UBILINGUA: A contextualized EFL/ESP platform

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ABSTRACT

This work presents the evolution of *UBILINGUA*, which started as a supportive learning space especially oriented to address those needs of students at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC) and has now become an Open Access (OA) foreign language platform intended for any students of Arabic, Chinese, French, German and English. *UBILINGUA* has been transformed into a ubiquitous learning environment (ULE) that can be accessed anywhere and at any time not only by ULPGC learners but by any interested online user. The outcomes of this study, although especially focused on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), describe the platform evolution and some learning strategies that promote knowledge building, vocabulary improvement and self-study skills that connect individual learners to the Internet in order to respond to specific needs and some flexibility regarding time and space when learning English.

Keywords: contextualized learning, EFL, ESP, LLL, OA, significant learning, UBILINGUA.

1. INTRODUCTION

UBILINGUA is an Open Access (OA) website that emerges as an initiative of the Innovative Educational Group (Grupo de Innovación Educativa (GIE-31), *Creation and dissemination of multilingual didactic objects for mobile language learning in a university context (Creación y difusión de objetos didácticos multilingües para el aprendizaje móvil de idiomas en el contexto universitario)* of the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC) in 2012. The main intention behind *UBILINGUA* (an acronym originated by this GIE-31 to address the concepts of ubiquitous learning and languages) is to respond to the improvement of different language and communicative skills in various foreign languages in graduate and postgraduate courses offered at ULPGC. *UBILINGUA* offers self-study material for language and cultural contexts in English, French, Arabic, German and Chinese. The interface of *UBILINGUA* (Figure 1) welcomes online users to simply register on the platform with a username and password in order to access the different type of learning content adapted to mobile and ubiquitous learning environments: podcasts, instructive videos, interactive activities with answers, listening exercises, etc. All these learning situations have been created by the team members of GIE-31 having in mind a language level that ranges from A1 to B2 of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFRL).

Although it continues to be a platform in constant construction, *UBILINGUA* is at present a consolidated OA space that aims to offer its visitors (ULPGC and any online user) a continuous, constructive and ubiquitous formation. In the case of English, there is material devoted to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the areas of social sciences (social work and tourism), and engineering (industrial and telecommunications). This study is therefore focused on two main objectives for EFL/ESP learners:

1. To make and publish learning material for EFL/ESP on *UBILINGUA*
2. To produce contextualised and motivating didactic material for the enhancement of the communicative competence in ESP socio-professional contexts

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Figure 1. *UBILINGUA* interface

2. LITERATURE FRAMEWORK

Learning English can be a challenge, a leisure activity and primarily an opportunity for many international citizens in order to have access to more job opportunities and therefore to a better life. Internet information and formation have become frequent practices in today's learners. Not only reading or accessing different types of multimedia material can improve the foreign language skills of international students, but online open access courses have also benefited the progress of language skills of worldwide EFL students who are now closer to the English speaking countries and traditions by connecting themselves to the world. *UBILINGUA* has aimed to contribute to this perception of being connected to the world by participating in innovative learning methodologies such as the communicative approach, ubiquitous learning, and LifeLong Learning (LLL).

Ubiquitous learning is described as that learning environment that combines inside and outside tasks, which may be supported by Information and Communication Technology (ICT), self-study and team work[1, 2]. Ubiquitous learning may also differ from e-learning since the former is more contextualized and significant to the learners[3]. Ubiquitous learning addresses personal and professional challenges that nowadays are linked to ICT and Internet connection. ICT, therefore, can be crucial in this knowledge building process, in which students not only exchange information and discuss ideas, but they must construct their own knowledge and present it to the learning community[1, 4].

Learning English should first and foremost accomplish communication as the main aim of the learning process for any EFL / ESP learner. By setting meaningful learning situations in a communicative learning approach, different tasks and activities can be designed to reinforce the independent learning skills of learners, together with their cooperative and collaborative learning skills[5, 6]. These meaningful communicative scenarios can enhance not only communicative skills but interdependent collaborative competences and cross-cultural awareness[7].

