

Virtual Blog Usage as a Way of Improving the Spelling

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Abstract

This study, funded by the ARMIF 2014 project for the Improvement of the training of students from the Double Bachelor's Degree in Preschool and Primary Education through the use of digital tools, wants to show the results obtained working Spanish grammar in a classroom with students of the Double Bachelor's Degree (FEPTS-UdL) by using a virtual blog. Good grammar use is one of the main weaknesses that these students have shown from the beginning of the school year 2015-2016. This blog has been conceived as an engaging tool which can back/give support to the teacher's lessons in a classroom with 33 students. After working with this blog in the Spanish Language subject throughout all the year, almost 70% of students have improved their correct use of grammar in this language. This was proved with a posttest in which students were asked about their grammar skills.

1. Language and Initial Teacher Training: the grammar case

The improvement in initial teacher training is the main aim and the reason for the *Program for the Improvement in Teacher Training* (MIF) driven by the Consell Interuniversitari de Catalunya (CIC). Other main aims of this *Program* are strengthening students' competences regarding their leadership, team work, good knowledge communication, communicative skills with pupils and their families, assessment culture, reflective practice and research as well as the student-centered methodologies as, for example, project-based work.

Good knowledge communication involves, among other aspects, good oral and written skills in the three languages studied in Catalan schools: Catalan, as a vehicular language, English and Spanish.

Several international studies –among which we can find the PIAAC (2013a, 2013b), regarding the adult population, and the PISA (2012), regarding the student population— show a lack in language dominance. These studies conclude that the initial training of teachers is one of the causes of their bad performance in language. In this sense, the level of knowledge and the dominance of the main language skills is below what is expected in the first year of a university degree.

The ARMIF project for the *Improvement of the training of students from the Double Bachelor's Degree in Preschool and Primary Education through the use of digital tools* aims at designing, adapting and applying assessment tools and skills tests in mathematics, language, science and digital tools in order to identify the most important gaps and needs of the students from the Double Bachelor's Degree in Preschool and Primary Education in relation to the competences required for every subject. Regarding the Spanish language competence, the written text competence, understood as the ability to write different types of texts coherently, is currently being worked (academic year 2015-2016).

The reason for working this competence arose from a previous stage in which an assessment test in Spanish validated by the scientific community was passed to the students. This test was one of the *Personal Aptitude Tests (PAP 2014)* elaborated by the Inter-university Council of Catalonia (CIC) from their University Admissions Office.

The reading comprehension questions –two questions– and the written expression questions –three questions– were extracted from this test. A total of 33 students from the Double Bachelor's Degree in Preschool and Primary Education which were enrolled in the Teaching and Learning of Languages I subject –in which the linguistic competence in Spanish is practised two hours per week throughout the first semester of the academic year– took this test.

In order to assess this test, a correlation matrix was designed. It consisted of three parts divided into subsections as indicated below:

1. Reading comprehension: 1.1 Identify the main idea of the text. 1.2 Use the information provided by the text to make inferences and deductions
2. Discursive competence: 2.1 The text is appropriate. 2.2 The text is coherent. 2.3 The text has cohesion.
3. Linguistic correctness: 3.1 The vocabulary is appropriate and correct, 3.2 The text presents good spelling, 3.3 The morphosyntactic structures –word order, prepositions, etc.– are used correctly.

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Each subsection was assessed on a scale from 1 to 4 as specified here: 1 (Always), 2 (Often), 3 (Occasionally), 4 (Never). If an answer obtained a score 1 and 2, it was considered correct. On the contrary, if it got a score 3 and 4, the answer was considered unsatisfactory or incorrect.

The correction of the test taken by 33 students gave the following results:

A. Regarding the **Reading Comprehension**, 87% of students are able to identify the main idea in a text, and 91% use the information provided by the text to make inferences and deductions.

B. Regarding the **Discursive Competence**, 70 % of students present a text which is appropriate and coherent from a semantic point of view and with respect to the ideas expressed, and 40% do not use connectors to make the text cohesive.

C. Regarding the **Linguistic Correctness**, almost 75 % use an adequate vocabulary for the text, although we can only speak about three texts which have no spelling mistakes (9%). In other words, 91% of students' texts show a lack of knowledge and use of Spanish grammar. With regard to morphosyntactic structures, 81 % show good use of these structures.

Taking into account these results and the fact that practising all the contents from the Reading Comprehension, Discursive Competence and Linguistic Correctness sections in a semester (2 hours per week) is unfeasible, it was decided to work on the two subsections of each competence with got a lower score:

D. The knowledge and correct use of textual connectors (**Discursive Competence**).

E. Spanish grammar, especially the rules of accentuation (**Linguistic Correctness**).

Logically, working on these contents will have a positive effect on the rest of the aforementioned subsections of the **Reading Comprehension**, the **Discursive Competence** and the **Linguistic Correctness**.

