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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN TOURISM STUDIES

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Digital technologies and foreign language learning in tourism studies

ABSTRACT

In order to foster the development of key competences, a research project was carried out at the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management CETT-UB (EUHT CETT-UB) from the University of Barcelona (Spain). The participants were a group of 16 students of English as a Foreign Language. They worked on a research project in groups and presented it orally to the rest of the class, who had to assess their peers' performance. All the project presentations were video recorded and the recordings were included in a weblog which the students could access freely. They could thus watch their own performance and those of other students, as well as comment on their strengths and weaknesses. A thorough analysis of the blog posts led to the conclusion that the students provided more positive than negative feedback, focusing on a wide range of aspects. In addition, the results showed that the posts reflected the awareness-raising work on reflective assessment that had been carried out during the academic period. This project gave rise to subsequent pedagogical actions based on the use of blogs with the involvement of other groups of students at EUHT CETT-UB. Our experience can be used as a model by other institutions, as such methodology can be applied in classes based on oral presentations, regardless of the topic they are covering and the language used.

KEYWORDS

Blog, English as a Foreign Language, Tourism Studies, Key Competences, Peer Assessment

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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This paper presents a study aiming to explore new areas of methodological application in language learning in line with the pedagogical conceptions that underlie the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), i.e. the decentralization of the classroom as a learning context, the promotion of autonomous acquisition and lifelong learning, and the incorporation of competences in curricula to foster the transfer of knowledge in a professional environment (Colén, Giné & Imbernón, 2006). The research focused on some key aspects in education in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Tourism: the motivation and the involvement of the students in their own learning process, the development of their competences, the use of digital technologies and the introduction of assessment tools.

This small-scale qualitative research was carried out at the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management CETT-UB (EUHT CETT-UB) from the University of Barcelona (Spain) and a number of objectives were set. The project was undertaken to work on the students' communicative competence, with a special focus on their oral skills. It was also intended to build up the reflective and critical capacities of the students in learning and assessment processes. The project also aimed to promote self and peer assessment through new technologies. Finally, it sought to develop the learners' autonomy as well as other professional competences such as teamwork, time management and work organization.

Three research questions were formulated based on the assumption that the above mentioned key aspects in EFL pedagogy needed to be analyzed. They mainly related to the development of the learners' critical thinking, their involvement in peer assessment processes, and the form and content of feedback provision after being acquainted with assessment procedures:

- **Question 1.** What aspects do students focus on when giving positive and negative feedback?
- **Question 2.** Do the blog comments reflect the work on assessment criteria carried out throughout the course?
- **Question 3.** How do students express politeness in their comments when providing their peers with feedback?

Before reporting on the research, let us explore some fundamental concepts underlying it.

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Communicative competence became popular at the end of the '60s as a reaction to the concept of linguistic competence defined by Chomsky in 1965. According to Hymes' model of communicative competence, speech events need to be linguistically correct, physically possible, sociolinguistically adequate and consistent with real language use (Hymes, 1972).

Canale and Swain (1980) conceptualized communicative competence as a system of knowledge and ability which is necessary for communication. In other words, communicative competence refers to the knowledge about language and its communicative use, as well as to the ability to use that knowledge in specific, real communication situations. Canale (1983) stated that foreign language learners should be trained to use language in authentic situations and stressed the importance of feedback provided by the participants in assessment processes in order to obtain relevant information about their validity.

Deriving from the initial model of communicative competence provided by

Canale and Swain, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) produced by the Council for Cultural Co-operation (2001) has been nowadays adopted by the vast majority of higher education institutions in Europe. According to the CEFR, communicative competence is composed of linguistic competences – including lexical, grammatical and phonological knowledge and skills; sociolinguistic competences -concerning the socio cultural conditions of language use, and pragmatic competences -related to the functional use of linguistic resources. Communication strategies are needed in order to carry out both written and oral communication activities such as message production and reception, interaction and mediation (i.e. the use of limited linguistic resources to process information and handle meaning equivalences). Thus, language users turn to communication strategies to plan, execute, assess and repair what they say.

