ICT-SUSTOUR and MARKETOUR: Two second language acquisition projects through a virtual learning environment

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Abstract
We are presenting a methodological approach that aims to increase students’ motivation by asking them to develop tasks based on professional settings. In order to meet this objective a collaborative methodology was designed and applied to two multidisciplinary projects: MARKETOUR and ICT-SUSTOUR. Both projects made students face real workplace situations by working collaboratively through the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE) and other information technology (IT) tools at a national and international level.

The methodology proposed offers students a professional scenario in which they are required to develop purpose-based tasks using IT. A virtual learning environment was devised for each project in order to create a real learning community and a website was designed in ICT-SUSTOUR for sharing information.

The development of both projects encouraged students to improve their communication skills in English as well as their IT skills with the ultimate objective of increasing their motivation to learn English for specific purposes (ESP).

1. Introduction

Our experience teaching English for specific purposes (ESP), in business and tourism studies, has shown us that involving students in real and professional settings is highly motivating and effective for learning a second language. In this paper, we are presenting a methodological approach that aims to increase students’ motivation by developing tasks based on professional settings. We involved students of ESP in two information technology (IT) projects based on working collaboratively. In this way we trained students in two skills, teamwork and the ability to use IT tools, both of which are essential nowadays to develop a successful career.

Researchers have highlighted the importance of collaborative learning as a means to prepare students for their professional life; some outstanding contributions to this approach include Gokhale’s (1995) who explains how companies place increasing emphasis on teamwork within the workforce. In this sense Ngeow (1998), states that collaborative learning should prepare learners for the kind of teamwork that will be required of them in their future workplaces. Stacey (1999), following Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, and Perry (1992), also supports the idea that tasks must be situated in a real-life context so that the student thinks as an expert would in the field. Other benefits students can obtain from collaborative work are summarised by Wiersema (2000) as follows: students learn by themselves, learn more, learn interpersonal/social skills, feel more dedicated and confident, enjoy the class, etc. Consequently, by making students work collaboratively we are encouraging autonomy and social interaction, which are two key skills currently required by companies.

In relation to the role of IT tools in the research we are presenting, the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE), the Internet and a videoconference system helped us create real virtual settings for the projects to be developed by students and enrich the courses as Cooper (2004) claims. This author finds that the abovementioned enrichment stems from the mixture of methods which allows lecturers and students to share instantly and easily all kinds of resources, documentation and activities. In addition, VLEs permit both the personalisation of teaching and an approach to the conditions of the world of work (Fowles, 1999). Furthermore, by making use of a VLE, we created a small learning community in which our students had the opportunity to interact and share specific and significative knowledge. In this sense we follow Bernard, De Rubalcava, and St-Pierre (2000) who suggest that the learner must feel part of a learning community for collaborative online learning to take place successfully.

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The methodology used in the projects we are presenting in this paper focuses teaching on learners, involving them in situations they will be likely to face in the future. Using Dillenbourg’s terminology (2000) our students are not only “active”, but also “actors”.

The convenience of using collaborative work in connection with IT tools has been widely supported by authors such as Bianchetti, Bocconi, and Sarti (2000) or Cobb, Neale, and Reynolds (1998) who found that with this methodological approach student’s motivation and participation increased. As explained by Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff (1995), this panorama represents a new paradigm for teaching and learning and provides unique opportunities to support active, collaborative learning. Furthermore Alavi, Yoo, and Vogel (1997), claim that working collaboratively through VLEs can open new possibilities for establishing partnerships with practitioners in various fields and at different education levels.

We are presenting two projects, MARKETOUR and ICT-SUSTOUR which were designed with the objective of making students feel they were immersed in the real workplace. On the one hand, MARKETOUR embraces the areas of vocational training in marketing and University studies in tourism. In both areas, students had to create and develop the promotion of a tourist product as part of their English course syllabus. Consequently, the project was presented as a case study in which marketing and tourism students represented two companies in their respective sectors. Students, playing the role of professionals, had to negotiate and collaborate in the design of an advertising campaign including the recording of a commercial (DVD format) to promote a tourist product.

