# 4 The e-generation: the use of technology for foreign language learning

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## Abstract

After the Bologna Process, European Higher Education was reformulated as a response to a change of roles in higher education in a globalised society. The implementation of a new system of credits, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), implied an enormous increase of autonomous learning hours. The high percentage of student workload reflected the new active role of students in the learning process and it was bound to the philosophy of learner-centeredness. In addition, the rise of autonomous hours led teachers to look for new media that fulfill the requirements of non-presential hours of education and that allow teachers to monitor the students' learning. One of the most useful tools has been e-learning platforms. This paper aims to explore how e-learning platforms and new technologies, in general, have contributed to the process of learning foreign languages. The point of departure of this research is a questionnaire about the use of new technologies in the English class and about their competence in English, which was designed for first-year students studying the primary education degree. After the analysis of the results of the questionnaires, the study presents a post-questionnaire presented at the end of the year in which the role of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) is assessed together with the improvement of the students' skills and competences.

**Keywords: autonomous learning, ICTs, e-learning platforms, skills, competencies.**

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# 1.    Introduction

Over the last few decades, the use of technology and multimedia for foreign language teaching has expanded rapidly. Recent developments in the worlds of technology and the Internet have offered new and numerous opportunities for teaching and learning. One of the main advantages of the Internet is that the time teachers require in order to gather authentic material is considerably reduced (Dudeney, 2000, p. 1). In the early stages, the introduction of the Internet meant the possibility of creating online courses by uploading files as class-materials and sending emails in an attempt to achieve a similar teacher-student interaction as in face-to-face classes. However, nowadays the part that technology plays in education is not limited to this.

The evolution in the role of technology in education is related to the development from distance learning to online learning. As Colpaert (2004) pointed out, "online learning or e-learning has gradually replaced the older 'distance learning' paradigm" (p. 43). While distance learning was an attempt to solve time and space limitations of traditional face-to-face teaching, online learning was the result of the complete adoption of technology as part of our lives. Teachers rely on technology as a medium to deliver courses, either fully online or as a complementary resource used with the aim of adapting learning to the needs of a new generation, the e-generation.

The e-generation is defined as a new group of students that has "spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). Living surrounded by a digital culture has had an effect on the way these young people learn. Firstly, the Internet and then, the mobile phone have contributed to a profound change in the modes of interaction and expression among the youth. This new generation of students prefers receiving information quickly, relying on communication technologies as well as performing multiple tasks (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). These students have a low tolerance for lectures and prefer active rather than passive learning, which leads to a change in the model of pedagogy, "from a teacher

focused approach based on instruction to a student-focused model based on collaboration" (Tapscott, 2009, p. 11).

This transition from teacher-centred models of education to student-centred models is reflected in the model of education proposed in the European Higher Education Area that alludes to ECTS. In this system, the way in which teaching is understood is modified together with the type of relationship between the learning outcomes and the time students need to achieve them (workload). Thus, a 6 ECTS subject amounts to 150 hours for the student, 50 hours of which are class hours, distributed between lectures and seminars, and 100 hours of autonomous learning. The high percentage (75%) of student workload reflects the new active role of students in the learning process, which is bound to the philosophy of learner-centredness where learners and teachers are involved in a process of give-and-take. Autonomous learners are those who explicitly accept responsibility for their own learning (Little, 1991) and who show initiative regarding learning, and participate in monitoring progress and evaluating the extent to which learning is achieved (Schunk, 2005). Students take control of their learning; however, teachers have a major impact on their progress towards autonomy (Reinders & Balciakanli, 2011, p. 15), which leads them to create activities that foster fruitful learning and that monitor the students' progress.

## 2.    Case study

In order to study the impact of new technologies on the English class in higher education, we analysed a total of 200 Spanish students in their freshman year from the university degree in primary education. All the students, whose ages ranged from 18 to 22, belonged to the 'e-generation'.

An initial questionnaire developed specifically for this study asked students about four main sections: 1) access to and use of technologies, 2) their competence in linguistic communication, 3) the way in which they learn English, and 4) their autonomy and personal initiative when learning. This questionnaire was complemented with a second questionnaire designed for the last sessions

of the course. Its aim is to observe whether there was an improvement in the students' general level of English and in the different skills assessed in the initial questionnaire. This last survey includes questions about 1) the use of technologies in their learning process, and 2) their current competence in linguistic communication.

## 3.     Results

In the first section, students were asked about their access to a range of technology hardware as well as about their membership to social networks. They were also asked if they had previously used any e-learning platforms (Table 1).

