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GROWING PAINS: A PROPOSAL TO ADOPT AULA VIRTUAL DE ESPAÑOL (AVE) FOR A BLENDED LEARNING BEGINNERS COURSE

BIODATA

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RESUMEN

Esta ponencia presenta una evaluación de la transicion a un modelo de enseñanza semi-presencial con el que incrementar el uso y adopción de las tecnologías de la enseñanza (Tics) en el contexto académico. En particular, se considera la aplicación de AVE como método educativo en al entorno universitario, los posibles ajustes de metodologías, y otros requisitos de las instituciones educativas del tercer ciclo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: AVE, Enseñanza semi-presencial, Tics, enseñanza de idiomas, español

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a report of the transition to a blended learning model with increasing adoption of digital technology in teaching and learning by academics. The key objectives were to consider AVE resources and curriculum as a comparable alternative to traditional teaching methods such as textbooks; secondly, to ascertain how could AVE be incorporated to a blended learning environment and what adjustments were necessary for the transition and thirdly, to determine the compatibility of such online resource with academic requirements of diverse nature.

KEY WORDS: AVE, Blended-learning, Technology enhanced Learning, language Learning, Spanish

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an overview of the foreign languages provision in the United Kingdom Higher Education sector and addresses possible solutions to the most pressing questions: How to raise the profile of language learning to increase recruitment when the resources available are diminishing? Although, the conflicting forces involved in this dilemma and its possible solutions, ranging from policy making to teacher training, go beyond the remit of this paper, some of these questions were discussed with an important number of professionals in the field of ELE at the first conference of UK Spanish university teachers and ELE providers in London in June 2010; an event organized by *Instituto Cervantes* and *Regents' College*. The present paper integrates some of those discussions and provides an insight on how the transition to a blended learning model with increasing adoption of digital technology in teaching and learning by academics could be a viable solution in the short term. A brief background introduction to the changes affecting modern foreign languages (MFL) provision in the UK will be followed by considerations regarding AVE as a

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resource and curriculum comparable in quality to traditional methods such as textbooks in order to adopt it for a beginners course; secondly, to ascertain the adjustments necessary to incorporate AVE to a blended learning environment and finally, to determine the compatibility of such online resource with academic requirements of diverse nature.

RECENT CHANGES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

The decade long crisis facing recruitment in UK university MFL departments may deepen with the introduction by the coalition government of the new fees regime with effect from September 2012. Humanities disciplines will receive little or none subsidy from the estate, making subjects under its remit vulnerable to be considered financial liabilities for most middle-ground universities. Whilst pupils from private schools are likely to obtain a language qualification, state schools fail to promote language learning effectively. Thus creating a correlation between socio-economic groups and language acquisition. The take up of languages at Secondary education has declined in recent years. *Routes into Languages*, an initiative that encourages young people of all backgrounds to study languages at university, has received an additional £1.2 million from HEFCE. This funding injection was announced in July 2011 and aims to increase take up of MFL courses in Higher Education.

At the same time, prestigious bodies are calling for a revival of languages to help maintain and improve UK research and business profiles in a global economy. The *British Academy*, a research body for humanities and social sciences disciplines, launched the *Language Matters* campaign to address this decline in MFL (2010). Its views of the situation can be resumed on the following quote: *'The lack of language skills at secondary, tertiary and research levels will affect the UK's ability to compete effectively in a global market and to promote UK interests in a global context.'* Likewise, the *Confederation of British Industry* (CBI) has stated that language skills are in shortage. Moreover, a recent survey revealed that only 27% of business does not need MFL skills to operate (2009).

In addition, while language learning is a compulsory subject on primary schools curriculum; secondary schools do not always provide a follow up option. The recently introduced International Baccalaureate qualification for Secondary education is an exception to this situation, as it requires a language option to be awarded. One will be forgiven to think that the drivers for MFL provision in the UK appear uncoordinated and out-of-step with each other. However, there are also positive signs, in particular for Spanish. Despite the falling number of students taking languages GCSE, the demand for Spanish has increased. While ten years ago recruitment will follow behind that of French and German, Spanish enjoy the predilection of many learners thanks to its world language status.

