The use of ICTs in the English class: an enriching experience

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Globalization has caused significant changes all over the world in different fields. Education has been particularly affected by this process of transformation, especially due to the development and fast spread of the new information and communication technologies (NICTs) which have led to a paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process.
The implementation of such technologies in and outside the classroom has fostered autonomous learning thus encouraging students to become more independent and more responsible for their learning processes in new educational environments.
The aim of this paper is to describe an experience using different ICTs in an ESP class and to analyse the advantages and drawbacks of using these tools in this particular context.

Introduction

No doubt may be cast on the fact that globalization, together with the development and fast spread of the new information and communication technologies (NICTs) have caused significant social, economic and educational changes all over the world. The impact of the digital wave has influenced a fully integral part of our lives integrating the digital technologies to our routines at high speed. Studying and managing a foreign language in this new context is a way of meeting a need in order to be apt and gain access to education and employment possibilities rather than being just a mere pleasing pastime to cater for leisure time, (Ellis, 2003; Graddol, 2006).

In the field of education, the introduction of the ICTs has brought about a paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process. Nowadays, our students are harnessing the new technologies and thus they learn in a new manner: they create knowledge rather than memorize and repeat content. Within this new digital environment, we, teachers, must provide our students with lessons where the outside world of

emerging technologies is bridged to the classroom and act as guides. Learners should feel that they can have an online identity in networking spaces in order to increase opportunities for learning, to foster collaboration, motivation and knowledge-sharing.

The aim of this paper is to describe an experience using different ICTs in an ESP class that paved the way for the creation of an educational blog with a variety of multimedia materials, and to analyse the advantages and drawbacks of using these tools in this particular context.

Background information

The experience was carried out with a small group of adult students (aged 30 to 55) who work as administrative or technical staff at the School of Astronomical and Geophysical Sciences belonging to the National University of La Plata, Argentina. They all shared the same mother tongue (Spanish) and English level (A2). The course lasted four months with two-hour classes being delivered once a week. The material used included a selection of units from New English File Elementary (Oxford) as well as some additional online material.

All students knew how to use the word processor and send emails and some of them were familiar to a little extent with the use of other tools available on the web (blogs, picture or video editors, google docs and social networking sites); however, they were all very enthusiastic about incorporating new ICTs in the classroom, as they had never used these instruments in an educational environment.

Within this context, the introduction of technology was thought first as a means of giving students the possibility of being in contact with the language they were learning beyond the classroom walls while engaging in real communication (Torres, 2012); second, as a possibility of integrating technologies that "support real models and contexts through which students can actively improve their listening, speaking, vocabulary and writing abilities" (Torres, 2012, p. 30); and third, as an opportunity of bridging the "digital divide" particularly in the case of the "digital immigrants", i.e.,

of "those who come late to the world of technology" (Dudeney & Hockly, p. 9, 2008).

As regards evaluation, the course focused on formative assessment, that is, assessment *for* learning rather than on assessment *of* learning (tests and examinations) (Black, Harrison, Lee, Bethan & Dylan, 2005). Therefore, at the beginning of the course students were informed that no final exam would be administered. The ongoing assessment would be based on the different tasks learners would have to perform, some of which would incorporate the use of ICTs, and they were also told that, by the end of the course, a blog would be created and they would have to post one of the texts (oral and/or written) they had created dealing with some of the topics covered in the course (personal information, description of places, historical events). Permanent oral and/or written feedback was given to students during the course. This was possible because there were only 10 students.

ICTs used in the English class

As stated, one of the goals set for this course was the creation of an educational blog in which learners could present their works. Therefore, the first step to introduce the new technologies in the classroom was to show students examples of blogs so that they became familiar with their use and characteristics. In this way, the students could see posts similar to the ones they would have to produce, analyse content, form and discuss what themes and topics could be imitated for their own presentations. In this activity, the students were capable to see in advance that when a person posts something, the message gains a highly meaningful communicative effect. Other students respond to the posts and links to other posts may also be created, the so-called *threads*.

As the course progressed, the students gradually became acquainted with other online resources that they were likely to use to prepare their posts for the blog: googles docs (now called Google Drive), e-portfolio, Glogster, Fodey, Letterpop. All these tools form part of what is now called WEB 3.0 which is the third stage of

the web evolution. Its aim is to improve the e-learning experience using new technologies and interfaces. Collaborative learning, more personalized interactivity, more live manipulation of content are favoured within synchronous and asynchronous modes (Lapatas & Stefanidakis, 2010).

