

Using e-mails in foreign language teaching at the ULPGC as a tool to enhance students' self-confidence while providing information

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide research on e-mail communication between teachers and students has increased for the past two decades. This paper aims to highlight the potential of Information and Communication Technology, particularly, e-mails, as a pedagogical tool in foreign language teaching at Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. The main objective is to demonstrate how e-mails represent a perfect platform to optimize the delivery of information, but primarily to reinforce some good values and enhance students' confidence and motivation.

Keywords: ICT, e-mails, foreign language teaching, motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has contributed to improving teaching methods and student learning. In recent years, ICT has clearly played a very important role in society, and also in education as a fundamental pillar of society. Technology has become embedded in every aspect of our life and has collaborated with the changing of the methods and principles of learning and teaching at all levels and in different fields. Extensive research has also demonstrated the positive effects brought about by ICT on students' learning motivation (e.g. Grabe & Grabe 2005)¹ and in the field of foreign language teaching and learning (e.g. Ghasemi & Hashemi 2011).² ICT provides a valuable asset in order to make possible different ways of transmitting any knowledge or piece of information a teacher may consider. All types of ICT are good enough to make communication more efficient between both, the teacher and the students, and also to enhance students' interest and motivation. However, using ICT should not be the goal itself. Otherwise, we should be missing the responsibility of qualified professionals whose expertise should be employed to make the best use of ICT to accomplish learning objectives (Floris 2014: 139).³

The overall goal of this paper is to highlight the potentialities of ICT, and more specifically, e-mails, as a powerful tool for foreign language teaching, along with their effects on students' self-confidence and motivation. The main objective is to describe the functions performed by e-mails in teacher-student interaction in the third-year undergraduate course Inglés V in the Degree in Modern Languages at Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC). The fragments under analysis in this study are taken from e-mails sent to the students from September 2018 until the present through the online platform (Campus Virtual). E-mails represent an impeccable device to optimize the delivery of information. Additionally, as it will be illustrated, they establish a line of communication between teacher and students that may be used to boost their confidence, enhance their self-esteem and make them feel respected and important individuals within and outside their educational environment as well.

2. E-MAILS AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

E-mail communication is pervasive in academia. The e-mail as a medium of communication has a great power to extend the interactive communication between the teacher and his or her students, despite the lack of a physical presence between them. Research on e-mail communication between teachers and students has increased for the past two decades (e.g., Absalom & Marden 2004; Mete 2011; Alcón-Soler 2015)⁴, mainly because of the wide spread of this type of interaction that enables them to use language for real purposes and in real contexts. Most importantly, E-mail exchange has also turned into a helpful pedagogical tool for teaching and learning languages.

The foundations of every relationship that can be imagined is based upon communication effectiveness. Any organization that we could think of is just a reflection of the current society, and this circumstance is a key factor in order to understand the importance of reaching an efficient communication status. It is obvious that if the latter works properly, the message will reach its final goal. Otherwise, the message will be compromised. Observing an empty classroom is like seeing an unplugged television set, there is nothing left but a communication tool. Nevertheless, when the television is switched on, suddenly something magical occurs. This is the exact same thing that happens when a class is taking place. The teacher and his or her students are interacting and a permanent back-and-forth communication exchange shows up. It all sounds great, but the problem is that the average class is somewhere between one and two hours long, and all that magical atmosphere will end sooner than later. Therefore, this manifest necessity of extending the effects of the class outdoor must be solved out.

Undoubtedly, an e-mail is an incredible tool not only to communicate a message related to the last class taken by the students, the class taught before that one or just to communicate students any information related to assessments or to send them any material or a teaching proposal. In fact, an e-mail for an English teacher could also be a great opportunity to test and develop students' proficiency in the English language. To be able to picture this way of teaching is mandatory to assume that the link between the teacher and his or her students is in good health, and the latter are going to check their inbox on a daily basis, as well as to read and pay attention to every single e-mail the English teacher is sending them. In other words, the climate of communication between the teacher and the students must be optimum for considering an e-mail as a significant means of transferring knowledge from the teacher to the students in a successful way.

When dealing with students and, specially, when those students are young adults and no yet totally grown as a person, teachers should have also another duty. They have the opportunity of actively participating in the maturity process of students as future mature adults. This means that teachers could reinforce some good values in students and, particularly, teachers could give some self-confidence to the students. The e-mail is a perfect platform to do this, especially because after reading the e-mail, students will be able to listen to these intangible recognitions not only with their ears, if said by the teacher in class, but they also will largely hear it in their heads. And this time, they can listen to it as many times as they want, or as they need, to be more self-confident. The only rule that needs to be followed when using an e-mail to try to increase the self-confidence of students is to be honest with the thoughts that are expressed in the e-mail and to be consistent with them during the whole academic course. In order to avoid any conflict with honesty, it is necessary to realize that there is no room in the e-mail, as a technological tool for education, for highlighting an imperfection a student might have. This way, students will be able to learn what they are good at and they will focus on taking advantage of it for the future.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this section is to illustrate some of the previous theoretical considerations with fragments taken from e-mails sent to the students for a year in the course Inglés V in the Degree in Modern Languages at ULPGC. English V is the fifth subject in a series of six adding up to the obligatory component 'English language: Theoretical and practical aspects'. English V aims to present some of the most complex grammatical structures of the English language and to introduce some specific vocabulary at advanced level. The e-mails under study in this paper were sent to the students by one of the members of the teaching staff of this subject. Another member of the teaching staff decided to store them without telling her colleague, so that they remained uninfluenced. This member considered that the novelty and

