

# PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION THROUGH THE ILIAS VIRTUAL PLATFORM IN THE AREA OF ENGLISH STUDIES

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## Abstract

This proposal presents the results of a qualitative study about a pedagogical innovation with the ILIAS virtual platform in the subject "Advanced English" of the second year of the joint degree in English Philology and Tourism at the University of Jaén (Spain). The study will endeavour to outline and comment on the different resources and online teaching materials implemented within this virtual environment for its exploitation in the area of English Studies, with a view to meeting the needs of autonomous and collaborative learning in the new European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to assisting students with materials specifically designed for self-work, considering that the second year of the aforementioned degree went extinct, as for face-to-face teaching, in the academic year 2010-11, and students will only have the right to sit the final exam in the next three academic years (2011-12, 2012-13 and 2013-14). Finally, it will offer the results of a student survey on the usefulness of this platform for the subject, and some other teaching action will be suggested to make up for the deficiencies pointed out by students.

Keywords: VLE (Virtual Learning Environment), ILIAS, English studies, autonomous work.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The compulsory subject "Advanced English" of the second year of the joint degree in English Philology and Tourism at the University of Jaén (Spain) requires from students a considerable amount of autonomous work for the successful attainment of an advanced level in English. Consequently, the elaboration of practical material conveniently adapted to the students' level of English, covering the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) is of paramount importance in this subject, especially considering that the subject went extinct, as for face-to-face teaching, in the academic year 2010-11.

The University of Jaén hosts a useful electronic resource in relation to ICT (Information and Communications Technology) –the ILIAS virtual platform– which has contributed both to the creation of online teaching material of easy and quick access for the students and to foster the aforementioned autonomous work, which is essential to pass the subject.

The main objective of this pedagogical innovation was thus the creation of online materials in this virtual platform for the benefit of students, together with the innovation in curricular contents which may ultimately facilitate the adaptation of the subject to the EHEA (cf. Pérez Cañado et al., 2010) [1]. All of this with a view to making the most of this VLE in the field of EFL (English as a Foreign Language), eliciting active participation on the part of students in the teaching-learning process and overcoming spatial and temporal barriers in the university educational context.

While there was face-to-face teaching, the theoretical and practical classes developed the materials, bibliography and specific objectives outlined in the official syllabus, although to achieve this goal the ILIAS virtual platform played a very important role. Not only did we create in it spaces for asynchronous teacher-student and student-student communication, but it was also used as a true teaching tool for the creation, for example, of online self-correcting exercises which triggered autonomous work on the part of students, thus allowing us to dedicate more teaching hours to theoretical and practical aspects for which students need more personal guidance in classroom hours.

All in all, then, the ILIAS virtual platform has been a key element in our subject, endowing us with a complementary tool to teaching hours that has proved especially useful for further practice, guidance, tutorials and asynchronous communication. Below we outline and comment on the different materials implemented in this pedagogical innovation.

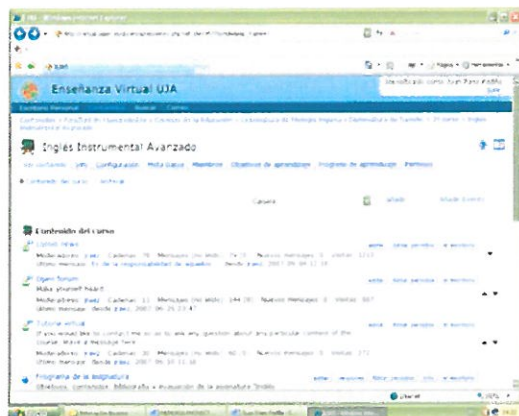


Fig. 1. Homepage for “Advanced English” in the ILIAS virtual platform.

