

# TEACHING SOCIOLINGUISTICS USING COMPUTER-BASED ACTIVITIES IN A BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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## Abstract

In English Studies at the Universitat de València we have been participating in an Innovation in Education Project (PIE) for the last four years. English Studies (*Filología Inglesa*) is one of only seven degree courses in the whole university in which the vast majority of the subjects in year one, two, three and four attempt to comply with what we consider to be the ECTS approach to higher education.

We will look at what the ECTS approach means on several interrelated levels. The first is student work load which takes into account contact hours and student work outside the classroom. The second is the delivery of content while giving the students the opportunity to acquire competencies. Organizationally contact hours are divided into theory classes, practical classes, seminars, work placement, and tutorials. Non-contact hours can be roughly divided into students' individual work and work in groups. We employ different teaching methodologies such as lectures, activities in groups and pairs to put into practice what has been learnt in class and give students the chance to do problem solving work, case study work, and project work. The third level is assessment. Our innovation project is geared towards continuous assessment that not only evaluates the theoretical content that students have learned or acquired but also their ability to put this knowledge into practice through subject-specific, instrumental, systemic and individual competencies.

In my talk I will be looking at the use of information and communication technologies in one particular subject Sociolinguistics. This is an optional subject in the first cycle of our degree course and it is normally taken by first, second and third year students. This means that the level of English varies considerably and also that the grasp of theoretical concepts differs greatly depending on whether students have just arrived from secondary school or are in their third year. So, apart from teaching content our job is to help the student to reach an adequate level in English so he/she can fulfil one of the most important instrumental competencies in our degree course, namely the ability to be able to understand spoken and written English and write and speak in English.

To do all this, it is essential to give the student the right opportunities and tools. We have found that blended learning not only provides us with all the opportunities we need but that it is the type of learning the students like the best. In my talk, I will look at all the computer-based activities and exercises that we use and how they tie in with what we do in the classroom. The main tools we use are: a resource space where we can leave materials for the students, bulk mail to inform students of what they have to do and address problems that may crop up, online information such as an academic planner and calendar, online self-assessment tests, forums and cooperative web pages. We will also describe the multimedia products that we have designed and produced specifically for this subject.

## Keywords

Innovation, English Studies, European Convergence, ICT, blended learning, *Aula Virtual*, sociolinguistics, competencies, learning content, multimedia, group work, self-assessment, monitoring, process and product,

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For the last four years English Studies (*Filología Inglesa*) at the *Universitat de València* has been immersed in an Innovation in Education Project (*Proyecto de Innovación Educativa*) to prepare the teaching staff for the imminent changes not only in the syllabus but also in teaching methods. Our degree course is one of only seven in the whole university that have introduced ECTS-based teaching in most of the subjects in year one, two, three, and four. The experience as a whole has been rewarding but a great deal of effort has been necessary to try to introduce new methodologies and new ways of assessing students. The problems we have encountered have been compounded by the fact that we are applying new methods in an old and often very rigid system.

In general terms, the teaching staff has taken to the new methodology enthusiastically and the project has given all of us the opportunity to reflect on our teaching methods and how to make our classes less teacher-centred and give the students more opportunities to be autonomous learners. At the same time, we have innovated and in doing so we have provided students with the opportunities to acquire different competencies rather than just focusing on the teaching and learning of the specific contents of each subject.

## 2. INNOVATION IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

One of the innovations we have introduced is a learning agreement (*Guía Docente*). This is a much more elaborate description of what students are expected to do and achieve than the programmes they were given beforehand. One of the biggest innovations is the estimation, not only of how many contact hours the students have, but also non-contact hours. To avoid classes which are too teacher-centred we have reduced the number of contact hours to give students more time for autonomous learning. Every subject in our innovation project has a learning agreement with the same headings.

- Information about Module: General information about the model such as if it is optional, number of credits, etc.
- Introduction: General description of an academic nature.
- Workload: The number of contact and non-contact hours.
- General Objectives: Overall aim of the course.
- Minimum Contents: Syllabus.
- Competencies to be acquired: Subject-specific competencies.
- Social Competencies: Competencies of a more general nature.
- Subject Matter: Main areas covered in the subject.
- Bibliography: Includes text book, background and reference books.
- Prerequisites: Knowledge and know-how the student needs to sign up for the course.
- Methodology: Teaching methodology to be used in class.
- Learning Assessment: Two types: traditional assessment and innovation in education assessment.

