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Using VLE and CMC to enhance the lexical competence of pre-service English teachers in the *European Higher Education Area*

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This paper reports on a quasi-experimental investigation with a pre-test/post-test control group design carried out in the second semester of the academic year 2006-2007 with Spanish pre-service English teachers at the University of Jaén in Spain. Its aim was to determine whether the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) within the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) could improve the teacher trainees' lexical competence. The investigation was motivated, on the one hand, by the extremely poor results ascertained in the vocabulary acquisition of pre-service teachers at the University of Jaén in the past four academic years (cf. Pérez Cañado *et al.*, in press) and, on the other, by the new methodological options advocated within the EHEA.

Indeed, the creation of the *European Higher Education Area*, whose chief aim is to harmonize academic degree and quality assurance standards throughout Europe, is radically transforming the conception and nature of teaching at a tertiary level across Europe. This is more markedly the case in countries like Spain, where the piloting of the new European Credit System is involving drastic changes particularly in terms of methodology. "The shift from teaching to learning, from input to output, and to the processes and the contexts of the learner" (Zabalza Beraza, 2006: 1) is highly advocated, and a "methodological plurality" (Informe CIDUA, 2005: 26, 29), favoring metacognitive, autonomous, and Life-Long Learning, is strongly advised.

This pedagogical innovation has spurred on the development of the governmentally financed research project on which this paper reports. The project has involved the creation of an original bank of material on diverse lexical aspects (e.g, phrasal verbs, prepositions, word formation and meaning, collocations, synonymy and antonymy, functions, or lexical chunks) central to the development of lexical competence in pre-service English teachers in Spain. To enhance the students' motivation, the activities have been designed on the basis of popular and extremely recent sitcoms which the students themselves selected. Each episode has focused on a specific semantic field covered in the programme of the subject within which the project was developed (e.g., health, food, family, new technologies, or turning points in life). The activities have then been exploited using *blended learning* (Thorne, 2003, O'Dowd, 2007), that is, a combination of traditional face-to-face interaction and online activity. The latter has been fostered via the two virtual platforms employed: ILIAS for the autonomous completion of the activities and BLACKBOARD for the telecollaboration exchange set up on the subject with the Southern Methodist University at Dallas.

The results yielded have been extremely interesting. While the homogeneity of both groups in terms of lexical performance is ascertained at the outset of the experience, in the post-test, statistically significant differences are detected in favour of the experimental group - who followed the VLE and CMC programme – on the vast majority of lexical aspects sampled. And what is more, whereas the latter significantly improves its lexical performance from the pre- to the post-tests, the control group significantly worsens, thereby confirming the tendency ascertained in previous years. Thus, it seems that the use of VLE and CMC to teach vocabulary for a single semester has been sufficient to counter the worrying decline in lexical performance of pre-service English teachers at the University of Jaén. These excellent outcomes are further reinforced by the extremely positive responses of the trainees on the qualitative questionnaire which was administered at the end of the Project to complement the quantitative data. They highly valued the project for its organizational aspects, motivational capacity, and learning potential.

The success of the project has had several immediate consequences. To begin with, it is being developed in the present academic year in all the instrumental English subjects which pre-service teachers take in English Philology at our University. It has also been extended

from one to both semesters, and to all students in the degrees of English Philology (our previous experimental group) and English Philology + Tourism (our previous control group). The bank of materials is equally being expanded through the creation of additional activities focused on new topics. Another important spin-off of the investigation has been the creation of the international research group *ESECS (English Studies in the European Credit System)*, which is currently undertaking cutting-edge research into the methodological innovation spurred on by the creation of the EHEA and is creating a thematic network on the topic across Europe.

The presentation of this brief paper will begin by framing the study within the broader context of the EHEA and of the project. It will then go on to report on the investigation, offering a detailed description of the sample of subjects who have integrated the study, its chief objectives, the variables and instruments employed, the procedure followed, and the statistical methodology used. The quantitative data will be complemented with qualitative questionnaires and classroom observation which provide interesting insights into the students' perceptions of the implementation of the experience. The results and implications will be discussed in a final section, which will highlight the benefits of using blended learning to enhance the lexical competence of pre-service English teachers and will briefly outline the important consequences which the project has had internationally.

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