## 2 MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

As regards methodology, this study has pursued to pedagogically apply the potentiality of ICT to the learning of the English language, emphasizing aspects such as inductive learning (initial linguistic practice followed by an explanation of the underlying theory), self-assessment and, above all, cooperative and autonomous learning (cf. Pérez Cañado et al., 2007) [2], thus advocating the so-called *life-long-learning* (LLL) promoted by the EHEA.

As for materials, the following resources have been implemented and managed in the ILIAS virtual platform, among others:

- **Latest news:** this section has allowed students, including those who could not regularly attend classes, to catch up with the latest news on the subject (writing exercises, different tasks and exercises, exams, etc.). 110 messages were uploaded, which received up to 1929 visits (see Fig. 2 below for an example).



Fig. 2. Example of *latest news*.

- **Forums** for the exchange of knowledge: they have stimulated a critical and active attitude on the part of students with regards to the contents of the subject, as well as educational exchange on its most ample sense. 143 messages (with a total of 1031 visits) were written. Through them students have shared different sources of information to enhance autonomous work. Especially popular was a topic thread with the title of *YOUR phrasal verb sentence*, which triggered the exchange of practical uses and examples of phrasal verbs, including sentences made by the students themselves, examples taken from the Internet or from specialized dictionaries, etc. (see Fig. 3 below for an example).
- **Virtual tutorials:** they proved especially valuable for students once face-to-face sessions stopped. Up to 30 topic threads were written to address different doubts on the part of students. There was a total of 60 messages and 273 visits.



Fig. 3. Example of exchange in the forum of the subject (*YOUR phrasal verb sentence*).

- **Chats:** a chat was opened for the exchange of information and synchronous teacher-student and student-student communication.
- **Download of materials and other online exercises:** this section gave access to photocopies, summaries, complementary exercises, etc. which were provided when there was face-to-face instruction. Other materials specifically designed for students undergoing the extinction process of the subject were also created.
  - As for *written skills*, a good number of presentations and exercises were uploaded to practise use of English (grammar and vocabulary) and reading comprehension. A key or suggested answers section was included. Practice on writing during the extinction period has been more difficult to offer, given the necessary feedback on the part of the teacher. Thus, apart from our weekly office hours we elaborated a good number of lists with the most common mistakes committed by students in previous academic years in the different genres (informal and formal letters, leaflets, reviews, etc.), together with the correction of those mistakes. This section was called *Correct your own writing*. Consequently, students have had the chance to self-edit incorrect sentences, offer their own version and double-check it with the correct answers offered in the key. We understand this was a positive virtual means to somehow make up for the necessary extensive practice in writing to master such a skill (see Fig. 4 below for an example). Model answers for the different written registers were also uploaded to, again, somehow compensate for the inevitable limitations of the few weekly office hours available for the whole group.

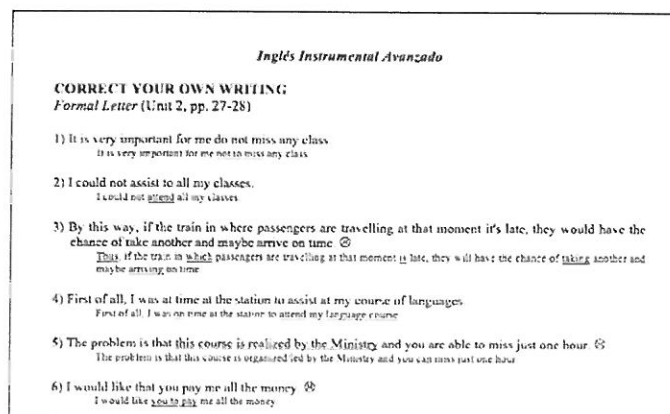


Fig. 4. Example of self-editing in writing (*correct your own writing*).