## 3. CONTENTS AND COMPETENCIES

Before the advent of the move towards European Convergence, due in part to class size and in part to the influence of tradition teaching methods, most of what lecturers in English Studies did was to teach content, that is, linguistics and literature in English. In the theoretical module of English phonology, for example, lecturers would describe the phonological system of English, its phonemes and allophones, words in connected speech, etc. In the practical module, students would mainly be asked to transcribe phonemically and phonetically. Whether a student had grasped the theoretical concepts or mastered the transcription of texts in English would be assessed in a final examination. No consideration was given to other aspects such as the students' ability to work in groups or if they had initiative or were original –at least this was not assessed overtly. The whole idea of introducing competencies has a great deal to do with designing a profile of what we would like our graduates to be capable of doing as graduates. This profile includes both what students should know as well as what they should know how to do. University lecturers have shown themselves more than capable of being able to teach content but less so with regard to competencies. This has changed in the last four years as now we are attempting to give the students the chance to show that they do have the above competencies. This has meant changes in what happens inside and outside the classroom to at least provide the environment for acquisition of competencies to take place. Acquiring competencies is, in a way, similar to Krashen's [1] concept of acquisition of language as opposed to learning a language. He argued that if the right circumstances are provided, that is, if learners are provided with enough comprehensible input in the target language, then they will pick up the language more easily than if they are given lessons in the grammar of a language. Analogously, students must be given the opportunities to work in a group to be able to acquire that particular competency. At the beginning of our experiences in innovation many lecturers included competencies in their learning agreement with the students. However, these were often too general and there was no planned attempt to include them and implement them in the same way content. One of the important things we have learnt during our experimentation with innovation is that everything we ask the students to do and to learn should be assessed. This is so because if we spend time in class teaching content and reward the students for learning it, the same should be true of competencies.

### 3.1. Competencies in Sociolinguistics

The other big innovation is the enumeration and description of the competencies the students will be expected to acquire during the course. The subject-specific competencies for each subject are unique to that subject but there are several specific competencies such as helping the students to express

themselves better in English or for them to be able to hone their critical reasoning, among others, that are common to many or all the subjects. The specific competencies for *Sociolinguistics in English* are:

- To help students acquire the knowledge and know-how to be able to
  - identify and explain the different dimensions of linguistic variation in different discourses
  - identify and explain how and why social context affects discursive practices
  - analyze both literary and non-literary discourse using insights from sociolinguistics
  - understand different varieties of English
  - understand and use empirical methods of analysis
  - apply their powers of critical reasoning, especially with regard to the ideas they might have on language, dialect and norms
- to improve their communicative fluency when discussing complex concepts
- to help them to reach a higher level of competence in writing academic English
  - by providing them with opportunities to write about sociolinguistic issues
  - by heightening their awareness of their own speech patterns as speakers of a second or third language

The social competencies included in the learning agreement, by their very nature, transcend one particular module. Some subjects put the emphasis more on some competencies than others. Not all subjects include working in groups, for example, or speaking in public. Coordination is needed to avoid repetition and to give the students the chance to acquire all the competencies required of them in both the professional and academic world. In Sociolinguistics we aim to help students to:

- take the initiative
- work in groups
- speak in public
- identify ways of improving the quality of their work
- be able to apply what is learnt in class to other issues in society

Although the competencies are divided into subject-specific and social, they often overlap. To give just one example, work in groups involves using English, which, in turn, means having to communicate complex concepts either in writing or orally to the other members of the group.

#### 4. ICT AND INNOVATION IN ENGLISH STUDIES

One of the areas we have explored in the past four years is how to implement information and communication technologies. We have been aided in this respect by the university's decision to provide training and advice on the use of ICT. We are indebted to the technical staff at the university for their guidance on a whole range of areas, from the use of our learning platform to the creation of multimedia learning objects. One of the most interesting experiences we have had is the technical help, during the second year of the project, of an ex-student who was not only familiar with our degree course but was an expert in ICT. It was extremely useful to have someone with technical skills *in situ* to help us overcome problems derived from a lack of knowledge in learning platforms above all. Without his help we would have advanced much more slowly. Having technical help at hand—not in some office or on another campus—is a must if lecturers are to make the leap from traditional to blended learning.

