

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY ON THE USE OF ICT BY STUDENTS AND FACULTY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LAS PALMAS DE GRAN CANARIA

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RESUMEN

Mientras el uso de las nuevas tecnologías tales como los mensajes de texto, las wikis, las redes sociales y otros servicios interactivos como el Facebook, MySpace, Flickr y YouTube y otras aplicaciones de la Web 2.0 por parte de nuestros alumnos es cada vez más común, no ocurre lo mismo en el caso de muchos profesores universitarios. Este fenómeno tiene importantes implicaciones a nivel educativo. Suponemos que el cambio tecnológico introducido por las herramientas de la Web 2.0 ha acarreado un cambio cultural al tratar con distintos tipos de comunicación, conocimiento y aprendizaje. El propósito de este trabajo es evaluar el uso de los recursos de internet por parte de los alumnos y profesores de Lengua Inglesa II así como su opinión sobre los beneficios de la Web 2.0 para completar el aprendizaje de dentro del aula.

Palabras claves: TIC, enseñanza de idiomas extranjeros, nivel universitario.

ABSTRACT

While students are increasing their use of emerging technologies such as text messaging, wikis, social networks and other interactive web services such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr and YouTube and other Web 2.0 applications, this is not the case with many university faculty. This phenomenon has important implications for educational institutions. We assume that the technological change

introduced by Web 2.0 tools has caused a cultural change in terms of dealing with types of communication, knowledge and learning. The purpose of this study is to assess English II students and faculty's use and awareness of the benefits of Web 2.0 to supplement in-class learning.

Key words: ICT, foreign languages teaching, university students.

INTRODUCTION

While students are increasing their use of emerging technologies such as text messaging, wikis, social networks and other interactive web services such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr and YouTube, and other Web 2.0 applications, this is not the case with many university faculty. It seems as if our students have an innate knowledge of how new technological devices work while university teachers struggle with the instruction manuals and attempt arduously to profit from the many uses of the never-ending appearance of new state-of-the-art tools.

Following this line of thought, at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, as I believe in many other universities, great efforts have been made to promote the use of internet for not only administrative but also academic purposes among students and teachers. In the last years, the university has offered teachers many courses related to new internet tools and software and supported the creation of innovation working groups for teachers to research on internet-related matters. Likewise, students are getting new opportunities to profit from the university online resources. In the case of English II students, they can find in the subject webpage not only the syllabus, but also exercises to practice grammatical points, links to dictionaries and online grammar exercises, listening practices, etc. In connection with this, the purpose of this paper is to assess ULPGC English II students and faculty's use and awareness of the benefits of Web 2.0 to supplement in-class learning.

1. A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Prensky (cited by H. Ajjan & R. Hartshorne, 2008: 72) refers to the 'digital natives'; individuals for whom digital technology has become ubiquitous. These digital natives are participating in social networks, social bookmarking, blogging, and other Web 2.0 activities on a regular basis. Veen (cited by R. Mason and F. Rennie, 2008: 9) talks about "Homo Zappiens" because of their

habit of using remote controls while Oblinger and Oblinger (cited by R. Mason and F. Rennie, 2008: 8) calls “Millennials” those born since 1982 who could be described as “having hypertext minds, craving interactivity, easily reading visual images, possessing good visual-spatial skills, and having the ability to parallel process. They prefer learning in teams, will seek to engage with problems and enjoy experiential forms of learning.”

According to Oblinger and Oblinger (cited by R. Mason and F. Rennie, 2008: 8), their learning characteristics are defined as follows:

- Ability to multitask rather than single task.
- Preference to learn from pictures, sound and video rather than text.
- Preference for interactive and networked activities rather than independent and individual study.

However, according to the same authors, these characteristics have the following disadvantages:

- Shorter attention spans or choosing not to pay attention.
- Lack of reflection.
- Relatively poor text literacy.
- A cavalier attitude to quality of sources.

This phenomenon has important implications for educational institutions. The new nature of the web from primarily a source of information and content to a new tool for creating knowledge and sharing ideas, together with the appearance of this new type of student, “presents unique challenges and potential benefits for higher education” (H. Ajjan and R. Hartshorne, 2008: 72).

In “A Theory of Learning for the Mobile Age”, M. Sharples, J. Taylor and G. Vavoula (2007: 221-2) explained

Every era of technology has, to some extent, formed education in its own image. That is not to argue for the technological determinism of education, but rather that there is a mutually productive convergence between the main technological influences on a culture and the contemporary educational theories and practices.

