



## THE USE OF MOODLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR IMPROVING ENGLISH SKILLS IN NON-LANGUAGE COURSES\*

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### Abstract

*Literature provides wide evidence of the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning nowadays for foreign language and intercultural learning. Furthermore, interuniversity cooperation is also facilitating language and culture teaching-learning processes. In this context, a collaboration agreement was signed between the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Universitat de València (UV), that was materialized in an interdisciplinary, bilingual and e-learning project for two different courses, i.e. Spanish Language and Society (LSE) and Marketing Research (UV). The present paper aims to analyze the UV students' point of view of this online project developed through Moodle. Although the main aim for the UV students of the so-called "International Group" was to get to know the characteristics of the British market as well as to develop several managerial competences, they also had the opportunity to practice their English and improve their foreign language skills. Taking into consideration both the quantitative results of a survey and the qualitative evidence obtained, we find support to the positive student perception of the interdisciplinary e-learning activities through Moodle in terms of motivation and satisfaction with the virtual learning environment and, therefore, with the use of education methods that facilitate active and cooperative learning by means of audio-visual didactic resources. In general, this interdisciplinary and bilingual collaboration project allowed students of different institutions, disciplines and cultures to get to know themselves, to discuss, as well as to obtain and to process information on other realities and to improve their language skills through a motivating e-learning environment.*

### 1. Introduction

The use of technology in language teaching and learning has been the focus of recent research [1]. Academic journals such as CALICO Journal, CALL, Language Learning & Technology, and ReCALL provide evidence of the importance and the interest of research on Computer Assisted Language Learning nowadays. Specifically, several authors have provided evidence of the suitability of e-learning environments for foreign language learning [2] as well as for intercultural learning [3] in terms of pedagogical results. Notwithstanding, the point of view of the learner should also be taken into consideration [4].

Additionally, relationships between universities are influencing the education-learning process during the past few years. Continuous efforts have been done to develop collaboration agreements between higher education institutions in the European Union through several programs.

As a consequence of the collaboration agreement held between the London School of Economics (LSE, London, United Kingdom) and the Universitat de València (UV, Valencia, Spain), an interdisciplinary, bilingual and e-learning project was designed. The project aimed to introduce new pedagogical resources in two different courses of two universities in different countries, i.e. Spanish Language and Society (LSE) and Marketing (UV). In this way, an interdisciplinary collaboration was held in order to facilitate students' knowledge and experiences interchange through an online learning environment as well as to improve their language skills in a foreign language. Thus, the collaboration was developed in Spanish for the topics proposed by LSE students, and in English for those related with market research tasks of UV students, respectively. Online exchanges have taken place through Moodle in the last two editions of the project.

In this context, we aim at analyzing the student perception of an online project based on a multicultural, interdisciplinary and bilingual collaboration developed between these two European

universities, through the open access academic platform Moodle. In this project, students have worked linguistic aspects, economic and managerial contents as well as other social competences. Specifically, we describe UV students' perception of the project, those taking a non-language course. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Next, we present the main characteristics of the International Group of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Valencia, where this experience has been developed. After this, we describe the bilingual project and analyze the UV students perceptions about this experience. Last, a series of conclusions are extracted.

## 2. University of Valencia International Group

Since the academic year 2003-04, the Faculty of Economics of the University of Valencia has been offering students the possibility to join an international group for its Business Administration, Economics or Tourism studies.

The International Group linked to these studies is a group where language of instruction is English exclusively. Lecturers in charge of teaching theory and practice in this group have an advanced English command and select and prepare materials in English for facilitating the teaching-learning process. In order to maintain and improve the lecturers' language skills, the Faculty organizes language courses for the International Group lecturers with a native English teacher who focuses on exercising technical vocabulary and subject presentation. Additionally, six grants are annually offered to International Group lecturers to attend an English course in an English speaking country with the objective of implementing language immersion.

On the other hand, students are to use English in all their class participations, individual and group projects as well as exams and office-hours. Initially the International Group was restricted to University of Valencia students, being most of them locals. However, the increasing number of Erasmus students at the Faculty of Economics opened this group to foreign students a few years later. Despite the cultural and social diversity, the common communication element in the International Group is English. The International Group is inspired in the following principles:

1. To provide an interesting and attractive range of courses that is adapted to the global, multicultural and multilingual environment we live in.
2. To offer different degrees in Economics, Business Management and Tourism in a language widely accepted as the reference language in international business.
3. To improve the students' English language skills, and,
4. To make International Group students familiar with other realities, cultures and languages to develop not only their social and communication skills but also to achieve personal growth.

International Groups in different degrees have been growing in number of students over time. For instance, in the case of the Marketing Management II course in English (Business Administration and Business Studies degrees), it has experienced a dramatic increase in number of enrolled students of 466.6% since its activation only six years ago (Table 1).

**Table 1. Number of International Group students in Marketing Management II**

	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
<b>Number of students</b>	15	21	33	72	95	85

Table 2 presents the list of courses that can be taken nowadays in English in the Degree of Business Administration at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Valencia, Spain.