On the other hand, the ICT-SUSTOUR project (funded by the Socrates Programme – Minerva Action) involved university students, one company dealing with environmental issues and an association of B&B (Bed and Breakfast) managers, all of them of different nationalities and languages (Spanish, Finnish, Portuguese and Romanian). Students had in common sustainability and ESP assignments. The project was divided into two stages: during the first stage students were required to analyse sustainability problems of a particular tourist area of their choice in national groups. Then, during the second stage, students in international groups shared suggestions through the VLE with their international partners to overcome those handicaps. The communication among students was exclusively in English and, therefore, English lecturers were involved in this stage. In order to share the findings obtained in the first stage, students had to write a report and upload it to the VLE, prepare an oral presentation, and take part in an international videoconference.

2. Methodological proposal

In order to explain the methodology followed to develop these two projects, we will take into account factors such as the IT tools used, time allocated, the processes and criteria used to form the groups and schedule followed to organise the projects. Data provided in this section are taken from our own class notes to the ICT-SUSTOUR methodological guide published as part of this European project (Alberola et al., 2006).

2.1. IT tools

The starting point which made it possible to carry out these pedagogical experiences was, in part, a suitable computer infrastructure in our Institution. Florida Universitaria has a large number of computers interconnected as a network, with Internet access and some computer programmes necessary for the project development. In addition, the European Union funding permitted the design of a website and a VLE by Florida’s computing staff for the ICT-SUSTOUR project.

Fig. 1. ICT-SUSTOUR website main page.
The website, exclusively designed for the ICT-SUSTOUR project, had two purposes: to inform and to promote. Computer experts divided the portal into three different sections as you can see in Fig. 1. On the left side of the project homepage there was some general information about the project (a brief description, its objectives, activities and documents, as well as information about the partners involved in the project and the output obtained). On this site there was also information about the transnational meetings held during the project. This section was mainly aimed at visitors who were not directly involved in the project but who were interested in its organisation.

The central and right hand sections of the portal were devoted to the participants. The central section offered the latest news on the project development. This information was frequently updated so that all the members taking part in the project knew what each institution was working on at the different stages. Finally, on the right hand side participants could access the VLE for real online communication by introducing their passwords.

The VLE designed for each project had different tools which enabled the development of the tasks required. These tools were: an uploading/downloading area, a forum, a warning tool and an enrolment file.

As Fig. 2 shows, number 1 is the icon which gives access to the uploading/downloading area of the VLE. This area was organised in files and both students and lecturers had access to them being able to download the documents required for each online activity. In addition, it was possible for students to create their own files to upload the information required by lecturers. All the files were available throughout the whole project period so that students could make use of the documents as frequently as necessary. In both projects, lecturers used this tool to upload all the documents which were necessary for the desirable development of the project (guidelines, objectives, outcome, assessment, activities, deadlines and feedback questionnaire).

Number 2 indicates the access to the forum. This tool permitted asynchronous communication between lecturers and students and among students themselves. By means of this tool students and lecturers could post messages establishing a public or private conversation thread in connection with topics of interest. In the private conversations, which could be initiated either by lecturers or students, the conversation thread was only seen by a selected student or groups of students, which permitted a more personalised attention to students according to their needs. However, in public conversations the conversation thread was seen by all students. In fact, students could post their message freely, creating a debate forum. It is important to point out that there was a warning tool linked to students’ personal e-mail accounts which made it possible for participants to read messages posted in the forum without having to access the VLE. Consequently, the communication among the participants in the projects was easier and more fluent.

Finally, number 3 indicates the “enrolment file” which permitted the access to some personal details about the participants in the projects (name and surname, e-mail address and a picture). This was an important tool because by clicking on this icon a student could know better the person working with him/her in the project, making communication more personal.

