Enhancing Learning to Learn Competences and Autonomous Learning by using ICT in the Acquisition of the English Language

Esther Nieto Moreno de Diezmas[1]

Abstract

In this paper a teaching innovation project for English language students enrolled in separate Faculties of Education in Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) is described. The aim of the project is to implement student-centered teaching practices, by creating a learning environment supported by ICT aimed at developing autonomy and self-regulated learning. In order to provide a framework for improving self-regulated learning strategies, a learning itinerary for English language acquisition was created, based on the hypothesis that better control of cognitive and metacognitive strategies would lead to self-improvement and more effective learning. The itinerary considered the development of two main dimensions: self-awareness and self-regulation, and focused on improving three processes: planning, evaluation and monitoring.

The perceptions the students had, gathered by means of a Likert type test and a group interview, showed the project had had a positive impact on their learning process, and notable gains in vocabulary and written production were reported.

1. Introduction

In a knowledge-based society, lifelong learning has become a necessity for personal and social fulfilment, and for successful performance in an ever changing labour market. The acquisition of learning to learn skills and autonomy are crucial to enable lifelong learning, since "learning to learn supports all learning activities" [1] and autonomy is a "precondition for effective learning" [2]. However "there is a lack of learner autonomy in the context of foreign language learning" [3], which can mainly be explained by several factors such as, the predominance of a traditional instruction model and the difficulty of creating an effective context for developing autonomous learning embedded in the curriculum [4]. To overcome the difficulties of implementing a "pedagogy for autonomy" [5] in higher education, new technologies are a powerful ally, since they can "provide catalytic conditions for development of autonomous learning elements" [6].

In this vein, and so as to introduce a more student-centred teaching method capable of fostering autonomy and the development of learning to learn strategies by means of information-communication tools, a teaching innovation project was designed and implemented for English language learning for future primary education teachers. In this paper, the main guidelines of this project are described, along with the perceptions the students had and their opinions of how it impacted on their own learning process.

2. Theoretical framework

For Huba & Freed [7] the main pedagogical changes to be made in higher education are connected to a shift from a teacher-centered model to a learner-centered approach that focuses on "the way in which learning is carried out, that is to say, the process of acquisition and construction of knowledge by students" [8], and that provides more effective learning [9], as the students and their cognitive and metacognitive processes become protagonists in the teaching practice. In this vein, one of the most important goals of higher education should be to encourage learners to be independent and equip them with learning to learn strategies, [10] and, therefore, a pedagogy for autonomy should be implemented for encouraging foreign language learning [11].

For this purpose, it is important to create an atmosphere conducive to self-regulated learning characterized by a focus on motivation, building this promotion of autonomy into the curriculum, providing resources to be used, developing skills for seeking and evaluating data, and by the pedagogical use of scaffolding with teacher assistance throughout the whole process [12]. In this sense, the development of self-regulation, namely control of the planning, evaluation and monitoring of the learning process, is a key concept, and one that connects self-improvement [13] and effective learning [14]. Additionally, in order to foster autonomous learning, students should develop self-awareness and self-assessment skills such as, "evaluation of personal difficulties and learning

[1] University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

strategies" and "awareness of the gap between the knowledge already acquired and that to be acquired" [15].

3. Description of the teaching innovation project

3.1 Setting

In our interconnected globalized society, mastery of foreign languages is an important competence for future teachers, due to the increasing number of bilingual schools that require teachers to be able to convey the content of different subjects by means of a foreign language, and predominantly, in English. However, it was detected that most future teachers in their first years of training at the university find it difficult to communicate in English, and this was the main rationale for the design and implementation of a teaching innovation project, the main goal of which was to improve English learning by fostering autonomy and learning to learn skills backed up by ICT.

The teaching innovation project was endorsed by the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) and aimed at university students of English as a foreign language enrolled in separate Faculties of Education. Five Spanish Faculties and 20 university teachers were involved in the design or implementation of this pedagogical intervention.

3.2 Method

Based on the aforementioned theoretical background, the project consisted in designing a learning itinerary that enabled autonomous learning by providing a framework aimed at improving cognitive and metacognitive processes by means of the development of two main dimensions: self-awareness and self-regulation.

To foster the self-awareness dimension, the students were given a CEVEAUPEU questionnaire [16] for detecting their learning to learn strategies, and set an English placement test the result of which were then discussed with the students. By application of these instruments the students became aware of what their starting points as English learners were, and analysed their learning strategies, which enabled them to develop metacognition.

The development of the self-regulation dimension was backed up by the design of a set of instruments for fostering the strategic actions of planning (an inventory of tasks for students and a wide repository of online resources); evaluating (online self-assessment questionnaires and evaluation rubrics, and monitoring (writing a reflection document). The itinerary of learning was monitored by means of a Virtual Campus, where the students uploaded their tasks (texts, presentations, videos, recordings, etc.), carried out the process of self-assessment, and accessed tests, questionnaires and the repository of online resources.

Every instrument was designed for specific functions to be carried out. Thus, the inventory of tasks aimed at scaffolding the process of planning, by offering the students a set of tasks connected to the curriculum that developed their language skills, and particularly their oral and written production. The repository of online resources consisted of a wide selection of materials divided into different sections: listening, reading, speaking, writing, use of English (grammar and vocabulary) and online dictionaries. Online resources were also graded according to different levels (basic, intermediate, advanced), so that the students could choose the area or skill they needed to improve and start at the level in which they felt most confident. In this way, the activities catered to the different needs the students had.

