

## The Use of ICTs to Improve Communicative Skills in a Bilingual Context: an Educational Project of the Spanish Ministry of Education in Melilla

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### Abstract

*The last results of the various national and international assessments of academic performance of pre-university students from different educational stages (national assessment tests, PISA and PIRLS) reflect that Spanish students do not get satisfactory results on communicative competence. For this reason the Ministry of Education, through its Provincial Office in Melilla –city with the worst results of the country because of the characteristics of its people–, designed an intervention programme in receptive and productive linguistic skills for students from the 1st to the 3rd level of Primary Education.*

*In order to work in this project, a group of experts was created, whose members came from different areas of Education: Ministry of Education staff, lecturers and researchers from the University of Granada, educational psychologists, academic advisors and school teachers from different specialities. This group was divided into smaller ones according to different levels.*

*The project involved using the digital environment School 2.0, already in the classrooms, and designing a website that allowed students to improve their different linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), and the audiovisual competence at the same time. These skills were in accordance with the different areas that the Spanish Education Law provides for each of the levels implied in the project.*

*Although the basic goal is to improve students' skills, the site also includes sections directed to the main education agents: students, teachers and families, due to the importance of a joint effort for the suitable schoolchildren's communicative development.*

*This paper describes the creation, composition and implementation of this project website.*

### 1. Origins of the Project "Improvement of Communication Skills in Melilla"

The latest results of the international assessment about the academic performance of pre-university students attending to different educational stages (PISA) and of the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) showed the poor level of linguistic competence that Spanish students hold in the main thematic areas that were assessed.

Nationally, the Spanish Ley Orgánica de Educación (LOE) (2006) introduces the obligation to perform diagnostic assessments to students at two key stages of their education (4th year Primary Education & 2nd year Secondary Education, 9 and 13 years old, respectively) in order to know the level of acquisition of the basic curricular competences. The results obtained with the report of 2009 placed the city of Melilla last and below the national average.

Obviously, the fact that in Melilla, a city of just 12 square kilometers, five cultural groups live together with their own linguistic nuances that differentiate them, (Jews, Gypsies, Hindus, of European origin and Muslims) could affect these findings. The first four are native Spanish speakers (L1), but the

Muslim population, covering approximately half of the students attending school, makes use of a non-coded Berber dialect as L1, so that they are in a situation of subtractive bilingualism or diglossia that could seriously affect their communicative competence.

The *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) [1] works as a valuable and essential reference both for the epistemologic and strategic assumptions of our linguistic competence. The Group *Atlántida* (group of professionals belonging to different areas that seek to enhance educational experiences of curricular innovation) [2], according to the suggestions of OAPEE, (Autonomic Organism for the European Educational Programmes of the Spanish Ministry of Education), is following the parameters proposed by the CEFR with the aim of drafting a document to spark debate on the improvement of linguistic communication. This document proposes seven sub-competences or basic skills for an appropriate teaching performance on this issue: speaking, writing, listening, reading, talking, interactive and audiovisual writing, which have helped as the basis for the present study.

## 2. Objectives of the experience

Given the situation of the students in Melilla (Spain), described above taking as a reference the mentioned documents (PISA & PIRLS), the Spanish Ministry of Education decides to carry out an intervention program for students from 1st to 3rd year of Primary Education, in an attempt to improve both communicative and audiovisual competence by designing a web page, framed in the Escuela 2.0 Program, a digital integration project of ICT in schools, which means launching the XXI century digital classroom.

On the other hand, this Website project (<http://www.mec.gob.es/grupo/>) gives access not only to students, but also teachers and families, other environments of virtual education (RedBuenasPrácticas 2.0, Guide to social networks for families of CEDEC, Leer.es, Gauss Mathematics project, the e-Twinning...) linked to the Ministry of Education and other participants of the site that have been integrated during its creation: on-line dictionaries, specific sites by content, dietaries for families, videos, audio stories, audiopoetry, virtual games related to the subject and skills to be worked, and so on.

