A Blended-learning Pedagogical Model for Teaching and Learning EFL Successfully Through an Online Interactive Multimedia Environment

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ABSTRACT

Faced with the need to teach English to a large number of students, the *Universidad de Concepción*, Chile, has created an innovative Communicative English Program using ICT, which is made up of four modules covered in four academic terms. The English program aims to develop integrated linguistic skills with a focus on learning for authentic communication. The program has been implemented in a blended-learning (b-learning) pedagogical model that includes: (a) learners' work with *UdeC English Online*, software conceived as the backbone of the entire Communicative English Program, (b) online monitoring, (c) face-to-face EFL teacher-led classes, and (d) conversation classes with native speakers of English. The online software is an interactive multimedia environment which houses all the materials and ICT tools that learners need in one central web platform. Some of the core concepts underlying its design are multimodal L2 input exposure, enhanced input, learner-fit content delivery, interaction (human-computer, human-human, and intrapersonal) through computer supported collaborative and individual learning tasks, as well as a more human-like dimension for positive and corrective feedback. This paper describes the elements of the b-learning model, issues about its implementation, and results obtained in the piloting of its first module.

KEYWORDS

EFL and ICT, Blended Learning, E-Learning, Interactive Multimedia Environments for SLA, Feedback, Teachers' Roles

CONTEXT

The government of Chile seeks to offer Chilean citizens equal opportunities to build the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in a highly competitive global environment in a new scenario of trade agreements with the United States, the Asia-Pacific region, Canada, and the European Union. Two of these so called "skills for the coming challenges" (as agreed on by the Ministers of Education

of the participating economies in Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation 2004 in Santiago, Chile) are (a) proficiency in English and (b) competence in the use of information communication technology (ICT).

The average level of English that Chilean students learn at state-maintained and subsidized schools is insufficient to enable them to function effectively. Diagnostic assessment figures[1] show that after more than 600 hours of instruction the majority of students do not reach a basic level of performance. The Ministry of Education has therefore allocated resources to improve and strengthen the teaching and learning of English in the present decade at the public school level through programs such as "English Opens Doors" (http://www.ingles.mineduc.cl) and at select tertiary educational institutions through MECESUP projects (http://www.mecesup.cl).

Today, when students finish their study programs, they are faced with a highly competitive work force that currently calls for professionals with a high proficiency in English, especially in speaking. Faced with this reality, the *Universidad de Concepción* (http://www.udec.cl), one of the three leading universities in the country with an enrollment of 20,000 students coming mainly from state-maintained or subsidized schools, has relied on the potential of ICT to create a system to teach English more effectively. The main goal is to facilitate students' proactive participation in an increasingly global society and give them opportunities to have an equal chance of success when applying for a job—or for a scholarship to pursue graduate studies—on a par with professionals from more privileged economic sectors in which there are greater opportunities to learn foreign languages. In 2001, the university won a MECESUP grant,[2] which gave rise to the creation of *UdeC English Online*, an interactive multimedia language learning program on a web-based platform, that was conceived as the backbone of a new Communicative English Program at the university.

THE COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM BLENDED-LEARNING MODEL

The English program aims to develop integrated linguistic skills, with an emphasis on listening comprehension and oral production and a focus on learning for authentic communication. It has been implemented through a blended learning (b-learning) strategy. In general, b-learning is defined as a combination of technology and classroom instruction in a flexible approach to learning that recognizes the benefits of delivering some training and assessment online but also uses other modes to make up a complete training program which can improve learning outcomes and/or save costs. According to some authors, there are as many b-learning models as there are organizational challenges (Reid-Young, 2003; Marsh, McFadden, & Price, 2003).

Our model combines (a) learners' independent work on a dedicated platform with the *UdeC English Online* software, (b) face-to-face EFL classes led by teachers who are also students' online tutors, (c) online monitoring carried out by these teachers, and (d) weekly conversation classes with native speakers of English. The decision concerning the elements to be included in our blend was made taking the following factors into account:

1. Students' preferences for learning methods
   The information obtained through target learners' focus groups showed that students prefer face-to-face classes to online learning. They mentioned the feelings of isolation they had experienced in other subjects they had taken in an e-learning fashion. They expressed the wish that even though teachers may place the learning materials and the tasks on the website, they want more opportunities for face-to-face interaction with the teacher and peers, something which they regard as fundamental for their motivation.
2. Students' need to communicate effectively in English
   Technology would give learners more opportunities for exposure to L2 input and interaction, with the possibility of many hours of independent work at their own pace.
3. Students' need to reach two goals: learning English and mastering ICT
   Students need to achieve not only the goal of learning English effectively but also mastering the use of ICT.