The self-assessment questionnaires were designed as checklists, so the students could bear in mind what they were mainly required to produce, and offered them guidelines for the processes of structuring, organizing, using grammar and vocabulary and revising. The students were also provided with the evaluation rubrics for oral and written productions used by their teachers in final exams, so they could become familiar with the dimensions assessed, adapt their productions to this framework, and improve their self-assessment skills.

Finally, the students had to write a document in which they reflected on their learning process and described what they had learnt, how they learnt better, what their strengths and weaknesses were and what they had to do to continue learning, by designing a plan of learning to reinforce or extend their abilities.

4. Results

A Likert type questionnaire and a group interview were conducted to research the perceptions the students had on how the project had influenced their learning process. The students reported very positive views on the implementation of the pedagogical intervention. In their opinion, the areas that benefited most from the new approach were their vocabulary and written production. The most valued documents and instruments designed for the project were the evaluation rubrics, the repository of on-

line resources and the inventory of tasks. The students considered the use of evaluation rubrics to be key to evaluating their progress, to understanding the knowledge and skills to be acquired and to organizing their learning process accordingly. As for the repository of on-line resources, the students believed it made it easier for every student to work on their individual weak points online. As the resources were selected, graded and classified, they did not get lost on the net. The students were also appreciative of the design of the inventory of tasks as a way of planning, organizing, putting their skills into practice and improving them. However, the students reported difficulties in identifying their strengths and weaknesses and in organizing a personalized practice plan in the reflection document, which showed that learners were not used to explicitly managing cognitive and metacognitive processes.

Finally, the design and implementation of the project also benefitted teacher coordination, reflection on teaching practice and the use of new technologies, especially, the Virtual Campus.

5. Conclusion

Creating a learning environment for the development of independent learning helps students improve their abilities for lifelong learning and has a very positive impact on their language learning, particularly in written production and vocabulary. Implementing student-centred teaching methodologies based on developing student autonomy has been challenging and rewarding, although it was also difficult and required a lot planning and reflection on teaching practice. The support of new technologies is crucial, since these enable individual students to be catered for by means of autonomous online learning, and provide very useful tools for students to create, present and communicate their productions, and for the teachers to monitor and provide assistance throughout the whole process.

References

[1] Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (Official Journal of the European Union L394).

[2] Benson, Ph. ”Teaching and Researching: Autonomy in Language Learning”, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 1.

[3] Manzano Vázquez, B. “Pedagogy for Autonomy in FLT: An Exploratory Analysis on its Implementation through Case Studies”, Porta Linguarum, 23, 2015, p 59.

[4] Forcheri, P. & Molfino, M. T. “ICT as a tool for learning to learn”, Boston, MA, Kluwer Academic, 2000, p. 175.

[5] Jiménez Raya, M. (2008). “Learner autonomy as an educational goal in modern languages education”, in M. Jiménez Raya and T. Lamb (eds.), “Pedagogy for Autonomy in Language. Education: Theory, Practice and Teacher Education”, Dublin, Authentik, 2008, pp. 3-15.

[6] Alagic, M., Gibson, K. & Doyle, C. “The Potential for Autonomous Learning through ICT”, in R. Ferdig, C. Crawford, R. Carlsen, N. Davis, J. Price, R. Weber & D. Willis (Eds.), Proceedings of Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference, Chesapeake, VA, Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 2004, pp. 1679-1684.

[7] Huba, M. & Freed, J. “Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the focus from teaching to learning”, Needham Heights, MA, Allyn & Bacon, 2000.

[8] Nieto Moreno de Diezmas, E. “From teaching to learning: a change of perspective at University. A Project for improving learning strategies through VLEs”, in V. Pritcan, S. Stanteru, Sirota, E., Muntean, A., Niculina, O. (eds.). “Traditie si inovare in cercetarea stiintifica” (pp 125-130). Balti, Presa universitara balteana, 2015, p 126.

[9] Overby, K. “Student-Centered Learning”, ESSAI, 9, 2011, pp. 109-112. http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol9/iss1/32

[10] Jiménez Raya, M. “Exploring pedagogy for autonomy in language education at university: possibilities and impossibilities”, in M. Pérez Cañado (ed.). “Competency-Based Language Teaching in the European Higher Education Area” (pp. 119-138). Nueva York, Springer, 2013.

[11] Jiménez Raya, M., Lamb, T. & Vieira, F. “Pedagogy for Autonomy in Language Education in Europe: Towards a Framework for Learner and Teacher Development”, Dublin, Authentik, 2007.

[12] Luzón, M. J., & Gonzlez, M. I. “Using the Internet to promote autonomous learning in ESP”, in E. Arno, A. Soler, & C. Rueda (Eds.) “Information Technologies in Language for Specific Purposes. Issues and Prospects” (pp. 177-190), New York, Springer, 2006.

[13] Paris, S., & Paris, A. “Classroom applications of research on self-regulated learning”, Educational Psychology, 36, 2001, pp. 89–101.

[14] Pintrich, P. R. & Schunk, D. H. “Motivation in education: Theory, research, and applications”, Upper Saddle River, NJ, Merrill-Prentice Hall, 2002.

[15] Forcheri, P. & Molfino, M. T. “ICT as a tool for learning to learn”, Boston, MA, Kluwer Academic, 2000, p. 176.

[16] Gargallo, B., Suárez-Rodriguez, J. M. & Pérez-Perez, C. (2009). “El cuestionario CEVEAPEU. Un instrumento para la evaluación de las estrategias de aprendizaje de los estudiantes universitarios”, RELIEVE, 15(2), 2009, pp. 1-31. http://www.uv.es/RELIEVE/v15n2/RELIEVEv15n2_5.htm