ASSESSMENT

Since validity is a crucial issue as far as assessment is concerned, let us clarify what is meant by this term by turning to the definition provided in the CEFR:

"A test or assessment procedure can be said to have validity to the degree that it can be demonstrated that what is actually assessed (the construct) is what, in the context concerned, should be assessed, and that the information gained is an accurate representation of the proficiency of the candidates(s) concerned." (Council for Cultural Co-operation, 2001, p. 177)

From a constructivist approach assessment is considered an essential component of the teaching/learning process. Even though different types of assessment exist, in higher education contexts assessment should serve a double purpose: the educational aim should not be overridden by certification requirements.

Colén, Giné and Imbernón (2006) consider that assessment ought to be continuous, multidimensional, contextualised, collaborative and learner-centred. According to these authors, assessment should be carried out continuously during the teaching/learning process.

Formative assessment should aim at guiding and supporting students by providing them with feedback on their progress, since "evaluating students is the process of 'forming' their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process." (Brown, 2004; p.6). Students, in turn, should also supply feedback on the teaching/learning process so that it can be improved.

On the other hand, summative assessment should inform about the degree of achievement of the academic objectives for certification purposes at some certain points, as according to Bachman (1990) it reports on the learning outcomes.

The assessment of students' learning is multidimensional because it involves assessing their knowledge, abilities, capacities, and cognitive and metacognitive strategies. It is not just a question of assessing what learners know, but also their resources and competences, including the ability of learning to learn.

Assessment should also take into account the students' learning context, as meaningful acquisition implies being able to relate different aspects of learning to each other. In addition, the assessment and management of learners' progress and limitations ought to be a collaborative process that should involve all the players in the teaching/learning game, i.e. the own students (self assessment), their classmates (peer assessment) and their teachers. This means that the students should be aware of the rules and that there should be an opportunity for negotiation: they should be familiar with assessment criteria and they should know how assessment is to be conducted.

POLITENESS STRATEGIES SHOWN IN FEEDBACK

Considering the importance of feedback in the learning process, special attention should be paid to politeness strategies when giving feedback. Politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearers' face, according to Brown and Levinson (1987). Usually people try to avoid making embarrassing comments that could mean loss of face for another, i.e. the respect and esteem that an individual has for himself or herself. Brown and Levinson describe four types of politeness strategies that sum up human politeness behaviour: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness and off-record indirect strategy.

Bald on-record strategies mean that the speaker makes no effort to minimize the threat to the face of his/her interlocutor. Positive politeness usually tries to minimize the distance between interlocutors by expressing friendliness and interest, whereas negative politeness implies that the speaker is trying to minimize the impact of the speaker's potentially threatening comment on his interlocutor. Off-record indirect strategies refer to when the speaker withdraws himself from making potentially threatening comments.

Politeness affects the words and expressions students choose when providing their peers with feedback. Calsamiglia (1995) indicates that linguistic politeness is based on recognizing that the interpersonal function of language is present on the basis of communicative behaviour.

KEY COMPETENCES

The school of tourism where this study was carried out has a teaching/learning approach focusing on competences in the context of the EHEA, and the key competences that the curriculum of the Degree in Tourism wishes to develop are based on this principle.

A competent person has the capacity of solving problems within his/her sphere of influence. Thus, according to Goñi (2005) whereas conceptual knowledge can become out of date, working on the students' competences is much more useful to integrate them in their personality and enable them to work autonomously.

There are different types of competences. In Catalonia (Spain), the region where this study was carried out, primary and secondary schools focus on a number of basic competences, whereas technical and university degrees are based on professional competences.

Basic or key competences foster the development of capacities, they are applicable to the curriculum contents, they are dynamic and cross-curricular. On the other hand, higher education seeks to foster professional competences, as well as those key competences which are necessary for lifelong learning according to the document developed by the European Commission (2004), such as communication in a foreign language, learning to learn, interpersonal competences, capacity of innovation and digital competence.

