Eminus 4 and the Brand New English 1 Course

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Abstract

More than 15 years ago, the University of Veracruz, opted for the development and use of its own educational platform based on international technological standards in order to meet the needs of the institution, which is called Eminus.

Eminus integrates a solid environment of support to the teaching-learning process in its different modalities. Eminus has evolved from its creation as Eminus 1 in 2004 to its latest version as Eminus 4 in 2020.

This paper presents the update of the Eminus 4 platform and the new virtual English 1 course. It mainly aims at describing the new work mechanics of this course, as well as the pros and cons found in comparison with the previous version of Eminus 3 and some observations made by both teachers and students regarding its instructional design.

First, the background of the platform is presented, as well as its characteristics and its new support tools. Subsequently, the recently launched virtual English 1 course is described including its contents, activities and self-evaluations, and finally some areas of opportunity for improvement are suggested.

Keywords: *educative platforms, online learning, English.*

1. Introduction

Because of the technological revolution around the world, most educative institutions have adopted a technology-based learning to respond to the necessities of our modern society and provide new opportunities and spaces for education.

All it started with distance education, where "teachers and students are in different places for all or most of the time that they teach and learn, depending on some form of communication technology" [1]. The history context of distance education has been divided by Moore and Kearsley in five generations:

- First generation: Correspondence study.
- Second Generation: Broadcasting.
- Third generation: The Open University.
- Fourth Generation: Teleconferencing.
- Fifth Generation: Computer and internet-based virtual classes.

In the fifth generation, the educational process of learning over the Internet without having face-to-face contact is known as virtual or online learning [2]. It is also called Web Based Instruction (WBI), which is defined by Khan as a hypermedia-based instructional program that utilizes the attributes and resources of the World Wide Web to create a meaningful learning environment where learning is fostered and supported [3].

Nowadays, most institutions of higher education have implemented this learning environment as a medium to facilitate education to those students who are not able to attend a face-to-face class. The University of Veracruz (Universidad Veracruzana), as an important public university in Mexico, started implementing this type of learning through a commercial learning management system called "WebCT", but it was too expensive because of the number of users required in it. The University also tried using free or open sources, but they were too complicated to use and lacked of important tools such as multimedia or videoconference system [4]. For this reason, the university developed its own educative platform: The system of distributed education called "Eminus, in order to meet the needs of the institution. Currently in Mexico, only two universities have their own virtual education platform; one of these is the University of Veracruz [5].

This paper presents the update of the Eminus 4 platform and the new virtual English 1 course. It mainly aims at describing its work dynamics, as well as the pros and cons found in comparison with the previous version of Eminus 3 and some observations made by both teachers and students regarding its instructional design.

2. Background

The Eminus educational platform has approximately 17 years of experience. Its first version called Eminus 1.0 was released in 2004 and the most recent, Eminus 4, was launched in 2020. There have been a total of 6 versions, each one improved according to the technological demands of the moment [6].

Fig.1. Eminus versions from 2004 to 2020.
(Source: Own elaboration based on the antecedents of the web page).

Eminus 4 allows communication in a synchronous and asynchronous way through information and communication technologies, simplifying the distribution of training materials and communication tools, to enable the creation of a complete environment for learning [7]. Among its main characteristics, the following can be mentioned:

- Facilitates the administration of Educational Experiences.
- Favors the management, integration and publication of educational content in multiple formats.
- Offers availability of online exams for the assessment of competencies.
- Facilitates the import and reuse of educational resources.
- It has tools that promote synchronous and asynchronous communication and collaboration.
- Provides detailed monitoring of the academic activity of students.

3. Eminus 3

The Eminus 3 platform, which has been running since 2013, is easy to navigate both on desktop computers and on most mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones, but support is not guaranteed on all models due to the wide existing variety [8].

This version contains various means of communication, such as email, audio and video chat, text messages, forums, virtual consulting room and remote classroom. It allows the design of several activities with access to upload and download files, grade tasks, and give feedback to the student. In addition, it has information stores, where the student and the teacher can share educational materials and hyperlinked infographic resources for easy access. It has a feedback system, with a record of grades per student or per group, where the teacher can have a timely monitoring of individual and group performance, and all students can consult their performance throughout each thematic unit evaluated in the course [9].

The current courses are displayed on the home screen, as well as the different sections to work on the platform such as: content, events, messages, activities, evaluations, forums, members, classroom and collaboration space. To design a course, you must click on the "+" icon located at the bottom left of the login screen. Once the course is created, the platform has an option called "edit mode" where teachers can design content, activities, and assessments. In the "Content" section it is possible to upload study material for students, in the "Activities" section, facilitators can upload or design practice exercises that are not assessable and in the "Evaluation" section, digital exams with different types of items including audios can be written.

To share any type of file on the platform, it is necessary to first upload it in the course repository, and there is the option of importing the content from one course to another.

3.2 The online English 1 course on Eminus 3

The online English 1 course on Eminus 3 was created for those students who are not able to attend in-person sessions. Its contents were designed exclusively for learners enrolled in this educational experience in the asynchronous virtual mode, but it is currently no longer in force. Before starting the course in, students attended an e-learning induction course in order to know how to work. The dynamic consists of the following steps: study the contents of each unit, carry out interactive exercises with an answer key to self-evaluate progress, participate in forums, and perform the tasks.