- As for *oral skills*, materials for both listening and speaking were created. Given the absence of face-to-face interaction during the progressive extinction of the subject, listening was perhaps the most severely affected of the skills, for it was specifically covered during the practical lessons. In order to compensate for such inconvenience different audio material adapted to the level of the subject (CAE, Certificate in Advanced English) was digitized with the help of the *Audacity* software (when the original source was a cassette) and an mp3 player embedded in the ILIAS virtual platform. Thus, students have had the chance to practise listening in what we called *listening booth*, with the possibility of answering different self-correcting questions within the same page, at the same time they listen to the audio material. The transcripts for the listening material were also uploaded, so that they could easily check the correct answers. The ILIAS virtual platform has allowed us then to reproduce the conditions of an English lab at a small scale, available 24 hours a day and accessible from anywhere through the Internet (see Fig. 5 for an example). As far as speaking is concerned, several CAE speaking video samples were uploaded. They contain interviews of candidates who sat the official CAE exam. They are not simulations, but real interviews that were recorded with the permission of the candidates. Students could then check the expected level and conditions of the speaking exam, with a view to clarifying further doubts and getting further practice during office hours.

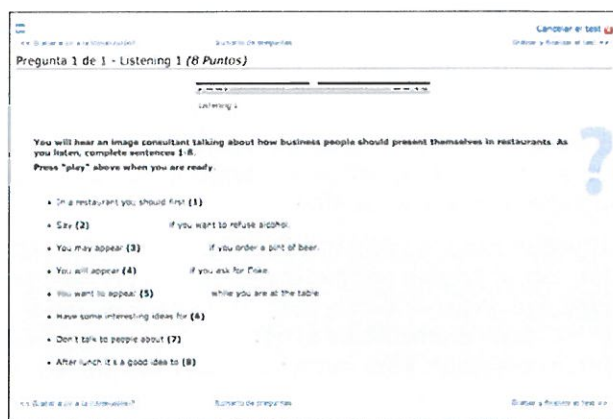


Fig. 5. Example of online listening comprehension exercise (listening booth).

- Especially relevant for the learning and self-revision of the contents of the subject was the creation of different types of *self-correcting tests*, which, getting advantage of multimedia versatility and asynchronous communication, have allowed students to assess their knowledge and progress in the subject at any time during the academic year. This resource in the ILIAS virtual platform is especially useful, since it facilitates practice and immediate evaluation of contents. The different types of tests –evaluation test, self-evaluation test, online exam and random variable test– and questions –image question, fill in the gaps, multiple choice question with multiple answer, multiple choice question with one answer (see Fig. 6), ordering question, short answer question and matching pairs– offered by the platform were used to create different tests for different purposes. An initial *placement test* was made available for students to get an approximate idea of their level of English at the beginning of the course (80 students completed it). This was followed by evaluation tests at the end of each of the units (see Figs. 7 and 8) (187 individual tests were completed), with which students could measure their overall level in the subject. Other types of activities based on the ILIAS testing format –we called them *practical online exercises*– were created for the reinforcement of morphology, syntax and lexis (vocabulary review, practice on difficult morphosyntactic aspects through multiple choice questions, etc.).



Fig. 6. Example of multiple choice question in ILIAS.

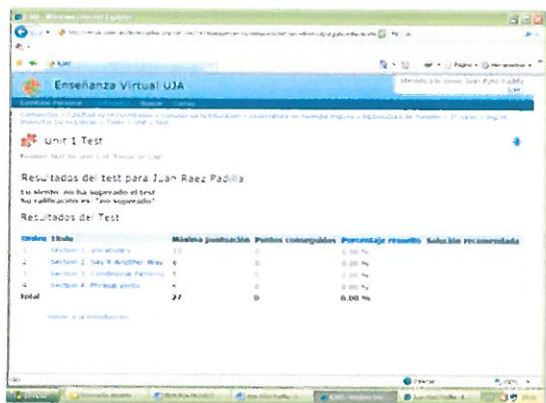


Fig. 7. Final window with self-correcting test results.

