

# Chapter 13

## A Digital Ecosystem for Teaching–Learning English in Higher Education: A Qualitative Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of the research is to analyse pre-service teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of the digital ecosystem implemented in the area of English morphosyntax in b-learning modality. Based on this goal, a qualitative research approach was adopted. One hundred forty-three learners were enrolled in the subject, and a total of 43 participated in the study. The instrument used to collect data was unstructured individual interviews. The findings suggested students' positive attitudes towards the implemented digital ecosystem. It highlighted that the students were active participants and knew how to manage their learning and how to collaborate with their classmates. The flexibility and accessibility provided by the technological tools available in the model allowed students to combine their personal and professional obligations with lifelong learning. It overcame all the spatial and temporal barriers and developed a kind of learning just-in-time, just-for-students, anytime and anywhere.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, the convergence of two teaching-learning approaches has been promoted. On the one hand, the traditional approach, in which all lessons and interactions are always carried out face-to-face, and, on the other hand, the e-learning training, in which some lessons and interactions are developed face-to-face and other ones virtually thanks to the affordances offered by new emerged technologies (Coaten, 2003; Graham, 2006; López & Matesanz, 2009).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3062-7.ch013

This new approach, as Thorne (2003) points out, “represents a real opportunity to create learning experiences that can provide the right learning at the right time and in the right place for each and every individual, not just at work, but in schools, universities and even at home. In this context blended learning could become one of the most significant developments of the 21st century” (p.18). From these words, it can be deduced the relevance of this instruction to respond to the educational demands of the present society, since citizens need to carry out training to acquire the knowledge that allow them to keep job skills up-to-date according to the different situations and the changes in the present society (González et al., 2013).

Universities are trying to adapt to these new educational demands of knowledge society to compete and be successful in the changing economic and political dynamics of the modern world. Teachers are also trying to contribute to this through the design and implementation of innovative educational practices that allow learners to acquire a complete and solid training (González, 2008), and to be more involved in the construction of knowledge (Arteaga & Duarte, 2010; Pinto-Llorente, Sánchez-Gómez & García-Peñalvo, 2017).

This new technological blended instructional model can represent an alternative for the communicative language teaching (CLT) pedagogy, which focused on the development of the communicative competence, since it can eliminate the limits of the traditional face-to-face learning environments.

Applied linguists have contributed to the development of the concept of the communicative competence that was initially defined by Hymes (1972) as a competence not only as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of situations. Savignon (1972) considered “the ability to function in a truly communicative setting, that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors” (p.8). A few years later Canale and Swain (1980) defined it as a concept comprised of three skills: grammatical competence (the mastery of the linguistic code: grammatical rules, morphological and syntactic rules, vocabulary, etc.), strategic competence (the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which allow learners to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns and problems arise in the communication process) and sociolinguistic competence (the knowledge of the sociocultural code, the rules and conventions of language use in different sociocultural contexts). That definition was further elaborated by Canale (1983) who added another component, the discourse competence (the ability to combine language structures into different types of written texts or meaningful units of spoken language).

The current study deals with relevant aspects in the communicative language teaching (CLT) pedagogy, especially in the component of the communicative competence that refers to grammatical competence: grammatical rules, morphological and syntactic rules. It aims to explore the pre-service teachers’ perceptions towards the effectiveness of the technological tools offered through the digital ecosystem implemented in blended learning modality.

The aim of the research was to find out pre-service teachers’ perceptions on the effectiveness of the digital ecosystem implemented in the area of English Morphosyntax.

The study focused on these questions:

1. What are the benefits of transmissive, interactive and collaborative resources in learning English as a second language?
2. Do the participants consider that the e-activities provided them enough practice to achieve the goals of the course?

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