**Table 2. List of courses for the Business Administration International Group**

Subject	Year	Subject	Year
Accounting Analysis	4	International Economy	3
Accounting Consolidation	4	Statistics I	1
Cost Accounting	2	Statistics II	2
Financial Accounting	1	Marketing Strategies Basics of Business	4
Multinational Organizations Accounting	4/5	Management	1
Marketing Management I	2	Introduction to Economics	1

Marketing Management II	2	Introduction to Business Mathematics	1
Managing Innovation and Technology	4/5	Marketing Research	4
International Business Management	4/5	Macroeconomics I	3
Strategic Management I	4	Macroeconomics II	3
Strategic Management II	4	Financial Mathematics	1/2
Financial Management I	3	Microeconomics I	2
Financial Management II	3	Microeconomics II	2
Business Econometrics I	4	Accounting Planning and Normalizat.	2/3
Business Econometrics II	4	Mathematical Programming	2
European Union Economics	1	Theory of Financing I	4
Spanish Economy	2	Enterprise Taxation	3

Under the current process of convergence towards the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Faculty of Economics will launch five new degrees, replacing the former bachelor and diploma courses for the academic year 2010-11. While the international group will continue to exist, it will undergo several changes:

1. While new degrees will not allow students to register option courses belonging to other degrees, actions will be implemented to maintain transversality across courses.
2. English will be the official language of tuition for the new International Business degree.

Moreover, there is a considerable institutional interest in the international group that operates, not only because of linguistic purposes but as a bigger project with specific objectives and where English language skills are not a goal but a feature of the group. This institutional interest is mainly a result of the evident visibility of the University of Valencia thanks to this project and its significant benefits for students.

### 3. The LSE-UV bilingual project

In the context of the University of Valencia International Group, and as a consequence of the collaboration agreement held between the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Universitat de València (UV), an interdisciplinary, bilingual and virtual-learning project was designed. The project aimed to introduce new pedagogical resources in two different courses of two universities in different European countries. In this sense, an interdisciplinary collaboration was held in order to facilitate students knowledge and experiences interchange in two different languages through a virtual learning environment (VLE). Spanish is the language of communication for the topics proposed by LSE students, whereas English is the vehicle for those topics related with market research tasks of UV students, respectively.

The LSE Language Center offers several optional subjects to degree students, such as Spanish Language and Society, which is oriented to non-Spanish-speaking students. In turn, the UV Business Administration studies include as core subjects Marketing Management I and II, and well as Marketing Research, among others. Students can choose language of tuition for these subjects among Spanish, Valencian and English according to their preferences. The collaborative project between the LSE and the UV has been developed for the International Group, where English is the language for tuition, being not the native language for most of UV students.

The specific objectives of this interdisciplinary project are, among others, to engage learners in activities that contribute to develop their linguistic skills in the target language and raise awareness of the attitudes, values and beliefs of the target cultures [5].

In its two first editions (2005-06 and 2006-07), the project started in February and was developed throughout six weeks. In the two last editions (2007-08 and 2008-09) the duration was also six weeks, although the project began in November. During this time, the students had the possibility to take part in several oral and written activities and discussions moderated by the lecturers in charge of coordinating the project, who are specialized in the respective subjects. In the two first editions, the exchanges were effected through WebCT, the virtual learning environment used by the LSE, having access to it students of both institutions. However, in the last two editions it was decided to use the course management system Moodle. Students were supervised by the lecturers responsible for the project who designed several tasks (written reports, oral presentations or individual research projects). In particular, concerning the course edition 2008-09, 23 UV students of Marketing Research (core

subject in the seventh semester), and 22 LSE students of Spanish Language and Society (outside option) took part in the proposed activities.

Complementarily, some LSE and UV students visited the collaborating university during two study trips organized by both institutions. During their respective visits students had the possibility to get to know personally their classmates and lecturers in the other university, to attend several classes and conferences, and to take part in extracurricular activities such as meetings with political representatives, journalists, and visits to businesses and political and cultural institutions.

#### 4. Results for the LSE-UV bilingual project

Once the course is finished, the lecturers responsible for the project collect the information about participation from Moodle statistics and process all the resulting data. In particular, data is gathered regarding student participation, i.e. duration of the connection period (number of days between the first and last login); number of logins; profile, resources, blog, forum and wiki view; comments sent to forum and wiki, and number of uploaded documents.

Regarding the student participation in the project, it was high for both institutions, so that apparently students are very interested in this type of activities. Table 3 shows the results for the UV students. In addition, upon the assessment of the different assignments delivered, students show to be able to use and to structure the information provided by their collaborators in the co-participant institution.

**Table 3. Student participation**

Variables	Mean	Stand. Dev.
Duration of the connection period (days)	29.86	11.35
Number of logins	7.10	3.90
User profile views	9.14	10.43
Resource views	0.76	1.04
Blog views	0.48	0.17
Forum views	30.00	15.73
Wiki views	1.71	4.12
Comments sent to forum	6.71	4.14
Uploaded documents	0.48	0.60

These results seem to support the positive influence of this interdisciplinary activity in the UV student involvement in the Marketing Research course.