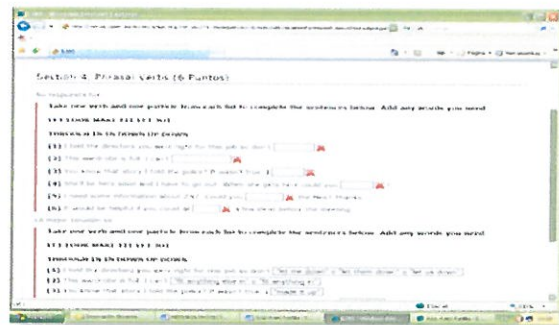


Fig. 8. Spotting mistakes and correct answers (post-correction).

We would like to emphasize the excellent response on the part of the students as regards ILIAS self-correcting tests, as can be seen in their feedback below. They have proved a useful online tool which allows students, both at home and at the university, at any time of the day and at their own pace, to immediately evaluate their knowledge in the subject. Considering that students cannot any longer interact with the teacher and their peers in face-to-face classes, these tests provide them with relevant feedback so as to re-orientate or keep on with their work in the subject with a view to successfully tackling it in an autonomous and effective way.

### 3 DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

As for the objective or quantitative evaluation of the use of the devised materials and contents, we have already made reference to the high participation of students in forums, latest news, virtual tutorials and self-correcting tests, to give a few examples, offering precise numbers of visits and students enrolling in the different activities. As for the subjective or qualitative evaluation of the experience, an online questionnaire was administered to students to elicit their opinions on the different available resources and possible improvements for future pedagogical innovations. The results for the 12 questions included in the questionnaire can be found in Table 1 below, considering

that 1 = not useful at all/strongly disagree; 2 = rather useless/disagree; 3 = somewhat useful/uncertain; 4 = useful/agree; 5 = very useful/strongly agree.

Table 1. Results of student questionnaire.

Question	1	2	3	4	5
1. According to your experience in ILIAS, the <i>latest news section</i> is...	6,9%	3,4%	13,8%	32,8%	43,1%
2. According to your experience in ILIAS, the <i>open forum section</i> (including "your phrasal verb sentences", "your mistakes in written assignments", etc.) is...	7,3%	3,6%	16,4%	41,8%	30,9%
3. According to your experience in ILIAS, the <i>virtual tutorials section</i> is...	7,5%	5,7%	24,5%	43,4%	18,9%
4. According to your experience in ILIAS, the <i>materials section</i> (including exercises, songs, writing corrections and material, key answers, exam practice, extra CAE exercises, etc.) is...	5,7%	–	1,9%	13,2%	79,2%
5. According to your experience in ILIAS, the <i>tests section</i> (including placement test and revision tests for each unit) is...	9,4%	–	1,9%	18,9%	69,8%
6. According to your experience in ILIAS, the <i>practical online exercises section</i> (including self-correcting grammar and vocabulary exercises) is...	5,7%	–	7,5%	18,9%	67,9%
7. According to your experience in ILIAS, the <i>listening booth section</i> (including listening material, tapescripts and online tests) is...	7,5%	3,8%	20,8%	13,2%	54,7%
8. The activities proposed through this virtual platform have helped me to become more autonomous in my learning.	7,5%	–	13,2%	49,1%	30,2%
9. I am more interested in English thanks to the activities and guidance offered in ILIAS.	7,5%	7,6%	15,1%	56,6%	13,2%
10. This virtual learning project has increased my motivation to study English and to practise it.	7,5%	5,7%	11,4%	52,8%	22,6%
11. The subject has been more fun thanks to the activities and materials proposed in ILIAS.	9,4%	3,8%	15,1%	52,8%	18,9%
12. All in all, you consider that the activities, materials, assistance and guidance offered by your teacher in ILIAS have been... (please write in the box below the most positive and the most negative aspect of this platform according to your experience, as well as any advice that you would give for next year, some particular aspect/activity which you would recommend to further explore/improve next year, or any other commentary that you would like to add).	7,5%	–	7,5%	32,2%	52,8%

These were some of the further comments that students included in question 12 above:

Student *abjr0001*: "In general the material and activities included in ILIAS have been very useful for self-learning thanks to the keys. Although I would include for next year some folders with typical English expressions and with foreign or different vocabulary. Besides I think that more songs could be included here or even suggested by the students because they are a good and a funny way in order to listen in English".

