

New Culture, New Language, New Learning Approach: a Case Study of EILC

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Abstract

In today's digital age, individuals come into contact with information by means of audio, visual and digital formats and educators cannot ignore the technological and media impact in learners' everyday lives and in their academic experience. As such, it is up to teachers to provide new methodologies and learning solutions that will not only enhance learners' ICT skills and learning autonomy but also create new opportunities for them to learn outside or alongside of formal learning. This paper aims at giving a full account of the experience carried out at our university with Erasmus Intensive Language Courses. This includes information on the different features that are applied in classroom sessions and those which have gradually become part of the course syllabus. In the past two years we have tried to bring language learning into today's way of gathering, processing and sharing information. Our objective is, on the one hand, to provide innovative language teaching and learning methodologies (which includes the use of authentic material, role play, conversation classes with peers, etc.). On the other hand, it is important to obtain a more precise analysis of their individual profile, expectations and needs. For this purpose, a specially designed survey has been created and applied, whose preliminary results will also be referred in this study. Though ICT is important and brings a wide variety of advantages, we must not ignore that course content is but one determining factor for the successful delivery of blended-learning courses. The other consists of evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of both the teaching and learning process so as to have learners achieve their full potential. At the same time, we believe that this combination contributes to boosting Erasmus students' integration in the Portuguese academic world.

1. Background - a shift towards multimodality

Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa first applied for organizing EILC (Erasmus Intensive Language Course) in the academic year of 2006/2007 and it was awarded one winter course in December 2006. That year, Higher Education Institutions in Portugal were undergoing a significant shift in the traditional concepts of university, course organization and content, syllabus, teaching and learning, i.e. a change in academic environment towards a student-centred approach. According to the European Parliament and Council (2005) key competences for lifelong learning include communication in the foreign languages, digital competence, learning to learn and interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competence. Within this scope, the design of an EILC course would necessarily have to contemplate and promote these competences. For this reason, we opted for different delivery methods. On the one hand, there was an immediate need for students to immerse in the language/culture and to learn language rapidly. On the other, there were no materials that would meet those needs.

Considering that one of our main premises is that learning activities should mirror the practices of a culture, it was our objectives to provide students with a greater exposure to Portuguese culture (by means of nonschool situations) while participating in common everyday communication activities. This resulted in the use of authentic materials such as flyers, newspapers, listening exercises with music

(Fado and others), open sessions with an introductory (small) lecture on Portuguese culture, reading traditional Portuguese tales, among others, with the overall emphasis on language and culture.

2. EILC today

When, in January 2008, a blended-learning approach to language learning was fully implemented at our university, a significant paradigmatic shift was made from a monomodal perspective to a multimodal approach of language learning. In other words, the learning experience now involved different forms of representation and communication for producing meaning that went beyond traditional textbook and classroom paradigms.

The introduction to blended learning allowed students to follow up on classroom sessions according to their specific needs and learning styles. For instance, the profile of the EILC group is always very heterogeneous which, in terms of language acquisition, means that students who speak Spanish, Italian, i.e., romance languages will have less difficulty in learning Portuguese than those from Northern Europe. With this new approach to learning, students with greater difficulties had the opportunity of spending as much time as they liked/needed on the platform and completing the exercises the number of times they felt necessary until specific communicative skills have been acquired. Before discussing the outcomes and/or impact of these resources, today's everyday context should be considered: learners are submersed in a digital era of video games, animation, and IT gadgets. As such, educational material that is packaged and delivered by this means fits in with their surrounding reality and makes learning more enticing.

Firstly, different materials were designed, including interactive grammar and vocabulary exercises using the ©hot potatoes authoring software and ©quia, an instructional archive, which allowed for the creation of games, flashcards and scavenger hunts based on cultural questions about Portugal.

Secondly, a class blog was created. This innovative approach fostered students' individual production and contributed to making the learning experience collaborative: on the one hand, because some tasks were divided in pairs or groups and on the other, because all students had access to their peers' work, allowing them not only to assess but compare each others' work. A final outcome was that this blog was public and allowed students to share their work with friends and family from their country of origin, thus contributing to their motivation and subsequent satisfaction.