2.2. Timing

The class time allocated for the development of the projects was between 8 and 10 h. The rest of the work was undertaken outside class making an estimated total of 15 h per group in the MARKETOUR project and 25 h per group in the ICT-SUSTOUR project.
2.3. Group formation

As regards group formation in the MARKETOUR project, marketing and tourism students were divided into groups using both self-selection and criterion-based selection. First, students organised themselves into groups formed within their own class (self-selection). However, as each marketing group had to collaborate with a tourism group, interdisciplinary groups were paired by lecturers applying the homogeneous English level as the main criterion. We worked with a total of 54 students, 34 marketing students and 20 tourism students. In the end, eight groups participated in the project.

As for the ICT-SUSTOUR project, students worked in national groups during the first stage of the project which were formed by the sustainability lecturers in each country according to their own criteria. At a second stage those national groups were reorganised in four international groups (with an average of eighteen students per group) without applying any specific criterion. Seventy-one people took part in the project altogether, nineteen of them studied at our institution.

2.4. Project schedule

A project schedule was devised for both projects following the same structure as shown in Fig. 3: an introductory session, a set of inside-class work sessions as well as some outside-class work sessions plus an oral presentation at the end of the project.

In the introductory session lecturers presented the projects to students and defined the conditions of cooperative learning. They explained the project guidelines which had previously been uploaded to Florida campus and provided information about the assessment criteria to be followed. During this first session students were trained in the use of the VLE as they did not have any previous experience. Finally, groups were formed in this session.

During the in-class sessions, students worked on the communicative side of the projects by exchanging messages through the forum in the VLE. On the one hand, in the MARKETOUR project, marketing students initiated the virtual communication by offering their services as an advertising agency. From this point students’ participation took place in turns emulating real negotiations between two companies culminating in a cooperative agreement. On the other hand, in the ICT-SUSTOUR project, students – in their international groups – posted a message to the forum following lecturers’ guides: students introduced themselves, described the tourist area, wrote a list of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SESSIONS</th>
<th>MARKETING STUDENTS</th>
<th>TOURISM STUDENTS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Project presented by teacher</td>
<td>Project presented by teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class work session 1</td>
<td>First contact: Students write a promotional e-mail to tourism students. In this e-mail they offer information about their company: name, services offered and reason for writing.</td>
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<td>(17-23 January)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-class work session 2</td>
<td>Students need to design an advertising campaign to launch a new product. They receive an e-mail from an advertising agency offering their services. Students accept the services and draft the product description.</td>
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<td>(24-25 January)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-class work session 3</td>
<td>Students reply accepting collaboration and ask for a detailed description of the product or service.</td>
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<td>(26-30 January)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-class work session 4</td>
<td>Students send the detailed description of the product or service. They ask for some information about the different possibilities for the advertising campaign to promote their product or service.</td>
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<td>(31 Jan-1 Febr)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-class work session 5</td>
<td>Students work on the advertising campaign and provide information about the target market and different advertising instruments to be used. However, they strongly recommend a promotional DVD as the core of the campaign. Students already propose the basic visuals and contents of the DVD.</td>
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<td>(2-6 February)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-class work session 6</td>
<td>Students accept the suggestion of a promotional DVD as core of campaign and propose changes and alternatives. They also suggest a collaborative work plan in which their marketing department will cooperate in the production of the DVD.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7-8 February)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outside-class work (9-27 February)</td>
<td>Students share ideas through the virtual campus and work on the promotional DVD.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-class Presentation (28th Febe &amp; 4th Mar)</td>
<td>Students give a presentation of the promotional DVD in their respective English classes. Presentation is recorded and uploaded.</td>
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Fig. 3. MARKETOUR project schedule.
environmental problems identified and asked for some advice to overcome those handicaps. Then, the same international groups posted the list of possible solutions to the sustainability problems of each area on the forum.

During these sessions lecturers in both projects monitored messages to see how teams were working and helped students with technical or linguistic problems. It is important to highlight that meeting the established deadlines was essential. However, the time allocated for the accomplishment of each activity allowed students not only to develop the required task, but also to organise further communication amongst the more enthusiastic and motivated participants.

When working outside-class time, in both projects, students devoted themselves to the development of the outcome as no external communication was required. In the MARKETOUR project, after negotiating and reaching agreements on the design of the promotional campaign virtually, the groups started to produce a commercial for the chosen product. In the ICT-SUSTOUR project, after sharing the necessary information through the VLE, students worked on the writing of a report presenting the procedure, findings and conclusions of the project. This report was posted to the uploading area in the VLE and to the website for further reference.

