Direct action for improving the learning conditions of students in two core first-year courses. Course on descriptive English grammar

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Abstract

The primary goal of this project is to improve the learning conditions of students in two core courses in the first year of the degree programme in English Language and Literature, *English Language: Descriptive Grammar I* and *II*. In these courses, the students have to handle the grammar of a foreign language in a systematic, serious way for the first time, which proves difficult for them. In order to achieve this goal, study materials have been developed specifically for our students (level of difficulty, syllabus covered, comparison with native languages). This material has been compiled in two textbooks, in a varied collection of exercises (with differing levels of difficulty) and in an interactive website. All of this was accomplished with a working team with a great deal of cohesion and coordination, which has enabled us to achieve the main goal of the project.

General area of interest of this innovation

This innovation is part of the goal of improving learning conditions in order to increase the academic performance of students in two first-year core courses in the English Language and Literature degree programme. This has been accomplished using ICTs (the UAB's virtual campus and an interactive website), tools which also help to bolster students' independent learning.

1. Objectives

The primary goal of this project is to improve the learning conditions of students in English Language and Literature, specifically in the first cycle courses on descriptive grammar of the English language. These courses have a theoretical component which

explains the fundamental features of English grammar, especially its morphology and syntax, along with a practical component which, by using a variety of examples and different registers, lets students practice analysing English words and constructions.

Improving the learning conditions is achieved by creating specifically materials designed to be used on the virtual campus (VC), which were later compiled in two textbooks, and by designing an interactive website. By using these materials, the goals can be further specified as:

1. To foster student autonomy,
2. To increase the quality of the input for reviewing the concepts,
3. To foster the acquisition of both transversal skills and skills that are specific to the field.
   a) Transversals skills:
     · Learning autonomously
     · Writing answers to specific questions in clear, orderly fashion
     · Finding examples from abstract concepts
     · Expressing oneself in English properly
   b) Specific skills related to the project:
     · Knowing how to find examples of linguistic concepts in English
     · Recognising and analysing flexive and derivative processes in English words
     · Recognising and illustrating different types of verbs
     · Recognising and analysing the different types of syntagma that form part of the English sentence, coordinated clauses and subordinated clauses.

2. Description of the project

This project focuses on two first-year core courses:
  · English Language: Descriptive Grammar I.
  · English Language: Descriptive Grammar II.

The courses have three components: theoretical teacher-led classes three hours a week, practical classes held two hours every two weeks, and integrated (virtual) tutorials. The syllabus covers the fundamental features of English grammar, especially its morphology and syntax, and practices are given on analysing words and constructions in English using a variety of examples.

The project consists of improving the learning conditions of the students in these courses in order to improve their academic performance and autonomy. This is accomplished using ICTs (the VC and developing an interactive website). First of all, we should explain how the VC is used in the courses. Uploading the contents and exercises on the different subjects onto the VC helped make the practices and classes much more interesting and fluid for students, as they have access to the information that will be dealt with in the classroom. For each topic, summaries were developed that contain the

main points to be examined, as well as blank spaces that students have to fill in and complete as the professor delivers the contents. The use of this material has meant an increase in the amount of content covered, and has also made it possible to increase the number of practices and exercises done in class. The exercises for the practical classes were also uploaded onto the VC, and students always attend classes having already reviewed the exercises. Some of them are done in the class itself, while students will have to resolve others beforehand. Apart from uploading the teaching materials onto the VC, we have also used the calendar regularly in order to follow up daily on the contents and homework. This has conferred a great deal of cohesion on the courses and has meant that students were guided at all times.

Other tools in the VC used frequently were turning in homework and the virtual forum. Turning in homework was especially useful for the integrated tutorials. Three integrated tutorials are scheduled throughout the term and uploaded onto the VC, and students have to resolve them at home. Afterward, they turn them into the teacher using this tool. In the process of the integrated tutorials, the VC forum has been activated so that students have always been able to comment on issues relevant to the integrated tutorial and the course in general.