The complete Communicative English Program is made up of four modules implemented in the *UdeC English Online* web platform and lasts a total of two academic years. Each module runs over a 15-week term, including 1 week at the beginning of the term for system familiarization sessions and for diagnostic evaluation and 1 week at the end of the term for final assessment. Each module contains about 100 hours of interactive language learning tasks.

The linguistic competence level to be achieved through the modules has been determined in line with the levels of the Common European Framework (http://www.coe.int). Learners are expected to reach an "independent user" B-1 level, although a B-2 level might also be expected for hard-working learners. Students are currently asked to complete the European Language e-Portfolio (ELP) (http://www.eaquals.org/portfolio/default.asp) to help them reflect on their language-learning process and to plan their learning objectives.

SYLLABUS

A topic-based, learner-centered curriculum has been designed to meet learners' needs and interests. Syllabus content has been developed taking account of the target learners' profile that emerged from work carried out with focus groups on campus. This profile included information about learners' personal motivation to learn English, their favorite free-time activities, plans to study or work abroad, and information they believed a person would need to be able to communicate when living in a foreign country. They also reported on their expectations for an English course and their perceptions of a good English teacher.

Through Modules 1 and 2 students learn the language they need to know in order to meet people, talk about part-time jobs, free-time activities, people, places, and so forth. Module 3 builds on the daily-life situations of recent graduates who may wish to travel to English-speaking countries to pursue graduate studies or careers. Module 4 deals with working in an English cultural environment; students

get practice in job interviews and learn about interpersonal relations, customs, and traditions.

OVERALL PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

The English program integrates a combination of task-based language-learning approaches with content-based instruction and computer-supported collaborative learning (Flowerdew, 1993; Long & Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 1989; Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, & Linnell, 1996; Doughty & Long, 2003; Warschauer, 1997; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Warschauer, Shetzer & Meloni, 2000). Students are encouraged to develop their autonomous learning abilities and to work towards fulfilling their language-learning goals. It has a strong cultural component aiming at the development of the learners' cultural awareness (Canale & Swain 1980; Byram & Fleming, 1998) and at learning the target language together with features of its culture. In conversation classes, both Chilean students and American teachers work together discussing their commonalities as well as their differences and exchange information about their cultural backgrounds. Research findings show that developing a positive attitude towards the target language culture or fostering an integrative orientation focusing on similarities between L1 and L2 cultures facilitates language acquisition (Robinson, 1993).

In this language-learning system, the computer plays the role of a tool (Crook, 1994; Levy, 1997; Kern & Warschauer, 2000) because it provides the media that students use to access information and to interact with other speakers in English. It serves as a resource and catalyst for socially constructed knowledge and understanding (Snyder & Palmer, 1986; Penfield, 1987; Papert, 1993; Winograd & Flores, 1988) and a support to encourage collaborative activity, making it possible to integrate authentic and creative communication in the English program. It also plays the role of a tutor (Coley & Griffin, 1987; Levy, 1997) because it is used to deliver input in multimodal channels in learning tasks that allow students to practice their language skills.

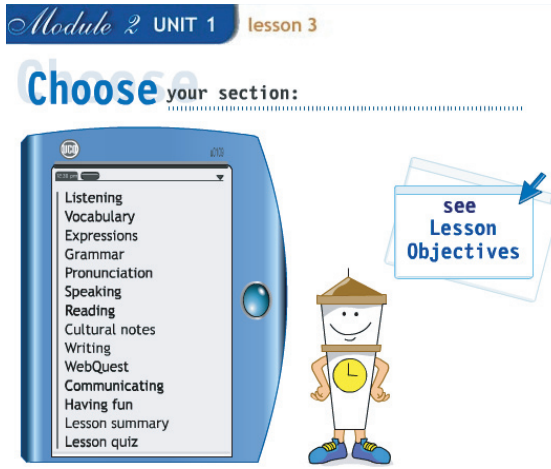
THE UDEC ENGLISH ONLINE INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The *UdeC English Online* system is made up of four modules housed in one central web platform which contains all the materials (see Figure 1) and tools learners need for their language-learning work, such as recorders, wordbook, voice/written chat, discussion forum, message board, reference material, portfolio, progress report, personal diary, and agenda, among other functionalities.