Thirdly, authentic materials also changed scope. According to Mishan and Strunz (2003:239) the resource to materials such as newspapers, leaflets, books provide only a source of "cosmetic authenticity" because they are used and integrated in classes for reading comprehension or vocabulary activities. Our initial intention was that of bringing culture closer to student and our intended pedagogical approach had the same outcome as that mentioned by the authors. In order to enhance the practical nature and usefulness of these materials, we introduced two new activities in the course: The Survival Tour and the City Tour(s).

Students were taken on a walking tour around the city of Lisbon. Usually, before the tour, students were given a plan of the tour with small texts on the most important places and people. At those specific locations, students took pictures and/or notes with the objective of writing a small text which would then be presented at a photo exhibition. On the one hand, students got to know more about Portuguese culture by being in contact with typical places and people, they experienced a "real" flavour of Portuguese culture. On the other, the assignment implied expressing their ideas and opinions, orally and in writing, based on the underlying premise that students learn best by doing. A second cultural tour was also taken, to a museum or to an important monument, usually near the end of the course and, in the case of an intermediate level course, the tour guide would speak Portuguese, so that students could be aware of their own proficiency in listening and understanding in a real situation.

Besides these cultural tours, all classes had a Survival Tour - 2 or 3 students were given specific contexts referring to common everyday needs: going to the photocopying centre, post office, bank, university administrative office, among others. After the tour, different students had different information which they would share with the class on the following day. This activity would allow all students to experience, even if not directly, common situations and problems they would probably face during their stay in the country.

In our attempt to provide students with not just the linguistic but also the cultural knowledge we believe is crucial to a full understanding of a country and its people, the course included several lectures by different teachers as well as a final lecture presented by the buddies - a group of students from our university who participated in the dinner, the conversation classes, and the tours and served as a link to academic life. The lecture prepared and given by the buddies focused on popular Portuguese myths and legends as well as on popular touristic destinations in the country.

Within this scope, instead of materials that provided practice of isolated skills, this new approach allowed us to supply specific and real contexts with functional uses as it simultaneously provided a shift from the static, monomodal form of learning to a multimodal perspective. In other words, students experience language and culture by means of multifarious ways of communication: direct interaction, auditory, visual, kinesthetic modes.

Of pivotal importance was the role of the e-learning platform, which allowed students to take advantage of the course at their own pace, using the different online resources, thus contributing to the overall success of the course.

Factors for this achievement were threefold: firstly, the course contents and the way they were delivered corresponded to today's university context - teaching is learner-centred and essentially practical; secondly, course syllabus and methodologies met the Erasmus student profile and represented a link with their daily lives and personal habits, since "university students are inherently inclined towards using the internet as a source of information within their day-to-day lives and, it follows, disposed towards academic use of the internet" (Selwyn, 2008); finally, our pedagogical needs were also met, by means of the heterogeneous nature of the materials created which catered to the difference in linguistic competence and learning styles of the students.

3. Questionnaire on student profile, expectations and needs

2010/2011 EILC students at ALS were 32 women and 30 men, 20 to 30 years old, who mostly attended Humanities, Sciences and Business courses; almost a third (72.6%) usually studied at home, though some study at university (14.5%) or in the library (11.3) and 1 (1.6%) at a café. They were almost all familiar with MSWord (96.8%), and many of them with MSEXcel (72.6%), MSPowerpoint (87.1%) and MSOutlook (43.5%), while only a few knew well MSAccess (14.5%) and MSPublisher (4.8%). The majority of the students used their own PC (67.7%) or a computer in a pooled computer room (24.6%). The chart below shows the most common activities carried out on the Internet and, interestingly, playing games is not included.

