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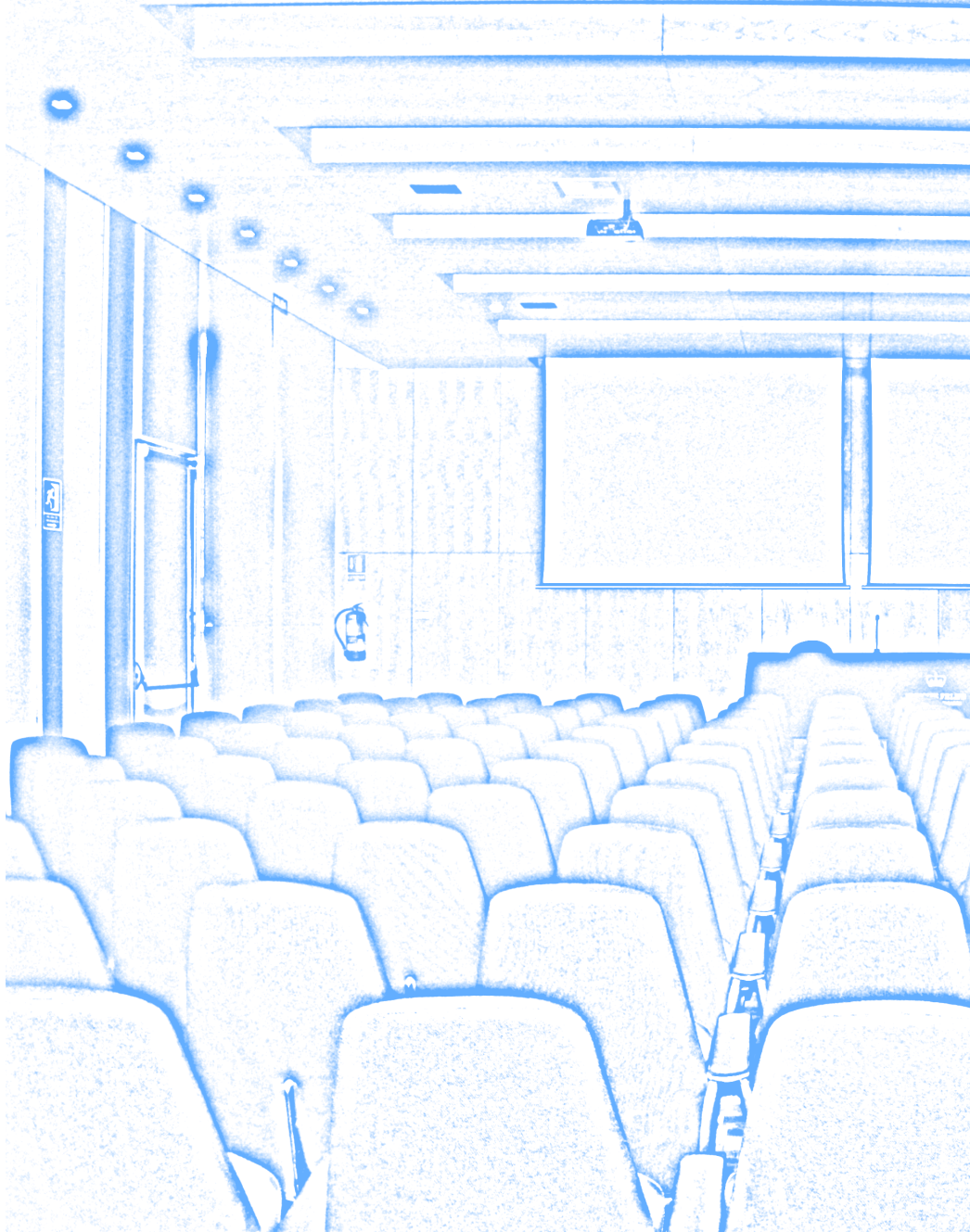


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**Actas del I Congreso Internacional de
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(Coordinadores)



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Learning to learn english with new technologies

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Abstract

At university level, instruction is mainly considered as a teacher-centered process, leaving aside the fostering of learning strategies and the promotion of independent learning. This paper is devoted to shifting this perspective, by showing an itinerary of learning, the main objective of which is to improve English language competence, by helping students control cognitive and meta-cognitive processes that regulate learning. To do this, two dimensions were considered: self-awareness and self-regulation, and a set of instruments implemented: an English placement test, a test of learning strategies, an inventory of tasks, self-assessment tests, assessment rubrics and a repository of online learning resources. Results showed benefits for students' learning process and for teaching practice.