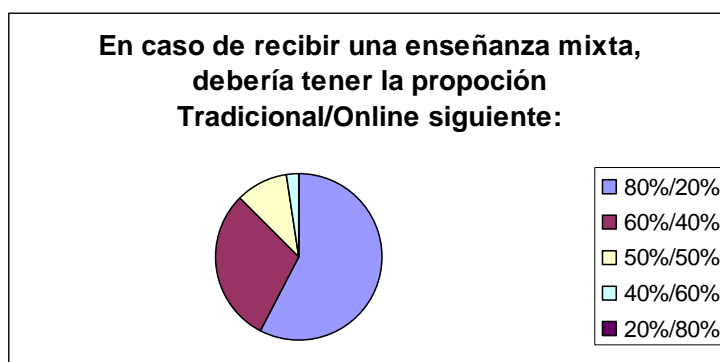


Fig. 1. Survey on teaching preferences

Teaching at our university is based, above all, on students attending lectures, seminars or practical sessions in the language lab. We do not have ambitions to be a distance-learning institution of higher education. Students who enrol expect most of the teaching to be carried out in the classroom, computer room, etc. with a teacher present. In 2006 we carried out a survey in a *Phonology* class and

a *History of the English Language* class (Figure 1.) and found that the vast majority of the students preferred blended learning to either strictly traditional classes or distance learning. Most of the students felt that a proportion of 80% traditional and 20% online would be ideal while others felt the proportion should be 60% to 40%. Very few opted for greater use of online classes, activities and exercises.

Once the decision to pursue a policy of preparation to implement blended learning was taken, our first main decision with regard to ICT was to only use computer-based technologies if we felt that they added something useful to our teaching or if they made our lives easier or both [2]. We wished to avoid the temptation of attempting to introduce ICT wholesale without taking into account whether it was feasible or not. Lecturers already complain about their workload so obviously burdening them with the job of innovating technologically would probably turn them into technophobes. Another reason to be wary is that teachers at all levels have often seen that ICT has been put forward as the panacea to all our problems and that, after a great deal of effort, it has been found to add very little. What is more, not every subject is necessarily enhanced by new technologies and may not suit a particular teacher's teaching style. So, we must advance with caution [3] and take a rather more jaundiced view of the brave new world to come than the prophets of a new technical age in education would have us adopt [4]. We did not wish to only take lecturers' opinions into account so in the survey mentioned above we asked students if they found our teaching platform *Aula Virtual* useful or not. The vast majority found that it was and not one student was against its use. So, it is fairly safe to say that most students believe that some kind of blended learning is not only recommendable but also, in practise, useful [5].

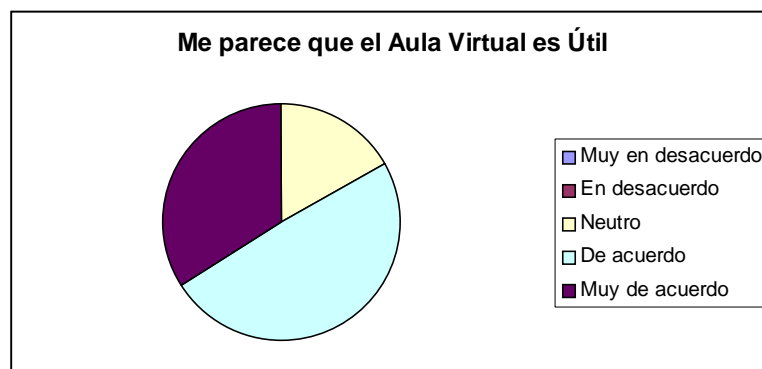


Fig. 2. Survey on *Aula Virtual*: Satisfaction with the platform

Another very important point to take into account when looking at learning platforms and programmes in general is that money is not unlimited. I personally have witnessed in some foreign universities and here in Spain how very expensive commercial learning platforms are hardly used by lecturers at all, except to contact their students. In this sense, we are committed to using open source software whenever possible. Although commercial programmes are often easier to use and offer greater capabilities, their price makes them impossible to use, especially when we consider that many lecturers will use only a fraction of the possibilities they might offer.

Given the decision to work as far as possible with open source or inexpensive software we have concentrated our efforts on using our learning platform *Aula Virtual* to its full capacity. This, of course, does not mean that all teachers do or should use all the possibilities that the *Aula Virtual* offers but that each teacher will use the features that he or she feels are useful. The *Aula Virtual* includes the following features:

- News
- Bulk mail: to send information to one student, a group of students, all the students, teachers, etc.
- Calendar: For important dates.
- Resources: Where teachers can upload documents for the students
- Online tests: Multiple choice and true-false tests.
- Forum: For the whole class or groups
- Chat: For the whole class or groups
- Wimpy points: For online presentations
- Individual results of evaluation: Configurable in blocks
- Multimedia server: audiovisual material can be uploaded and mpeg, etc. can be converted to flash video.

