Experiences with the use of technology in English classes

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(Experience report - Secondary school Implementations - Rafael Hernández National School – National University of La Plata [Colegio Nacional Rafael Hernández - UNLP])

The experience to be told in this paper consists of a succession of tasks (all of them created by the teachers who write this paper).

This experience was carried out during the coordination of the English Section of the Modern Languages Department at Rafael Hernández National School by Professor Liliana Pace. During 2009 school year, within the digital basis, the use of multimedia blogs as a vehicle of the syllabus for each year or level was implemented.¹. On this particular occasion, a fragment of what was done in 5th year during part of the already mentioned school year will be taken into consideration.

The pedagogic support of this experience has two fundamental basis:

The administration project running at that time at Rafael Hernández National School – National University of La Plata (Colegio Nacional Rafael Hernández - UNLP) - based on Teaching for Understanding- Project Zero - Harvard University

The administration project of the English Section of the Modern Languages Department based on CLIL (Content Language Integrated Learning; teaching through content), that was aimed at the DIGITAL ALPHABETIZATION of students - in the context of multiple literate cultures (multiliteracies⁴) - as regards the handling of different multimedia technology tools, among other objectives, some of them also analogical.

With reference to digital alphabetization, we consider it fundamental since XXI Century society requires knowledge and flexible command of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), because they will allow the workers of the future - our students - to be able to face the changing demands of the current and future working world.

In connection with the target language, students, through the use of blogs, get in touch with the English language in real contexts - songs, videos, etc - and in an autonomous way, since they do not need the classroom, or the teacher, or following a certain order in the resolution of the tasks, and they can access extra material in case they want to or need to. For example, the blogs were a fundamental tool during winter recess 2009 which was extended because of an H1N1 flu epidemic. Due to the fact that the blogs transcend classroom limits, they allowed students to do different tasks ad hoc and stay in contact with schooling.

At the same time, the use of blogs enables teachers to get closer to teenage reality, not only to chat or download information from the net, but also to give them the opportunity to use the applications already known by students in new ways. It is worth noting that the use of this tool within the educational framework makes students change their view of the use of this medium from an informal to a more formal one. It is because of this that they need to learn to acknowledge their role and the conventions that rule this space, since what they publish is available for the whole blog community. Students learn to deal with a well-known medium, but in a different manner.

For this experience to be possible, the collaborative work that was carried out among teachers - since the experience involved all 5th year classes -, as well as among students and, at the same time, among students and teachers was essencial.

As regards the role of the teacher, he or she is considered, from our pedagogical point of view, as the facilitator or mediator, the person who teaches how to learn, how to use technological tools in a flexible and autonomous fashion, and who considers learning a process that takes place throughout life.

Key words Blogs; multimedia; CLIL; teacher as mediator; English; collaborative work; learning process

Aims of this presentation

Since we consider this experience both innovatory and productive because of its results, we believe it is worth sharing it with other teachers.

The presentation is also aimed at showing what students are capable of producing both from the point of view of target language construction, as well as the use of multimedia technology.

¹ BLOG 5º AÑO 2009: http://inglesnaciofive.blogspot.com/
² Multiliteracies flexible and sustainable control of the use of a range of practices as regards traditional texts as well as new technologies, whether they are oral, printed or multimedia.
Besides, we seek to show the different possibilities that emerge from combining analogical and digital classroom work -blended learning-, hypertextuality(3), interlanguage(4), process and product evaluation, collaborative work among teachers with a common goal.

This paper is also intended for showing how language can work as a vehicle to achieve other goals that go beyond the linguistic aspect and also beyond the classroom limits. Since the weblogs belong to the web 2.0, the one in which the user can produce content, the traditional sender-recipient dynamics, in which only one produces content while the other just receives it, is broken.

Among other aims, we include: discourse construction in target language as a communicational tool, reflection about the language learning process as well as personal behaviour, role taking, autonomy, conscious use of social networks, creativity, and pleasure.

Body

The experience to be described should be interpreted according to the following frameworks:

The administration project running at that time at Rafael Hernández National School, from which we adopt the ideas of values-based education and active citizenship education, among others.

The administration project of the English Section of the Modern Languages Department, from which we adopt the ideas of: target language teaching, together with reflection about the learning process to generate awareness on the part of the students, digital alphabetization, all-round education, etc.

It is worth noting that taking the concept of World English into consideration, or English as the global language, it can be said that most communications in that language take place among non-native speakers, and not among native ones. That is the reason why the main goal when learning to use the target language is fluency and not accuracy. In Herbert Puchta's words "accuracy does not necessarily imply the ability to communicate, since the latter requires, among other skills, creativity, flexibility, and spontaneity, the use of chunks, the ability to control the interaction, and fluency." Therefore, expecting an average student to be accurate in the context of secondary school, and considering everything that this context implies - for instance the demands students have from other disciplines - would lead into false expectations on the part of the teacher as regards students achievements, that inevitably will end up generating in both the students and the teacher feelings of frustration and failure.

As a consequence of this, it is clear that the hypothesis about the use of user-friendly technology stimulates and interests students as well as teachers, it promotes collaborative work and it produces a constant flow of information, a feedback among the participants and, at the same time, the construction of discourse in the target language with clear communicative purposes among the students. The inner organization of weblogs enables the development of a way of thinking that facilitates control of the discourse since almost everything can be modified without changing its essence: adding and modifying a post, links, bibliography, etc.