In this paper we will focus solely on the work carried out to improve the grammar level of Spanish, which is the aspect in which more time was invested.

2. The virtual blog as a tool for improving grammar: some examples

In order to carry out this project, the teacher in charge of the Teaching and Learning of Languages I subject (Spanish language) designed a virtual blog called *Correctografiate*. Grammar advice for all audiences (<http://correctografiate.blogspot.com.es/>).

Esta web ha sido creada por el Departament d'Ensenyament de la Generalitat de Catalunya.

Os invitamos a que le echéis un vistazo dando clic al siguiente link: [ORTOGRAFÍATE](http://correctografiate.blogspot.com.es/)

Al hacer clic os encontraréis con esta página:



Fig.1. Main page of the blog *Correctografiate*

In this blog, which is interactive, the teacher and her students uploaded all types of resources (list of grammar mistakes in the media, exercises to distinguish the diacritical marks in Spanish, etc.) which could be commented by all the users who had access to the blog.

The creation of this blog does not intend to replace the lessons in the classroom. The blog is used as a support tool for these lessons where students can share and comment pieces of information related with the correct use of the Spanish language.

All the work done in the blog has spanned all the semester of this academic year 2015-2016, with more intensity at those moments when questions regarding the correct use of the Spanish grammar have been addressed in the course. The role of the teacher consisted in prompting a *virtual dialogue* among students so that they shared resources related with this competence. The first virtual resources that were introduced by the teacher had to do with the correct use of *mp i mb, br i bl*, and the letter h in Spanish, among other aspects. The focus was also placed on the use of capital letters, identifying the stressed syllable in words and the general rules of accentuation.

In order to work all these grammar aspects, exercises like reading, filling out words with *problematic* letters, correcting mistakes in words, alphabet soups and diverse language games were proposed.

The students also proposed to work the grammar in some posts. We want to emphasize one of these posts, which is related to a very problematic issue that leads to many spelling mistakes in Spanish: the accentuation of diphthongs and hiatus.

Diptongo: 2 vocales juntas que se pronuncian en una sola sílaba.

Hiato: 2 vocales juntas que se pronuncian en sílabas distintas.

Triptongo: 3 vocales juntas que se pronuncian en una misma sílaba.

En nuestro caso, hay que analizar las palabras: Habría y primaria; por lo que vamos a centrarnos en los **DIPTONGOS** e **HIATOS**.

La separación de las sílabas es muy fácil cuando las vocales están separadas por consonantes, pero al tener vocales juntas la cosa se complica. Teniendo el concepto de



diptongo e hiato claros no deberíamos tener ningún problema al acentuar, ya que siguen las reglas normales de acentuación. Tal y como pasa con nuestra palabra, PRIMARIA (IA, forma diptongo), es una palabra llana acabada en vocal, por lo que según las reglas de acentuación no lleva tilde.

Fig.2. Post for working the accentuation of diphthongs and hiatus in *Correctografía*

The teacher offered feedback in the posts that each student or group of students proposed. There was a total of 10 posts made by the teacher and the students throughout the semester (15 weeks, so almost 1 post per week). The content of these posts has been diverse (the use of *sobre todo, dónde* and *donde, por qué* and *porqué, sino* and *si no, sí* and *sí*, etc.), although we can confirm a common element that links all these posts and it is the correct accentuation in Spanish, which was the main weakness detected in the pre-test stage.



3. Conclusions from the results

Once the subject was finished in January 2016, the students were assessed with a *post-test*. This post-test had a part of Reading comprehension, a part regarding the use of connectors and another part where they had to write a text in Spanish about a particular subject. The assessment of this text was made taking into account all the contents worked in the classroom in relation with the rules and the use of Spanish. Therefore, it helped us determine to what extent the blog had been useful to improve linguistic correctness in Spanish, which is the main weakness found in the texts that were assessed in order to set the aspect(s) of the Spanish language that had to be included in the Project for the *Improvement of the training of students from the Double Bachelor's Degree in Preschool and Primary Education through the use of digital tools*.

The results of the *post-test* show that, in general, almost 70% of students improve their accentuation in Spanish, specifically the identification of oxytones (stress on the last syllable), paroxytones (stress on the penultimate syllable) and proparoxytones (stress on third-to-last syllable). However, there are some accentuation aspects concerning diphthongs and hiatus which still need to be improved, although these have also been improved by 70% of the students participating in this study.

As a conclusion, the implementation of a virtual blog in a classroom of the Teaching and Learning of Languages I (Spanish language) subject from the Double Bachelor's Degree in Preschool and Primary Education has been satisfactory, as the results show us. This is a scientific evidence of the usefulness of the implementation of new technologies in the teaching and learning of Languages, which needs to be carried out more intensively in the Initial Teacher Training.

References

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