We will now provide a brief theoretical background that supports the implementation of these WEB 3.0 tools and describe how we used them in the course.

Google Docs

This service works as a document editor that allows learners to work individually or collaboratively. One of its valuable characteristics is that both the teacher and the students keep track of the changes introduced in a text. (Torres, 2012), a feature that was well in keeping with our interest in assessment for learning. As most of the students in our course already had a gmail account and the editor is quite simple to use, we thought this could be an appropriate instrument to introduce collaborative work.

The learners worked with this tool both individually, sharing the document only with the teacher, and in pairs to write texts containing personal information (introductions, hobbies, the family, job, etc.), letters and short narratives.

We agree on the fact that feedback to the learner is an essential aspect of formative assessment (Black et al. 2005). Therefore, the works written by the students were not marked immediately; instead, mistakes were highlighted and comments were made to help students identify the kind of error; for example, tense, punctuation, verb, etc. If the solution to the mistake made was beyond the proficiency level of the learners, a complete version of how to express the intended idea was provided by the teacher and, if necessary, explained orally in class. Comments also aimed at guiding students on how to improve their weaknesses (for example, 'revise form of simple present') and they also included positive feedback such as 'good organization of ideas' or 'well done, you have correctly identified and solved punctuation mistakes!'. A final mark was awarded

only once the written work was passed, which meant that students sometimes had to write two, three or more drafts of the different activities.

E-portfolio

A formative portfolio (Torres, 2012) was used with all the written texts produced by the students, even those that were not going to be included in the blog.

The idea of creating printed-mode portfolios dates back to the mid-1980s especially in areas like art and communication. Then, they gained importance in higher education during the 1990s. It was then when the electronic and digital portfolios appeared. According to Barrett (2001), an electronic portfolio is defined as the compilation of portfolio items stored in electronic formats such as audio-visual, graphical, or text (Barrett, 2001). Pearl and Leon Paulson (1991) created a metaphor for portfolios as a tool to construct meaning and they stated that the portfolio is a laboratory where students can construct meaning from their accumulated experience. They also pointed out that: "A portfolio tells a story. It is the story of knowing. Knowing about things... Knowing oneself... Knowing an audience... Portfolios are students' own stories of what they know, why they believe they know it, and why others should be of the same opinion. A portfolio is opinion backed by fact. Students prove what they know with samples of their work." (Paulson & Paulson, 1991, p.5).

The material comprising the e-portfolios included the texts that the students had been writing in google docs.

Glogster, Fodey, Letterpop

Before the end of the course, the learners were requested to revise their portfolios, select the items they liked best from all the activities that they had uploaded and chose one to post in the blog.

In google docs, the students had only used plain text. Hence, in order to make their postings more attractive, the following tools were shown so that they could ornament their texts: Glogster (http://www.glogster.com/), which allows to create posters; Fodey (http://www.fodey.com/generators/newspaper/snippet.asp), which

is used to generate newspaper clips; Letterpop (http://letterpop.com/), which provides templates to publish newsletters.

Finally, the students generated a final version of their written texts using these tools and chose a catchy title for their productions. These final pieces of work were not marked, as we were not evaluating how proficient students were in the use of these new instruments: instead, they received feedback through comments made face-to face, which contributed to increase the learners' motivation.

Windows Movie Maker

As the course progressed, students felt more confident with the use of ICTs. They became even more excited and came up with new ideas: produce two videos as a means of showing their oral production.

The learners worked collaboratively planning how to introduce themselves in a mock class and writing a sort of script for a mock advertisement. In the class, the students provided personal information as they knew there would be a real audience for the blog outside the classroom. The ad, in turn, was a really creative text. That is, the students prepared the script using the language they had learned or asked for help when they lacked the vocabulary/structures to deal with a topic we had never worked with in class.

In both cases, the recording was carried out by one of the students and the videos were edited by two of them using Windows Movie Maker and uploaded in YouTube before posting them in the blog. Even though in this final stage of the video production the work was limited to only two students, we believe the experience was highly rewarding for the whole group.

