



A Model for Evaluating Spanish Language Learning Websites Coherent with the Communicative Language Approach: Towards the Strengthen of the Teachers' Knowing-How-To-Do Knowledge in Digital Competence

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Abstract

Nowadays, with the rise of the era of Information Technology and Telecommunications, known as the fourth revolution [2], the Internet started to be promoted as an innovative educational tool for enhancing language teaching and learning processes, where free access websites play an important role as alternative spaces for informal learning. Nonetheless, the implementation of these websites imposes some challenges for teachers since due to its large array, it makes difficult to locate the most appropriate ones that match the instructional purposes in terms of: (a) the conception of language that best encourages autonomy, interaction, interculturality, etc.; (b) the interface that differing from a paper-based language material (printable PDF files), should encompasses hypertextuality, multimedia, hypermedia, etc. in order to foster a more communicative and meaningful environment; and finally, (c) the lack of an assessment tool that implies a true understanding of a particular teaching language approach within a virtual learning setting and that focuses on what students will be able to do with this resource.

Thus, this paper aims to describe a research study that sought to suggest an evaluation instrument (checklist) as a model to select Spanish as foreign language websites (ELE in Spanish) coherent with the Communicative Approach, so that teachers in training of their Digital Competence could additionally, strengthen their Knowing-how-to-do skills, which embrace the ability to be critical and reflective when integrating Internet-based tools into class. To achieve this goal, some literature and theoretical proposals related to the evaluation of language learning websites was analyzed and synthesized, and information regarding the Communicative Approach [6] was revised in order to establish the principles that best apply to virtual environments, and which could be included as part of the evaluation criteria.

As a result, it was proposed a checklist included into a designed Study Guide, piloted by a sample of language teachers who were participants in this study. This document also reports the results of a review of Spanish as a foreign language website in which the assessment model was applied. The findings of the project suggested that the resulting checklist along with the instructional material contributed to the reinforcement of the teachers' Knowing-how-to-do skills as part of their Digital Competence, by providing practical and theoretical inputs as well as leading them to the selection of language learning websites in accordance with the Communicative Approach. However, it is important to note that not all of the principles of this teaching approach, commonly entailed in synchronous and asynchronous e-Learning environments, can be incorporated into a language-learning website, owing to the limitations of this resource.

1. Introduction

In the language teaching context, the Internet has become important in Computer-Assisted Language Learning practices, since the integration of websites to complement this educational process has been widely used for providing: a) Authenticity through real-life materials; (b) Literacy to master reading, writing, researching skills, etc.; (c) Interaction that leads to meaningful communication among worldwide speakers; (d) Vitality to feel the need and motivation to communicate with freedom, flexibility and real-time; and (e) Empowerment to become autonomous and collaborative learners [11]. However, this Web-based language learning pedagogical trend most of the times fails to take advantage of even a fraction of the available online resources [1] and instead, is tightly linked to grammatical explanations, structuralist and audio-lingual exercises grounded on a behaviorist language learning theory [5] that makes difficult to use language creatively, meaningfully and spontaneously in authentic communication contexts. Additionally, owing to the increasing number of websites, it has become burdensome to locate, pre-screen and select the most suitable ones that meets learners' communicative needs [2]; since despite appearing as "interactive" for its appealing interface and immediate feedback, most of them still do not lead to real negotiation of meaning.



Therefore, teachers need to be discerning and critical when integrating internet-based tools, as in comparison to textbooks that imply linear readings, websites' hypertextual nature [7] require a practical knowledge translated into "Knowing-how-to-do skills", as one of the learning domains of the Digital Competence. Thus, having a checklist [3, 7] that aims at assessing Spanish language learning websites, and which focuses on structural features and on a specific language teaching approach, like the Communicative Approach, will guide educators to choose appropriate sites, not only in relation to its design interface, but also to the concept of pedagogy-methodology behind it.

2. Background and research question

This study was conducted at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia), which population encompassed a group of language teachers who were taking the MA in Applied Linguistics to the Spanish as a Foreign Language, and from which six voluntary individuals in training of their Digital Competence constituted the sample. A needs analysis survey was applied to these participants, which showed that they exhibited some difficulties in identifying the Communicative approach principles on language learning websites, a fact that indicates the incoherence between this particular teaching approach and the one commonly reflected on these online tools. According to Nomdedeu [8], teachers need to gain a practical-theoretical knowledge for making the appropriate selection of websites that meet learners' communicative needs.

Thus, the research question of this study was: *How to evaluate and select Spanish as Foreign Language learning websites coherent with the Communicative Approach, that additionally, allow teachers training in the field of Digital Competence to strengthen their Knowing-How-to-do skills?*

3. Theoretical framework

The implementation of language learning websites as instructional classroom tools can enhance the communicative environment pursued by some language teaching approaches that seek to lead learners to interact and communicate effectively in real-life contexts, as it is the case of the Communicative Approach. This is possible thanks to websites' features, such as hypertextuality, multimedia, hypermedia, unidirectional interactivity and some Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) systems supported by this technology, which manage to foster, to a greater or lesser extent, communicative principles like autonomy, language contextualization, integration of the four language skills, interculturality, interaction and evaluation.

Thus, multimedia documents provide learners with authentic materials that include meaningful contextualized input [3, 6] along with the possibility of integrating receptive skills. Hypertextuality and hypermedia offer them a wide range of pathways to navigate the site in concordance with their communicative needs, learning styles, pace, language level and particular interests, while encouraging autonomy, eliciting a learner-centered role and approaching them to the target culture. Furthermore, unidirectional interactivity engages pupils to be active receptors [3] as well as to receive automatic closed-feedback as part of their evaluation performance. Finally, CMC tools benefit the integration of reading and writing skills and provide authentic contexts to perform communicative activities.