The *Aula Virtual* has some limitations that commercial programmes do not have. One of the main problems is that some lecturers find it user unfriendly. A rather more serious problem involves the online tests. A *sine qua non* to upload a test is for us to be able to see whether the student has actually done the test and –sometimes– how well he or she has done it (see below). This is possible with text-based multiple choice and true-false tests but not with tests that include audio-visual material in them such as sounds, images, videos. Of course, it is possible to upload a multimedia test created

with hotpotatoes to a web page but then we cannot follow the student's progress within Aula Virtual. We have overcome this problem (Figure 3) by using a split screen, that is, a web page on one side and the on-line test on the other but this is a much more laborious process than simply uploading a zip file created with *Respondus*, for example, to the *Aula Virtual* platform.

#### 4. COMPUTER-BASED ACTIVITIES IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

On-line tests, like the one in the Schegloff activity (Figure 3), constitute one way to get the students to do work on their own and to spend less time in class correcting exercises with the help of the teacher in what is, after all, a mechanical task. To do this, we have designed the tests to be self-correcting. In other words, students get five chances to write the answers to the questions, which is more than enough for them to get the right answer by a process of elimination. I personally do not assess students directly but I do take into account whether the students have done the exercise or not. To incentivize the use of these self-assessment tests 10% of the total mark is given over to these activities. A further incentive is the fact that one or two of the questions in the tests are always included in the examination after each unit. In this way, the student needs to study regularly at not just before the examinations as I programme the tests for a certain period after which the students cannot do them. One of the difficulties that we have experienced with on-line tests in *Aula Virtual* is that it is an extremely laborious task to design them. We have overcome this problem by using *Respondus* but as mentioned above, for the moment we can only use text-based questions if we want to see which students have done the exercise.



Fig.3. Schegloff activity

#### 4.1. ICT and Group Work in Sociolinguistics

As one of my aims is to get the students to work in groups, 30% of the total mark has been assigned for group work which consists of several activities. The first is to get students to answer open-ended questions as a group. The main reason for this, apart from monitoring and assessing their ability to work in groups, is that with over 50 students it would be too time consuming to mark and correct each answer on an individual basis. One of my aims is to cut down the work I have to do while maintaining a high level of exigency. The second type of group work involves the preparation and realization of a power point presentation on a topic in sociolinguistics. The mark for the presentation is evenly weighted between the process and the final product.

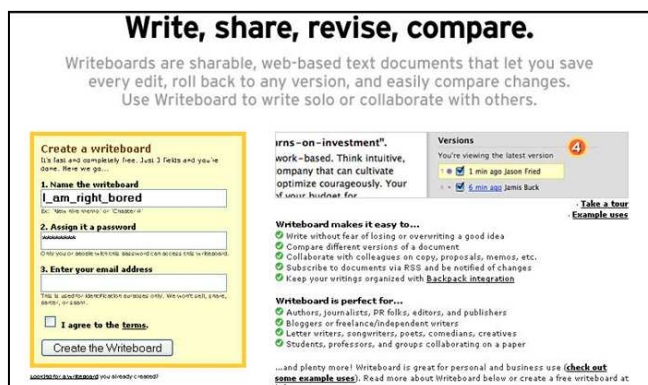


Fig. 4. Writeboard

Students often complain that when they have to do group work, one, or various members, do not pull their weight. To be able to monitor who is doing what in each group I decided to require students to create a shareable web document using the *Writeboard* web page (Figure 4). This is an extremely easy blog type web page to set up. All students need to do is give their group a name, write a password and provide an email. The student who creates the page in *Writeboard* then invites the other members of the group and the teacher. Thus, anything that is done can be monitored by the teacher and there can be no arguments about who did what. Apart from being able to monitor the students' work and avoiding the problem of not knowing who actually did what, the *Writeboard* activity has several other advantages. We can assess the students' ability to express themselves in written English. Students not only answer questions but also have to liaise with other students (Figure 5). This means that they need to communicate in English and that this communication is authentic, that is, if they do not express themselves clearly, other students have to ask them for clarification. The students' ability to work in groups, which includes such aspects as leadership, initiative, the ability to work in groups, and quality control, can also be assessed. With regard to content, I can also assess whether students have grasped the theoretical concepts introduced in class through their answers to the open-ended questions I give them. Monitoring the activity is obviously hard work but students know they are being monitored and therefore have to do the work required of them. Work done using *Writeboard* is not carried out in isolation but can and does continue in the classroom and in face-to-face communication after class.

