

A new proposal for the teaching of English based on technology

Una nueva propuesta para la enseñanza del inglés basada en la tecnología

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Abstract

This article aims at showing the results of a research project entitled "Inglés por módulos semipresenciales" carried out by the Languages Department of Universidad Central with the students of the Faculty of Engineering of the same University. This study aims at developing a new pedagogical proposal for the teaching of English as a foreign language through the communicative approach, based on technology "English Discoveries software" and supported by the new pedagogical trends such as bimodal education, autonomous learning and qualitative evaluation. This project is based on action research, it took place during two years and was divided into three phases of two stages each. The results of the data analysis are shown through some critical points, and some pedagogical implications are stated.

Key words:

Technology, autonomous learning, communicative approach, bimodal education, qualitative evaluation, participant action research.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar los resultados del proyecto de investigación "Inglés por módulos semipresenciales" que se llevó a cabo en el Departamento de Lenguas de la Universidad Central con los estudiantes de la Facultad de Ingeniería. Este estudio busca desarrollar una nueva propuesta pedagógica para la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera a través del enfoque comunicativo y apoyado en el *software* "English Discoveries". Los conceptos teóricos que fundamentaron este proyecto son la educación bimodal, las tecnologías aplicadas a la educación, el aprendizaje autónomo y la evaluación cualitativa. Este proyecto fue una investigación-acción participativa que se desarrolló durante dos años y se dividió en tres fases con dos etapas en cada una de ellas. Los resultados del análisis de la información se muestran a través de algunos puntos críticos y, finalmente, se establecen las implicaciones pedagógicas producto de este estudio.

Palabras clave:

Tecnología, aprendizaje autónomo, enfoque comunicativo, educación bimodal, evaluación formativa, investigación-acción participativa.

Artículo recibido el 3 de marzo de 2006 y aprobado el 3 de octubre de 2006.

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Introduction

The Languages Department of Universidad Central along with the Faculty of Engineering, aware of their role in the curricular innovation –which consists in the transition to credits and the use of technology for schooling disengagement that was being carried out at Universidad Central– decided to offer an alternative English course different from the courses the Languages Department offered up to the moment. The Languages Department offered courses to the BA students of the University in which there was a component of mandatory attendance, formal tests and classwork grades.

The alternative the Languages Department began to work on was a proposal for the teaching of English through “*semidistant*”¹ modules supported by the English Discoveries software. The project started in May, 2002 and finished in December, 2004.

Research question

Our research question for the project was: Which pedagogical proposal allows students to achieve an intermediate level of proficiency in English as a foreign language –equivalent to B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages– in less time than the offered in the regular courses of the Languages Department at Universidad Central?

Sub-questions

Our research question was divided into the following sub-questions:

- In which way can we implement a software in an English Language Teaching program so that it allows to reach an intermediate proficiency level in less time than the offered in regular courses?
- Which methodological strategy is appropriate to develop a pedagogical proposal in order to reach the proficiency level required by the University?

¹ Semidistant refers to a modality in which there is a component of students’ mandatory attendance and another component of independent work out of the classroom. It is known in Spanish as “modalidad semipresencial”.

- How can we incorporate learning strategies in order to foster autonomous learning?
- How can we improve the development of the different communicative skills that make part of the learning of English as a foreign language?
- Which are the parameters to evaluate the effectiveness of the software English Discoveries?
- Which systematic processes of evaluation must be taken into account for the development of the oral and written production skills?

General objective

Based on the research question, we established our general objective which was:

To design a proposal for the teaching and learning of English in “*semidistant*” modules by means of the use of the software English Discoveries. By using this software, students will be able to achieve an intermediate level of English in less time according to the latest pedagogical and technological trends in terms of the schooling disengagement and flexibility of the programs.