Keywords:

English learning, independent learning, self-regulation, self-assessment.

En el nivel universitario, la instrucción se considera fundamentalmente como un proceso centrado en el profesor, dejando de lado el fomento de estrategias de aprendizaje y del aprendizaje autónomo. Este artículo se consagra a cambiar esta perspectiva, mostrando un itinerario de aprendizaje, cuyo objetivo principal es mejorar la competencia en lengua inglesa, ayudando a los estudiantes a controlar los procesos cognitivos y meta-cognitivos que regulan el aprendizaje. Para ello se consideraron dos dimensiones: autoconciencia y autorregulación, y se implementó un conjunto de instrumentos: prueba de nivel, test de estrategias de aprendizaje, inventario de tareas, tests de autoevaluación, rúbricas de evaluación y un repositorio de recursos de aprendizaje online. Los resultados mostraron beneficios para el proceso de aprendizaje de los estudiantes y para la práctica docente.

Palabras clave:

Aprendizaje del inglés, aprendizaje autónomo, autorregulación, autoevaluación.

1. Introduction

This paper presents an ongoing Teaching Innovation Project aimed at improving the English skills of future teachers of Early Childhood Education and Primary Education, which is being developed at the University of Castilla-La Mancha for the degrees of Primary school Teacher and Early Childhood Education Teacher.

The command of foreign languages, and particularly English, is ineluctable in the training of future teachers, in light of the rapid introduction of bilingual schools due to the social demand of educating citizens who can communicate in one or two foreign languages. However, students in the first years of both the aforementioned degrees find it difficult to interact in English.

Hence, this project was designed as an educational intervention to contribute to the acquisition of English language skills through the development of the competence of learning to learn and independent learning with the support of new technologies.

2. Theoretical framework

As Manzano Vázquez (2015) points out, the promotion of independent learning is not an important goal for Higher Education. A traditional approach to teaching is dominant in university settings in which lecturers have control over all the processes of learning: planning, transmission and evaluation of knowledge, not paying

much attention to “the way in which learning is carried out, that is to say, the process of acquisition and construction of knowledge by students” (Nieto, 2015: 126). In this sense, Huba and Freed (2000) consider a shift of the focus from teaching to learning is imposed in knowledge era, and show that the main innovations in 21st century in Higher Education are focusing in learner-centered instruction and also in assessment. In student-centered learning the protagonists are the students and their cognitive and metacognitive process of learning, and this approach is claimed to provide more effective learning and higher achievement levels (Overby, 2011). The concept of active learning is also key, as well as the shift in control from the teacher to the students. According to this approach, students are to be responsible for their own process of learning and be able to be more autonomous and independent to organize their own learning process.

Thus, fostering autonomy is deemed to be a cornerstone for lifelong learning and a challenge in education, and particularly, for the learning of foreign languages, and therefore, it is necessary to implement a “pedagogy for autonomy” (Jiménez Raya, Lamb, and Vieira, 2007; Manzano Vázquez, 2015). In this vein, for Jiménez Raya (2013), one of the most important goals of higher education should be to help students to be independent learners and to develop effective learning strategies that can be transferred to different situations and other areas of study.

To achieve these goals, helping students develop self-regulation is crucial, since it has an implication form autonomy and control of the planning, monitor and evaluation of the own learning process and leads to self-improvement (Paris and Paris, 2001). Self-regulated students are able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and select the steps they have to take to overcome their difficulties and this autonomy and control make them more effective learners (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) and successful in and beyond formal education (Pintrich, 2000; Winne and Perry, 2000). For all these reasons, when Higher Education fosters autonomy, learning strategies and self-regulation, not only does it contribute to academic achievement, but it also prepares students to overcome challenges they will encounter beyond formal education.

3. Setting

In the Faculties of Education of the different campuses of the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM), “English Language and its Didactics I” and “English language and its Didactics II” are compulsory subjects in the syllabuses of first and second year respectively. This means that all students, regardless of the specialty they intend to acquire (PE, special needs, music, English, etc.) have to take these subjects. This has an implication on motivation and foreign language skills. Indeed, in previous years, the teaching staff has detected that a significant number of students are neither particularly interested in nor good at languages. It is also important to acknowledge that some students did not study English in previous years for various reasons: after High School they found a job, or they enrolled on Vocational Training courses (it is relatively common to find students enrolled on the Early Childhood Education Teacher degree who previously completed Vocational Training studies in Infant Education), or they started a different degree and they decided to leave it before enrolling at the Faculty of Education.