Taking into account teenagers' close contact with social networks, and considering how carelessly they exchange private information through their use, we decided to work on this topic with the students, also in order to make them aware of the possible risks - anonymity and underlying danger within social networks - that these exchanges may imply (for example: getting in touch with people who can be dangerous) with the aim of training responsible users.

The experience had a gradual not thoroughly planned development. A text about social networks and achieving online safety was used as icebreaker, and the sequence of tasks was organised as follows:

1.- Getting connected: the undersigned teachers have especial interest in students finding motivation to learn the target language through the use of user-friendly audiovisual aids. Because of that, we decided to open the sequence of tasks with an activity about social networks, such as Facebook, Bebo, etc, that was downloaded from a website designed for teachers of English around the world. This activity included a text aimed at promoting both the acquisition and the use of the language connected to that context, and also at making students aware of the need to adopt certain online safety precautions, mainly due to these sites popularity. The above mentioned activity presents an interesting sequence of tasks of graduated level of complexity (vocabulary, matching the two halves of an idea expressed in the text, deciding what to do or not to do to be protected, etc.).

2.- Prometeus. The media revolution: the second phase consisted of the use a video called ‘Prometeus. The media revolution’ in which a technological timeline is developed, which starts in the past and continues into the future. An avatar voice-over as appears in the credits of this video, which is supposed to have been made in 2051 - explains and narrates a series of events about merging companies, bankruptcies, copyright issues, which are represented by images with sound effects and music.

With this video as a starting point, we made students approach the icons identifying different programmes and applications, draw a time-line in groups according to the sequence of technological events and the acknowledgement of

3 Hypertextuality: expression that refers to the expansion of the meaning of the term text from the concept of only that which is written, into anything which can be read. a video, a picture, a drawing, etc.
4 Interlanguage: transition language system which results from the combination of the mother language with the second language.
the spaces mentioned in the video, deduce the definition of prosumer, etc. This was presented to us in paper and was achieved through specially designed activities.

In due time, students had to develop a virtual personality for a fictional social network, taking up a second life. After that, they also had to design a homepage for this fictional social network, both activities based on concepts suggested in the video.

3. Facebook Project: at the same time, we found an article in an Argentine newspaper about the mentioned project, which was developed and put into practice under the direction of Professor Alejandro Piscitelli at UBA (National University of Buenos Aires): ‘El Proyecto Facebook, una herramienta de trabajo’ de la Cátedra de Procesamiento de Datos de la Carrera de Comunicación, UBA (‘Facebook project, a working tool’ Data Processing Class, Communication Course of studies, UBA). In the above mentioned article, Professor Piscitelli takes account of the lack of interest in his own theoretical classes shown by his students at University.

Attracted by this situation, we decided to invite our students to read the mentioned article, visit the site and do research about the author of the article. In due course of time, we uploaded two of Piscitelli’s students’ videos from Piscitelli’s website into our blog for our students to fulfil a series of tasks. The first task suggested by us was to reflect upon the content of one of the videos, which showed family (in)communication and the role of social networks in this, mostly when used by teenagers. That is to say, how communications are somehow favoured by social networks and how difficult intra-family communication might come to be.

The second video showed an amazing and ridiculous – and false – Facebook profile for the cartoon character HE-MAN. By means of this, we tried to give a more relaxed version of the worried point of view suggested by the other activities in connection to our topic of studies, as well as to promote the positive aspects of social networks, such as Facebook.

The final production consisted of the digital design of a Facebook profile, of a real or fictional character, after that of HE-MAN. These were digital team work productions (using power point presentations, movie maker, or other applications) to be presented and analyzed in class and, after a selection, eventually uploaded to our blog.

4.- Assessment: it was multilateral, that is to say, initial, on-going, formal and informal, of the process and of the final production.

Informal assessment is that which takes into account classroom work and the different steps showing the series of activities developed before and after the formal assessment. The latter included both the above mentioned final production and a written test about a real newspaper article concerning two British young girls missing after they met an adult male in a social network. A fact we consider worth mentioning is that the subscribers entirely designed the mentioned written assignment via Skype in six different versions to guarantee individual work as students work sitting at tables for six.

**Conclusions**

The complete set of activities described before have been uploaded to the blog for 5th year as well as the students’ final productions, and can be seen at [http://inglesnaciofive.blogspot.com/](http://inglesnaciofive.blogspot.com/).

We would like to clarify that the English Section office computer, together with those computers in the classrooms, the school library, and other school areas were at the students’ disposal (it is worth noting that the One Netbook Per Student project was not in force in Argentina in 2009).

This sequence consisted of a series of activities, increasing in complexity, in which not only did students have to build discourse in the target language in groups of no more than six, but they also had to perform analogical as well as digital productions. The interest the activities arose is shown in the students’ commitment and the quality and variety of their productions. We strongly recommend you visit the above mentioned blog.

As seen in the didactic sequence, the students used both their target language – English – and their mother tongue – Spanish – for they read a newspaper, a comic on the topic, an article from an Argentine newspaper (“Pagina 12”) and Piscitelli's website, they analyzed videos from his students which were in Spanish. This stimulated bilingualism, which implies flexibility, concepts of neurolinguistic and meaningful learning and what is known as hypertextuality.

The degree of the students’ interest and commitment can be grasped by the following class account: a group asked for permission to upload a related – video for the rest of 5th year student to see! They felt part of the project.

In conclusion, we strongly believe this experience is worth-sharing not only because it is linguistically and technologically rich and powerful, but also because it meant pleasure in the accomplishment of what came to be a common goal, and because of its infinitude or endless nature, the emotional bonds fostered, the freedom students felt and the quality of the final productions.

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