According to Herrera Jimenez (2007: 25), “If, on the one hand, current pedagogical trends are based on a constructivist approach supported on Vigotsky’s theories and on Ausebel and Novak’s concept of meaningful learning, the Web 2.0 is based on the creation of shared knowledge built in

community.” He then quotes Owen when he stated that social software and the changing goals in education seem to be moving in the same direction.

Likewise, H. Ajjan and R. Hartshorne (2008: 72)

Many constructivist theorists posit that learning is a social process and that learning occurs through interactions and sharing information with each other (Bruner, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, researchers have found that collaborative learning help students retain information better than students working individually (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). In addition to social learning, many theorists cite active participation as a major component of effective learning environments (Ferdig, 2007; Linn, 1991). While many traditional web applications focus on the delivery of content, Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs, wikis, social networks, and social bookmarks, focus more on social connectivity.

Finally, R. Mason and F. Rennie (2008: 17) suggest that

Constructivist curricula favour an open-ended, negotiable approach which structures activities so that students have opportunities to collaboratively negotiate knowledge and to contextualize learning within an emergent situation. This reflects the two tenets of constructivism: that (1) learning is an active process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring it, and (2) instruction is a process that involves supporting that construction rather than of communicating knowledge.

However, are we teachers profiting from the Web 2.0 applications? In “Investigating faculty decisions to adopt Web 2.0 technologies: Theory and empirical tests”, H. Ajjan and R. Hartshorne (2008: 71) state:

Many studies in the past have shown that technology use in the classroom has increased over the past years; however, this use has been primarily limited to content delivery, such as accessing course materials.

In Roberts’s 2003 study (cited by C. Gonzalez 2010: 62), three conceptions of teaching using the Web are mentioned:

- As a source of information.
- For individual and independent self-paced learning.
- For group analysis, decision making and dialogue.

Elaborating on Roberts's conceptions, C. Gonzalez (2010: 62) found three conceptions of teaching using eLearning:

- For individual access to learning materials and information, and for individual assessment.
- For learning-related communication (asynchronous/synchronous).
- For networked learning.

Many teachers take advantage of internet by using it to search for content for their subjects. For R. Mason and F. Rennie (2008: 4-5), the theoretical benefits of user generated content in education are fairly obvious:

1. Users have the tools to actively engage in the construction of their experience, rather than passively absorbing existing content.
2. Content will be continually refreshed by the users rather than require expensive expert input.
3. Many of the new tools support collaborative work, thereby allowing users to develop the skills of working in teams.
4. Shared community spaces and inter-group communications are a massive part of what excites young people and therefore should contribute to users' persistence and motivation to learn.

On the other hand, the same authors (R. Mason & F. Rennie, 2008: 6) explained the limitations of user-created content:

Critics of user-created content refer to a breakdown in the traditional place of expertise, authority and scholarly input. They express concerns about trust, reliability and believability in relation to the move away from the printed word to the more ephemeral digital word (Poster, 1990). The web contains a plethora of unauthenticated, unfiltered information and most students lack the critical skills to penetrate this mass of undifferentiated material. In short, traditional notions of quality in higher education seem to be abandoned in the move to web 2.0 learning.

2. METHOD

2.1. Design of the study

This is a research study based primarily on a review of the literature, and two surveys: a student survey on their use of technology for the learning of English

II and a teacher survey on the same matter from the English II teachers' point of view.

2.2. Research questions¹

2.2.1. Students' survey questions

Students' survey consisted of eight questions on the students' use of different online tools. There is a question on the web resources, on the university library online sources, on the tools for cooperative work and on the social networking websites students frequently use. They also have to assess two statements: "The relationship with my teacher through the university web page is positive and productive" and "Social networking websites could be used in the learning process in a useful way". Finally, students are asked about the web tools they employ to learn English.

2.2.2. Teachers' survey questions

The survey questions for the teachers were similar to those of the students except for question number three in which the statement to assess was "The relationship with my student through the university web page is positive and productive", and one last question on whether teachers agree with the support the university is giving faculty to improve their training in virtual environment.

2.3. Participants

The participants were 39 second grade university students of English II (31 women and 8 men, all but 4 under 25 years of age) and four English II teachers, all female.

