

Chapter XXIX

WebCT Design and Users' Perceptions in English for Agriculture

M^a Camino Bueno Alastuey
Public University of Navarre, Spain

ABSTRACT

The adaptation to the European Space of Higher Education and to the new demands of the labor market has produced a shift in university education, which has changed from being teacher-centered to being learner-centered. Following this trend, at the Public University of Navarre, a blended course of English for Agriculture was created using the virtual platform WebCT. In this chapter, we forward a description of content organization and resources used, analyze students' attainments and perceptions, and finally conclude with a reflection on the effect various organizations have produced in students, together with future trends in the use of WebCT in our context.

INTRODUCTION

Spanish universities are immersed in a process of modernization due to the creation of the European Space for Higher Education, which should be a reality in 2010. The process started with the Bologna Declaration signed in 1999 and had among its main objectives the recognition and homogenization of degrees¹ to facilitate the mobility of students and university staff, and the adaptation to the

new demands of the labor market, especially the development of new skills and lifelong learning, to increase competitiveness.

In the Spanish University community, the process is involving a profound change in methodology as the focus of education shifts from the teacher to the student in how subjects' credits are measured and in the emphasis on students' skills and lifelong learning.

The Spanish University system was based on a classical methodological stand, where the professor was the focus of the process of learning. University courses had credits assigned that accounted for the number of hours of direct tuition, and the transmitted knowledge tended to be theoretical and hardly transferable to the labor world. Moreover, all the courses were campus-based and thus unable to meet the demand for flexible and autonomous lifelong learning.

In contrast, the European Space for Higher Education introduces European credits—called ECTS—that measure the total number of hours a student has to work in each course, and thus represent students' workload. Furthermore, it places emphasis on practical knowledge as “[in the labor market] it tends to be knowledge about processes that is highly valued—knowledge *how*, rather than knowledge *about*” (Dovey, 2006, p. 390), and on the development of inestimable skills such as teamwork, oral expression, organizational skill, public speaking, and planning, which are all transferable to the labor world. Consequently, methodology has to become more learner-centered, concentrating on specific students' needs and trying to individualize their learning. Finally, the European Space for Higher Education also emphasizes the importance of flexible, autonomous, lifelong learning and the need to offer courses adaptable to workers' time constraints at our universities.

The need to adapt our subject—English for Agriculture—to the new demands of the European Space for Higher Education and to create a virtual space for students unable to attend classes encouraged us to start using a virtual platform, WebCT, in combination with face-to-face classes to create a blended course².

Although the quantity of excellent research concentrating on new technologies and their use for language learning, especially on the design of CALL activities, task-based projects, and innovative ways of using technology (Chapelle, 2001; Felix, 1999, 2000; Warschauer, 2000, 2001)

is large, and there is literature on the benefits and features of virtual platforms (Burgess, 2003; Jager, 2004; Ngai, Poon & Chan, 2007; Polisca, 2006; Yip, 2004)—one of the resources most widely used in universities—reports and analyses of how they are used, how resources are organized, and the effect various organizations may have on the final users, the students, are surprisingly scarce. These descriptive accounts are necessary because otherwise, “with much writing on CALL by those at the forefront of theoretical research, there is sometimes the danger that teachers are left behind in a cloud of publications” (Littlemore & Oakey, 2004, p. 96).

In this chapter, our aim is to provide such an account by describing the process of creating a course of English for Agriculture. First, a pedagogical background for the use of WebCT in our context will be forwarded. Then, the possibilities of WebCT for language learning and its use at our university will be explained to continue with a description of our project, which focused on how changes in the organization of WebCT and the addition of new features affected students' attainments, use, and perceptions. Finally, future trends and general conclusions about our experience will be analyzed.

BACKGROUND

New technologies have a number of widely recognized advantages that are very useful for the new teaching methodology brought about by the new concept of learner-centered education demanded by the European Space of Higher Education. First, they are an element of innovation, which is highly motivating for the pupil, and introduce the student to “methods and ‘tools’ which may be applied in the workplace” (Dovey, 2006, p. 388). They also develop the capacity “to adapt to an ever-changing world and to compete in equal conditions with undergraduates from other countries” (Roldán, 2005, p. 302). Furthermore, they

15 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/webct-design-users-perceptions-english/20046

Related Content

Untangling Multimedia Effects on EFL Incidental Vocabulary Learning via Playing an Online Hidden-Object Game

Emad A. Alghamdi (2016). *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching* (pp. 24-39).

www.irma-international.org/article/untangling-multimedia-effects-on-efl-incidental-vocabulary-learning-via-playing-an-online-hidden-object-game/143685

Investigating the Adequacy of EFL Learners' L2 Digital Literacy Skills, Consistency of Self-Assessed Competence, and Actual Performance

Khalid Al Seghayer (2020). *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching* (pp. 1-22).

www.irma-international.org/article/investigating-the-adequacy-of-efl-learners-l2-digital-literacy-skills-consistency-of-self-assessed-competence-and-actual-performance/248517

Online Approaches to Learning Vocabulary: Teacher-Centred or Learner-Centred?

Glenn Stockwell (2011). *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching* (pp. 33-44).

www.irma-international.org/article/online-approaches-learning-vocabulary/51345

Helping Language Learners Put Concordance Data in Context: Concordance Cards in The Prime Machine

Stephen Jeaco (2017). *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching* (pp. 22-39).

www.irma-international.org/article/helping-language-learners-put-concordance-data-in-context/188769

Mothers' Attitudes toward the Use of CALL for Their Children's English Learning: A Focus on Individual Differences

Masoumeh Hasani (2015). *Handbook of Research on Individual Differences in Computer-Assisted Language Learning* (pp. 321-343).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/mothers-attitudes-toward-the-use-of-call-for-their-childrens-english-learning/134622