innovative character in the use of these e-mails as a pedagogical tool in foreign language teaching in the Degree was worthy of detailed analysis. As it will be shown in the following examples, rather than being used as tools to publish information, e-mails perform further functions whose primary objective is to exert a positive impact on students' achievements. From this standpoint, the teacher acts as a truly sympathetic interlocutor who conveys words of encouragement in the learning process and enhances students' self-esteem. (Note that, although not in the original version, some sections of the e-mails have been highlighted in bold type).

E-mails contain information that has already been mentioned in class or that is sufficiently evident as it is already uploaded and available on the online platform (*Notice that all pending material concerning inversion, or any other stuff that we did plan for this Friday is already uploaded to the Virtual Campus*). Sometimes, information is presented as a kind of instruction manual of the course (*Likewise, you'll find the reading we were working on last day and that we didn't finish. Please, read the rest of the text and be ready to give your opinion about the different examples regarding the working situations we didn't discuss on Friday*). Nevertheless, rather than valuing these e-mails as repetitive or tedious messages, they allow students to have a kind of written record of content seen in class that they can also consult whenever they wish. E-mails may help remind, clarify or consolidate aspects of special interest to students, specifically those regarding the contents of the course (*If you visit the "Vocabulary" section (except for "Prepositions") and also the "Reading" and "Listening" Vocabulary, you will find out what to study for the exam*) or dates for the exam (*Some students were wondering if the "Reading" exam could also take place before Christmas. In order to do that, the "Reading" assessment must be done with the "Vocabulary" exam, that is to say on Friday, December 14th*). Through these messages the teacher ensures that relevant information is not overlooked, as they act as a reminder that is especially welcome by somewhat forgetful students. Obviously, e-mails do not primarily perform an informative function in itself. They contribute to reinforcing information, but most importantly, they may turn that information into an excuse to exert some kind of positive inner effect on students.

Indeed, providing information does not seem to be the major objective of e-mails, as sometimes there is hardly something to tell. Indeed, under the pretext of publishing information, the teacher will establish a line of communication with his or her students that will be employed to boost their confidence, enhance their self-esteem and make them feel respected and important individuals within and outside their educational environment (*it is always fascinating and exciting to share with you guys our knowledge; Fortunately, you all passed and got good grades as expected*). E-mails may further be used to monitor students in their learning process (*Even though you may see it difficult when you consider the whole bunch of different grammar contents altogether, I promise you it is not difficult at all*), to express good wishes (*I wish you all the best for this second semester and of course, also in the future*) and to congratulate them on their hard work (*Congratulations for your good work and see you around!*). Accordingly, messages work as an extension of the class (wherein the main focus will be the teaching of the syllabus content) whose aim is to discourage students from adopting negative attitudes or feelings of disappointment or frustration. Facing a likely neutral or more distant relation in the classroom, e-mails employ approaching techniques to inspire optimistic and hopeful behaviours in the students that will be beneficial to deal with the course.

Words of advice and recommendations will strengthen students' self-reliance, and will also encourage and guide them within and outside an academic context (*and to succeed with the assessments you'll be taking soon, my advice is that you keep working hard and when facing the exams, if any doubt comes out, and your knowledge doesn't seem to be enough to figure it out, just use your intuition, which I like to define as that knowledge we really have, but actually we aren't aware of it; You'll need also to remember that while writing an academic paper, you might change your mind concerning the title or the scope of your work. So despite having changed your mind, you move forward with your brand new idea; However, I guess it is more than challenging when you realize that if you put some effort into it, you will make it no matter what. And at the same time it is pretty exciting to be able to manage all this advanced English knowledge properly and internalize it as soon as possible*). E-mails operate not only as reminders of contents seen in class, but also as reminders of some attitudes and studying techniques that may even be transferred outside the educational setting. The teacher transforms e-mails into a psychological assistance tool that will additionally allow him or her to be in tune with the feelings or needs of the students, and which will impact favourably in the classroom environment.

