practise speaking and the other skills in groups, rather than individually and through computers; self-study is seen as a boring learning methodology, e. g., Víctor, aged 20. Others, such as Ester, 21, believe that "online exercises are not good as they do not imply speaking practice, I consider speaking my biggest problem with English".

6. Conclusion

This pilot study on the activities carried out in the language lab calibrated to the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages shows that the introduction of language learning activities on the computer is perceived differently by teachers and learners. Thus, although students' and teachers' perception of advantages in computer language learning significantly outnumbers disadvantages, it is important to note that teachers and learners perceive these advantages differently as, for example, time flexibility. Moreover, while teachers value autonomous learning very highly, slower students don't consider autonomous learning so rewarding; they don't feel very comfortable in computer-based language learning, these results being comparable to those of Felix (2001). As it turned out in this study, the mismatches observed in the students' and teachers' responses on the adequacy of the speaking activities developed are of special importance; this may imply that students are still a bit reluctant to give up traditional teaching models in tertiary education. Another interesting mismatch observed is the opinions about the listening practice in the lab: while teachers regard this skill as very likely to be improved through online activities, students have not valued it very highly.

On balance, what can be concluded is that the study undertaken in the new context of the Framework may be methodologically useful. As Hawkey (2006: 249) points out:

There is no doubt that the more we know about what is perceived to be happening in the classroom, the better our chances of improving the quality of language learning and use. Impact studies, using opinion surveys, face-to-face opinion finding, and classroom observation can be crucial elements in the discovery process.

Further research may observe assessment aspects of lab activities calibrated to the Framework levels in tertiary education. It could also be examined whether academic achievement has improved with the introduction of the levels in the course organization. The comparison between tailor-made computer programs and commercial computer programs for language learning could be worth observing in follow up studies. The incorporation of other levels of the CEFR in the study could also be of interest in further research.

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Apendix

Example of the introductory questionnaire administered to students

Name

Age

Answer the following questions:

1. Have you ever used a language lab? If, yes, when and for how long?
 Did you like the experience?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
2. In the language lab I would like to practise					
Reading					
Writing					
Grammar					
Vocabulary					
Listening					
3. As for speaking, I would like to practise with another student					
4. As for speaking, I would like to practise with the teacher					
Teacher/student interaction					
5. I would like the teacher to be permanently available in the lab					
6. I would prefer to work on my own					
7. I would prefer to work in groups					

Comfort, enjoyment and usefulness	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
8. Do you like working in the lab?					
9. In English B1, do you think it will be enjoyable?					
10. In English B1, do you think it will be useful?					

6. Give your opinion on self-study programs.