The pedagogical model underlying the environment takes into account the capabilities of network multimedia applications, criteria for the development of multimedia CALL drawn from cognitive, sociocognitive, and interactionists' perspectives on SLA (Skehan, 1998; Chapelle, 1998, 2001, 2003; Ellis, 1999; Gass, 1997; Krashen, 1981, 1982; Long, 1996); the conditions for optimal language learning environments (Egbert & Hanson-Smith, 1999); methodological principles for task-based language teaching in distance learning (Doughty & Long, 2003); criteria for CALL tasks appropriateness (Chapelle, 2001) such as language

learning potential, learner fit, meaning focus, authenticity, positive impact, and practicality; design issues for computer applications for second language acquisition (CASLA) materials (Chapelle, 2001) like input, feedback, content, management, control; and a range of teaching methodologies for network-based language teaching and e-learning pedagogy (Chapelle, 2003, 2005; Chapelle & Jamieson, 2002; Chun & Plass, 2000; Warschauer, 1997; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Warschauer et al., 2000; Felix, 2003). Some of the core concepts underlying the language-learning materials are multimodal exposure to L2 input, enhanced input for noticing selected key linguistic features in each lesson, learner-fit contextualized content delivery, interaction through computer supported collaborative and individual learning tasks, and a more human-like dimension for positive and corrective feedback. In addition, efforts have been made to make learners feel at home and entertained while working with the software. Students get to feel they belong to a language learning community, the *UdeC English Online* community.

Figure 1
Lesson Components



Input

Learners are given ample opportunities for L2 input exposure through different channels (written, aural, and visual) to support their different cognitive styles. L2 aural input is delivered through a variety of intensive and extensive listening activities designed in a way to provide opportunities to focus on meaning and form. Learners are also encouraged to watch films and to listen to television and radio programs in English for additional extensive listening.

The online software makes use of devices for explicit enhancement of input, such as marking specific aural or written forms through colors, enlarged letters, stress, animations, and other modifications and elaborations. This is done with the purpose of increasing learners' chances to notice selected forms focused on in particular lessons to positively influence their acquisition (Chapelle, 1998, 2003;

Chapelle & Jamieson, 2002; Schmidt, 1990; Robinson, 1995; Skehan, 1998; Sharwood Smith, 1993; Doughty, 1991).

Content Delivery

The semantic and linguistic contents are delivered through videos produced in-house and audiovisual recordings depicting real characters—international and national students, foreign teachers, and visitors to Chile—interacting in dialogues on a central theme in sociocultural environments based in both Chile and the United States.

Interaction Through Tasks

The language-learning tasks have been designed to engage learners in three types of interaction: interpersonal communication, learner-computer, and intrapersonal (learner-mind) (Chapelle, 2003; Ellis, 1999). Learners are encouraged to interact with their partners in problem-solving or information-gap activities and games. They have to work collaboratively in computer-supported activities relying on both computer-mediated and face-to-face communication with other speakers, both from their local community (classmates) and from the global community (foreign students on campus and abroad). Learners have opportunities to negotiate meaning and to focus on form as they speak to and get feedback from their partners and teachers. Virtual recording tools for practicing pronunciation and speaking skills, which allow learners to interact with video characters and record role plays, are provided to maximize their opportunities to focus on output. With regard to intrapersonal interaction, as learners perform their skill-practice activities on the computer, they can make use of locally produced devices such as a vocabtool,[3] available on request, as well as glosses, pictures, and hypertext, all of which facilitate making connections between meaning and form. Learners also have the ability to highlight content they consider salient for themselves. They can choose vocabulary items, favorite expressions, syntactic forms, and so on and record them in their online wordbook or notepad.

Feedback[4]

Feedback has been one of the key concerns in the design of the software materials. Research findings on effective corrective feedback strategies suggest that elicitation, metalinguistic cue, clarification request, and repetition types of feedback lead to student-generated repair, and students are thus able to initiate negotiation of form (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Other studies suggest that answer-prompting strategies (e.g., elicitation, metalinguistic cue, and clarification requests) may be more effective for dealing with vocabulary and grammar errors (Ferreira, 2003; Ferreira, Bañados, & Salazar, 2004-2006).

