

Using Moodle for the teaching of the history of the English language

Usando Moodle para la enseñanza de la historia del idioma inglés

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ABSTRACT. The present paper describes our experience with the teaching of Old English, considered to be the most difficult part as a result of its inflected nature, especially for those students not acquainted with other inflected languages such as Latin or Greek. Our proposal is conceived as blended-learning, which combines the face-to-face class sessions with a proposed set of distant-learning activities through the use of ICT, most of them as group work.

RESUMEN. El presente artículo describe nuestra experiencia con la enseñanza del inglés antiguo, considerada la parte más difícil como resultado de su naturaleza flexionada, especialmente para aquellos estudiantes que no están familiarizados con otras lenguas flexivas como el latín o el griego. Nuestra propuesta se concibe como aprendizaje semipresencial, que combina las sesiones presenciales con un conjunto propuesto de actividades de aprendizaje a distancia mediante el uso de las TIC, la mayoría de ellas como trabajo en grupo.

KEYWORDS: Moodle, Competences, English, Blended-learning, Teaching.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Moodle, Competencias, Inglés, Blended-learning, Enseñanza.

1. Introduction

The experience has been carried out in the course History of the English language I, a 6-ECTS third-year subject taught in the Degree of English Studies at the University of Málaga. The course provides the basics of the phono-orthographic and morpho-syntactic features of early English, that is, Old English and Middle English. The inflected nature of Anglo-Saxon, together with the high number of students enrolled in the course as a result of its compulsory status, makes it necessary to reinforce the on-site classes with Moodle-based additional material for autonomous and collaborative learning.

The present paper describes our experience with the teaching of Old English, considered to be the most difficult part as a result of its inflected nature, especially for those students not acquainted with other inflected languages such as Latin or Greek. Our proposal is conceived as blended-learning, which combines the face-to-face class sessions with a proposed set of distant-learning activities through the use of ICT, most of them as group work. In line with other university courses (Pennock-Speck, 2008, pp. 65-66), ICT is viewed as an aid to the traditional teaching and learning methods. Burbat (2016) analysed a number of digital tools for teaching and learning foreign languages and concluded that they had a positive effect on learner's autonomy. As far as the teacher is concerned and taking into account the new scenario in university education, in which the assessment system has changed from (generally) one final exam in the past to continuous assessment nowadays, computers have become necessary to lessen the teaching load and at the same time keeping high assessment standards (Pennock-Speck, 2008, pp. 66-67).

The course has been designed through the learning platform, Campus Virtual, a Virtual Learning Environment in Moodle which meets all the requirements for the teacher to foster a more active learning process and to engage students in the topic. Virtual Learning Environments are helpful for uploading contents and filing them properly. This includes articles, readings, either printed or electronic references with their corresponding hyperlinks, exercises, etc.

The model has been tested with two groups, the morning group acting as a control group and the evening group as a test group. The number of students is 99 in the morning group and 74 in the evening group. In the control group, a traditional teaching model was adopted, mostly based on the description of the phonological and morpho-syntactic features of Old English and the subsequent analysis and translation of relevant texts, both in prose and poetry. The test group, on the other hand, was taught following a blended-learning approach where the students' autonomous/group work is significantly highlighted throughout the teaching/learning process. The results have shown that this turns out to be an efficient tool for the learning of the basics of the Anglo-Saxon language.

2. Methodology

Due to the nature of the contents covered in the course, the students' attitude towards the subject usually goes through two stages. First, their motivation tends to be high during the first weeks of the course since it is their first contact with early English, and thus they show interest in the spelling and pronunciation, runes in particular. This initial interest, however, generally diminishes after the first two weeks when inflections and paradigms are tackled, as the subject is considered to be too theoretical. To avoid this, ICT is used to make the subject more attractive for students. As mentioned by de la Cruz (2012, p. 57), ICT also promotes some competencies like autonomous learning, which becomes the basic competence for lifelong learning (Sáez Hidalgo & Filardo Llamas, 2012).