2.4. Implementation

The survey was passed during the first term of the school year before students volunteer to participate in a project with the University of Queensland in Australia to write on a blog where Australian students wrote Spanish and Canarian students in English on the same five topics and feedback in each other in pairs.

At the end of the year, the students who participated were asked for their opinion on the project and, in general, they were happy with the result of the experience. Likewise, the students' attitude to the use of technology in the foreign language classroom changed for the better.

2.5. Data analysis

2.5.1. Students' general results

1. With regards to the first question on the web resources they use frequently, only two of these resources are employed by most students (the email and the syllabus of the subject) while chats, blogs and wikis are used by less than a fifth of our students.
2. Most students agree with the statement "The relationship with my teacher through the university web page is positive and productive"; with six students who disagree with it.
3. On the topic of the online university library resources they frequently use, 24 out of the 39 students check the library webpage and also they renew their book loans. Besides, 20 out of the 39 students profit from the multimedia resource on the page (such as dictionaries...). But, databases, blogs, electronic journals and other services offered by the Library are barely used by our students.
4. The use of collaborative work tools such as Google Docs, or Adobe Acrobat Connect etc. is practically non-existent with 9 students using the Microsoft Office Online.
5. Social networking sites are popular with 22 students connecting to Facebook and Tuenti regularly.
6. The main reason to connect to these websites is to communicate, while an older student mentioned the possibility of looking for a job in the net. For collaborative work, to search for information and to play were the answers of 9 students only.
7. To the question "Do you consider that social networking websites could be used in the learning process in a useful way?" 27 out of the 39 students answered in a positive way, but this number grew at the end of the school year with the blog experience.
8. Regarding their use of internet to learn English, most of them (33) mark YouTube as an answer; followed by watching television online in English (26) and using the Messenger (25).

2.5.2. The teachers' answers

1. With regards to the first question on the web resources they use frequently, the teachers agree with the students in the main use of the web resources: the email, but two out of the four teachers did also use the syllabus of the subject and blogs.
2. All teachers agree with the statement "The relationship with my students through the university web page is positive and productive".
3. On the topic of the online university library resources they frequently use, all teachers check the library webpage, consult the online library catalogue and also they renew their book loans online. They also consult electronic journals and set aside books through the webpage. But databases, multimedia and the possibility of ordering a purchase online were used by only two teachers. La Memoria Digital de Canarias and Acceda, two databases developed by the university library, were only used by one teacher.
4. On the use of collaborative work tools, two teachers mention using blogs and one Microsoft Office Online.
5. Only one teacher out of the 4 connected usually to Facebook to communicate and search for information.
6. To the question "Do you consider that social networking websites could be used in the learning process in a useful way?" all teachers answered in a positive way.
7. Regarding their use of internet to learn English, three teachers use YouTube in their lessons, two use audiobooks and one uses podcasts; but none use the messenger, videochat/videoblogs, or online television in class.
8. To the question "Do you agree with the support the university is giving teachers to improve their training in virtual environment?" the answer was positive in all cases.

CONCLUSION

All in all, the use of online resources by our students of English II is very basic. In general, they usually check their email and consult the subject webpage. Regarding the library and its webpage, they mainly use it to check the catalogue, renew the books they have borrowed and consult online dictionaries; while all the other benefits the library offers are ignored. Online collaborative tools are used by a surprisingly scant fourth of the students. However, social networking websites are more popular with nearly 60 percent of the students connecting to any of them, essentially with the purpose of communicating with others.

To the question “Do you consider that social networking websites could be used in the learning process in a useful way?” most students answered in a positive way, but with regards to its use for learning English they primarily use Youtube and the messenger, and watch TV online.

On the other hand, teachers’ use of online resources is a little better, but not much. They basically use the email and agree with the statement that “The relationship with my students through the university web page is positive and productive”. Their use of library online resources, as with the students, is limited to check the catalogue and electronic journals, the possibility of renewing loans online and setting a book aside, but they also read electronic journals, set aside books and order the purchase of new books. In the teachers’ group, there is a marked difference in the use of technology between a younger teacher and the others. She is the one in Facebook and in the blog with the University of Queensland.