## 3. Contents

The communicative character of language is characterized by its functionality, that is, the specific uses made of it in the dimension of social and human interaction, so it is necessary to develop communication skills in the classroom, by focusing on the students' needs and creating activities to promote the use of language in real communication scenarios. If we read the LOE, it is not difficult to justify the importance given to communication, as it is present in the general principles and pedagogical stages of Primary Education and its basic objectives. In fact, linguistic competence is the first skill to be accomplished that the current legislation considers as essential in a student's learning process, something that justifies the concern of the Spanish government, in general, and of teachers, in particular, to develop core competences for the social integration of today's students, and the citizens of tomorrow. Therefore, the working contents of this project Improvement of the Communicative Competences in Melilla are linked to the different language skills (listening, speaking, reading, talking and writing), as well as to audiovisual skills, focused across the thematic blocks the LOE provides for each level included in the project. The following lines explain the way to work on each of the skills.



### **3.1 Listening**

It is one of the most frequently used communication skills, but also the one that receives less attention on the educational context, as it is understood to be naturally acquired, and therefore needless of a systematic learning process.

According to different classifications, [3, 4] this project proposes different activities to work from distracted to analytical and critical listening, to directed or attentional listening, in the three stages identified by Pavoni [5]: pre-listening post-listening and while-listening.

### **3.2 Speaking and conversation**

Modern society demands a high degree of oral communication at different levels, since not knowing how to speak effectively limits severely our career possibilities and personal skills.

The text typology proposed on our website is based on features and usage habits, by varying situations, contexts and the number of participants.

### **3.3 Reading**

The school has a dual commitment in this skill: the teaching of reading to acquire knowledge and information, and the establishment or creation of reading habits [6]. The activities of the *Improvement Project* work on literal, interpretative and critical comprehension, as stated by Cooper [7] through a variety of texts (informative, expository, literary and prescriptive) that are perfectly adapted to these students.

### **3.4 Writing**

Despite being the most repeated ability in education, the contribution of the project is to do so with exercises that help the student to follow the three phases of the writing process: planning, contextualization and review, varying stimuli, scenarios, intentions, etc.

### **3.5 The Audiovisual receptive skills**

The existence of a different concept of writing, with audiovisual communication codes and also a different medium [8] is obvious and requires abilities to make us proficient in this sort of communication that might be used in a family, academic, social or working contexts/environments, both for communicative and recreational or for information purposes, so that this Project is centred in the use of these audiovisual media in order to develop the different communication skills to do a proper use of the audiovisual communication.

## **4. Process, teaching strategies and materials developed**

In October 2010 the Ministry of Education in Melilla selected several professionals from different educational levels whose performance in this city, was linked to projects, publications, research and good teaching practices related to creation and improvement of communicative competence, to take part in the designing of the educational intervention program they intended to carry out. Therefore, the group counts with Ministry of Education staff, lecturers and researchers from the University of Granada, educational psychologists, academic advisors and school teachers from different specialities, besides an IT technician and a graphic design teacher, with the option of adding, in a timely manner, other external partners.



In order to be more operational, it was agreed to set up three working groups which would focus respectively on the first three years of Primary Education.

For a better organisation, two types of meetings were established according to their frequency: weekly meetings; in which every working group designs and develops the materials that will be uploaded to the website, and monthly whole group meetings: aiming to present a debriefing, review overall coordination tasks and decision making procedures regarding the progress of the project.

The website encourages children's interactive participation, and it is designed not only for teachers and students, but also for families as a crucial educational agent of the children's progress.

Students have access to different activities, distributed by thematic areas and skills, including three levels of difficulty. These activities also lead participants to various resources that students may consult for this purpose or simply to gather information about different content-related issues.

Teachers can also access the student activities, but, exclusively for them, its teaching guide will be added for guidance.

Families also have the opportunity to check the exercises and activities designed for their children, accessing two specific sections of the website: a bank of resources and a diary, where simple activities about communicative skills related to each level's thematic area can be found on a daily-basis through the whole academic year.

These sections will be available in the entries corresponding 1st, 2nd & 3rd level even though each of them has been specifically developed to fit the contents of every particular level.



Fig. 1. Website Project "Improvement of Communication Skills in Melilla".

## 5. Evaluation and prospective

Like any other activity program, this Project and its Website need to be tested in terms of its efficiency, so in the academic year 2011-2012 the program will be run experimentally for the three levels mentioned above; the website will be subject to modifications not only through the referred period, but through the site's entire life. Depending on the implementation results, the project could be extended to the other two levels of primary Education.

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