LLL is a philosophy that remains in our 21st century European society, especially when any missing piece of information is just on a click to the Internet. Learning is about being curious and motivated to either improve specific content or abilities (required for a job or a particular objective) or to either enjoy the experience of acquiring information or developing skills (cooking an Indian recipe, for instance). When motivation or leisure plays its part, learning becomes more significant and well-acquired by the self-directed ubiquitous learner[8, 9]. The design of *UBILINGUA* has been possible having in mind that learning which is inclusive, constant, continuous, communicative and ubiquitous.

3. METHOD

UBILINGUA was established to promote communicative and cognitive skills in various foreign languages. In the case of English, there were three principal stages, which were generated in the EFL/ESP classroom and transformed to the OA platform over the 4 years of this innovative project. First, the two teachers in charge of the English language sections started creating didactic material for EFL learners (flipped classes, interactive activities, etc.) ranging from level B1 to level B2 of the CEFRL. Second, the necessity of having specific learning situations that could support ULPGC learners

in their professional fields made these teachers to create multimedia material adapted to the following ESP contexts: History, Geography, Social Work, Tourism, Telecommunications Engineering and Industrial Design Engineering. The third stage combined the students' work with the creation of didactic activities. This meant that the dialogues ULPGC students created as part of their continuous assessment were selected and transformed into podcasts with the intention of using their own pieces of work so that they could serve as learning material for future generations of ESP learners. Students' active contribution in the creation of the situation, the performance and pronunciation of each participant were vital in this interdependent collaborative learning task. It is essential to highlight that this last process was carried out with the positive consent of the students who were involved in this project.

The role of the teacher in this third phase was assessing and selecting the dialogues, and transforming them into podcasts. In order to select the dialogues, the teachers considered two main criteria: first, the dialogues had to meet some minimum standards of quality regarding the sound and the content. The chosen dialogues had to reflect a real professional situation that had to do with the particular specialty the material was created for. After having selected the conversations, the process of transformation of the chosen dialogues excerpted from the videos recorded by students to audio file or podcast was carried out by using the software *Camtasia*. The final result was the creation of podcasts in MP3 format. The next step was the design of exercises to work on the dialogue content. In these activities, the teachers focused on the development of certain aspects such as specific / technical vocabulary, sentence and paragraph structures, comprehension of the conversations, etc. Eventually, the materials were published on the *UBILINGUA* website. Table 1 shows the current classification of content for EFL or ESP in *UBILINGUA*.

Table 1. Classification of EFL/ESP content in *UBILINGUA*

Item	Format	EFL / ESP
A set of riddles: Riddle 1- Riddle 39	Listening	EFL
• The telephone: Dialogue 1 • The Internet: Dialogue 2 • Travelling abroad: Dialogue 3 • Child protection: Dialogue 4 • Do colors mind? Learning situation 1 • A meeting at work. Learning situation 2 • Old age and social work mediation. Learning situation 3	Listening	EFL / ESP
The telephone: Dialogue 1 The Internet: Dialogue 2 Travelling abroad: Dialogue 3 Child protection: Dialogue 4 (UN)Countable nouns BrE vs. AmE Phrasal verbs Academic writing History How to make a successful oral presentation Do colors mind?-Learning situation 1 A meeting at work-Learning situation 2 Old age & social work mediation-Learning situation 3	Activities with Keys	EFL / ESP

• How to write a film review in English • Types of questions in English • Formal / informal letters and e-mail • Discourse markers • Phrasal verbs • Paragraph writing • BrE vs. AmE • (Un)Countable nouns • Australia • Metaphors & idioms • Hedges in the academic paper • The academic paper & the bibliography (Part 1) • The academic paper & the bibliography (Part 2)	Instructional / Cultural / Academic Videos	EFL / ESP

All the materials shown on the previous Table 1 have been designed and created by the two teachers involved in the English section of *UBILINGUA*. Some of them are riddles that welcome any user to practice English in a playful way; other materials are dialogues recorded by students, as explained in detail in the previous paragraphs; others are dialogues recorded by teachers, all of which are complemented by practical activities. There are also some SCORM interactive web-based activities on *UBILINGUA*. SCORM stands for Sharable Content Object Reference Model, and it aims at enabling interoperability, accessibility and reusability of web-based learning content for different purposes: industry, government and academia. Finally, the last set of activities displayed on Table 1 is video recordings, which follow a screencast format and deal with useful contents for any EFL / ESP student or professional. Each of these instructional, cultural or academic videos, which would also have interactive comprehension activities (e.g. BrE vs. AmE), has three sections that students can rewind, fast forward, repeat or pause as needed: a warm-up, the delivery of the main content and a conclusion.