Digital competence refers to knowing how to use information and communication technologies (ICT). ICT tools like blogs are a good means to work on student competences and assessment skills. Through blogs student work is not just collected, edited and assessed, but also published for a real audience because of the public nature of blogs.

BLOGS

Blogs are a social software application that initially aimed at linking websites (Raith, 2009). These Web 2.0 tools became more accessible and user friendly thanks to the creation of blog hosters in 1999, which together with faster Internet broadband connections and affordable flat rates had a stimulating impact on the blogosphere.

From the perspective of integrative Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) blogs are a means to promote language use in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class not just by providing a technological support to the language learning process, but rather by allowing students to share and co-construct knowledge inside and outside the classroom as they become motivated, critical, and active while engaging in learning activities that in turn help them to develop their language skills more authentically (Chang, Pearman & Farha, 2012). In the case of tourism students, communication skills are considered a crucial aspect, as well as the ability to meet the ever changing technological requirements of the tourism and hospitality industry (Sigala, 2002). They therefore need to develop both their communicative and digital competences, which can be effectively fostered through integrated instruction.

Previous research on the effects of blog and face-to-face education in an English course for hospitality and tourism students has shown that this blended approach can be fruitful, as the learners' professional skills can be improved, students can benefit from autonomous and collaborative learning processes, they can take advantage of peer and teacher feedback provided through blogging, and they feel more comfortable as the possibility of losing face is reduced (Shih, 2012).

According to Campbell (2003), there are three types of blogs: the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog. A tutor blog is administrated by the teacher and is mainly used to provide learners with extra practice and resources. Learner blogs, on the other hand, are run by individual learners and are usually used to develop their writing skills. The class blog is the result of the collaborative work of a whole class and it can serve a number of different purposes. For instance, it can be a space where learners and teachers can post extra information, share videos, have a discussion or post their assignment.

For the purpose of this research, a class blog was used as a class assignment. The researchers posted videos of their presentations on the blog and students had to comment on them. Further details on the project are provided in the following section.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH SETTING

This research was carried out at Escola Universitària d'Hoteleria i Turisme CETT-UB (EUHT CETT-UB), a Catering and Tourism Management College forming part of the University of Barcelona and offering education and training to students wishing to work in different sectors of the tourism industry. The participants were a group of 16 students of the Degree in Tourism. The majority of the participants were 20-21 years old and this was the third year of their university studies for most of them.

English was a compulsory subject matter for one term at a level of B2 within the CEFR. The participants' level of English was reasonably homogeneous, as an initial placement test had been designed to ensure similar levels of competence.

In terms of assessment, the students could choose between sitting a final exam at the end of the term or doing continuous assessment, which involved carrying out a number of tasks. In the case of the group of students who took part in our research, one of these tasks consisted of undertaking a research project in groups and presenting it orally to the rest of the class, who had to assess their peers' performance. Thus, the mark the participants obtained for their project presentations resulted from combining the marks provided by both their teacher and their peers. In order to train the participants in terms of peer and self assessment, several awareness raising tasks had been devised prior to this, such as individual presentations that had been a springboard for discussing assessment criteria in the classroom.

As part of their assessment, most of the participants had to submit portfolios, seen as a collection of samples of the work they were carrying out throughout the term that supplied evidence of their learning and an opportunity to reflect on their progress critically. The students' portfolios comprised different types of artefacts, such as questionnaires, audio and video recordings, written reports, samples of class activities, etc. The self assessment and peer assessment sheets used for the individual oral presentations had been included in the participants' portfolios.

DATA COLLECTION

Two weeks before the end of the term the participants presented their research projects orally to the rest of the class using the support materials they wished. All the groups prepared PowerPoint slides and some groups also used DVD players. In turn, all the presentations were video recorded by one of the researchers. Each member of the group was supposed to speak for 5 to 10 minutes and every presenter was required to answer the questions that both the teacher and the audience asked at the end of each group's presentation.