It is undeniable all the profits given by this web-based resource, however, it is also remarkable the fact that it poses a challenge for the teacher's skills in regards to making the most appropriate choice of language websites. This task makes part of the Knowing-how-to-do skills as one of the domains of the Digital Competence [4], a practical-knowledge that requires educators to analyze, evaluate and establish the pedagogical worth of a website in order to reach a decision on which best matches the learners' communicative needs and the conception of language held by the teacher [6]. This is why, some evaluation instruments have been suggested among which the checklist [9] is considered as the most appropriate because: (a) it serves as a guidance to choose an online resource that has not yet been implemented in the classroom, and therefore is devoid of a specific context of application [7], and (b) it helps teachers to progressively develop their Knowing-how-to-do skills, which additionally is favored by its inclusion within an instructional material that guides the teachers' understanding and application of learnt concepts.

4. Methodology

At the core of this applied research, three phases were followed in which different qualitative and non-qualitative data-collection instruments were applied.

Thus, the first one concerned a needs analysis survey administered to six teachers in training of their Digital Competence and a semi-structured interview applied to a Spanish professor from which results suggested the need to propose an evaluation instrument (checklist) included within an instructional



material for selecting language websites coherent with the Communicative Approach. The second one aimed at validating the assessment instrument by administering a four-part survey to an expert in the language-teaching field; and the third one encompassed the evaluation of both materials by two surveys applied to a Spanish language professor and one participant of the study sample. This survey contained twenty Liker-type questions with a free commentary space from which the first eleven ones intended to measure the materials' impact, the teacher's development of self-confidence and feeling at ease when using them, as well as their perception towards their displayed contents as relevant and useful, while the second nine focused on the structure, clarity of the instructions and quality of the checklist descriptors; and finally, four last opened-ended questions explored the advantages, drawbacks and future usage of the evaluation instrument.

A brief description of the resulting materials is:

- The **checklist** comprises three types of criteria: (a) Technical features (allow users to recognize at first sight, whether the website is worth exploring and if it serves as a supplementary material for the class), (b) Pedagogical context features (how the website offers opportunities that facilitate language learning in relation to the given contents, activities and extra resources), (c) Communicative approach features (aims at describing what students are able to do within the website in terms of the Communicative principles already mentioned).
- The **Instructional material** includes the following sections: (a) a theoretical framework of the main technical concepts within a virtual environment, (b) a depiction of each criterion and descriptor concerning the Communicative Approach to exemplify what is sought in a website, (c) the proposed checklist together with its application instructions, (d) a series of suggestions to design by oneself a website and (e) a glossary.

5. Findings and discussion

The Spanish professor and one participant of the sample conducted evaluation surveys after reviewing both materials; the latter applied the model of checklist to a website (<http://www.aurora.patrick-nieto.fr/>). **Table 1** depicts a comparison between the participant's results and the ones obtained by researchers, who also evaluated this website.

CRITERION	ITEMS	PARTICIPANT'S RESULTS	RESEARCHERS' RESULTS
Technical features	Ease of use	77,7%	88,8%
	Reliability	40%	60%
TOTAL		64,2%	78.5%
Pedagogical context features	Contents quality	60%	60%
	TOTAL	60%	60%
Communicative approach features	Autonomy	100%	100%
	Language contextualization	85.7%	85,7%
	Language skills integration*	50%	50%
	Interculturality*	12.5%	12.5%
	Evaluation	75%	75%
TOTAL		60%	60%

Table 1. Results of the website evaluation

According to these, it can be stated that the evaluated website successfully met the first three criteria, still, it shows some weaknesses* regarding the specific descriptors of *language skills integration and interculturality*. Additionally, **Table 2** displays the results concerning both materials' evaluation.

CRITERIA	PROFESSOR	PARTICIPANT
INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL		
Materials' impact	100%	100%
Teacher's development of self-confidence	100%	100%
Teacher's feeling at ease	100%	100%
Perception towards the displayed contents as relevant and useful	87,5%	100%
Teacher's self-investment	100%	100%
CHECKLIST		

Structure	91,6%	100%
Instruction's clarity	100%	87,5%
Descriptor's quality	100%	100%

Table 2. Evaluation results on the instructional material and the checklist

These previous outcomes demonstrated that for both evaluators the instructional material reached impact, contributed to their self-confidence and self-investment development and encouraged them to feel at ease. Thus, its appealing design, its “voice” [10] and its gradual level of difficulty of its activities and exercises (from theory to practice) reported to have a positive effect on the teacher’s Knowing-how-to do skills and therefore, other criteria such as self-investment was favored by the practical tasks of evaluating a website. These findings comply with the results of the checklist application to a site, revealing that the teacher used her critical and reflective skills as can be evidenced in the ranking given to the website, which mostly coincided with the researchers’ results.

Finally, the checklist evaluation results showed that descriptors received an average of 96.5%, highlighting its practicality.

6. Conclusion

Language websites alike e-Learning environments might not have the same number of resources to encourage active interaction among users and do not integrate completely language skills, but some do provide interaction exercises to conduct in class. However, they become useful tools to identify websites’ particular strengths and weaknesses so that teachers can use them in accordance to the class objectives and as starting points to embark on the creation of language websites from its proposed criteria.

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