Content-based virtual oral assessment of university students of English: Babelium application experience

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Abstract: The use of online course designs has changed the learning environment of second language learning. Recommendation for best practice in online course designs frequently include maximizing students' virtual assessment applications. Thus, a group of English language teachers from the Faculty of Arts at the University of the Basque Country that is carrying out an Educational Innovation Project (COBLE Project, Content Based Learning of English), granted by the University of the Basque Country, uses an online assessment platform called Babelium. This virtual application is used in assessing oral competences in English Language students of the first and second courses of the Grade in English Studies. The levels of linguistic competence of these groups of students (117 students) correspond to levels B2 and C1 (European Framework of Languages). By using this virtual application we have improved the assessment tools in language teaching and the quality of achievement of oral skills of the students involved in this experience.

Keywords: new technologies, language assessment, second language teaching

1. Introduction

E-learning can be defined as "the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance" (Rosenberg 2001:28), or simply, it is an online access to learning resources which can take place "anywhere and anytime" (Holmes and Gardner 2006:14). However, there are other definitions that do not limit e-learning to online learning only but imply a complete learning solution that covers all educational activities performed by an individual or a group either online or offline, and synchronously or asynchronously using networked or standalone computers or telephonic electronic devices, in combination or in isolation (Chada and Nafay Kumail 2002:31; Naidu 2006:1). E-learning instruction is delivered using all kinds of electronic media such as the Internet, intranets, extranets, satellite broadcasts, audio/video tape, interactive TV, and CD-ROM (Govindasamy 2002:288). Other common terms that are used for e-learning are online learning, virtual learning, distributed learning, networked or web-based learning, computer-assisted learning and tele-learning (Singh and Sharma, 2005: 2; Naidu 2006:1).

Liaw et al. (2007a:1077-1079) suggest that multimedia instruction to be considered when designing effective e-learning environments. Multimedia instruction uses materials in verbal form such as onscreen text or narration, pictorial form which includes static materials such as photos or illustrations, and dynamic materials such as video or animation (Mayer and Moreno 2002:87). Liaw (2004:313) adds that this allows learners' development of complex cognitive skills; to understand conceptual complexity, to be able to use acquired concepts for reasoning and interference, and to have the flexibility of applying conceptual knowledge to new situations. Tymczyńska (2009:157) further suggests the use of authentic resources in interpreting courses so that learners "will be able to see a tangible connection with the real interpreting world."

Israelite and Dunn (2003:258-259) propose four basic elements of building blocks that can be combined in various ways in order to achieve the intended objectives. They are:

a) Presentation

Presentation, which is made up of information about the learning context, content, instructions and other information that the instructors want to convey directly to the learners.

b) Elicitation

Elicitation, i.e. asking learners to respond, which demonstrates their understanding of content, or to act according to the stimuli shown on the screen. Scores or results are not tracked or stored because this block is developmental in nature.

c) Evaluation

Evaluation, which measures the mastery level of learners with regard to the relevant content. Here, scores or results are stored to enable further reference.

d) Collaboration

Collaboration, which allows asynchronous interaction between instructor and learners, as well as among learners themselves.

2. The didactical improvisation

Since interpreting courses require students to record their oral interpretation, the biggest challenge in introducing digital technology in the courses is the nonexistence of a digital laboratory. However, this is facilitated by the fact that all students own laptops or personal computers. Weekly assignments with specific instructions are uploaded onto the UPV/EHU e-learning portal. Students download the weekly assignments from the portal and carry out their own recording activity anytime-anywhere, using headphones, microphones and a freeware audio recording application. The preparation time is reduced from several days to several hours as they progress.

Through e-learning, learners can have access to a wide range of learning resources and learning can occur anywhere, anytime, and there are no longer any geographical constraints to learning. Ming-Chi stated that e-learning users face several new constraints, such as the impersonal nature of the online environment. Traditional approach to e-learning tends to be structured around courses, timetables, and testing an approach that is too often driven by the needs of the institution rather than the individual learner. Ming-Chi stated that in current e-learning, lecturers deliver the content, students learn it, and there was no memorable change, less collaboration, less learner participation, and grading.