In the past, one of the weak points of the courses involved in this project was many students' need to do more exercises and practice the contents covered in class more independently. This is the aspect that is even much more important in a degree programme in a foreign language, such as the one we are concerned with. In order to improve this point, we worked on developing an interactive website with useful links, original study materials and self-correcting exercises (http://antalya.uab.es/english-descriptive-grammar). However, the goal was not independent learning but a combination of this plus classroom learning, as independent learning is a complement to what is done in class. In order to develop this material, we had the aid of a computer specialist and have had to coordinate and integrate the computer and language aspects. The resulting exercises and all the links ended up being extremely useful for the students. The use of this website has enabled students to work more autonomously. This latter point, autonomy, is one of the skills that has to be worked on the most with first-year students, and the results were very positive.

Within the efforts by the group, another point worth highlighting is the two textbooks that were written by the team and then published by the Publications Service of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. They include the contents of the courses and a variety of exercises with an answer key. Both volumes reflect the work performed by the team during the past few years. In order to write them, we were always guided by students' needs and what we had observed throughout the years in which we had taught these courses. Therefore, we can state that both publications perfectly fit the needs and characteristics of the students of these courses and are therefore an indispensable tool in their education. Furthermore, they filled the gap in the literature on morphology and syntax from the descriptive standpoint, and are appropriate to the level and characteristics of our

students. They are as a complement to the VC and the interactive website, and they provide homogeneity to the entire project. All together, we have managed to create a more stimulating and effective learning environment for students.

3. Methodology

With regard to the actions, means and resources used to carry out this project, we should first mention the teamwork methodology used in drawing up the teaching materials, which includes the professors' class notes, the dossiers for students and the exercises. Secondly, hiring support staff in English and IT was an essential factor in achieving our goals.

First of all, then, we should mention that coordinated teamwork was one of the fundamental aspects of this project. The process of developing the material was as follows. The teaching team, made up of four professors from the Department of English and German Languages and Literatures at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona met for the first time in order to divvy up the topics according to each member's specialisation so that each was responsible for a series of topics. The meetings of the teaching team were led by the project leader, who was also in charge of centralising all the information and material. Then the professor in charge of each topic wrote a master document and prepared the student dossiers and exercises with the corresponding answer keys. All of this was sent to the other group members, who had a few weeks to forward comments. Afterwards, at the second meeting, changes in both the format and content of the material were agreed upon, criteria were discussed and the definitive versions were drawn up. Finally, the dossiers and exercises were turned into pdf files and made available to students through the VC and the interactive website. In short, the coordinated, constant efforts of the team, as well as the harmony among the members, enabled us to draw up cohesive original materials that fit in with the specific needs of the students of this course.

With regard to the materials developed, we should mention that we considered it essential to design our own materials for two reasons: first, the content of the course focuses on morphology and syntax of English, and there are no textbooks at the right level that cover this subject and only this subject. Secondly, the vast majority of students in the course are bilingual (Spanish-Catalan) and come from the same educational system, and this should be borne in mind when preparing the material: first, we were able to use the knowledge they already had, and secondly we could easily draw comparisons with the languages that the students already knew. These factors were taken into account systematically when preparing all the material.

The design of the dossiers was an important part of the innovation process because our goal was to prevent students from having to spend a great deal of time in class copying long lists of examples, and this way there was more class time to spend on further explanations. By the same token, if we included all the information, the students might

not pay attention in class. Therefore, we had to find a balance between either extreme, and avoid being repetitive. As a result, in some of the topics, there are primarily examples in the dossiers, while on others there are mainly explanations. With regard to the exercises to be corrected in class, they were drawn up with differing levels of difficulty. All the students had to master the same knowledge by the end of the course, but they started with very homogeneous levels of English. Therefore, we had to provide the suitable materials in order to handle this diversity. These exercises were mainly corrected in class in the practice sessions held every two weeks.

The notes developed by the teaching team served as the foundation of both textbooks published by the UAB's Publications Service. Once again, the coordinated teamwork following the methodology set forth above was crucial for successfully adapting the material to the printed publication. The system of meetings and revisions of the material that was to appear in these books was similar to the process of creating the teaching materials for the course.