Table 1.    Pre-questionnaire: access to and use of technologies

| Do you have… | % | Do you belong to any social networks? | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Computers (desktop and/or laptop) | 100 | Tuenti | 89 |
| Tablets | 35 | Twitter | 75 |
| Smart phones | 100 | **Have you ever used e-learning platforms (Moodle, Blackboard, etc.)?** | |
| Internet access | 100 | No | - |
| **Do you belong to any social networks?** | | Yes | 100 |
| No | 8 | School | 15 |
| Yes | 92 | University | 100 |
| Facebook | 83 | | |

As would be expected, all our students have a computer and a smart-phone as well as access to the Internet. Although some of them also had a tablet, the majority of them (65%) did not. The questionnaire confirmed the initial hypothesis that a high percentage of students (92%) belonged to social networks, Tuenti (89%) being the most popular, followed by Facebook (83%) and Twitter (75%). It was very enlightening that students expressed their concern about the fact that Tuenti was in Spanish, whereas Facebook and Twitter were associated with the English language and a more international profile. In spite of the use of e-learning platforms being relatively new, 100% of the students said that they

had already used them. However, the percentage was considerably lower in the case of schools, where some reticence regarding their use can still be observed.

In the second section, competence in linguistic communication, students were asked to state whether they had an official certificate and if so the level obtained, and if not, to self-assess their general level of English (Table 2). In both cases students had to indicate their level of English in different skills (oral/interaction, listening, writing and reading), using a five-option scale: basic, lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. This nomenclature substituted the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment levels A1, A2, B1, B2 and C1. This was done in order for it to be easier for participants to make a selection and so that the analysis of the results would be more accurate. The C2 level was dismissed in this questionnaire due to the fact that they are freshman students.

Table 2.  Pre-questionnaire: competence in linguistic communication

| 2.1 Have you got any English level certification | % | 2.4 my listening skills | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| PET | 2 | Basic | 48 |
| FCE | - | Lower intermediate | 32 |
| CAE | - | Intermediate | 18 |
| Trinity. Level | - | Upper intermediate | 2 |
| Others (specify and level) | 8 | Advanced | - |
| **I consider…** | | | |
| **2.2 my general level of English to be** | | **2.5 my writing skills** | |
| Basic | 46 | Basic | 36 |
| Lower intermediate | 23 | Lower intermediate | 25 |
| Intermediate | 30 | Intermediate | 35 |
| Upper intermediate | 1 | Upper intermediate | 4 |
| Advanced | - | Advanced | - |
| **2.3 oral/interaction skills** | | **2.6 my reading skills** | |
| Basic | 60 | Basic | 25 |
| Lower intermediate | 22 | Lower intermediate | 25 |
| Intermediate | 16 | Intermediate | 38 |
| Upper intermediate | 2 | Upper intermediate | 12 |
| Advanced | - | Advanced | - |

The high percentage (90%) of students who did not have any certificate stood out. Only 10% stated that they had a certificate and the level of their certificates was A2. Of this 10%, 8% had got their certificate in the Official Language Schools and only 2% had a Cambridge certificate. Official Language Schools have a good reputation in Spain due to their long tradition which explains why their certificates are preferred to other certificates that remain unknown to the parents, who are the ones that encourage their children to get them.

Considering the questions 2.3-2.6 as a whole, one can observe that there is an increase in level as we progress from 2.3 to 2.6 and that none of our students considers their language skills to be advanced despite the considerable number of years they have been learning English. A similarly high percentage of the participants consider their oral/interaction skills (60%) and their listening skills (48%) to be basic; whereas there is a significant change in the tendency if one refers to writing and reading skills. Thus, Spanish students seem to feel more self-confident when dealing with writing and reading skills than with those which involve some type of oral interaction.

The third section included questions related to the way in which they learn and improve their English (Table 3).

Table 3. Pre-questionnaire: way in which students learn English

| What type of materials do you use to learn English? | % | What type of materials do you use to learn English? | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Printed… | | Internet resources | |
| Books | 95 | English activities on websites | 64 |
| Newspapers | - | English courses on e-learning platforms | - |
| Magazines | - | E-books | 16 |
| Audiovisual materials | | Journals | 3 |
| Films on digital television | 10 | Magazines | - |
| Tv series on digital television | 2 | YouTube (tutorials, clips) | 48 |
| DVDs | 15 | Films | 70 |
| | | Series (subtitled) | 80 |
| **Indicate if you prefer to do…** | | | |
| Individual work | 81 | | |
| Group work | 19 | | |

On the one hand, it included questions about their use of traditional formats such as printed materials and more up-to-date materials like audiovisual materials and Internet resources. On the other hand, students were also asked, in this section, to show their preference either for activities that involve individual work or alternatively activities which involve group work.

The study reveals that although the students belong to the e-generation, they mainly use materials that are in traditional formats. However, the wide variety of Internet resources employed by the students is noteworthy. Among these activities, a preference for those on websites and of audiovisual materials on the Net such as YouTube videos, films, and series stands out. The highest percentage is found in the use of downloaded series subtitled in English. This is in line with the interests of the students who see it as a leisure activity. Their interest in seeing the latest episodes of their favourite series together with the time required, 40 minutes in comparison with the 120 minutes of films, make this activity one of the most attractive ones.

