Acquisition of English for Vocational Purposes through Active Learning Approaches with ICT

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ABSTRACT: *The move from a teaching-centered model to a learning-centered approach has meant a great educational challenge in the last decades. This methodological renewal, based on collaborative and active learning strategies, has led to new educational paradigms that place the student at the core of the learning process. Combined with other teaching approaches such as a flipped classroom, game-based or collaborative learning, Problem and Project-Based Learning (PBL) promote the development of competences and enhances students' autonomy.*
In this paper we describe how the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) is being used to support the development of learning scenarios for language and culture acquisition in non-formal educational settings in the field of English for Vocational Purposes (EOP). At the end of the project, feedback from students was collected to bring out the students' opinion on the implementation of the PBL approach to help develop their language competence in professional contexts.
KEYWORDS: *English for Vocational Purposes, Student-centered learning, ICT, project-based learning.*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Technology and the world of economic crisis have facilitated the appearance of novel demands in the labor market, emphasizing the acquisition of new skills. Work has become something that can be looked for and offered on a global scale, making it necessary to update knowledge and master newer competences, such as the development of interpersonal skills, communication strategies and the acquisition of foreign languages as a basic skill to get a job and be mobile in a globalized market (Commission of the European Communities, 2002; Castiglione & Longman, 2008; Rico et al 2019). Likewise, new educational settings based on ICT and e-learning programs have pushed many non-formal institutions to provide occupational and professional training to an increasing workforce under the umbrella of life-long learning (Rico et al 2019). Supporting a plethora of training chances and methodological perspectives, ICT mediated constructivist approaches enable students to be better trained in real life tasks for the professional market, supporting decision taking abilities, autonomy and teaching critical thinking skills (Ng'ambi, & Johnston, 2006).

Apart from meeting users' online demands, such educational paradigms have also changed traditional, top-down class dynamics into more collaborative learning environments. One of the teaching proposals that has grown popular as a model for this collaborative learning environment is Problem Based Learning (Brabazon et al, 2012), with proven results in terms of developing learning, competences and skills (Bender, 2012) through a progressive sequence of learning objectives that include identification of a problem or need, group problem solving and reflective steps. Furthermore, an approach, Project Based Learning, in which students actively explore and collaborate in real-world problems to respond to authentic situations over an extended period of time, fosters the learning process, engages students, and allows for critical thinking (figure 1).

Figure 1. Project-Based Learning Scheme

Though there are plenty of learning management systems (LMS) for this purpose, a well-known alternative is Moodle, a modular platform which can be customized and extended through external modules which aims to adapt the online environment to users' educational needs (Agudo et al, 2015).

In this sense, there exists the possibility of linking or using external tools for PBL or active learning initiatives within the potential of the Moodle platform for e-learning. Modules such as PBLTool and Techproject have been specifically designed for the development of projects collaboratively.

The focus of these activities shifts from the teachers to the learners, thus paving the way to cooperative, collaborative learning, where the students work together in groups or in pairs as per the demands of the task, making it easier for students to understand the lesson since they are actively involved in the learning (Ritz, 2014).

II. CONTEXTUALIZATION & AIMS

The need of acquiring linguistic competences in professional settings has been discussed in studies devoted to teaching languages for occupational purposes (Tajuddin, 2015; Peters &Fernández, 2013). Rico et al (2019) claim that workers have specific and particular communicative needs in their daily work routines, and that these wants and lacks can be successfully accomplished under appropriate training conditions. Lam, Cheng & Kong (2014) find that nowadays workplaces have turned mobile, demanding better communication and interaction skills from users. According to these authors, communicative inefficacy can also lead to productivity loss. Furthermore, finding solutions to improve youngsters (population who cannot find a job when they finish university careers or vocational school training programs) and workers employability, those who have lost their jobs due to the economic crisis is set as a priority in most government employability agenda. This search for a job demands knowledge and competence update is on which our proposal is based. The lack of qualifications, especially felt in some emerging professions and in many cases related to language demands, has its origin in factors such as globalization, population aging, language barriers, the shortage of ICT expertise and a solid policy on professional competence certification.

