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Guiding in Tertiary Education: A Case Study on Social Networking and E-Learning Platforms

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Abstract

In this paper we present an innovative treatment which involved students' participation in online blogs in a university course of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Mediation of teacher-learner through the university e-learning platform (PoliformaT) was used to guide students through social networking etiquette as well as to provide online tuition to reinforce language contents and resources. By means of an integrated analysis which included qualitative and quantitative research, we see the influence of a Computer-Mediated Communication genre on motivation and learning. Questionnaires administered to the students and interviews provided insightful data to the research about the students' perception of the treatment. Our results suggest that the approach promoted learner engagement and achievement resulting in high quality learning. Additionally, the research shows the effectiveness of the use of the university virtual tool to enhance teacher-student communication and guidance.

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1. Social networking in the language classroom

Scholarly research on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) highlighted a growing concern on the uses of online communication for language teaching at the end of the last century (see Warschauer, 1997). Nowadays, with the advent of Web 2.0, CMC is common practice in tertiary education and may imply a radical change in the learning paradigm applied so far (Cole, 2009; Hadjerroui, 2011). As Coldwell et al. (2011: 97) propose, the challenge for the modern educator then is to “engage a diverse range of students using an ever increasing range of eTechnologies now available”. Emerging Web 2.0 services such as blogs or wikis, as well as social networking sites are seen as social and personal platforms, based on digital content in small fragments that may be combined and recombined by individuals to produce new patterns, images and interpretations (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). In this

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paper we identify the affordances of Web 2.0-based social software tools, and provide a treatment of a current innovative approach that introduces blogs in a language classroom and uses an e-learning university tool to guide students in their learning with a view to increasing students' motivation. Our main hypothesis is that students engaged in blogs dealing with topics related to their specific field of study are more motivated in their English writing course and hence their learning improves. A blog has been defined as "a web application that displays serial entries with date and time stamps" (Thorne & Payne, 2005, p. 381). Getting involved in blogs, i.e., blogging, has become a recent phenomenon from a sociological standpoint (Montes-Alcalá, 2007), useful for dissemination of information, for communication, and for reflection. According to Huffaker (2005): "In the classroom, students can have a personal space to read and write alongside a communal one, where ideas are shared, questions are asked and answered and social cohesion is developed" (p. 94). Specifically, in language learning, the teacher's main challenge when using blogs is to create meaningful activities in the language learning classroom, as Murray et al. (2007) claimed. But, despite its foreseen potential, scholars have recently argued that the implementation of new technologies in language learning in specific contexts is in need of more research (Kuteeva, 2011). The expected result of the incorporation of these technologies in our treatment is the enhancement of students' motivation and learning outcomes.

2. Motivation in the realm of psychology and education

Educators in general will agree on the importance of motivation as a key to success in language acquisition, as it is both a condition and a result of effective instruction (Winne & Marx, 1989). The concept of motivation, previously used in the realm of psychology, has been transferred to the field of education, or rather, to the field of educational psychology concerned with how students learn, the approaches to which they best react, and ultimate rates of success. Social and educational psychologists distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation implies doing something as a means to some separable outcome such as getting a job or gaining a qualification (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, intrinsic motivation, i. e., doing something as an end in itself, is closely related to the learners' enjoyment, interest, challenge in skill and knowledge development, and results in high quality learning and creativity. Ryan and Deci (2000) highlight the spontaneous learning behaviour and powerful self-sustaining dynamics of intrinsic over extrinsic motivation which leads to a qualitative difference and a more effective kind of learning. In their words: "Intrinsically motivated learners are deeply concerned to learn things well, in a manner that is intrinsically satisfying and that arouses a sense of optimal challenge appropriate to their current level of skill and competence" (Deci & Ryan, 1980, in Ushioda 2008, p. 21). Consequently, having this perspective in mind, in this paper we mainly centre on the study of intrinsic motivation in language learning. Shroff et al. (2008) believe that little is known about the impact of different technology-supported learning activities on students' intrinsic motivation. In this line of thought, in a study about the use of blogs in the English classroom, Blackbone et al. (2006) posit that student' motivation increases when they participate in meaningful writing activities, which are translated into greater and higher quality production. Blogging in language learning can contribute to more fruitful interaction among classmates and teacher; it can extend instruction beyond the university walls, as blogs allow participants to be "together at any time and place" (Arslan & Sahin-Kızıl, 2010, p. 194) and hence, contribute to the increase of interest in these tasks. In our case, we will focus on the use of blogs to enhance motivation in language learning in the specific context of tertiary students.

3. Methodological framework

3.1. The treatment

The treatment was implemented in an English language course in a Polytechnic University. In order to frame class blogs within an authentic context, students were provided with a list of 150 blogs where a world of information, specific to the participants' field of study, is available and discussed. Students got engaged in the required assignments which consisted in participating in blogs by exchanging posts, making comments, agreeing, and disagreeing on what was discussed in the posts, asking for clarification, etc., always with the hope of raising the interest of other bloggers and starting a discussion. As part of the writing tasks, on a weekly basis, students were required to dedicate an hour in groups to elaborate posts and to respond in class. In parallel, students daily checked

their blogs and followed the thread of the discussions in the blogs outside the English classroom, either at home or in the computer room.