Blog

As mentioned, one of the course goals was to create a blog[1]. This tool allows to promote interaction and communication between the author and the audience (Torres, 2012). Blogs can be an undeniable source of expression in which teachers

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1 Blog/WebLog: a web page containing brief, chronologically arranged items of information. A blog can take the form of a diary, journal, what's new page, or links to other web sites. (Peter Scott, Internet Librarian, 200)

and students can share and exchange data and content in a whole environment of participation and collaboration. Ferdig & Trammel (2004) contend that blogs are more successful in promoting interactivity that is conversational; a mode of interaction more conductive to improve student and teacher relationships, active learning, higher order thinking, and greater flexibility in teaching and learning processes. Other activities can be combined with the use of a blogging software to strengthen real interaction.

Thus, we expected the implementation of an educational blog would provide an authentic audience for the students' works as well as fulfil the following aims:

- to promote the students´ acquisition of digital literacy skills.
- to enhance participation among learners in an online environment.
- to encourage reciprocity and active learning.

Blogs allow for authentic asynchronous communication, a feature particularly beneficial for introvert students. In this respect, Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) see online communication technology such as blogs as particularly important for shy students who are more reluctant to ask questions or challenge the teacher directly and blogs provide opportunities for interaction not possible in class. Moreover, learners know that their postings are likely to be read -and commented- not only by their teacher and partners but also by their families, friends and the whole community, depending on the blog access restrictions. Hence, even though they may be shy, they feel more motivated and tend to make their best effort to achieve a better communication (Santamaría González, 2005). We were satisfied to observe how well some shy students did on being able to communicate with an audience asynchronously.

Short before the end of the course, the blog was created with the material selected by the learners. Because of time restrictions to teach students the different aspects involved in the creation of the blog, the posts were uploaded by the teacher although the blog name and organization was the result of a class discussion on how to arrange it.

Finally, the learners were so happy with the result that they suggested making a kind of 'official presentation' of their blog and organized a party to such end. They invited the school authorities, other English teachers working in the institution and some of their workmates. The blog was shown and they even offered a 'live show' singing a song for the audience.

This blog is available at http://www.thecobblestonesfcaglp.blogspot.com.ar/

Advantages and disadvantages of using ICTs for language teaching

The integration of the NICTs to teach languages presents both advantages and disadvantages for teachers as well as learners, just as the use of any other material.

Among the advantages noticed, we would like to mention the following:

- the possibility of extending the learning experience beyond the classroom walls.

- increased motivation.

- more interaction both teacher-students and students-students.

- flexibility (in terms of topics, timing, learning styles).

- development of collaborative work.

- increased students' participation.

Although we believe the advantages far outnumber the drawbacks, some cons can also be mentioned:

- teachers need to be familiar with a number of resources and sometimes they lack enough preparation. In this sense, as Jeff Utecht, a teacher in Shanghai, says, "If we want to engage students in learning, we need to first understand their world. This world is without borders, boundaries, and is limited only by the speed of one's Internet access" (as cited in Solomon and Lynne, 2007, p. 22).

- the application of some activities requiring ICT may be time-consuming.

- some students might be reluctant to use new technologies and that fear needs to be overcome.

Conclusion

Even though technology in language teaching has been around for centuries (if we consider the blackboard as such, for instance), it is true that the early 1980s signalled a radical change with the introduction of computer-based materials for teaching languages (Dudeney & Hockly, 2008).

The fast increase in the use of ICTs has most evidently had a tremendous impact on the way teaching and learning take place. The implementation of such technologies in and outside the classroom has fostered the organization of educational environments where students are encouraged to become not only more independent but also more responsible for their learning processes, thus contributing to learner autonomy, as Benson (2001) points out.

This paper has demonstrated with pedagogical reasons, how new technologies can be integrated into a curriculum to support learning and it has also shown how positively the learners responded to the challenge of incorporating ICTs to encourage autonomy and to improve their grammar, cooperative teaming, interpersonal and digital skills. We, as e-teachers, became active users and confident e-facilitators with high readiness for innovation. Instead of dispensing our knowledge, we set up e-practices, arranged for access to appropriate web resources, and created the scaffolded support that helped students achieve their aim in a more independent way. We constantly mentored our students´ performance with a stimulating attitude in order to shield the pressures and stress that were sometimes caused by the manipulation of technology.

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