Most of current e-learning systems are based on Learning Management System (LMS). Moodle as an open source LMS has adopted as an e-learning system. Moodle is a LMS based on learner-oriented philosophy which promotes social constructing pedagogy that engage students in constructing their own knowledge and share it with colleague. However, through LMS, the content of the courses is fully controlled by the lecturers. In other words, the effective use of the e-learning is totally depending on the participation of lecturers in managing the course. According to Sbihi and El Kadiri, the content is the secondary concern among those being responsible for e-learning. Content-based e-learning platforms, such as Babelium, are seen to support a range of applications which display qualities associated with educational technologies already in use at university level such as communication, participation, interactivity and collaboration.

3. Content-based assessment

Testing tasks are “assignments that incorporate student input, with content deriving from real second language use through extensive contact with native speakers and texts, integrating language skills, and extending over several weeks or more”. In the relevant literature a number of labels have been given to classroom approaches that make use of content-based virtual projects. Whatever the term used, however, project-based assessment has the following characteristics:

It involves multi-skill activities focusing on topics or themes, rather than on specific language targets. While students focus on solving a problem or reaching a goal, they have ample opportunities to “recycle known language and skills in a relatively natural context”

It does not have specific language aims, but what is important is the route to achieving the end product, since this promotes the development of student confidence and independence.

It is an activity that "involves a variety of individual or cooperative tasks such as developing a research plan and questions, and implementing the plan through empirical or document research that includes collecting, analyzing, and reporting data orally and/or in writing".

It is an approach "in which learners investigate a question, solve a problem, plan an event, or develop a product".

It emphasises content over form, promotes individualization of activities, incorporates student input in goal setting and evaluation.

According to Stoller (2006), for effective conten-based testing and assessment to take place, educators need to make sure that content-based testing has a process and product orientation, requires student involvement in topic selection in order to encourage active participation and a sense of ownership in the experiment, extends over a period of time, is structured in such a way that integration of skills is natural, makes students work both in groups and on their own, requires learners to assume responsibility for their own learning through the process of selecting, gathering, processing and reporting of information acquired from a number of sources (e.g. the World Wide Web, library), results in a tangible end product (e.g. a theatrical performance or multimedia presentation), and concludes with an evaluation of the process and the end product.

4. Babelium: Language e-assessment platform

The tool we use, Babelium, is a web application to practice oral language in a collaborative way, developed by the research group GHyM of the University of the Basque Country. Users can use Babelium directly from their browsers without having to install any other application. Babelium allows users to display video-recorded conversations, usually involving 2 or 3 people, in several languages (English and Basque in this first beta stage). The usual workflow will be the following: having viewed one of the videos, the user can choose to take the role of one of the characters and perform the associated dubbing. That is, after selecting the role you want to dub, the video will start playing until the time for the selected role comes, at which point Babelium will record the user's voice (via the microphone and, if the user wishes, also image from his/her webcam). Just as in real life, the time-frame to respond is limited, equaling the amount of time taken by the character in the original video. When the user completes the dubbing of the conversation, he/she will have the option of reviewing his/her work. When the user determines that the recording is correct, he/she will upload it to the server so that it will be available for evaluation by other users. This evaluation is done collaboratively, e.g. if the recording was done in Basque, the Basque-mastering users will have the chance to judge the user's performance. This assessment may also include text comments and/or video-comments.

5. Use of Babelium in English classroom

Firstly, by using the Internet, students have to connect to a public Internet Protocol (IP) address that leads to our internal Babelium server. If students already have an account, they have to identify themselves by clicking on the Login link. Otherwise, they will have to register in the system, specifying their personal data and English language skills. Once they are logged in, Babelium has three optional setup modules (just to be sure that users fulfill all the requirements). The first recommended step is to test their microphone, webcam and connection bandwidth. It is a straightforward process. First, students click on the "Configuration" tab where they can find three options: "Webcam setup", "Mic setup" and "Bandwidth check". They use the "Rec" button to try to record something and the "Play" button to play the recording back. The system will detect a proper configuration or will give them some hints about what is wrong. The "Bandwidth check" module will allow the user to check his or her connection speed. Once students have checked the minimal requirements to use Babelium, they go to the home page by clicking on the "Home" tab. There, they will see some videos prepared to assist them to improve their foreign language (FL) speaking skills. After fulfilling

these steps, students start taking the tasks prepared by the team of instructors beforehand. Thus, our students were previously instructed in order to acquire a good level of mastery

Tasks were the following:

Lvel B 2:

Reading-aloud text and oral presentation about semantic fields covered through the course: By doing so, instructors make sure that students used materials given at class.