Specific objectives

- To implement the multimedia program English Discoveries as a tool to support the process of learning English as a foreign language.
- To design “*semidistant*” modules for the teaching of English as a foreign language.
- To re-design the programs according to the needs presented in each one of the modules.
- To apply learning strategies with the purpose of fostering autonomous learning.
- To strengthen the development of the communicative skills (reading comprehension, listening comprehension, oral and written expression).
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the software English Discoveries in our project so as to determine its adaptability to our proposal.
- To adopt systematic processes of evaluation for the speaking and writing skills.

State of the art

We did an exhaustive revision of the projects related to the use of technology for language teaching and we found that in the last decades the use of computers for language teaching has led to the creation of softwares that complement the work done in the classroom.

One of them is English Discoveries, which is used in over 40 countries and was designed by a team of educators from Edusoft/Edustar and the world renowned Berlitz Language Training Company; this software offers one of the latest in multimedia for the instruction of English as a second language or foreign language. It is available in 10 languages. It is a comprehensive series that provides a total experience in the four language skills.

Although this software is used in a lot of institutions, not many of them have done research on its specific use and effectiveness. However, there are two studies related to the use of this software: "Evaluation of English language comprehension within the Framework of the software English Discoveries" and "Computer assisted/aided language learning".

Evaluation of English language comprehension within the framework of the software English Discoveries

The objective of this study was to evaluate the comprehension in English bearing in mind the program "New Technologies" that the Secretaría de Educación has developed as part of the curricular innovation that is taking place in public education (middle and high school). The results indicated that the institutions which used the program for their classes surpassed the ones which did not have it in 46.5% in the level of recognition and differentiation of the code. This means that students who were exposed to English Discoveries were able to identify English at first sight and could differentiate it from other languages. On the other hand, the study indicated that there was a need to work on reading skills that went beyond the literal aspects of

comprehension to approach other mental operations such as inference, analysis and argumentation since the software did not work on them. Also, the study concluded that there were variations in the level of written production, and finally, that there were some barriers – financial resources, computer access and knowledge and/or acceptance of technology – which inhibited computer assisted language learning.

Gran Colombia University computer assisted language learning

In 2004, La Gran Colombia University carried out a research which discussed the nature of the interaction and roles of the participants mediated by the software English Discoveries. Interaction was understood in this project as knowledge acquisition and promotion in language use. López (2004) concluded that a genuine interactive exchange is an essentially human activity, but that the multimedia can play an important role to facilitate language interactive teaching when opportunities for pair work are provided in the class.

MCALL Project

Another study related to using technology in the classroom was the MCALL Project. It was developed by Karen Ngeow and Ken Soo at Indiana University in 2003. Its main objectives were to evaluate the use of computers with multimedia in language teaching, to evaluate the effectiveness of the ELLIS (English Language Learning Instruction System), and to propose a new methodology for language teaching to improve the effectiveness of MCALL. The result indicated that MCALL enabled students to obtain a higher level of learning in contrast with the students who studied in a conventional program.

All these projects gave us some guidance in terms of the elements that we ought to take into account when designing the proposal we wanted to evaluate in the project. Unfortunately, we could not find a project directly related to our main objective, which was to design a new proposal for the teaching-learning of English based on the software.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of our research was based on the conception of language teaching and learning as a process. This process relies on theoretical principles such as communicative approach, technology in foreign language learning, bimodal education, autonomous learning, learning strategies and evaluation.

According to Hernández and Rodríguez (2002), the communicative approach emphasizes on the development of the communicative competence, specially the productive skills, that is speaking and writing (Bachman, 1990). It is so widely accepted by the whole academic community that the Common European Framework – which regulates the standards for the learning and teaching of foreign languages – has its foundations on it.

Another aspect we took into account was technology because it offers teachers a new tool in order to look for alternative classroom settings; and because it is an issue our students really like (Jonassen, 1996). The concept of bimodal education (Asmar, 2002) –which is understood as the combination of the principles of traditional education and distant learning– was also considered. In this way, we could define a proposal in which students not only had some class attendance, but which also promoted autonomous learning by means of having independent work (Carvajal 2000).