An effort has been made to implement some of these findings in the software materials. When students answer a question incorrectly, the system guides them towards the correct response by means of a written or oral response through elicitation, metalinguistic cue, or clarification request corrective feedback strategies

in a more human-like dimension, going beyond the typical "that's right/that's wrong" type of feedback. Feedback is usually provided immediately after learners give an incorrect response to help them repair their error while their focus of attention is still on the item they have failed to answer correctly because effectiveness of feedback tends to diminish as distance between the triggering event and feedback increases (Doughty & Long, 2003). After finishing a task, learners get an automatic feedback message that consists of a written or spoken comment plus a mark and a reaction of the section coach (coach smiling, jumping, nodding, etc.) associated with the score (on a 1-7 scale normally used in the Chilean education system).

WHAT HAS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE B-LEARNING ENGLISH PROGRAM MEANT?

Change in Teachers' and Students' Roles

Both teachers and students have been challenged by new roles which are coherent with the ones described in the literature when technology is integrated in the class. In general, teachers are guides and collaborators who support students and provide feedback. They challenge learners' thinking and design language learning tasks. Students are autonomous learners who participate actively and are responsible for their learning process. (Levy, 1997; Squires & MacDougall, 1997; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Stoller, 1997). Some of the key roles that the implementation of the b-learning program has brought about are described below.

CALL Material Designer and Developer

The university has its own e-learning platform for distance education which had to be adapted to meet the requirements of a user-friendly multimedia language-learning environment. The project coordinator defined all the tools and functionalities that had to be integrated into the platform by the team of technicians. The guidelines about the underlying theoretical principles had to be clearly established in order to apply them to the design and development of the software. The team of EFL teachers had to review existing language software and think about adapting current ways and creating new ways to design the tasks and develop the materials. This meant devising motivating ways to engage learners in language tasks presented through a computer screen. This process demanded hundreds of hours of discussing possibilities, sharing ideas, and jointly planning lessons. As a result, the course is not simply a computer version of a textbook, instead, the materials design takes advantage of the creative potential of the EFL teaching team and technicians and the potential of the computer to provide interactive and engaging tasks for learners.

Script Writer

The teaching team agreed on the central theme and set the story line and the characters for developing the software materials. Having this baseline, the process

of writing the scripts for the audios and videos to be recorded for each lesson involved making decisions on pedagogical issues such as how to present the linguistic functions, grammar, vocabulary, sociocultural aspects, levels of formality, and so forth in core dialogues that would fit the learners and the linguistic goals of the course. A bank of unscripted audio material related to the topics of the lessons was created for extra listening practice.

Manager and Producer of Media Resources

The teachers are responsible for providing the technicians with audiovisual media for the software. This task includes instructing the speakers on their poses for the pictures and audio recordings; setting the guidelines for the graphics to create animations, cartoons, and picture arrangements; and guiding the video production. When the texts are recorded, the teaching team takes turns directing the characters to speak with the intonation, pitch, speed, pronunciation, and attitude needed. All the audios are later double checked for approval by the coordinator. Video-recording sessions require that part of the team be in charge of producing the setting, guiding and encouraging the characters to perform the dialogues as scripted, explaining the planned scenes to the producer, and helping video technicians in the editing of the final video product.

Work Flow Manager

The coordinator and teaching team communicate the requests for the designed materials to the software developers and make sure they are implemented as conceived. The teaching team is in charge of coordinating the smooth flow of the development of software materials. This is a cyclical process involving discussions with technicians, working jointly on the details of the materials for each section of a lesson, reviewing the software materials on the computer screen, writing reports about the revision of each section's materials, re-reviewing to check if corrections have been implemented, and re-writing reports for pending corrections. This was one of the most time-consuming tasks for the team.

Online Tutor

As online tutors, teachers help learners build their confidence as they get used to working independently online. They post messages to the group as a whole—and to each student individually—to meet their need for support. They may post explanations to guide learners in more complex tasks, encourage them to communicate, do their individual assignments, and use all the platform tools they have at their disposal to facilitate their work. Tutors check and mark the online assignments, fill in learners' progress reports, and write feedback on their performance in their online portfolios. They continuously track learners' improvements and give encouragement when motivation begins to falter. They have to encourage learners to carry out their collaborative work tasks, which is usually difficult because of the students' different schedules and the fact that they are not used to working collaboratively to achieve language-learning tasks.