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A further positive signal is the internationalization agenda that most universities have embraced, which provides MFL departments with the opportunity to link themselves to wider university strategies. Languages have a central role to play in the global stage, promoting language skills for those who had no access earlier and providing the opportunity to improve to those students already in possession of a language qualification. MFL departments need to emphasise the employability edge a graduate gains by adding a language to their CV, especially nowadays, when we can expect graduates moving abroad to work or working within a multicultural group. Generally, universities acknowledge the aforementioned benefits of MFL, however their provision seldom becomes policy. The declining numbers of undergraduates means that MFL departments are often the first to be scrutinized when efficiencies are considered. A proactive approach to publicize the benefits of learning languages and to capture untapped interest needs to be a priority for MFL departments.

Given the present crisis facing recruitment in university MFL departments, it is crucial to explore ways to reduce the cost of MFL teaching while maintaining its integrity as a discipline. This paper will propose a transition to blended-learning as a way forwards, using Technology Enhanced Learning and Information and Communication Technology. In particular it will map the advantages and disadvantages of adopting a commercially available Spanish online course for the provision of beginners Spanish at a UK university.

A CALL PROPOSAL: BLENDED LEARNING FOR BEGINNERS

Although we acknowledge there are many other modalities of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), including distance learning, for the purpose of this paper and our transition project, CALL is understood as a multimodal approach to language learning that takes place in a blended environment where face-to-face and digital sessions are administered to students. Consequently, Salmon's (2003) five stages model has been adapted to fit the mix modality of the course. At Plymouth University we offer Spanish modules as accredited electives and as minor pathways. Spanish attracts well over a hundred students at beginners level and allocating timetable space is very challenging. Timetable constraints are one of the difficulties faced by those MFL departments that do not provide Major Honour Degrees, as their cohorts come from wide-ranging programmes. Since language modules are not core, they can be steered to the timetable confines making them less attractive to students and perpetuating their marginality. Hence, it will be argued that blended learning can be a win-win solution in such contexts.

The possibility of using blended learning appealed to practitioners as a way to surmount timetable constrains. This move coincided in our institution with the switch from an analogue to a digital language lab. Facilitating the integration of ICT infrastructures with CALL resources was the right course of action. Whilst this integration will allow accommodating some of the demands placed on MFL

departments by timetabling, staff and students learning curve was expected to be extremely steep. As a way to ease the transition a number of commercial resources were examined and the Spanish online course: AVE was selected. What adjustments to our current practice will be needed? What barriers, advantages and disadvantages can be expected? How will students benefit from these changes?

THE CASE FOR ADOPTING AVE

Adopting a commercially available program was preferred primarily to facilitate transition. It was decided that staff time would be better invested on structuring and adapting the content than creating it. This approach corresponded with current practice when adopting a textbook. AVE was originally conceived as an online tool with a team of educational developers constantly updating and improving the resource (Juan Lazaro, 2009). The contextualization of language, its authenticity value were other aspects of the linguistic input (audios and videos) that made this resource more appealing than others. Furthermore, AVE complies with the design principles for CALL highlighted by Chapelle (2001), making it a safe and sound choice. In comparison with the average textbook, AVE provides ample opportunities for language learning, appropriated authenticity, contextualization, learners input creation tasks and error correction opportunities. Additionally, it provides multimodality and asynchronous access, which made it ideal for our blended learning project.

Additional to the face-to-face and digital lab sessions, and as part of their learning contract, undergraduates are expected to dedicate a minimum of four hours to independent study using AVE and other learning resources available from the university proprietary VLE. The dedicated digital lab platform can hold materials for practice both when attending a teaching session and for independent study while in campus. Parallel to this, AVE language learning potential is provided online on a 24/7 basis, offering a 360degrees learning experience. Although collaborative learning functionalities are embedded in AVE, it was decided to relinquish them in favour of the proprietary collaborative tools to avoid duplication and confusion.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS, ADJUSTMENTS AND COMPLICATIONS

The transition to blended learning also generated managerial changes that need to be taken into consideration. It has been noted earlier that timetabling language modules was complex due to the diverse body of students from various undergraduate programmes. Blended-learning allowed for larger groups and less timetable slots for the laboratory teaching sessions; accommodating some of the demands placed on MFL departments by timetabling. However AVE licenses run on a six months contract while the current timetable at our institution is term based. The period will either be too