Promoting autonomous learning leads to a systematic training on learning strategies (Oxford, 1990) to give students the required elements to work independently. Another very important and complex issue was taken into consideration: evaluation. For the purpose of our investigation, we took into account Estévez's (2002) concept of evaluation, who regarded it as a process in which our students were assessed in terms of their process and also of the results they had at the end of it. In other words, we took into account both the grades they had at the end of each module, and which their strengths and weaknesses were during all the levels they studied

Pedagogical proposal

Taking into account the theoretical framework we stated for our project, we designed our initial pedagogical proposal as follows:

Cycle	Presentation-software-evaluation
Content	Twice the amount of content that in the regular program
Assessment	Portfolio, roleplays, software test, final grammar exam after each module
Times	Presentation: two hours Evaluation: two hours Computer: six hours
Teacher's role	Guide and tutor
Student's role	Autonomous

Initially, the course we proposed followed a cycle of presentation, software and evaluation. During the presentation sessions, students were explained the grammar aspect and carried out the workshops designed by the Department for that purpose. Secondly, they went to the language laboratory to practice the aspect studied with the exercises presented by English Discoveries and finally, they took the tests given by the software in relation to that topic.

The contents that the participants studied were determined by the content studied in the regular program, however, as the objective was to reach the level in less time, in this proposal we planned to include twice the amount of content specified in the regular program, that is, they studied two levels per semester.

For the assessment component, apart from the software tests, we considered techniques of informal assessment such as role plays for the speaking skill and portfolios for the writing skill in order to see more in detail the improvement in students' learning process. Moreover, to have a more formal approach to assessment, there was a grammar exam designed following the pattern of the software exercises at the end of each module.

The time was distributed in the following way: two hours were assigned for presentations, 6 hours

for independent work with the software and two hours for evaluation. In this initial proposal, the role of the teacher was guide and tutor both in the presentation sessions and in the laboratory sessions since she/he was there to solve doubts related to the development of the workshops and to the use of the software. In this way, students had to work independently building their knowledge with the help of the software.

Methodology

Our project was a participant action research; and the model we chose was Lewin's (1946) which states the investigation in a spiral of cycles, and each cycle

contains a plan, a course of action, an evaluation and an amended plan according to the evaluation carried out. This model is illustrated in the following figure:

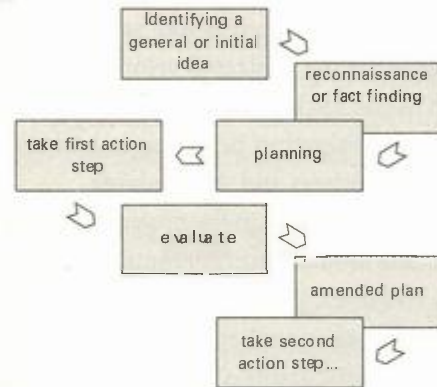


Figure 1. Lewin's model.

After selecting the model we designed the instruments we were going to use in order to collect the data, and the information we got through them was analyzed in qualitative and quantitative terms.

Technique	Instrument
Survey	Questionnaires
Semi-structured interview	Format and guidelines for the interview
Document analysis	Teachers' reports
Interview with key informants	Format and guidelines for the interview
Analysis of academic results	Grades reports
Experts' evaluation	Experts' reports