As a result, a significant number of students do not start the course with the minimum required of a A2 level (CEFR). They usually have acceptable knowledge of grammar and sometimes of vocabulary, but show poor domain of communicative skills and struggle when they have to put their language skills into practice in written and spoken productions. In addition, students find it difficult to overcome their difficulties via independent learning, using internet or textbooks, and they do not usually know how to organize their learning process, as their strategies for learning to learn are not sufficiently developed.

In order to remedy this situation, a Teaching Innovation Project, which is still ongoing, was launched under the title “Educational intervention to improve learning to learn strategies and independent learning of a foreign language using Virtual Campus”. In this innovation project seventeen teachers from the Faculty of Education of Ciudad Real and Toledo are involved, as well as three teachers from Universities abroad (Toulouse and Pitesti) and a teacher from a Spanish University other than the UCLM, which are supporting its design and implementation.

4. Objectives and Method

The main objective of the Teaching Innovation Project is to improve English language competence, by fostering learning to learn and independent learning strategies through the development of self-regulation and metacognition in the following dimensions:

- Self-awareness
- Self-regulation. Fostering of strategic actions:
 - planning,
 - evaluating
 - monitoring.

In accordance with the different dimensions of the main objective, each cognitive process is connected to one or more instruments, as shown in table 1:

DIMENSIONS		INSTRUMENTS
SELF-AWARENESS		- English placement test. - Learning to learn strategies questionnaire.
SELF-REGULATION	PLANNING	- Inventory of tasks - Repository of online resources
PROCESS	EVALUATING	- Self-assessment questionnaires - Rubrics for self-assessment
	MONITORING	- Reflection document.

Table 1. Dimensions and instruments.

First, to foster self-awareness two instruments were applied: an English placement test, the objective of which was to provide students with information about their base level of English, so they can be aware of their starting point as English learners, and a learning to learn strategies questionnaire adapted from the CEVEAPEU questionnaire, developed and validated by Gargallo, Suárez-Rodríguez and Pérez-Perez (2009) to test the learning strategies of university students. The aim of this instrument was to examine the learning strategies students used, and to make them reflect on their learning process, in order to develop metacognition.

The second dimension of self-regulation for independent learning was “strategic action”. This dimension is composed of three processes: planning, evaluating and monitoring. Firstly, to help students develop their planning strategies, a scaffolding system has been designed with the creation of an inventory of tasks for every lesson. The main goal of these tasks is to help students prepare the topics and discursive structures of each lesson, so that they can improve their productive skills. There are three kinds of tasks they can upload to Virtual Campus (Moodle): recording tasks, in which they have to produce an oral text about the main topics of the lesson, writing tasks, consisting of carrying out writing compositions using a varied text typology (according to their level), and finally, reading tasks. For the reading tasks, some extracts from the textbook are chosen and students have to check the pronunciation of the difficult words, read the text aloud and record it.

The second cognitive process to develop the strategic action is evaluating. Self-assessment is critical for self-regulation. To foster self-assessment strategies, two different instruments were used: on the one hand, self-assessment questionnaires for speaking and writing and on the other hand, rubrics for self-assessment also of the productive skills of speaking and writing. There were two self-assessment questionnaires: one for written production and another one for oral production. The questionnaires were designed as check-lists and aimed at improving the students’ revision and monitoring strategies. For example, the self-assessment questionnaire for written production, was created to model the process of writing in three steps: prewriting, writing, and revising, following the principles of the cognitive process theory of writing (Flower and Hayes, 1981). This questionnaire tries to elicit the process of prewriting, by asking questions such as: “Before writing, do you write down the main ideas you want to include?”, “before writing, do you organize your ideas into different paragraphs?”, “before writing, do you think in the vocabulary, linkers and structures you have to use?”, etc. In addition, the process of revising is fostered with questions such as: “When you finish writing, do you make sure that adjectives are not in plural form?”, “do you make sure that adjectives are placed before nouns?”, “do you make sure that all the verbs in the third person of present simple end in s/es?”, etc. The self-assessment questionnaire for oral production encourages students to reflect not only on the cohesive and coherence aspects aforementioned, but also on other language areas such as intonation and pronunciation, by asking questions such as: “When you are talking, do you bear in mind that “v” does not have the same sound that “b”?”, “When you are talking do you bear in mind that the regular past tenses ending in –ed are not always pronounced as /id/?”, etc.