3.2. *PoliformaT: an e-platform to facilitate students' learning guidance*

The teacher's involvement in the activity played a primary role in engaging students in the tasks being carried out and, hence, in the success of the treatment. *PoliformaT*, a virtual platform developed at the Polytechnic University of Valencia (Spain) was used to enable teacher-student interaction in the e-learning treatment. This platform is based on the Sakai Project, an online collaboration and learning environment founded in the University of Michigan and Indiana University. Its instructional potential, not only in online courses but also in traditional face-to-face courses, is becoming evident because of its suitability for teacher-students' communication. Innovative experiences based on *PoliformaT*, as Buendía et al. (2009), confirmed that more students could drive the course easier when their proposed instructional approach was integrated in the platform. At the moment, more and more learning modules are being created and accessed through the university e-learning platform for different subjects (see Martínez et al., 2007; Fita, 2011). *PoliformaT* tools have several options for teacher-learner interaction, content management and communication tools like resources, fora, management, chat rooms or Wikis, among others. In our treatment, the following guidance was provided through *PoliformaT*. On the one hand some introductory tutorials on collaborative work and formal writing were given in the first week of the semester. Special attention was given to paragraph structure and coherence, blog interaction, information about ethics on team work so as to involve members in an equal contribution of the work, the use of formal vs. conversational writing, and an analysis of the comments exchanged in the thread of a blog, taken as an example. This contributed to familiarise the students with the tool and the quality of contributions as well as online writing structure. Clear instructional guidelines were uploaded in the platform to document the pedagogical rationale of the tasks to be implemented, e.g., the process and nature of participating in blogs as well as the adequate etiquette and protocol used. In this way, the teachers' role of facilitator of the treatment offered support and guidance throughout the process. Moreover, language resources were uploaded in *PoliformaT*, guiding the learner to approach the writing tasks effectively. On the other hand, the teacher gave individual expert advice, guidance, and support on *PoliformaT*, as a key strategy to better connect with the students, allowing a unique context for the teacher to develop tutoring and guidance. The platform facilitated an effective and quality networked tutoring community, as suggested by Vázquez and López (2012), Martínez et al. (2007), in which the teacher played the role of a guide and a coach (Brandl, 2002) to make the learning activity a successful experience for the learner. Teacher-student communication made it possible to coach learners individually and tailor responses to the needs of each individual learner. Guidance was provided in the form of tips, reminders and suggested items for the practical sessions.

3.3. *Data collection*

To examine students' perception on the tasks and motivation, an integrated methodology was put into practice. This implied a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection. Quantitative research consisted in the measurement of students' course participation. In parallel to the quantitative study, a qualitative study on the students' background, attitudes, and motivation was carried out. Data were collected from a questionnaire with open questions which was administered at the beginning and end of the semester to provide feedback from the learner's perspective. Moreover, the research was further complemented by abundant interviews throughout the semester. All the students were individually interviewed to provide feedback from their perspective on their perceived interest, challenge, difficulty, and on their intrinsic motivation. The transcriptions of the interviews and the students' reflections on the portfolios were organized, categorized, interpreted and synthesized.

4. Interpretation of results and discussion

To measure students' motivation, guidance and language improvement, the analysis clustered data into the following meaningful categories:

- The blogging process: students' motivation correlates strongly with their perception of the integration of the blogging process in an ESP course. Firstly, it is interesting to point out that most students agreed on the fact that the level of the tasks carried out was appropriate. Secondly, the group's high motivation was enhanced by the students'

active engagement in authentic communication in their field of studies in English, and their participation in social networking based on their professional interests. The participants were satisfied at being able to express themselves freely, a clear parameter that enhances intrinsic motivation in technology supported activities according to Shroff et al. (2008). Besides, they enjoyed dealing with topics related to their future career, being involved in authentic communication, reflecting on ideas and giving feedback to classmates' entries. Likewise, learners' motivation to participate in the blogging process correlates highly with the time dedicated to the activity outside the language class (Arslan & Sahin-Kızıl, 2010). Despite some drawbacks, students often justified the lack of feedback from other bloggers and tried to transmit a positive side of their learning experience. The students felt intrinsic motivation in being able to participate in the "English-dominated on-line world"; they felt inherent satisfaction in doing the activity "which has moved them to act for the fun or challenge" (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The students' positive attitude towards Internet activities confirmed that intrinsic motivation occurred because of its appeal of novelty, challenge or aesthetic value that Ryan and Deci consider critical in raising students' motivation, and what's more, they appeared to retain their positive motivation over the 14-week semester.

- The use of the university virtual e-learning tool (*PoliformaT*). What can be drawn from the analysis is that students in the treatment showed a highly favourable reaction to the teacher's guidance throughout the process and her role as a facilitator offering support, encouragement and helpful content to enhance their posts. The students positively appreciated the close contact with the instructor through the university e-learning platform and the availability of resources in the platform to guide their writings.
- Language improvement: another factor studied was the students' own perception of their improvement in language skills.

The participants strongly agreed on the fact that their writing fluency, grammar accuracy as well as correct use of vocabulary had increased as they spent a long time writing their texts in order to produce attractive posts to raise attention from other bloggers. The fact that their language level could be judged by the whole online community may have forced students to write more carefully when participating in the blogosphere. Relatedly, the teacher's perceptions of the language outcomes of the students also corroborated the improvements in their writing skills shown in the achievement test. When posting blogs, bloggers were mostly concerned in using the English language accurately.

5. Conclusions

This small scale study has explored how a blog project can be incorporated into a university language course. The innovative contribution developed by the treatment was the challenge of participating in real-world environments, blogs where tertiary education students were able to apply theoretical knowledge acquired in the degree in the medium of English. Writing for a purpose in a real environment engaged the participants in the experience. The role of the teacher pointing out pedagogical and instructional issues through the university e-learning platform successfully guided the students to accomplish the task. The truly novel component of educational application of blogs used in the present approach resulted in a positive attitude of the students and, thus, motivation enhancement. On balance, in this treatment students' enthusiasm and fun were translated into higher levels of motivation which, in turn, had a positive effect on their academic results.

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