Analysis of phases and stages

	First phase		Second phase		Third phase	
	1st. stage vacation period	2nd. stage li-02	1st. stage I-03	2nd. stage li-03	1st. stage I-04	Final stage li-04
Cycle	Presentation- software-evaluation	Presentation- software-evaluation	Presentation- software- evaluation	Software- tutorial - interaction- evaluation	Software- tutorial - interaction- evaluation	Software- tutorial - interaction
Content	According to the regular program	According to the regular program	Redistribution of content	Reduction of topics	Reduction of topics	Reduction of topics
Assessment	Portfolio, roleplays, software test, final grammar exam after two modules.	Portfolio, roleplays, software test, final grammar exam after two modules.	Portfolio, roleplays, software test, final grammar exam after two modules.	Portfolio, roleplays, software test, quizzes every 15 days and final grammar exam after two modules.	Portfolio, roleplays, software test, quizzes every 15 days and mid-term and final exams.	Portfolio, roleplays, software test, quizzes every 15 days and mid-term and final exams.
Times	Presentation: 2 hours Evaluation: 2 hours Computer: 6 hours *Evaluation percentages: Software: 100%	Presentation: 1 hour Evaluation: 1 hour Computer: 8 hours *Evaluation percentages: Software: 100%	Presentation: 2 hours Evaluation: 2 hours Computer: 6 hours *Evaluation percentages: Soft. And classwork: 60% F. eval: 40%	Software: 6 hours Tutorials: 2 hours Interaction: 2 hours (every 15 days) Evaluation: 2 hours (each 15 days) *Evaluation percentages: Soft: 30% Classwork: 50% F. eval: 20%	Software: 6 hours Tutorials: 2 hours Interaction: 2 hours (every 15 days) Evaluation: 2 hours (each 15 days) *Evaluation percentages: Soft: 15% Soft: 20% F. eval: 65%	Software: 6 hours Tutorials: 2 hours Interaction: 4 hours Evaluation: 2 hours (every 21 days). *Evaluation percentages: Quizzes: 15% Soft: 20% F. eval: 65%
Teacher's role	Guide	Guide	Guide	Guide	Guide	Guide
Student's role	Autonomous	Autonomous	Autonomous	Autonomous	Autonomous	Autonomous

Figure 2. Phases and stages.

Our project had three phases with two stages each one. These phases and stages were determined according to the changes we did to the first pedagogical proposal. In the chart, we can observe the aspects we considered as well as the changes we implemented as the project developed. The aspects included were: cycle, contents, assessment, time distribution, evaluation percentages and the roles for both the teachers and the students.

One of the constants in the project was the role of both teachers as tutors and students as independent learners. However, the initial pedagogical proposal suffered many changes because of the suggestions made by the participants. One of the main changes the proposal had was in terms of the cycle, initially, it was *presentation-software-evaluation* but afterwards, due to teachers' and students' concerns, it became *software-tutorial-interaction-evaluation-consolidation*, in this way students had more opportunities to practice more naturally the language they were learning since they could interact with their partners and with other media different from the software.

This change in the cycle obviously had an effect in the time distribution as you can see in the chart. At the beginning, we had assigned six hours for work with the software, two hours for presentation and two hours for evaluation, but when we included the other steps in the cycle, such as interaction and evaluation, we had to redistribute the time. This is the reason why, at the end the time distribution was six hours for independent work with the software, two hours for tutorials, four hours of interaction sessions and two hours for evaluation, which were made every fifteen days due to the nature of the cycle.

Another change the proposal suffered was in terms of contents. At the beginning, students were supposed to study two levels per semester according to the contents of the regular program but as the project developed both teachers and students discovered that the time allowed was not enough to work with all the topics appropriately, that is why, for the first stage of the second phase we did a redistribution of topics based on their difficulty

and the time available. However, from the second stage of the second phase to the final stage, based on what both students and teachers stated, we decided to reduce the number of topics.

The way to assess was another aspect that changed. Both roleplays and portfolios were kept as ways to test the productive skills. Initially, there was a grammar exam after one or two modules, but due to the fact that students were not taking the subject very seriously, as stated by themselves, we decided to include quizzes and in the end, we had not only quizzes but also mid-term and final exams. This resulted in a change in the percentages assigned to each one of the activities; in the first stages, the software was 100% of the grade, but in the final stage, informal assessment was 15% of the grade, 20% was assigned to the software tests and 65%, the highest value, to the formal assessment, that is to say, mid-terms and final exams.