Finally, after the in-class and outside-class work sessions, students prepared an oral presentation which was delivered in class. In the MARKETOUR project, students presented the advertising campaign and the commercial they had created. Although these presentations were arranged separately and during class time, those students who wanted to attend the presentation of their virtual partners were allowed to come as an audience. Afterwards, the promotional DVDs presented were uploaded to the respective areas in the VLE so that team members could see the outcome. In the ICT-SUSTOUR project, the information included in the report was shared with the rest of the class in an oral presentation and with the international partners through a videoconference.

Once the projects came to an end, a feedback questionnaire was designed for each project in order to have knowledge of students’ opinions on them. The questionnaire was divided into three parts in the MARKETOUR project: use of technologies, collaborative learning and motivation. The ICT-SUSTOUR project; however, added a fourth part related to sustainability. Questions were dichotomous (yes/no) in MARKETOUR, whereas the Likert scale (strongly disagree–strongly agree) was chosen for the ICT-SUSTOUR project. Some space was left for comments in each questionnaire and suggestions for improving the global development of both projects were encouraged.

3. Results

It is important to analyse both students’ opinion about the projects as well as lecturers’ viewpoint in order to assess the degree of success of each project and establish a comparison between them.

3.1. Students’ viewpoint

The students’ points of view were examined using the feedback questionnaire. The MARKETOUR feedback questionnaire was delivered in class with a response rate of 80% of the participants in the project, whereas the questionnaire for ICT-SUSTOUR was uploaded to the VLE, and students from the four partner countries were given a week to respond online. With this method the response rate decreased to 44%.

Although comparing the two questionnaires was difficult, given the fact that items did not fully coincide and they used different item types (dichotomous and Likert scale), we found some common aspects to be compared in connection with three sections: the use of IT, collaborative work and motivation. On the whole students had to answer eight questions in relation with these three subjects. As regards the use of new technologies in both projects, most students found that their use for pedagogical purposes was interesting and motivating (97% in MARKETOUR and 100% in ICT-SUSTOUR). However, 38% of students in MARKETOUR recognised that the use of IT had occasionally been a problem for them, whereas this percentage decreases to 29% in ICT-SUSTOUR.

As far as working collaboratively in interdisciplinary or international groups was concerned, the figures show a notable difference in the results. Students involved in the MARKETOUR project did not encounter any problems working in interdisciplinary teams during the virtual collaboration (all of them with Spanish although with different English level), whereas 55% of students in the ICT-SUSTOUR project declared they had understanding difficulties when collaborating virtually at an international level.

Regarding motivation, the majority of students (96% in ICT-SUSTOUR and 100% in MARKETOUR) claimed that working with people they had never met had been a motivating aspect. On the whole 90% of the participants in ICT-SUSTOUR and 100% in MARKETOUR found the project development challenging and positive and, what is more, almost all the participants (100% in ICT-SUSTOUR and 97% in MARKETOUR) would like to take part in similar projects again.

3.2. Lecturers’ viewpoint

From the lecturers’ perspective, there are two aspects to be taken into account to evaluate the degree of success of each project: the development process and the outcomes obtained. As far as the development process is concerned, we would like to highlight the percentage of students’ class attendance, well above the attendance to normal classes, which implies an increase in students’ motivation. As figures show, the average attendance rate during the academic year, in the group taking part in MARKETOUR, was 55%, reaching 70% during the project development. As regards the Spanish students participating in ICT-SUSTOUR, the average class attendance during the year stayed at 60% increasing to 86% during the project sessions.

Another aspect analysed during the development process of both projects was the degree of students’ involvement in the collaborative work. Students, used to working with a more directive methodology, initially encountered adaptation problems with working autonomously; in fact all the messages posted to teachers after the first in-class session (10 enquiries in MARKETOUR and 9 in ICT-SUSTOUR) asked for guidance. Nevertheless, once they got used to the methodology this type of enquiries decreased to 3 messages in MARKETOUR and 1 in ICT-SUSTOUR. The number of questions grew again at the end of the project when students had to produce the outcome (commercial or report), but enquiries were related to technical or linguistic matters.