In addition, the students' answer in relation to the way they prefer to work in class shows that the traditional learning model was used in their first learning stages.

The fourth section was designed to assess the level of motivation of our students. In terms of education, it is particularly relevant to know this since a students' lack of interest can make the learning process difficult (Table 4). One of the best ways to motivate students in the English class is the use of technology and the Internet, which provide the students with a great deal of information and innovative resources that contribute to making the learning process more attractive. The questionnaire showed the students' preference (75%) for using technology. We cannot forget the fact that the life of the e-generation is marked by digital communication that becomes as natural as face-to-face communication. Their affinity for the integration of technological devices in their lives seems to lead them to show a certain attraction to integrate them into their learning and "encouraging involvement is the key to its success and we should stress it is sometimes not easy to get the ball rolling" (Hannam & Constantinides, 2011, p. 63).

Table 4.  Pre-questionnaire: autonomy and personal initiative when learning

| Mark the type of activities that you prefer doing | % |
|---|---|
| Classroom exercises and tasks | 25 |
| New technology and/or computer-based exercises and tasks | 75 |

The following table (Table 5) presents the questionnaire proposed at the end of the year to students and their results.

Table 5.  Post-questionnaire: role of technology in the learning process and students' competence in English

| Was Moodle useful? | % | -oral/interaction skills | |
|---|---|---|---|
| No. It does not contribute to my learning at all | - | Basic | 45 |
| No. Too much effort for little improvement | 30 | Lower intermediate | 35 |
| Yes. Definitely, it has contributed to my learning | 60 | Intermediate | 17 |
| Yes. It has been an additional tool | 10 | Upper intermediate | 2 |
| **Possible disadvantages:** | | Advanced | 1 |
| Difficult to use | 15 | **- listening skills** | |
| Time-consuming | 30 | Basic | 30 |
| Others | - | Lower intermediate | 44 |
| **Possible advantages:** | | Intermediate | 20 |
| Source of additional information | 40 | Upper intermediate | 4 |
| Power point presentations | 40 | Advanced | 2 |
| Self-assessment quizzes | 90 | **- writing skills** | |
| Others | - | Basic | 20 |
| **Would you recommend using Moodle next year?** | | Lower intermediate | 29 |
| No | 30 | Intermediate | 45 |
| Yes | 70 | Upper intermediate | 5 |
| **Competence in English. I consider my** | | Advanced | 1 |
| **-general level of English to be** | | **- reading skills** | |
| Basic | 20 | Basic | 15 |
| Lower intermediate | 32 | Lower intermediate | 36 |
| Intermediate | 41 | Intermediate | 27 |
| Upper intermediate | 6 | Upper intermediate | 20 |
| Advanced | 1 | Advanced | 2 |

Students were asked to express their concerns regarding the e-platform used, their usefulness and the difficulties found as a consequence of their

introduction when learning. In this respect, most of them (70%) considered that Moodle had contributed to a great extent (60%) or to some extent (10%) to their learning, whereas 30% thought that although it contributed it was hardly worth using. According to the students, the main disadvantage was that it was time-consuming and in a few cases students found their use complicated. However, 90% of the students found the quizzes in Moodle especially useful for self-assessment, and a reasonable percentage (40%) used this e-platform to enhance their learning.

Students were also asked to assess their progress as we consider that the students' perception of improvement is intrinsically linked to a motivation for continuing working in the same way. Finally, the use of Moodle and new technologies played a significant role in the improvement of the students' English competence. All their skills were improved, according to their personal opinions and to the results obtained in the tests and quizzes done throughout the year.

## 4.    Conclusion

This study has attempted to prove and demonstrate the positive effects of the use of new technologies in education. We are conscious that large classes like ours of 70 students limit the interaction between students and lecturers and make it more difficult to provide students with immediate feedback. However, the results of this study reveal that the use of Moodle has contributed to assisting students and making them feel that they receive instant and individual feedback.

A positive reaction among students has also been observed. Firstly, students showed their enthusiasm for technology as they associated it with fun and, secondly, they were familiar with its use, which provided them with confidence. A consequence of the acceptance of technology is the students' request to continue using new technologies in the coming years.

ICTs are adapted in novel ways to enrich the learning environment (Stevens & Dudeney, 2009) and their use can foster independent learning. The results have

proved their potential value. Students developed transversal skills working on linguistic, autonomous and digital competences. The quizzes done on Moodle revealed a significant improvement in all skills. Although these preliminary quizzes show a notable development in English, we will have to wait until the final and official assessment to confirm the actual improvement of our students.

## 5.     Acknowledgements

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