Additionally, to promote development of the strategic action of evaluation, students are provided with the rubrics teachers are going to use to assess their oral and written production in the final exam. With the use of unified rubrics of assessment, the intention is twofold. On the one hand, this has an implication for teacher coordination, since teachers had to reach an agreement on the dimensions of performance to be evaluated, the performance levels and the descriptors for every performance level. For the rubric for the assessment of written production three dimensions were considered: structure and coherence, grammar and morphology and vocabulary. The rubric for the assessment of oral production were composed of four dimensions: pronunciation and intonation, grammar, vocabulary and fluency. On the other hand, the rubrics help students evaluate their work, adapt their productions to the requirements of the rubric and pay attention to the different aspects and dimensions assessed. In addition, rubrics improve the objectivity of grading, contribute to formative evaluation (Sánchez Santamaría, 2011), teaching improvement (Stevens and Levi, 2013) and academic results (Reddy and Andrade, 2010).

Finally, the last strategic action for self-regulation that is been promoted in the present Innovation Project is monitoring, which is critical for controlling the process of learning and contributes to development of metacognition and thinking about thinking.

After every lesson students have to write a reflection document in which they have to include their perceptions on their own learning process: what they have learnt, how they learn better, what they are able to do now, in which aspects they need reinforcement and/or extension, and how they are going to get it. In order to do so, they have to design a learning plan, itemizing the specific activities to improve their language and learning skills and to continue learning. The learning plan connects the process of monitoring with the process of planning and thus, the entire cycle starts again. To support the independent learning the students are carrying out during this stage, and particularly, to support selection of online learning materials, teachers created a repository of resources with a varied range of online activities aimed at the development of listening, reading, speaking and writing, as well as grammar and vocabulary activities and links to dictionaries. These resources are graded, so the students can start with activities of their level and continue with more difficult ones when they feel prepared. This way, students do not get lost surfing the vast amount of information available on the Internet and can strengthen or expand at their own pace the areas or skills they deem more convenient.

5. Results

Although the present Innovation Project is still in progress, it was experimentally implemented last year (2014-2015) in the Early Childhood Education Teacher Degree for the subject “English Language and its Didactics I”, and was exclusively addressed to struggling students that have already failed the subject at least once. The results of this experimental implementation were very satisfactory, as all the students that followed the instructions of the project, that is to say: uploaded the inventory of tasks in the Virtual Campus, used the self-assessment instruments, and completed the document of reflection, passed the final exam. Thus, we can conclude that this project improved students’ language skill and, subsequently, academic results.

The academic year 2015-2016 the Innovation Project addressed to all students enrolled on the courses “English Language and its Didactics I and II”. After the first semester of implementation, the students’ impressions and perceptions were researched in order to collect information on the progress of the entire process, by using a Likert type questionnaire. The results showed that students’ opinion on the Innovation project was very positive. They reported particular gains in vocabulary and in written production thanks with this method. One of the most valued instruments were the rubrics of self-assessment, which they deem to be a crucial element to understand teachers’ expectations and to organize their learning process. The inventory of tasks and the repository of resources were also positively valued as a way to plan and organize the practice of the subject. However, students deem the completion of the reflection document and the design of their learning plan to be the most difficult task, showing that there is a still a long way to go in the improvement of self-regulation and metacognition.

The Innovation Project has also had an implication for teachers. They reported benefits for teacher coordination, understanding of students’ needs and struggles, reflection on teaching practice and use of the Virtual Campus (Moodle)

6. Conclusion

A new challenge for teachers and future teachers is to acquire a second language to thus meet the requirements of the knowledge society and be able to teach content through a foreign language. What is more, the expansion of bilingual schools also has an implication for work opportunities for teachers with a B2 or C1 level in a foreign language and particularly in English. This has been the main motivation behind the implementation of the Teacher Innovation Project described in this paper, the main goals of which were improve the level of English language of the undergraduate teachers in the first and the second year of the Early Childhood and Primary Education Teacher degrees and provide students with self-regulation strategies to foster independent learning and learning to learn competence, which are crucial for lifelong learning.

In order to do so, a group of teachers mainly from two Faculties of Education of Castilla-La Mancha collaborated to create an environment which promoted the acquisition of strategies for independent learning, by fostering self-awareness and development of strategic action and, particularly, strategies for planning, evaluating and monitoring. As a result, struggling students improved their academic performance, and generally speaking, students valued the instruments of the project very highly, particularly the rubrics of assessment for written and oral production, the inventory of tasks and the repertory of resources for independent online learning. They also report difficulties in thinking and reflecting on their learning process and in creating their own learning plan.

As for the teachers, this Teaching Innovation Project has been an opportunity to reflect on the teaching practice, improve teacher coordination and their use of Virtual Campus.

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