Voice over task: Students analyze a clip taken from a film, and adopt the role of one of the characters. The system allows students to check the written dialogue, and for this level of competence, subtitles can be seen on the screen.

Level C 1:

Oral presentation: This exercise fulfills the same requiirements, vocabulary instructed in class was used as a content-based material.

Exercises were evaluated following a Likert scale (5 crietria: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and creativity, and 5 scales: very good, good, satisfactory, poor, and very poor):

6. Participants

The tool has been carried out by a team of professors of English Language in the degree of English Studies and Philology at the University of the Basque Country (academic courses 2012-2013 and 2013-2014). There have been three courses in which the mixed assessment (final exam and virtual oral testing tasks):

1st course Philology High Grade (level B 1 +)

1st courses: English Studies High Grade (level B 2)

2nd course: English Studies High Degree (level C 1)

The participants of these groups have taken different testing tasks by using our online application, Babelium. Students of the Grade of Philology has taken the Reading aloud Text testing task. Students from the 1st course have taken oral presentations related to some speaking topics included in the materials instructed in class. Students from the 2nd course has taken the voice-over testing task.

7. Description of the testing tasks

Reading aliud testing task

Reading aloud text was extracted from a novel written by a member of our teaching staff (Gielete, R., The Explorer of the Chest). By doing so, the teaching materials and the text extracted was controlled by the group of professors that have taken part in this experience. The text was inserted on the application and students have had the choice of printing the text or even read it on the screen. Students have a limited amount of time to take the exercise.

Voice over

Students from the 1st course of English Studies degree have taken the voice over testing task. This activity consists of adopting the role of an actor/actress in a clip from a film. This activity implies more practice practical sessions on Babelium application. The level of competence increases the difficulty of the activity, just because the conversations inserted on the application demands a hiagher speed and command of oral language skills.

Oral presentation

Students from the 2nd course (level C 1) have taken the oral presentation. First, instructors have taught the vocabulary material included in the syllabus. Students were instructed about how to present an oral presentation properly, that is, rhythm, intonation, and pronunciation patterns. By doing so, we pretend to control the criteria we demand from the testing task. Students have a limited time (6-8 minutes).

8. Assessment process

Once students have performed their corresponding testing tasks, instructors start the assessment procedures. For the Reading aloud testing task the criteria were pronunciation, intonation ad rhythm. As for the Oral presentation the criteria are grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm and originality. For the Voice over testing task the criteria have been rhythm pronunciation and intonation patterns.

Instructors have used a 5 point Likert scale (very good, good, enough, poor and very poor. Students received their grades immediately in their students´ university email accounts. Besides, instructors make comments about their testing tasks (by including texts or videos), and even, students can make questions about these comments. By doing so, this interaction ensures one of the main educational goals, cooperative and collaborative teaching and learning process.

9. Conclusions

The team of professors believes that the use of Babelium application has been very useful to make students practice on a content-based testing tasks. By using this tool, students practice more on their oral skills, and implies more effort in order to improve their command on oral competence. Students of language as a second language, in our case, English language, have the option of practicing as much as they can (instructors control the amount of time devoted to the practice and the number of attempts students have taken).

On the other hand, interaction between the instructor and the learner implies a higher level of motivation, and the experience of helping students to take their exercises have increased the grades as compared to other groups of learners that have not taken these virtual testing tasks.

Finally, as students complete a final survey about their experiences on Babelium application, instructors and technicians who control the online tool adopt students´suggestions for further academic coirses and groups of learners.

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