It is also important to mention that Moodle stands out for being a powerful communication tool, which allows the exchange of information among students, but also between individual students and the teacher, through messaging, discussion groups and chats. The discussion groups and the chat constitute a key role in the learning process, reassuring the students' confidence and improving their competence in the English language (de la Cruz, 2012, p. 59; Pérez Lorido & Pérez Lorido, 2008).

3. Results

The present proposal has been organised into three different stages, necessarily sequential, each with two face-to-face-sessions: 1) background readings on Old English morphology to provide the theoretical component; 2) group-work activities (consisting of a glossary and three wikis); and 3) a self-assessment based on a test to measure the students' level of achievement (individually). The students, however, are not allowed to access the whole unit from the beginning insofar as each stage will be progressively offered after the successful completion of the previous one.

The first part contains the theoretical background needed to master the morphological analysis and subsequent translations of Anglo-Saxon texts proficiently. The students are provided with a concise description of the basics of Old English morphology, including the major word classes, i.e., nouns, adjectives, demonstratives, pronouns and verbs.

The second part, in turn, deals with the practical component of the course, where two different activities are proposed. On the one hand, the students are asked to build up a glossary of linguistic terms in order to become acquainted with the specific terminology of the field. In the majority of cases, it is the students' first contact with the phonology and morphology of early English, and knowledge and correct usage of the appropriate terminology are essential. Figure 1 partially reproduces the beginning of the glossary, showing the headword and the definition provided by the students.

This material is revised in order to delete those entries that are not necessary for the subject. If a term is not properly defined, the teacher informs the student responsible for that definition through the virtual platform so that he/she corrects the wrong information. The outcome is then used in a face-to-face session to highlight the key terms in the field. The benefits of this activity are manifold as team work given that the students learn not only from their own contribution but also from the entries provided by the other students.

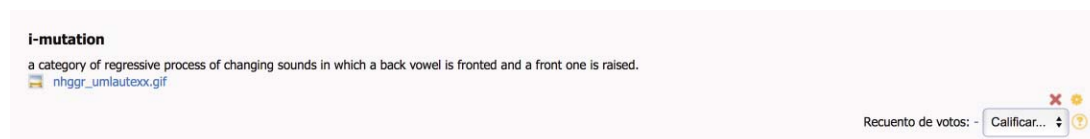


Figure 1. Glossary of terms (partial reproduction).

The compilation of the glossary is followed by three wikis that are specially conceived to generate group discussion about the course contents. A wiki is commonly defined as a site allowing the users to add, delete or edit and change its content via a web browser. In education, they become very effective in a blended-learning environment because they encourage group interaction and support asynchronous communication. Students thus find that their learning is most effective when they are actively involved in the construction of their knowledge (Augar, Raitman & Zhou, 2004), as they learn not only from their own participation in the activity but also from the other partners' feedback. Wikis are then a propitious platform for collaborative learning in higher education as long as learning strategies are effectively designed and planned (Zheng, Nijya & Warschauer, 2015).

Divided into groups, the students are asked to analyse and translate a set of Anglo-Saxon prose texts. The rationale behind this activity is the mastering of Old English morphology as a requisite for a correct translation of the source text. Once completed, these wikis are used in a face-to-face session with a view to discussing any difficulty or problem that the students may have encountered when analysing and translating the texts.