Critical points to be analyzed

After the detailed analysis of the phases we had in our research, there were some critical points to analyze: the content of the program, the software English Discoveries, the autonomous work done by the students, the assessment and the evaluation, the cycle and time distribution.

One of the most significant findings in our research was the fact that although we wanted to design a program that taught students twice the content they had in the regular courses, we had to reduce the topics due to two main factors: first, students did not devote the time we expected them to, and second, there was not enough time to complete the schedule we organized. When students were asked the reason of their lack of commitment they answered that they had too many responsibilities from other subjects in their major and that English was not a priority for them. As a result, their independent work was affected as well.

There are three important aspects to share in relation to the software. First, there were many problems to work on the net since students did the tests and the grades did not appear –and which

is worse— without a reasonable explanation for it. Second, there was no reliability in the results since students could repeat the tests as many times as they wanted. Therefore, there was not a direct relation between the grades and the pupils' knowledge. And finally, the productive skills are not appropriately developed in the software since the writing section was merely filling in the blanks and the speaking ability did not promote real interaction; in consequence, the interaction classes had to work on these skills deeply.

In relation to the independent work students were supposed to carry out, they recognized that it could have been better if they had devoted more time to their obligations in the subject. They also stated that they did not feel prepared to assume such a role of autonomy without their teachers' help, who also admitted not being able to train their students to help them become autonomous learners. Teachers pointed out the need of an institutional policy that provides them with the required training so as to multiply that knowledge in their classroom practices.

The evaluation was another issue that played an important role in the findings of our project. Students evaluated it as one of most positive points in our proposal since we took into account both process and product. Notwithstanding, they also recognized that they were not ready to adopt that modality. They needed to feel the pressure of the grades like in the traditional system; that forced us to come back to the traditional system of evaluation in terms of quizzes, mid-terms and final exams, as we could notice in the analysis of the stages.

Finally, as we had to reorganize the contents of the modules and restate our pedagogical proposal—at least three times—the time distribution was affected as well. It is how the students made us realize the importance of the interaction classes as the opportunity they had to really interact with others. They insisted on the importance of the teacher and the classmates as key elements when learning a foreign language since they promote meaningful communication which is at last the goal of the communicative approach.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

This project had great acceptance by the community in general. They liked it because of the use of technology as a motivating factor and because of the modality of “*semi-distant*” learning that was supposed to allow students to manage their time in a convenient way. Additionally, the use of qualitative assessment techniques such as portfolios and roleplays had a positive impact on the students since they could see the progress they were making in both skills.

Nevertheless, despite the acceptance of the modality, both students and teachers had some inconveniences with the component of independent work. Students were reluctant to work independently. They argued for their poor commitment lack of time or lack of discipline to work in this way. On the other hand, teachers did not feel experienced enough to foster this kind of autonomous behavior in their students and they affirmed that there was a need of training in the fostering of autonomous learning.

This reluctance to autonomous work led us to think that there is a need for the creation of an institutional policy in which all the subjects start to work with this kind of modalities so that students get familiar with them. However, this research was a first step for the development of this kind of projects in our institution.

Another aspect to be improved in our project was the way to develop learning strategies in our students by means of developing more workshops and exercises that helped them become aware of the ways in which they learn best.

Within the contents of the course, there was a special space for learning strategies but, as the time was never enough, we could not work with the workshops designed to that end in an appropriate way and also they did not seem enough to strengthen students in this aspect. Another great shortcoming of our project was meeting the needs of the night shift students because they do not have the same time availability as the students from the day shift do. Therefore, it is necessary to create a strategy

that allows these students to have access to these modalities by establishing a program that can be accessed through the Internet so that students can organize their time or by the institution providing them with more flexible schedules that let them have more time available to devote to this program.

Finally, it is necessary to establish contact with local and foreign institutions in order to

share experiences they have had with the use of technology in the classroom, and specifically, with the use of the software English Discoveries or any other software. Besides, it would be an enriching experience to share information about other courses based on technology that are carried out at other universities as well as its effectiveness in language learning and teaching. ■

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