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short or too long. Alternatively, the license could be initiated slightly later than the academic year to maximize its benefits without incurring in needless expense.[84]

Among the changes generated by the transition to blended learning, the management of the physical environment, the digital lab, has placed new demands on staff training and technical support involvement. Staff needed to become familiar with technical functionalities and terminology in order to instruct students and communicate faults to the support team. Managing logging in information has proved a time consuming task for staff as students need to receive individual details to create a personalized learning profile. Other difficulties included becoming accustomed to the new learning space where students' focus shifted from the teacher to the screen. The integration of CALL programs with technical infrastructure is only one aspect of the transition to blended learning. As Leakey states 'institutional priorities, problems of technical installation, staff training, the management of staff expectations, and the existence or absence of a pedagogy-driven approach to use are all as important, if not more so than the array of functionalities a system may have.' (2011:164).

Moreover, changing the medium of delivery inevitably affects the methodology. The transition calls for a global revision beyond the simple adoption of multimodal functionalities; a revision that comprises an update of the academic provision. In the case under discussion, the challenge was managing and structuring the content to fulfill academic requirements rather than creating content, as explained earlier. AVE's wealth of material meant staff needed to pace progress within the synchronous teaching sessions and the independent study element of the course. Navigating AVE's as a student is straight-forwards since it usually progresses in a lineal manner. The content is embedded from activity to activity and the visual icons point the direction to follow. However, from a teachers' perspective, the relevant information is scattered and presented in different formats depending the area of AVE you are consulting, making the selection of specific linguistic input tasks laborious. Moreover, to select specific exercises to practice during the digital lab sessions staff have to navigate the material and create referential language from level to topic, to session, to activity to screen number within an activity, etc.

Despite engaging with AVE teachers' training course proposing exploitation tasks and pedagogical insights, staff felt the need to create their own summaries and lessons plans as a means to take ownership of their engagement with the resource. These are preliminary observations and further analysis of staff and students' attitudes to the transition need to be carried out once the academic year is completed.

Nonetheless, it is evident that within the digital learning environment, staff have to adopt a distinct pedagogy, where the interactions and dynamics are significantly different to those of a traditional face-to-face environment (Comas-Quinn, 2010; Salmon, 2009). Furthermore, staff resistance to alter the position the tutor holds within

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[84] To its credit *Instituto Cervantes* has been very supportive and accommodating helping to find the appropriate solution.

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the traditional teaching and learning setting may respond to a significant shift on the tutor role creating an identity or confidence crisis that cannot be ignored. As many scholars have observed this shift surpasses the mere technical proficiency and affects deep believes and understanding of a not yet fully articulated teaching and learning contract in computer mediated learning (Comas-Quinn, 2010; Gillespie & Barr, 2002).

On a different level, another of the expectations created by AVE is that students may engage more readily with the program of study breaking the vicious circle observed with text-book based teaching, where the input comes predominantly from the teacher. Independent study opportunities outside the classroom may provide enough risk-taking instances in a controlled and safe environment to boost students' confidence and make them more proactive in the classroom. In turn, this may improve their language learning progress and help them to achieve better grades. It was acknowledged that learning is often driven by assessment and accreditation (Biggs, 1999; Boud et al., 2010). Hence, it was crucial to provide a learning environment, both within the proprietary VLE and through AVE, where learning will be supported by assessment. To that effect, a small percentage of the module assessment grade was assigned to engagement and achievement through AVE, making use of the personalized learning tagging capability. It was anticipated that this would encourage engagement with the resource and motivate students to fulfill their learning contracts.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an overview of the challenges facing the foreign languages provision in the United Kingdom Higher Education sector. Although high profile drivers such as policy and teacher training are outside this paper scope, they have been highlighted to provide a richer picture. However, a possible solution to the pressing question of how to increase recruitment with diminishing resources has been proposed through a blended learning approach that incorporates CALL as a delivery medium. Although based on a particular transition project for a specific cohort of students, it is felt that the findings can be of value to a more general cluster of professionals in the field of ELE. The paper provides preliminary observations and insights on how the transition to a blended learning model may operate and what are the challenges and advantages of such switch. In particular, highlighting the significant shift in teaching and learning roles and how this may affect staff and students interactions. Finally the paper has identified some avenues for further research and comparative studies to ascertain whether some of the expectations generated by the project will be realised.

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