The guiding function of e-mails also emerges from the way they narrate the chronological sequence of classes so that students are constantly located in time and may perceive how classes develop (*First week of English V is about to end and you will have gotten a pretty good general idea of this subject by then; Finally, and taking into consideration we are getting pretty close to the end of the semester, and we've spent quite a while together, I honestly can confirm that*

until today you have the contents of this subject under control; I just realized that next Wednesday will be our last day of class, because the semester will be over next Friday). By placing students in the evolving context of the semester, they get both a retrospective and a prospective view of the course. From this perspective, it is more likely that they discard some reprehensible attitudes that may interfere in the proper development of their learning process.

The teacher demonstrates a natural ability to clear up misunderstanding and also to transform situations in which students may expect to receive a written reprimand into soothing recommendations (*Once you've unanimously agreed not attending class tomorrow, plus last Friday's general absence, I think it is time to update the information in order to avoid missing the big picture*). And also in situations in which students take no notice of what is said in class, the teacher prefers to insist rather than ignore them (*On the other hand, and even though I've asked you folks several times to send me by e-mail your topic and chosen classmate for the presentation, unfortunately there is feedback from very few of you. Consequently, let's set an official deadline for this issue*). Students' passivity is rejected and channeled into productive tasks that will mitigate their apathy.

Through e-mails the teacher may adopt a fairly democratic position whereby students' decisions and opinions are fully taken into account (*Well, to proceed, we need you folks to unanimously agree with it. So please let me know your final decision as soon as possible*). E-mails also perform a tranquilizer and reassuring function (*Nevertheless having said this, I want you to know that there actually are some more sections that are included in an academic writing. But do not worry, we'll see them next day in class*). Apologies (*Sorry, it seems that my mail didn't work out properly yesterday*) and words of thankfulness (*I would like to tell you guys that after spending this entire semester with you, I want to thank you all for your awesome behavior in class, each and every single day*) contribute to making students feel greatly appreciated by their teacher. Through different means e-mails convey the impression that students are highly respected and deserve to be treated well (*As I did state in class, I'm doing my best to learn your names. It is going to take me a couple of weeks but I'm trying hard and I know I'm going to learn all of them sooner than later. You'll see*). Accordingly, the teacher adapts his style to the therapeutic nature of the message, for example, avoiding the lack of concern or carelessness that may arise from telegraphic speech when informing about exam revision dates (*Nevertheless, if any of you feels like has the need to see his or her exam, you can review your grades tomorrow morning from 8 am to 9 am*). Emphatic phrases (*your awesome behavior in class, each and every single day*) and polite expressions (*Please, I will appreciate it if you let me know by e-mail, whether you have any intention of stopping by*) will also help to a sense of well-being on the student. Thus, e-mails pursue an implicit strategy of transfer of power to students by apparently downgrading the authority of the teacher in favour of an increased decision capacity on the part of the learner.

Finally, needless to say, grammar is the perfect candidate to benefit from this educational procedure. Obviously, there are diverse grammar contents included in the syllabus of the specific English subject. Therefore, the teacher may include in this writing most grammar contents on purpose so that students get further practice on how to use them in context. Note, for example, how some future tenses and expressions studied in unit 1 are inserted in the following message:

I remember once when I was on the brink of deciding which of two subjects I was going to take in the extraordinary examination because I had a scary clash and oh boy!, I can tell you this, it really wasn't a piece of cake to make up my mind at that moment. You will probably think that it is very unlikely for a clash to happen in an extraordinary call but this uncomfortable scenario is certain to show up pretty often [...] So taking into consideration that tomorrow we are starting our class at eleven o'clock sharp and we are going to begin with the future and this is an important topic, make sure you'll be there on time because I will be teaching different ways of expressing the future and if you arrive late, by the time you arrive I will have taught many expression that you probably won't be able to understand if you study them on your own. And I will be teaching other expression and I'm afraid won't be able to go back to square one again.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Generally speaking, these e-mails definitely create a new kind of student, with a renewed fortified identity that will help him or her face the course. E-mails may be valued as epilogues of the class, as supporting sessions with a therapeutic effect that might hinder any feeling of rejection or discouragement that some subjects, especially those that demand an advanced level from students, may arouse. E-mails perform as a psychological extension of the classroom

that redefines the relationship teacher-student and that may have a beneficial effect on the student's outcomes and, above all, on their attitude towards life.

No doubt that ICT are playing an important role in the current society and particularly in education. However, it will take some more time before teachers completely realize the potential of this tool in the education field. ICT will be evolving very fast in the near future and teachers have to evolve with them. But no matter how powerful an educational tool might be if teachers are not convinced of its benefits. There is not probably an accurate figure of teachers who are using e-mails as part of their teaching to enlarge the effects of teaching out of the classroom, but using the e-mail as one more technology tool to enhance the quality of teaching should not be understood as a threat but as an opportunity. Hence, if there are increasingly more and better resources at teachers' disposal to enable creativity to maintain a permanent communication between a teacher and his or her students, those resources must be used by teachers. E-mails, as one more of those resources, have been successfully implemented in this case study and hopefully they will keep playing a significant role in this scenario of English teaching in college education.

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