In the light of this context, our study is focused on the application of active methodologies through PBL supported by ICT for the acquisition of language and culture competences in the field of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), specifically English for shop /sales assistants. The study is twofold (1) the design and completion of collaborative and active learning tasks through two Moodle external PBL tools - PBLTool and Techproject- have been specifically designed for the development of projects collaboratively and (2) the feedback from students to bring out the students' opinion on the effectiveness of the PBL approaches to help develop language skills (B1 level content according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning –CEFR-) as a previous training to the expositions to real world situations.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The participants were adult learners taking continuing education courses in non-formal teaching institutions around Spain. The course was offered by private initiatives to increase employability in the commerce sector by means of specific training, in our case, English for Specific Purposes (B1 English for shop /sale assistants training in English as a foreign language).

The total number of students enrolled in the course is 178 -40 groups with 3-5 students in each one- were involved in the study, a reasonable positive figure which may be caused by the increasing demand of English competence in this sector.

3.2 Objective and Procedure

As a final task of the 60 hours course whose content, covering all the language skills and linguistic components applied to the EOP proposal, was delivered through the Moodle platform, students were asked to build a website, blog or social network on the theme 'promote your local business abroad'. Based on the given theme, the students got the approval of their ideas from the instructor and proceeded with their projects. They were required to apply their knowledge of vocabulary, writing, speaking strategies and the design and analysis of multimedia resources in the design of the online promotional artifacts. The course syllabus was organized as follows:

1. Shop /sales assistant in a global market. Expectations and failures.   2 hours
2. The language of shopping. Main contexts.   10 hours
3. The language of tittles, slogans and headlines. Keep them clear, simple and catchy. 8 hours
4. Writing main ideas.   5 hours
5. Developing digital competences: develop your website or blog.   7 hours
6. Techniques to make text easily readable (fonts, colour, paragraphs, headlines, etc.). 3 hours
7. The oral language of advertising: persuading, advice and testimony.   10 hours

| 8. | Non-verbal language. | 3 hours |
| 9. | Final Project: promote your local business abroad through ICT. | 12 hours |

## IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION: ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION THROUGH MOODLE PBL TOOLS

Objective 1. - Design of collaborative tasks through active learning and Moodle PBL Tools

In the EFL- English as a Foreign Language- or in our case in the EOP classroom, project based learning offers flexibility when planning content and language objectives, creating opportunities for interaction and the inclusion of a variety of learning skills and competences.

In the specific case of language learning, PBL is characterized by the following principles:
- Builds on previous knowledge.
- Integrates all the language skills
- Incorporates collaborative team work, problem solving, negotiating and other interpersonal skills;
- Requires learners to engage in autonomous work.
- Trains students to fulfill real tasks
- Engages learners in acquiring new information that is important to them;
- Promotes self-evaluation and peer evaluation

Figure 2. Project Objectives
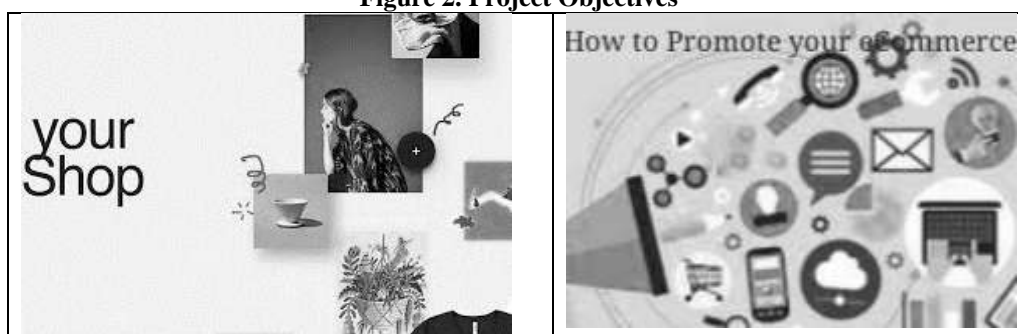
PBLtool is a management block which is integrated with a group forum and Moodle chat and whose main function is to allow teachers and students to plan their activities together (figure 3). It allows participants to define learning goals and tasks, check assignments, progression, and group management.