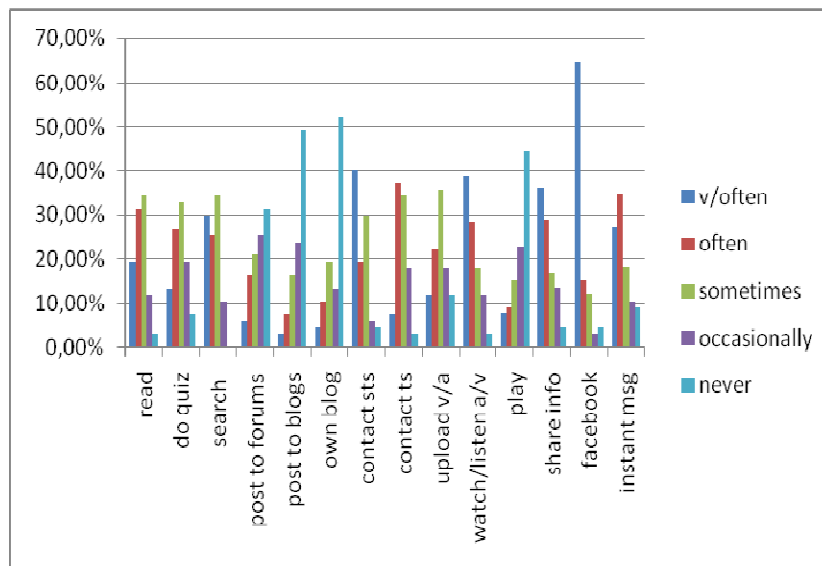


Chart 1 – Most common online activities

As far as students' perception of the usefulness of the resources made available to them on the e-learning platform, the wiki was by far considered the most useful. In fact, 13.3% of the students completely agreed and 46.7% of them agreed with the statement "The wiki was the most useful", leading this collaborative tool to stand out among the all those used.

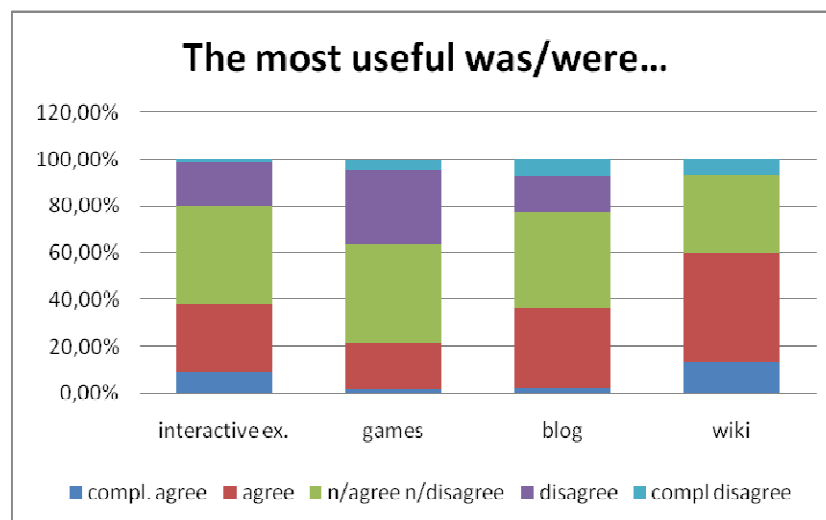


Chart 2 – The most useful tools/resources.

Finally, the survey included some suggestions in terms of possible improvements for the e-learning platform. 4.3% of the students completely agreed and 49.3% agreed that "the interactive exercises could use more sophisticated software /enhanced technology", 10.6% completely agreed and 48.5% agreed that "it would be a great improvement to have lectures on video/audio support", and 7.6% agreed while 36.4% completely agreed that "it would be a great improvement to be able to speak to staff or colleagues using Skype or other VoIP". Considering these results, new tools and resources are being developed to meet the students' expectations and continue to improve the EILC offered by our university.

4. Conclusions

The use of the e-learning platform along with a methodology that gives preference to the multimodal nature of the learning process has enabled the EILC at Universidade Autónoma to reach positive and satisfactory outcomes.

From the pedagogical (and institutional) perspective, it becomes possible for us to provide our students with tailored courses and syllabi that correspond to their learning needs and expectations. At the same time, this methodology provides learner autonomy and allows students to learn at their own pace and continue the learning process outside the classroom according to their own schedules and personal habits.

Because the e-learning platform exercises provide immediate feedback and results, students become consciously aware of their own progress and are thus motivated to better their personal results. In general terms, students feel they have more control over the learning process. Not only is there is a level of personal satisfaction in assessing their own progress in terms of language usage but also in assessing the relevance of what they learn: activities are perceived as real and worth solving.

The effective management of classroom learning, use of authentic materials and interactive online exercises has allowed the EILC learning process to become a more complete and whole experience which involves the collaborative effort of all participants (including teachers, lecturers and buddies), and allows students to share insecurities, fun and overall learning results.

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