The video recordings were uploaded on YouTube and then included in a weblog (http://englishcett.blogspot.com) so that the students could access it freely, watch their own performance and those of other students and analyze their strengths and their weaknesses.

The last two sessions of the course were carried out in the computer lab. During the first session the blog was presented to the participants. Half of the class was told to watch and analyze their presentations individually, filling in a self assessment report in writing. Meanwhile, the other half had to work in groups to watch and analyze another group's presentation and give feedback by writing at least two comments in the blog referring to the presentation's strengths and weaknesses. After completing these activities, the two halves of the class exchanged their tasks. Finally, the participants had to give their opinions about the experience by filling in a brief online questionnaire included in the blog.

During the second session, the participants were asked to read the comments provided by their peers in the blog and write a reply to their comments. They were also recommended to continue using the blog independently once the course had finished.

RESULTS

To carry out this study, a number of areas were identified in order to classify the students' feedback contributions and analyze them later. These areas cover a range of comments on the presentation itself, the presenters' performance and language aspects. The data processing procedures will be illustrated next with respect to each one of the initial research questions, including examples of the students' verbatim posts (in italics) as well as the researcher's own remarks.

FOCUS ON LEARNERS' FEEDBACK

Regarding the presentation itself, a number of subcategories were identified, which were related to previous work (e.g. *The project was very well prepared, we could see that they have worked a lot on it,*), the topic (e.g. *Interesting topic*), the support material (e.g. *Support materials they used were appropriate and useful*) and the structure (e.g. *Well structured presentation*).

Regarding the presenters, the subcategories which were found were related to pronunciation (e.g. *The pronunciation was very good*), professional skills (e.g. *They seemed quiet and professional*), discourse management (e.g. *All of them have explain their section very well and clearly*), analytical ability (e.g. *As well the conclusions were very well found.*), ability to synthesize (e.g. *put across their topic very clearly*) and audience motivation (e.g. *they have grown up more this interest with their performance*).

The last field identified, language aspects, included only comments related to vocabulary (e.g. *Good use of vocabulary*).

Each comment was assigned to one area; however, occasionally, some comments were related to more than one item such as: *They were able to put across their topic very clearly,* which was connected to two subcategories, in this case to "Discourse management" and to "Ability to synthesize".

As for the results gathered from data analysis it can be stated that students focused on a wider range of aspects when providing positive feedback.

They covered aspects of the presentation itself, as well as aspects of the presenters and language aspects. However, while providing negative feedback students mainly focused on the presentation itself rather than on the presenters' skills, and language aspects were overridden. Thus, the vast majority of comments referred to support materials. This is probably due to the fact that comments on support materials are the most "face-saving" item to give negative feedback on.

The main items students focused on during positive feedback were related to their peers' discourse management, the work done in order to prepare the presentation and the topic, whereas the language aspects of the students' discourse were barely mentioned. Students are more prone to comment on aspects that will help them develop their professional skills and be better communicators; the task goes beyond a language task.

FOCUS ON ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

In order to reply to the second research question, the feedback comments provided by the students on the blog were analyzed by putting them in relation with the self assessment and peer assessment sheets used to report on the students' oral presentations. Thus, each one of the aspects commented on the blog was related to the corresponding item in each section of the above-mentioned documents.

With respect to the procedure, it must be pointed out that the blog comments were accounted for in terms of general recurrence. Occasionally one comment, such as: *On the* *other hand we think that maybe the PowerPoint presentation was too long, maybe there were too many ideas included,* was included in relation with two different items. In this case, this comment was related to these two items: "Adequacy of the support materials" and "Discourse management: relevance, coherence and extent".

Another feature dealt with in the analysis had to do with the range of groups who provided the item-related blog comments. Different colours were used to indicate the groups who originated the comments to keep track of group variety.