Furthermore, according to the course design, participation of UV students in the project does not directly contribute to the student grade in this subject. Therefore, we understand that students involvement in the activities proposed by this project may be explained in terms of their intrinsic motivation. We measured student intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to take part in this e-learning activity through two scales of four items each, adapted from Young [6] and ranging from 1 (total disagree) to 10 (total agree) based on the degree of agreement with each suggested sentence. Table 4 shows the results obtained.

**Table 4. Student motivation**

Item	Mean	Stand. Dev.
<i>Intrinsic motivation</i>		
1. I have the satisfaction of improving my personal knowledge and skills.	6.59	1.47
2. I have a sense of personal accomplishment.	6.82	1.68
3. I have completed exciting and challenging class activities.	7.05	1.76
4. I enjoy learning about an interesting subject.	8.18	1.53
<i>Extrinsic motivation</i>		
5. I think that the required time will have a negative effect on my social life and other grades.(*)	2.32	2.34
6. I will have simply completed a required course, nothing more.(*)	3.45	1.99
7. I will receive a good grade that will help my Grade Point Average.	7.18	1.82
8. I will make other people proud of me.	4.77	2.79

(\*) Inverted item

Generally, all the items show scores near or over the midpoint of the scale. Therefore, we understand that the proposed e-learning activities are valid to motivate students of both institutions intrinsically and extrinsically.

Additionally, we analyzed the degree of satisfaction with the virtual learning environment. Since we have previously observed a high degree of student participation, regardless the incentive in terms of contribution of the e-learning activity to the final grade and the non-obligation to elaborate these activities to pass the course, we expect high levels of satisfaction with the virtual learning environment. With this purpose, we measured student satisfaction with the virtual learning environment through a 10-item scale adapted from Hannon and D'Netto [7]. Items were ranked through a 5 point-scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). As in previous analyses, Table 5 shows mean values and standard deviations.

**Table 5. Student satisfaction**

Variables	Mean	Stand. Dev.
1. I had no problems using the online technology	4.41	1.01
2. Online activities in the program are useful and relevant	4.14	0.83
3. I need to ask for the lecturers advice often during the course*	3.00	1.19
4. The rules and expectations in using online discussion are clear to me	4.36	0.85
5. I sometimes need help using the online software and finding my way around*	2.23	1.07
6. I usually write long posts to online discussion	3.09	0.87
7. I find easy to use an informal style in an online discussion	4.27	0.83
8. I find difficult to write in an analytical or critical style*	2.32	1.04
9. Technical help is available and helpful	3.64	0.90
10. I found online communication a friendly experience, not a lonely one.	4.18	1.10

\* Inverted item

Consistently with previous results, satisfaction with the virtual learning environment is high for the students of the University of Valencia, since for all the items of the questionnaire, excepting the inverted items, scores exceed the midpoint of the scale (3). Regarding satisfaction with communication skills, UV students score highly the item “I find easy to use an informal style an online discussion”, as it gets a 4.27 out of 5. The other two items, “I usually write long posts to online discussion” and “I find difficult to write in an analytical or critical style”, were also high scored. These results may be explained by the fact that UV students attending the so-called International Group have a good command of the English language, and find this experience useful to improve their English language skills through their interaction in the virtual learning environment with LSE students.

## Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a collaborative project to improve language skills of both foreign language students and students using a foreign language in a business management course. Taking into consideration both the quantitative and the qualitative results obtained for the non-language students, i.e. the Business Administration students at the University of Valencia, we find support to the positive influence of interdisciplinary e-learning activities through Moodle on student participation, motivation, and satisfaction with the virtual learning environment and, therefore, with the use of education methods that facilitate active and cooperative learning to improve language skills by means of audio-visual didactic resources.

In particular, it is observed that regardless the incentive offered to students for their participation in the proposed activities, the impact in terms of student involvement, and intrinsic motivation as well as extrinsic motivation is overall positive. Additionally, students show high levels of satisfaction with the learning environment created by the instructors, and declare not to find great difficulties as far as the use of the virtual resources.

All in all, this collaboration project allowed students of different institutions, disciplines and cultures to get to know themselves, to discuss, as well as to obtain and to process information on other realities and to improve their language skills through a motivating virtual learning environment. In general, results seem to confirm the positive contribution of this interdisciplinary, bilingual and virtual activity to the teaching-learning process.

Nevertheless, this evidence is not conclusive, since this experience should be replicated in other courses to guarantee its validity. Additionally, we understand that this research is not free of limitations. As far as the quantitative data is concerned, the obtained results may be biased due to the reduced number of students in these courses.

Additionally, there are students with quite different initial levels of English language command. This fact might have an influence on the student perception of the usefulness of these activities, and therefore, taking into consideration this issue may allow us to conclude the existence of differences in participation, motivation and satisfaction depending on the initial English command.

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