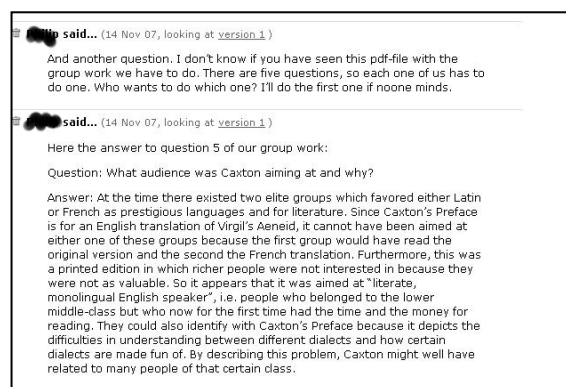


Fig. 5. Example of *Writeboard* activity

#### 4.2. Creating Multimedia Products for Sociolinguistics

At the beginning of this section, I stated two of my guiding principles, namely, to use ICT only if it makes our lives easier, which is the case of the self-assessment tests above, and also if it adds something useful to our teaching. In a subject like Sociolinguistics the possibilities are almost limitless when looking at the possible impact of multimedia products on learning. Using only text-based materials would deprive students of the chance of listening to English and hopefully of acquiring listening comprehension skills. Video produced commercially or by teachers makes it possible not only to acquire greater language skills but also to acquire content at the same time. In the same way as the teacher talks while making a power point presentation, a video based on that very same power point presentation can be viewed as many times as the students want either as streaming video or on the student's own computer after being downloaded. Moreover, such videos can be assessed through on-line tests as is the case with the following video on hypercorrection which has an accompanying test in *Aula Virtual*.

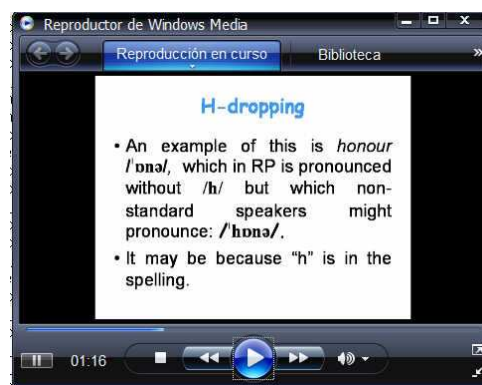


Fig. 6. Hypercorrection Movie

Another very important consideration when suggesting to lecturers that they make their own multimedia learning objects is the question of time and effort. In principle it is possible to create very elaborate products that take thousands of hours to finish. However, no lecturer has the time to do that. The hypercorrection video I have created was relatively easy to make, was based on a power point presentation that already existed and did not involve any commercial programmes.

The process was as follows. First, I created or rather modified a power point presentation. I needed to take into account that to create the impression of movement, such as the progressive adding of rows, the original presentation had to be modified so that each slide included one more row than the last. Once this was done, the presentation was saved as jpeg in the "save as" menu. These images were imported into Microsoft *Movie Maker* and then each slide was inserted into the time line. For the voice-over I used *Audacity* an open source programme. The voice-over was then saved and imported into *Movie Maker*. Adjustments had to be made to the length in time of the slides and once this was done, the project was ready to be converted into a short film. Images from other sources can be part of the project as can videos. A learning object such as this one can be complemented by videos shown in class or which can be found on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) among other sites. For this particular lesson I used a scene from *My Fair Lady*. There are commercially available programmes which can also be used such as *Adobe Premiere* or *Sony Vegas*.

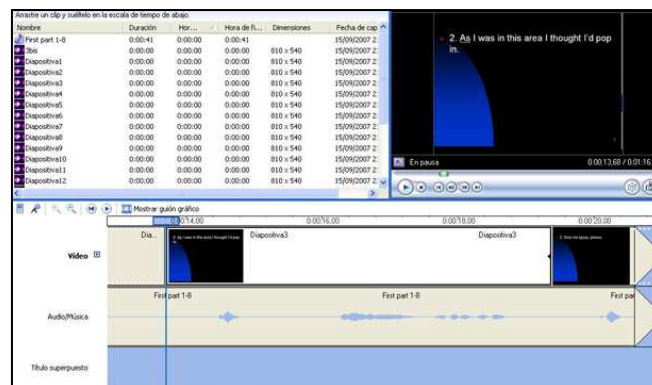


Fig. 7. Movie Maker

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

I have no doubt that ICT will be used more and more in the future. Far from fearing changes that this may bring we are enthusiastically awaiting further progress in the usability of presently existing programmes and those that will be created in the immediate future. The simple fact that we can now contact all our students via bulk mail is one of the less conspicuous but most useful innovations brought about by the use of the *Aula Virtual* and learning platforms in general. We see ICT as a complement to our work in the classroom and that, just as teachers have created paper-based exercises in the past, they will gradually move towards on-line exercises and activities. Of course, some will be quite simple while others will be much more complex. The advantages of multimedia over paper –as well as some of the disadvantages– are readily appreciable. For both helping students to acquire content as well as subject-specific and social competencies ICT has a lot to offer and at the present time I believe we have just scraped the surface.

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