Student *mbc0001*: "I consider that the subject is complex because it contains a lot of vocabulary, expressions, phrasal verbs; in the ILIAS platform we can practise every day important aspects like for example listening or phrasal verbs. I don't see any negative aspect in the teaching method by the

teacher; on the contrary, we have to thank him for his interest in us to create this platform full of information that we can use for our own benefit”.

Student *eru00001*: “this virtual platform is very useful because you can use what interests you most. I would like to have more listening materials”.

Student *sas00003*: “The most positive aspect of this platform is that I can practise my English better, because I have a lot of exercises and examples to compare. I don't think that the platform has any negative aspect”.

Student *jrd00004*: “More practical exercises such as vocabulary exercises and expressions which are up to date in the English language”.

Student *soc00003*: “I think this platform is useful to the student because it is a good form to improve my English. You can do extra exercises that help you to study that subject. However, if some people haven't Internet, it's difficult to then getting the exercises from here”.

Student *img00011*: “To my mind, no activities or materials of any subject can be useless; therefore I think that all the information given is very positive, but at the same time it can be also negative because it is too much in order to put it into practice (although it is our obligation, of course). The only problem that I can find is the lack of time. Thank you”.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

From the data above some aspects are worth mentioning. They will be commented on as a final evaluative conclusion of the present pedagogical innovation:

- In each of the 12 questions above the 2 highest scores –4 (useful/agree) and 5 (very useful/strong agree) were predominant (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Highest scores in student questionnaire.

Question	4	5	4 + 5
1	32,8%	43,1%	75,9%
2	41,8%	30,9%	72,7%
3	43,4%	18,9%	62,3%
4	13,2%	<b>79,2%</b>	<b>92,4%</b>
5	18,9%	<b>69,8%</b>	88,7%
6	18,9%	67,9%	86,8%
7	13,2%	54,7%	67,9%
8	49,1%	30,2%	79,3%
9	56,6%	13,2%	69,8%
10	52,8%	22,6%	75,4%
11	52,8%	18,9%	71,7%
12	<b>32,2%</b>	<b>52,8%</b>	<b>85%</b>

- As can be seen, the sum of percentages given to 4 and 5 above is higher than 62% in all of the questions, with a mean of 77,32%.
- The item which was given greater value was the materials sections (question number 4), with a value of 5 by 79,2% of students, followed by tests (question number 5), with a value of 5 by 69,8% of students.

- The global evaluation of the experience by students (question number 12) is of 85% of students defining it as useful (4) or very useful (5).

The statistical data run parallel to the positive appreciations made by students in question number 12. As can be seen above, students have made a very positive evaluation of the experience, highlighting aspects that are precisely the foundations of the present pedagogical innovation, i.e., autonomous learning, complementation and compensation for face-to-face classes with further practical online materials and, as an ultimate aspiration, interest and motivation for the subject. On the other hand, these data provide valuable suggestions about aspects that could be improved in future pedagogical innovations, such as further materials for listening comprehension and for the acquisition of updated vocabulary and expressions, i.e., *real English*. In fact, practice on oral comprehension has been one of the main objectives of another of our studies, in which different practical activities were designed for the development of the lexical competence in English by watching and analysing in a VLE excerpts taken from popular sitcoms such as *Family Guy*, *House*, *CSI Las Vegas* or *Friends* (cf. Pérez Cañado et al., 2010) [3]. For all the aforementioned reasons, we make a highly positive overall assessment of this pedagogical innovation.

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