4. RESULTS

UBILINGUA is presented as an OA learning space that is available anywhere and at any time (ubiquitous learning). The work produced by learners has been transformed to ubiquitous learning activities for other ULPGC students or any other online user registered on *UBILINGUA*. Moreover, ESP learners of Social Work, Tourism, Telecommunications Engineering and Industrial Engineering have participated in the construction of their own professional knowledge adapted to their context, which has resulted in a satisfactory activation of their English language skills.

The three more recent contextualized learning situations posted on *UBILINGUA* (Figure 2) for ESP are entitled*: Do colors mind?, A meeting at work* and *Old age & social work mediation. Do colors mind* is addressed mostly to students or professionals within the field of Industrial Design and Product Development Engineering, as it recreates a situation in which a manager of a car dealership and a student talk about the importance of colors when designing and selling a car. Certain colors seem to be more attractive for particular customers' profiles. The second situation, *A meeting at work,* is mainly oriented towards Telecommunications Engineering students or professionals in this field, and it reproduces an interview among a telecommunications engineer and two company representatives. A discussion between the two parts reflects the demands of the company for the engineer to design and build a tablet for kids according to their requirements. The last situation *Old age & social work mediation*, which is addressed to Social Work students and professionals, presents a telephone conversation between a social worker and the children of an elderly person. They reach an agreement about what measures to take in order to improve this senior's quality of life.

Do colors mind?-Learning situation 1

Do colors mind?-Learning situation 1

A meeting at work-Learning situation 2

A meeting at work-Learning situation 2

Old age & social work mediation-Learning situation 3

Old age & social work mediation-Learning situation 3

http://www.webs.ulpgc.es/webidiomas/ubi/

The results also propose that OA learning spaces such as *UBILINGUA,* combined with face-to-face sessions, reinforce the communicative competence in learners[6]. Furthermore, the design of collaborative learning tasks promotes a variety of aspects such as students' motivation, autonomy and confidence. Learners become actively involved in their own learning process when they are building their own knowledge. Students' autonomy and self-confidence are also improved since these collaborative learning tasks are self-corrected by the students themselves and they recognize their work as being good, since it has been chosen by their teachers for the design of additional materials that may help other classmates in their learning process. Team-work skills are also improved as students must reach agreements and learn to hear their classmates' ideas and opinions in order to have a satisfactory final product. A number of advantages are revealed with this communicative collaborative learning approach where students are not mere passive receivers of contents, but they are active participants and builders of their own knowledge being guided by their teachers.

5.   CONCLUSION

This brief work has intended to show the development of *UBILINGUA*. The foreign language website *UBILINGUA*, created by a group of specialized teachers at ULPGC is an OA space not only for ULPGC students but for any online interested user. At the same time, *UBILINGUA* participates in the LLL philosophy by offering citizens to participate in EFL / ESP learning contexts anywhere and at any time, even for those who may not be able to attend face-to-face formative courses (ubiquitous learning).

The ESP participants of this study, teachers and students, have combined their work, competences and skills to produce ESP situations now shared and posted on *UBILINGUA*. The teacher has moved behind the scene as a guide and evaluator of ESP language skills and content in order to allow learners to be the creators of ESP contexts. These active learners seem to be more motivated for their meaningful interactions and the resulting significant acquisition of knowledge applied to their professional fields.

As teachers and researches, we consider essential to investigate and innovate in the areas of teaching / learning EFL / ESP acquisition of knowledge and skills. Our current students belong to a new generation of learners who have been born surrounded by the use of ICT and instant access to all kind of knowledge. *UBILINGUA*, although a challenging project, has aimed at adapting learning situations to our EFL and ESP students at ULPGC. Therefore, the design and use of learning materials which intent to respond to students' specific interests can often be powerful tools that motivate learners' continuous and contextualized LLL.

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