The online tutor only evaluated the participation in forums and the tasks of each unit [10]. If students had difficulties understanding the content or the exercises, they had to contact their virtual tutors via email to schedule an online counseling session (in-person before the pandemic and through the virtual classroom after the pandemic).

Students presented a midterm exam and a final exam and had to submit a final project as evidence of their learning.

4. Eminus 4

The Eminus 4 platform was conceptualized and redesigned with the collaboration of teachers from the 5 regions of the state of Veracruz where the university has its campuses. This new platform has improvements in communication, collaboration and monitoring tools, in addition to allowing the integration of educational resources built in Lienzos, the institutional platform for the development of educational resources; and stored in Lumen, the institutional repository that will house various digital resources such as: audios, videos, photographs, documents, educational resources, which may be used and shared by the university community [11].

This new version of Eminus was launched at the beginning of 2020 together with the Lienzos and Lumen platforms. It has a friendly and modern interface and is also easy to navigate on desktop computers and mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones, but due to the wide variety of these, support is not guaranteed on all models [12].

Within the "Settings" section it is possible to change the language of the platform to English, French, among others. On the home screen there is a list of courses to which the facilitator or the student is added. From this same screen it is possible to create a new course by clicking on the "New Course" button located in the upper right corner of the screen.

In this version you can use the "Tags functionality" which consists of putting keywords for the project so that it can be found more quickly in the course search section. There is also the option "Archive" which is used to hide or move courses that you do not want to delete, and that it is not necessary for them to be displayed in the "Current" or "Concluded" courses. It is also possible to import certain information from the Eminus 3 version.

Among other novelties that Eminus 4 offers are: the implementation of monitoring of teachers and students, the unification of evaluable and non-evaluable activities whose files are uploaded directly from the teacher's personal computer, and synchronous communication through: Interactive room, Microsoft Teams and Zoom UV.

4.1 The brand new English 1 course on Eminus 4

The new English 1 course on the Eminus 4 platform started in August 2021. It consists of 10 learning modules visible in the "Contents" section. This course is available for university students enrolled in this educational experience in asynchronous or synchronous mode.

At the beginning of the course, students receive an introductory talk through the interactive classroom in which they learn the work dynamics that consists of: studying the contents of each module, carrying out the tasks and learning logs, and participating in the discussion forums.

As in the Eminus 3 course, if the student has difficulties understanding the contents or performing the tasks, they should contact their virtual tutor through an email message or via WhatsApp to schedule an online counseling session. For their evaluation, students take three practice tests and a final oral and written exam.

Regarding the design of the course, it is important to mention that due to the benefits provided by the Eminus 4 platform, the instructional design of this educational experience is more interesting than the Eminus 3 course since it is more functional and easier to navigate. It presents the icons for accessing the different types of learning activities such as: "Contents" (where the student studies independently and performs practice activities online), "Activities" (containing the Integrative tasks and learning logs), "Forums" (where the student tests the written ability in the English language), "Exams"; among others, on the left side of the home screen,

4.2 Main differences of the English 1 courses on Eminus 4 and on Eminus 3

Table 1 shows the main differences of the English 1 course in Eminus 4 and the one in Eminus 3 found by the facilitator.

EMINUS 4	EMINUS 3
Files for student sharing can be uploaded from the facilitator's computer.	To share a file it was necessary to first upload it to a repository and from there attach it in the corresponding space.
The contents and tasks of the course include exercises for the 4 skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) in learning a language.	The practice of oral and auditory skills were left to the teacher's discretion.
All assessable learning activities such as homework and learning logs can be found in the "Activities" section.	The tasks did not have an icon on their own (as other activities did) so, it was difficult for students to find them.
The practice activities provided by the platform have some errors in the answer key.	The practice activities provided by the platform did not present any error in the answer key.
The preparation of digital exams is more complicated because it has fewer options to choose types of items.	The elaboration of digital exams was easier due to the different types of items that were offered.

Table 1. Main differences of the English 1 courses in Eminus 4 and in Eminus 3.

Students, who have been taking this course on the Eminus 4 platform since August of this year, have been making some comments regarding its design and structure through their learning logs. These include: to add examples of how to carry out the exercises, to include more graphic images in explanations of topics, to define where exactly the tasks will be delivered because the instructions from the platform and the calendar suggest different places.

5. Conclusions

Creating a course in any educational platform requires a huge research work, preparation of materials and a correct instructional design that allows the learner to study and carry out activities independently.

The University of Veracruz has made enormous efforts to have its own institutional platform that meets the specific needs of teachers and students, as well as to improve and update it based on technological and pedagogical innovations that have emerged over the years. Although both, the platform and the virtual courses, are perfectible; the enormous work carried out by the technology experts and teachers participating in this task is noteworthy. Any new course must be thoroughly revised before being taught to ensure its proper functioning. However, small mistakes can often go unnoticed.

Therefore, it is suggested that newly created courses be piloted by teachers who have not participated in its creation, as well as the scheduling of frequent meetings to share experiences in the development of the courses and, where necessary, find possible solutions. It is also suggested to carry out a research project on the perception of teachers and students about this new virtual English course.

Finally, we agree with Ramirez (2010) in the sense that Eminus is a platform with different perceptions on the part of the university community, there are those who use it and those who criticize it, but at this moment an institutional vision must be supported and used [13].

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