4. Results

After the efforts made by the team, the results show that the goals set of improving the two courses *English Language: Descriptive Grammar I and II* were achieved. Below we outline how we achieved the basic goals of improving the learning conditions of students in these courses in order to increase their academic performance and autonomy.

The first goal, which consisted of improving students' learning conditions, was achieved given the fact that the learning conditions were adapted to the new technologies: a virtual facet was added to a traditional teacher-led class, which meant adapting the university system to ICTs (VC and interactive website), which in turn facilitated students' overall learning. Uploading teaching materials (contents and exercises) onto the VC meant much more interesting classes and an increase in the contents covered and practices done in class. The periodic use of the virtual calendar also gave the course a great deal of cohesion; the activation of the forum enabled many students to discuss issues that there was no time to discuss in class; and the use of the file delivery system enabled the integrated tutorials to be held online.

The second goal, to foster and improve students' autonomy, was also achieved: students made extensive use of the VC, and more limited use of the http://antalya.uab.es /english-descriptive-grammar/ website. The students have used the original study materials and the links on the website. In this way, then, in addition to following the class through the classroom sessions, they were also able to work independently and at their own pace, with the chance to work with original material designed exclusively to meet their needs. The use of the self-correcting exercises enabled students to independently ensure that they had assimilated many of the contents covered in class. In short, these exercises encouraged and fostered a blend of classroom and independent learning.

The goal of increasing students' academic performance was also largely met. The academic performance of the students in these two courses in academic years 2004-05, 2005-06 and 2006-07 improved noticeably. This can be seen in the information from the UAB's OPQ [Planning and Quality Assurance Office], as well as in the responses to the SEEQ satisfaction surveys that students were given at the end of each term. The results showed that the students were highly satisfied with the courses, they felt that they had learned, and they believed that the VC and the website were useful for learning more autonomously. They also claimed that the use of the self-correcting exercises helped them to work independently.

The goal of preparing materials to cover the needs of the students in these courses was also achieved. In this sense, we only have to recall the gap in the linguistic literature for textbooks on morphology and syntax from the descriptive standing that also offer points of comparison between English and Spanish/Catalan.

5. Conclusions

The books, exercises and website developed as part of this project were used for two academic years with a high degree of satisfaction by both the teachers and the students. First of all, the students liked having a textbook (especially one designed specifically for their needs) because it freed them up to take notes in class and allows them to participate more. The professors were also satisfied with the books because they had more class time for discussions and practices. Secondly, the exercises (varied and with differing degrees of difficult) were also useful, both those used in the classroom and those that the students themselves corrected with the answer keys provided on the VC.

With regard to student autonomy, further autonomy was achieved with both the textbook and the extensive use of the VC by both students and professors. This is one of the most highly rated aspects of the class for the students in the satisfaction surveys, especially in the last academic year of this experiment, when the VC had improved substantially.

We should also mention that the existence of this material (both the textbooks and exercises) designed specifically for our students makes it easier to rotate the professors of this first-year course.

Generally speaking, the level of satisfaction was so high that some of the professors have transferred the same working system used in this team to develop materials for other courses as well.

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Interesting links

- Website of the project: http://www.learningcircuits.org/2003/jul2003/rossett.htm [2008]
- http://www.learningcircuits.org/2002/aug2002/valiathan.html [2008]
- http://www-ice.upc.es/pro_accio/seeq/presentacio.htm [2008]

Keywords

Student autonomy, improving learning conditions, blended learning, ICT, grammar, English language

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Supplementary materials on the CD-ROM

Demonstration of the offline version of the *ENGLISH DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR* website: Virtual tour of different individual learning exercises.

Project leader

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Presentation of the working group

The working group is made up of four professors who have taught the aforementioned courses in recent years. All four have also been involved in a variety of key aspects of this project: expert use of the VC and ICTs in general, coordinating teaching teams of a variety of courses, and drawing up and processing student satisfaction surveys designed specifically for the courses in the English Language and Literature degree programme. They have all demonstrated their interest in teaching innovation and the use of ICTs in higher education.

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