In the end, students found the methodology rewarding and all the students participated in every stage of the projects. Even those who could not attend the in-class sessions posted their messages to the forum meeting the fixed deadlines in both projects, showing in this way, that they had developed a sense of responsibility not comparable with their attitude during the rest of the academic year.
Message quality was good despite the different English levels within groups. Two facts helped achieve these results: on the one hand, students were allowed time outside class to check over and concentrate on the language aspects. On the other hand, students could consult lecturers for help during the in-class sessions or through the forum.

A comparative analysis of the outcomes produced in MARKETOUR and ICT-SUSTOUR is not possible since the tasks developed were different, therefore, we will analyse the results separately. In MARKETOUR, students had to produce a promotional campaign highlighting one of the advertising tools they suggested in the campaign. We asked them to produce a DVD with a commercial. However, owing to technological handicaps in the DVD recordings, 10 commercials were designed using images and sound on PowerPoint and 4 could be recorded on a DVD.

The quality of the advertising campaigns and the commercials designed for the MARKETOUR project met the minimum standard required. In fact, all the group results obtained were above the pass grade: 5 groups out of 8 obtained a grade between 9 and 10 (on a scale from 1 to 10) and 3 groups obtained a grade between 7 and 8.5. In the ICT-SUSTOUR, the outcome required was a comparative report and results were also good although lower than in MARKETOUR: 75% of the groups (3 teams) obtained a grade between 7 and 8.5, whereas 25% (1 team) scored between 5 and 7 on a scale from 1 to 10.

As regards oral presentations, although students were initially reluctant to speak in front of an audience, presentations were delivered very professionally according to the rules participants were assigned in the case study as the following results show. Assessment involved criteria such as fluency, accuracy and participation, and show individual grades: in MARKETOUR 55% of the participants obtained a grade between 7 and 8.5 (on a scale from 1 to 10) and 45% obtained between 5 and 6 grades. As regards ICT-SUSTOUR, grades were higher and 79% of the Spanish students who took part in this project obtained a grade between 7% and 10%. In ICT-SUSTOUR, apart from the oral presentation in class on the sustainability data collected through the project development, students had to share their experience with their European partners in a videoconference. Despite some technological problems with the online connection, which made the simultaneous communication among the four partners impossible, two partner countries were able to share opinions at each time.

Therefore, although in turns, all the students had the opportunity to speak with the rest of European participants. The guidelines agreed among partner teachers to be followed in the videoconference were: students’ introduction, explanation of the sustainability problems identified in the tourist area studied, and the ideas given to overcome those handicaps. Students showed great interest in this activity given the fact that none of them had got involved in a videoconference previously and, furthermore, they finally had the opportunity to see their partners. After students’ participation, still through the videoconference, teachers discussed about the development of the project showing a high degree of satisfaction.

4. Conclusions and further work

On the whole we find that both projects had a very positive effect on students’ attitude towards the usefulness of the English language in their future career as students feel they are being efficiently prepared for their professional life.

Furthermore, we think that organising these activities offers students a wide range of additional advantages: they learn about areas such as sustainability, tourism or marketing by implementing the contents of the English course, use technological resources which are new to them, improve their ability in written negotiations and finally boost their confidence in their communication skills by being able to interact successfully with real audiences.

During the project development, we have also observed that students assumed a sense of group responsibility as well as individual autonomy. Students’ attitude showed that when they learn by themselves, they become more involved, and their motivation increases. Consequently, we feel that the objective of motivating students through an innovative activity that involves real-life settings, collaborative work and the use of IT tools, has been met, although there are still a number of functional aspects to improve in the future.

Both projects have run their course, but there is a common interest among lecturers involved in developing similar projects in the future. This will give us the opportunity of using our experience to overcome the problems and make the best of the pedalagogical and technical tools designed.

Acknowledgements

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References


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