Some of the blog comments referred specifically to the items, whereas in some other cases it was necessary to interpret them to match the items. An example of the former - *The Discourse was coherent* - can be compared to an example of the latter - *So sometimes you got lost in what they were saying.* Both comments were linked to the item: "Discourse management: relevance, coherence and extent".

Exceptionally, two different items referred to the same idea, as in the examples: "My classmates' interest in my presentation" (from the Self assessment report sheet) and "My interest in my classmates' presentation" (from the Peer assessment report sheet).

The question of fluency was related to pronunciation, as fluency is affected by the rhythm of speech. This is the case with the comment: *We think that fluency is an important factor.*

Finally, very few blog comments did not fit any of the items listed above. Such comments were grouped under the heading "Other comments", and the purpose of most of them was to thank the feedback providers for their feedback, followed by a couple of apologies for incorrect feedback giving procedures.

As a result of data processing, it can be observed that the vast majority of the blog comments provided by the students refer to the items on the Self assessment report sheet. This makes it possible to conclude that the blog comments reflect the work on oral assessment criteria which was carried out throughout the course. The students were familiar with most of the assessment criteria and most of them integrated them into their own approaches towards reflecting on the students' oral performance from a critical perspective. It can therefore be stated that self assessment and peer assessment enhanced the learners' analytical competence.

As for the most frequent blog comments in relation to the oral assessment report sheets, both in terms of general recurrence and group recurrence, the students' feedback refers to the following aspects: structure of the presentations, support materials, discourse management, and finally, pronunciation. These items coincide with some of the most frequent aspects identified by the researchers to answer the first research question of this study.

The structure of the presentation is somehow connected with discourse management, at least as far as coherence is concerned. Obviously, the students considered this was a relevant issue. On the other hand, all the groups used PowerPoint slides to support their presentations, and because of the visual impact of this tool, attention was paid to this aspect. Finally, pronunciation is usually a major concern for Spanish learners of English as a foreign language as it is an essential component of communicative competence which often interferes with their intelligibility in oral communication situations. Managing oral communication successfully is a must in the professional context of tourism.

After analyzing the data, it is quite striking to find out that all the assessment criteria are mentioned, except for the criterion: "Interactive communication: initiating & responding, hesitation and turn-taking". Now, the last few minutes of the students' oral presentations were devoted to asking questions and replying to them. This was a moment for relevant meaningful communication between the audience and the presenters - we must bear in mind that the students will be mostly engaged in oral interaction in their professional lives and they must prepare for it. The reason why this aspect is completely overlooked in their blog comments might be due to the fact that the last part of their presentations did not receive enough attention as they had already focused on other issues. This shows the need to make the students aware of the importance of oral interaction. It will be a matter for teachers to increase their opportunities to interact meaningfully - in and outside a classroom setting - so the learners can make the most of their communication resources effectively.

FOCUS ON POLITENESS

At this point, let us turn to our third research question and focus on how students expressed politeness in their feedback. Students' comments were classified into positive or negative to observe which kind of feedback was more abundant. After this classification, the comments were analyzed through discourse analysis to study the level of politeness. Maximizers, minimizers and other types of similar indicators were identified to carry out this analysis.

In this study, three types of politeness strategies as described by Brown and Levinson (1987) were identified: bald on record, negative and positive politeness.

With respect to bald on-record, the absence of indicators is the main characteristic. The lack of politeness in some students' feedback resulted in one group reacting negatively to another group's feedback. A good example is what happened when Group 3 provided the following comments: *Negatives things: They need fluency.*

In return, Group 6 replied: *Thank you for all the positive things that you believe we have. We thing that fluency is an important factor and we think that is necessary to do a good presentation, although we think our fluency was OK with the level we have.*

Regarding negative politeness, students used minimizers and softeners to reduce the threat. The indicators that were found in this study were: "a little", "sometimes" and "maybe".
As for positive politeness, the following indicators can be found in the students' comments:

- Expressions of flattery. They are expressions that are used to flatter the other speaker (e.g. *Congratulations, fantastic, great).*
- Amends and justification. They are used when the speaker excuses his/her interlocutor and justifies the interlocutor after having made a face-threatening comment about him/her (e.g. *Sometimes they read the screen but it's normal in this types of activities because you get nervous).*
- Accompanying expressions. These expressions are used to soften the face-threatening comment (e.g. *The only thing we think that can be improved is the fact that they were usually reading. But in general it is a great presentation. Congratulations!!! The three girls were fantastic!!).*
- Emphatic punctuation marks. Punctuation can also be used to emphasize a comment (e.g. *Congratulations!!! The three girls were fantastic!!).*

The students' comments were analyzed in accordance with the abovementioned indicators and were classified into positive and negative.

As a result of the data analysis, it becomes obvious that even though the three strategies of politeness were used, every group of students provided more positive than negative feedback. This is probably due to the fact that in order to establish a polite relationship with an interlocutor, it is better to minimize the acts that can potentially endanger the positive image of the interlocutor.

It has been mentioned that students gave negative feedback in three different ways. Perhaps strategies for giving negative feedback should be presented in class in order to prevent other students becoming offended or not taking the feedback well.

The lack of politeness in negative feedback usually corresponds to less proficient students who have problems expressing themselves in a foreign language. It is important for politeness to be worked on from all levels, especially when students are carrying out peer evaluation. Furthermore, politeness is an essential aspect of communicative competence in terms of socio-cultural adequacy, particularly for future professionals who will be dealing with customers in English as a foreign language. Customer care implies taking care of details when relating to clients and is a cross-curricular key competence that needs to be fostered among tourism students.

Finally, the participants were specifically asked through a questionnaire how they felt about watching their presentations. While 70% reported that it was interesting and helpful, 30% considered it was a helpful experience, and nobody believed it was not useful.

CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, this experience was very successful from the students' point of view, according to the results of the blog questionnaire. Moreover, the students' positive opinions were also recorded in some of their portfolios and they pointed out that it had been a motivating experience. In one of the students' own words: *"An improvement in the class was the "new technologies", because it is a great motivation for students, because in this way, the class becomes interesting and amusing and this is very important when students learn a language."*

On the other hand, in the researcher's view the experience was also satisfactory. The students seemed motivated indeed and the blog evidence shows that it was a good opportunity to work on their professional skills as well as their communicative competence. Therefore, the aims of the project were accomplished. These findings are consistent with previous research conducted by Shih (2012), in line with the aforementioned theoretical conceptions underpinning our project in terms of what constitutes a valid teaching/learning/assessment process that has a communicative approach through blogging.

Nevertheless, there were a number of drawbacks during the development of the project. Firstly, the time and energy devoted to its preparation was considerable, as some technical difficulties arose which required external guidance. Moreover, the blog sessions were scheduled for the last week of the course, which meant that the timing of the experience was not optimal and affected the students' attendance and involvement. In fact, despite having been encouraged to continue using the blog outside the classroom, nobody did. This was the main limitation of the study in terms of facilitating learners' autonomy.

For future learning experiences based on the use of this tool it would be a good idea to bear in mind two potentially limiting aspects: the timing and the technical requirements. It is advisable to use this tool gradually throughout the term in order to promote students' engagement and autonomy. As for technical requirements, it is important to take into account the resources that are necessary from the moment their performances are recorded to their broadcasting through the blog. During the class there might be some unforeseen technical difficulties, such as problems with the Internet connection. On the whole, however, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, as blogs are an excellent means to develop students' competences and enable them to take part in their own learning process.

Stemming from this small scale project, the blog as a learning and assessment tool has been used in subsequent academic years up to the present time for the benefit of other groups of learners. New blog materials are posted periodically and made accessible to the rest of EUHT CETT-UB students. We hope this paper contributes to show possible blog applications and make them extensive to the global educational community.

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