**Figure 3. Diagram of project management tool**
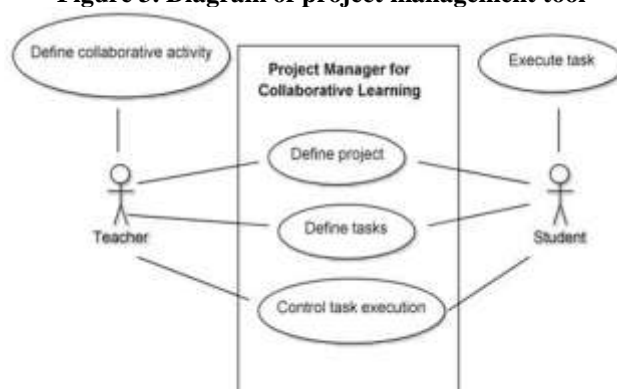
In our case, groups of 3-5 students (project teams), researched, analyzed, answered and debated the same questions according to the project goal "strategies to promote your local business abroad", organized in a set of forums (and topics) following the proposed methodology. For each group of questions (forum items) the team also had a wiki at their disposal to make a synthesis of the consensus obtained in all the previous discussion phases (the analysis).

The forum items were all related to the course content and are summarized as follows:
- Main expectation and challenges to internationalize yourbusinesses
- How to write a catchy title and headlines for blogs, websites or social networks
- Tips to write effective slogans
- Writing main ideas from a given passage. Paragraphing

- Developing digital competences
- How to improve an online artifact readability
- Persuading and advising others
- The language of testimony
- The role of non-verbal language (kinesics, touching and haptic).

Figure 4. Proposed diagram for the final task
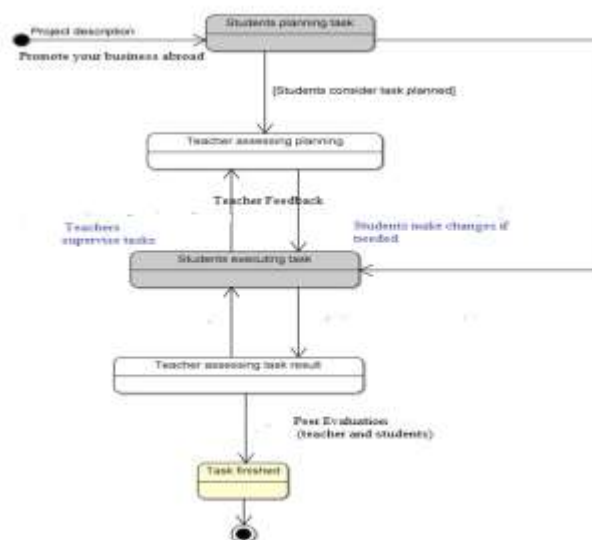
The intended "learning process" is that each group can discuss and solve the same set of challenges and can work cooperatively to negotiate toward a common outcome. Teachers' supervision throughout the project enhances the successful completion of the proposal.
Techproject

Likewise, the plug in Techproject is a pedagogical tool for project learning that can be used either for real project handling or just for teaching with groups of students who are involved in a project (figure 5).

Figure 5. Techproject

In our proposal, studentsplay the role of a shop/sale assistant who needs to develop and create an advertising campaign in English for his/her shop established in one of the target language countries of the world. Students should decide on an appropriate name, create an address, discuss about the layout of the website, blog or social network, promotional strategies which should be consistent with examples they have previously analyzed on-line from authentic shops of the target culture.

Figure 6: Blog /websites designed by course participants
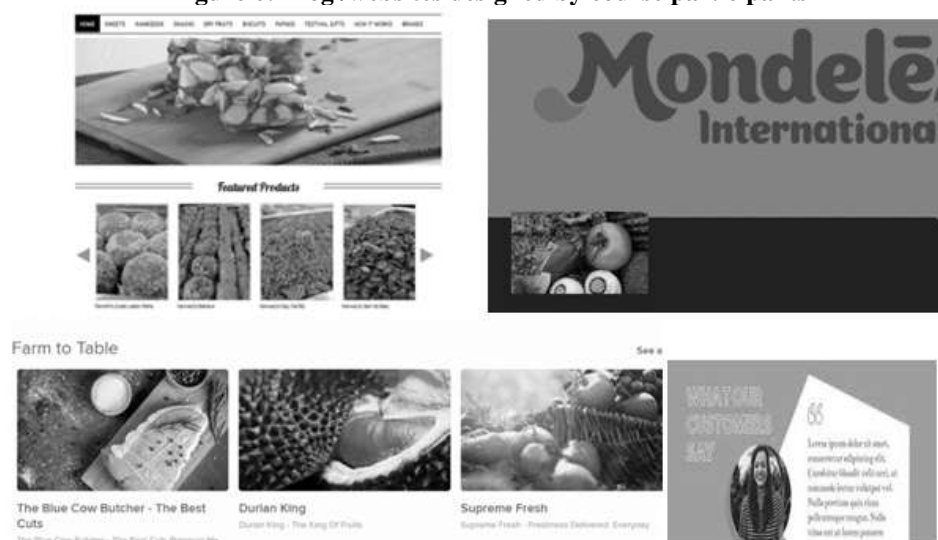
Also, the students are asked to say and record at least 15 sentences presented in a video to (1) persuade potential customers to visit their shop and (2) say positive testimonials to make them trust their products and sales.