Broadly speaking, it could be said that, although the attitude of students and teachers of English II is positive to the use of technology to learn/teach a foreign language, their actual use of internet is limited to the use of email, the library catalogue and, in the case of students, social networking sites such as Facebook and Tuenti. Few students take advantage of the many other possibilities the web offers. Hopefully, university courses for teachers and digital natives’ prompt learning of the numerous web tools for the teaching and learning foreign languages will improve this situation.

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NOTES

- 1 The students' and teachers' survey questions can be found in appendixes 1 and 2.

APPENDIX 1

Student survey questions:

1. Mark the web resources you use frequently:

- Syllabus of the subject English II.
- Blog.
- Wiki.
- Chat.
- Email.
- Others. Name them:_____.

2. Assess this statement: “The relationship with my teacher through the university web page is positive and productive”. Circle the number which is closest to your opinion.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree totally	Disagree	Closer to disagreement than to agreement	Closer to agreement than to disagreement	Agree	Agree totally

3. Mark the online university library resources you frequently use:

- Electronic journals.
- Data bases.
- Blogs.
- Multimedia material (dictionaries...).
- Library catalogue.
- Repositorio institucional (Acceda —University Library web page catalogue—, Digital Database on the Canary Islands...).
- Library web page.
- To renew your library loans.
- To reserve books.
- To ask for the purchase of books.
- Others. Mention them:_____.

4. Do you use any tools for cooperative work? Which ones?
- Google Docs.
 - Microsoft Office online.
 - Adobe Acrobat Connect.
 - Blogs.
 - Others. Name them_____.
5. Do you usually use social networking websites on the Internet? If you do so, which ones?
- Facebook.
 - Hi5.
 - MySpace.
 - Twitter.
 - Tuenti.
 - Others. Name them_____.
6. What do you connect to these sites for?
- To search for information.
 - To communicate.
 - To play.
 - To participate in debates.
 - Learning sites.
 - Collaborative work nets.
 - Other reasons. Name them_____.
7. Do you consider that social networking websites could be used in the learning process in a useful way?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree totally	Disagree	Closer to disagreement than to agreement	Closer to agreement than to disagreement	Agree	Agree totally

8. Mark with a cross if you have ever used any of the following web tools to learn English online:
- Podcast.
 - Videochat/videoblogs.
 - Messenger.
 - Youtube.
 - Audiobooks.
 - Televisión a través de internet.
 - Other tools to listen to English online. Mention them_____.

APPENDIX 2

Teacher survey questions:

1. Mark the web resources you use frequently:
- The syllabus of the subject.
 - Blog.
 - Wiki.
 - Chat.
 - Email.
 - Others. Name them:_____.
2. Assess this statement: “The relationship with my student through the university web page is positive and productive”. Circle the number which is closest to your opinion.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree totally	Disagree	Closer to disagreement than to agreement	Closer to agreement than to disagreement	Agree	Agree totally

3. Mark the online university library resources you frequently use:
- Electronic journals.
 - Data bases.
 - Blogs.

- Multimedia material (dictionaries...).
- Library catalogue.
- Repositorio institucional (Acceda- University Library web page catalogue, Digital Database of the Canary Islands...).
- Library web page.
- To renew your library loans.
- To reserve books.
- To ask for the purchase of books.
- Others. Mention them:_____.

4. Do you use any tools for cooperative work? Which ones?

- Google Docs.
- Microsoft Office online.
- Adobe Acrobat Connect.
- Blogs.
- Otras. Indica cuales_____.

5. Do you usually use social networking websites on the Internet? If you do so, which ones?

- Facebook.
- Hi5.
- MySpace.
- Twitter.
- Tuenti.
- Others. Name them_____.

6. What do you connect to these sites for?

- To search for information.
- To communicate.
- To play.
- To participate in debates.
- Learning sites.
- Collaborative work nets.
- Other reasons. Name them_____.

7. Do you consider that social networking websites could be used in the learning process in a useful way?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree totally	Disagree	Closer to disagreement than to agreement	Closer to agreement than to disagreement	Agree	Agree totally

8. Mark with a cross if you have ever used any of the following tools to teach English to your students:

- Podcast.
- Videochat/videoblogs.
- Messenger.
- Youtube.
- Audiobooks.
- Television on internet.
- Other tools to listen to English online. Mention them_____.

9. Do you agree with the support the university is giving teachers to improve their training in virtual environment?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree totally	Disagree	Closer to disagreement than to agreement	Closer to agreement than to disagreement	Agree	Agree totally