Finally, the third part is concerned with the students' self-assessment and it is carried out in the last two face-to-face sessions. On the one hand, the students are asked to develop a concise conceptual map of the classification of Old English verbs incorporating not only the four major classes, i.e., weak, strong, preterite-

present and anomalous verbs, but also the different sub-classes. In the particular case of weak verbs, the students are asked to provide the grouping into class I (-an and -rian verbs), class II (-ian verbs) and class III verbs. In this same fashion, strong verbs should be classified into the seven classes in terms of their different apophony. A conceptual map becomes a graphic representation of the relationships prevalent in an action, state or event providing a visual to organise a given piece of information. Concept maps have been extensively used in education in the last decades as they have been found to contribute to the quality of the learning process, “both for technologies and educational software and also for activities that bring into play mechanisms of active and participatory learning in students” (Murga-Menoyo, Bautista-Cerro & Novo, 2011, p. 47; González García, 2008; Jiménez Segura, 2010). For the purpose, the use of Mindmeister (<http://www.mindmeister.com/es>) or Gliffy (<http://www.gliffy.com/>) are recommended so that the students can upload files and share them with the other classmates. This activity may be used to deal with any other component of the syllabus. Figure 2, for example, reproduces the classification of the Germanic family of languages, where English is located within the West-Germanic branch.

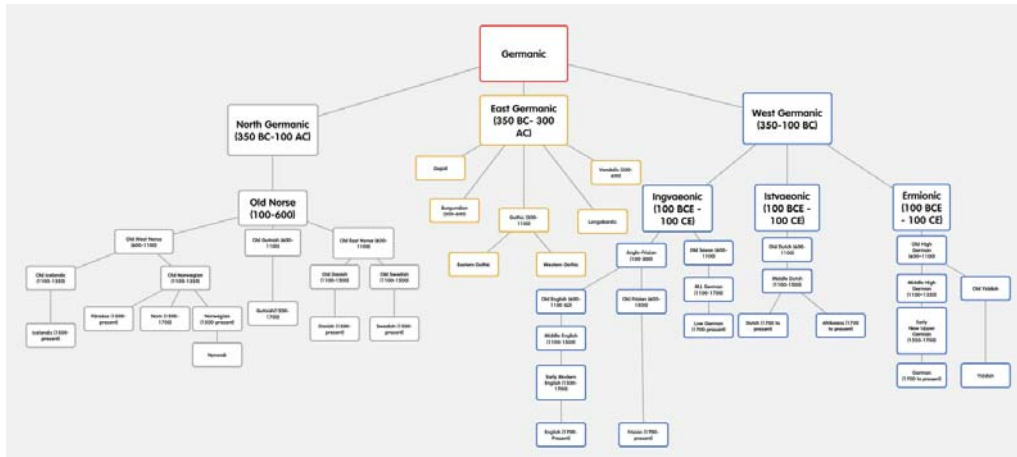


Figure 2. Conceptual map of the Germanic family of languages.

The self-assessment process finishes with a test which the students are asked to fill in in class. The test has been designed to contain multiple-choice, true/false and open answers, making up a total of 20 questions which review different aspects of the course contents: from simple questions about the morphology of the different word classes to the morphological analysis of words in context. The questions are given in jumbled order to the students to avoid cheating from the other classmates’ screens. A minimum of fifteen questions must be answered correctly in order to pass the unit with some level of proficiency. If not, the students will have to revise the course material and fill in a new test in the next face-to-face session. A successful performance here is taken as a requisite before they begin with the second unit, concerned with the transition from Old to Middle English. Figure 3 reproduces the type of questions in this self-assessment; the first one is a multiple-choice question and the second one asks for an open answer.



Figure 3. Self-assessment.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The present experience has been found to have a positive effect on the learning of Old English, not only in terms of the mastering of the course contents but also in terms of the students' level of satisfaction with the teaching process. On the one hand, the results obtained from the test and the control groups confirm the validity of the blended-learning approach. Quantitatively speaking, 85% of the students in the test group eventually managed to complete the process with significantly better results (obtaining an average mark of 8,5 out of 10) than those in the control group. Contrariwise, 70% of the students in the control group successfully completed the process, but the average mark was lower (7,1 out of 10).

The students, on the other hand, have also expressed satisfaction at the use of ICT as it positively enhances the learning of the course contents. Activities like wikis were more than welcome by the students, fostering a model of collaborative learning of Old English. They learn both from their participation in the activity and from the feedback and corrections that they receive from the other participants.

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