In both cases of our PBL approach, the students are involved in collaborative learning, but at the same time they get to learn on their own. During this self-directed learning, the students work together in groups, discussing, reviewing, comparing, etc., and developing and utilizing their problem solving skills.

Objective2. Feedback from Students

At the end of the project, feedback was collected from the students on their experience and feedback on the implementation of the PBL based-teaching.

In general terms, all participants have a positive opinion about the course content and the design structure, which justifies the reasonable high percentage of students who finished successfully the 60 hour course, 84% (149 students) as a whole.

Focusing our attention on the students´ opinion about the main features which could make a training course like that an appealing teaching/learning proposal. Over a five point Likert scale, table 1 summarizes the mean values about the 6 variables under study: course content, interactivity, collaboration, autonomy, novelty of the PBL tools and skill development.

Students 'opinion about course variables	Mean
1. Content	4.0750
2. Task interactivity	4.1045
3. Collaboration	3.9193
4. Autonomous learning	4.0625
5. Novelty of the Course format and PBL tools	4.4725
6. Skills development	3.7595

Table 1: Mean values of main variables

From the results, the novelty of the course and the PBL tools (PBLtool and techproject), which enabled participants to coordinate, interact and discuss the forum topics without time and place restrictions, shows the highest percentage, 4.4 over a 5 point scale. Course content, interactivity and the possibility to work autonomously present positive results as well (above 4 points). The implicit collaboration among participants and the perception they have about the language development as a whole show an average percentage of 3.8 points as shown in table 1.

To get further insights about how the proposal had helped them to get the objective – promoting their shops and products abroad in English-, a semi-structure questionnaire was delivered online. Around 55% of those who had finished the course - 80 students from a total of 149 participants- answered the google form questionnaire.

Through the analysis, the students stated that through the project not only had their vocabulary, writing and speaking skills improved, but also their reading abilities, their digital literacy competence and their promotional strategies. They also claimed that team work through the PBL tools enhanced the implicit collaboration, teaching them to share ideas and discuss to find the best solution (Muñoz Campos, 2017).

The findings from this study, as well as from a large number of studies already done in this area (Ritz, 2014), reveal that implementation of PBL activities has advantage of allowing the students to integrate both language skills and content knowledge to complete their projects. Interest and motivation were gained as well, since students realized how they could apply their knowledge into real world situations. As suggested by Wilkerson &Feletti (1989), PBL approaches are primarily student-centred and enable students to take up full responsibility for his or her learning and the increase of motivation which in turn has a positive effect on their learning.

V. CONCLUSION

The study describes the approach of using e-Learning techniques to support PBL, based on its functionality to develop competences and promote collaboration and self -learning. Within our context of EOP teaching, students' satisfaction are measured in terms of the design of collaborative tasks addressing the necessary skills students must acquire for an effective communication in professional contexts.

Student-centred and problem-based approaches for language acquisition allow instructors to become more of a facilitator and encourage students to explore, analyze and make reasoned decisions by working on quasi-real simulations collaboratively. Learning is enhanced through the completion of a set of stages (from the identification of the problem and setting the objectives to how to apply the knowledge and to reflect it on the final outcomes). The adoption of an online constructivist approach supported through ICT tools like PBLTool and Techproject allows the instructor to introduce active scenarios for the development of specific skills, decision making, and teamwork, while promoting the construction of new competences and integrating learning with real life dynamics, where learners learn to collaborate, develop knowledge and exchange ideas.

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