Chapter 10

A Research on Students’ Perceptions on a B–Learning English Environment to Improve Written Skills

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the chapter is to explore university students’ perceptions about the effectiveness of interactive and collaborative tools to improve written skills in a blended-learning environment. Based on this goal, a mixed methods research approach was adopted to enhance the mutual invigoration of the two types of methods, and the validity and reliability of data. Three-hundred-fifty-eight learners participated in the quantitative study and 91 in the qualitative one. All of them were enrolled in the subject English I. The instruments used to collect data were two tests and semi-structured interviews. The findings suggested students’ positive perspective towards the possibilities offered by online glossaries, online quizzes, wikis, and forums to improve written skills and foster effective written communication in different contexts. It highlights their potentiality to create a learning community in which students could participate actively in the construction of knowledge, abandoning their passive role as simple observers.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to explore university students’ perceptions about the effectiveness of interactive (online glossaries and online questionnaire) and collaborative (forums and wikis) tools to improve English written skills in a blended learning environment. As García-Peñalvo, Colomo-Palacios & Lytras
(2012), and García-Peñalvo & Colomo-Palacios (2015) point out all these Social Web tools have changed the way in which users take part in the communicative and learning process. They state that Web 2.0 philosophy facilitates the access to knowledge, the communication between individuals and the possibility of being a content author. Students learn, practice, and communicate with all the protagonists of the teaching-learning process (Pinto-Llorente et al, 2015a). This enhances a collective construction of knowledge in which students have an active role, against individualism of traditional methods (Pinto-Llorente et al, 2014a).

In this study researchers analysed a technological model implemented via the platform Moodle at the Pontifical University of Salamanca to know if its technological tools facilitated the learning experiences and written interactions in English between the participants of the teaching-learning process (Blake, 2000). They focused on the analysis of some of the interactive and collaborative resources provided by Moodle to improve students’ written skills in English.

Regarding the interactive resources, they analysed the use of online glossaries and online questionnaires. On one hand, the online glossaries were used to create a dictionary of grammatical terms. Students had to include the definition of two terms, and all their entries and examples. Although that e-activity was designed to do individually, learners shared their definitions with their virtual classmates. Regarding the rules to develop the glossaries, participants had to write everything in English, since the purpose of those e-activities was not only to learn all the new grammatical terms but also to help them to improve their written skills. On the other hand, the online questionnaires were used to design assessment and self-assessment e-activities. They enabled teachers to create a bank of different kinds of questions (multiple choice, true/false questions and short answer) and to design different questionnaires to include them in different sections of the course to practice reading and writing. The assessment and self-assessment questionnaires had different rules. In the case of assessment questionnaires, teachers decided to shuffle the questions and answers randomly, avoiding the same order for questions and answers in the questionnaire. Students only had one attempt to complete the questionnaire, so the grading method was first attempt, time was limited and there were penalties applied for incorrect answers. Moreover the results were available after the questionnaires were closed. In the case of self-assessment questionnaires, questions and answers were not shuffled randomly, time and the number of attempts were not limited and penalties were not applied for incorrect answers. The results were available immediately after each attempt. The purpose of those questionnaires was to help students to learn the contents of the course and to prepare them to do the assessment questionnaires and the final exam. It was a way to help students solve their doubts about contents, and recognize their strengths and weaknesses. All online questionnaires were completed individually. Although they were interactive resources and there was a bidirectional communication, that only took place between learners and computers.

In the model implemented there were also two forums; one was about methodology and another one about English culture. In the first forum, students shared their ideas for teaching English in Primary Education, attaching different documents in which they included good practices. The second forum was used as a complement of the different wikis of English culture, and allowed each group to interact, exchange points of view and make decisions about the content, and format that they wanted to include in their final wikis. Regarding the rules of use of those forums, teachers established that students used English in all their interactions and in all the documents uploaded, since the forums were designed to improve students’ written skills.

The second collaborative resource used in the model was the wiki. It was used to carry out a group e-activity about different topics of English culture. Small groups of students developed each wiki and