Being teachers and online tutors has introduced beneficial qualitative changes in teachers' roles, but it has also meant a quantitative increase in the number of hours dedicated to learners. Teachers spend only 1.5 hours a week in face-to-face classes, but they spend a larger number of hours managing learners' work in the online environment.

Manager of the Language Learning Environment

Teachers have to orchestrate diverse variables in the learning environment to create favorable conditions for SLA. This has meant having a closer interaction with learners, making them feel safe and comfortable when they speak in the target language, and supporting them with a positive attitude to help them communicate their ideas and concerns. Teachers also have to help learners develop learning strategies and become autonomous and confident learners able to manage a language learning system which relies strongly on their ability to work independently. They find that they have to build on the work students do independently online and reinforce that work in their face-to-face classes. Finally, they have to identify learners who may be experiencing particular problems and help them address their language weaknesses in remedial work sessions if necessary.

Opening Communication Channels with a Multidisciplinary Team

One of the challenges of the project was finding a common language that could be understood by everyone in a multidisciplinary team of teachers, technicians, graphic experts, and video producers in order to create an online language-learning environment that conformed to the original idea. This meant reaching agreement and working collaboratively making the most of the team's substantial talents to make the platform and software materials visually appealing and effective.

Devising Assessments

Creating assessment procedures to evaluate both learners' face-to-face and online work meant finding ways to keep the right balance among the elements of the b-learning system in line with the course objectives. Speaking skills are assessed in face-to-face sessions and contain, among other tasks, a problem-solving activity with a partner. All the other skills that can be automatically corrected by the computer are assessed through online lesson and unit quizzes. Thus, listening, reading, vocabulary, pronunciation discrimination, and integrated skills[5] are evaluated online. Students take a total of eight online quizzes in each module (6 lesson quizzes plus 2 unit quizzes). Writing skills are assessed by the teachers in the assignments submitted to an online portfolio.

PILOT GROUP EVALUATION

The results briefly reported here correspond to a pilot group of 39 students who enrolled in the first presentation of module 1 in the second academic semester (August-December) of 2004.[6] Instruments were created with a two-fold purpose:

measuring (a) the impact of the entire Communicative English Program on the learners' linguistic competence and (b) their level of satisfaction with the program. The improvement in language skills was assessed in a longitudinal fashion, comparing the learners' scores on the initial diagnostic test and final end-of-term test. Learners' satisfaction with the program was investigated in a survey.

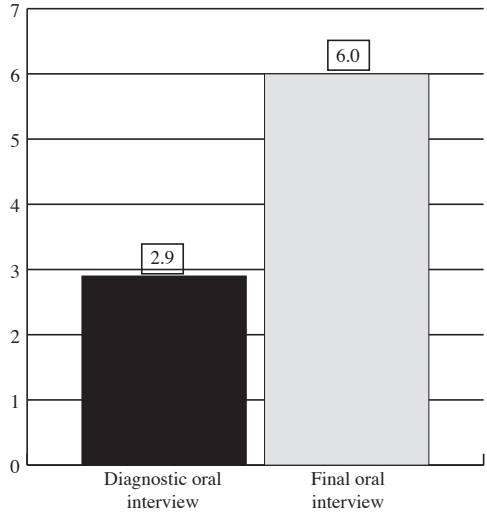
Impact on Students' Linguistic Competence

The results obtained by students in the diagnostic and final assessments are presented in the figures below on a 1 to 7 grading scale.

Speaking Skills

Figure 2 shows a comparison of the pilot group mean scores on the diagnostic oral interview with those obtained in their final oral exam. A remarkable improvement in speaking skills, going from a mean of 2.9 to a 6.0, was achieved over a 15-week period.

Figure 2
Comparison of Mean Scores on the Diagnostic Oral Interview and Final Oral Interview



Other Skills

Figures 3 and 4 show comparisons between the mean scores on diagnostic test 1 and unit test 1 and diagnostic test 2 and unit test 2 in listening, vocabulary, integrated skills, reading, grammar, and pronunciation. Diagnostic test 1 and unit test 1 cover the contents of the first unit of module 1 (lessons 1, 2, and 3). Diagnostic test 2 and unit test 2 cover the contents of the second unit of the module (lessons 4, 5, and 6). As can be observed in Figures 3 and 4, there were important

improvements in all the skills, especially in listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

Figure 3
Comparison of Mean Scores on the Diagnostic Test 1 and Unit Test 1

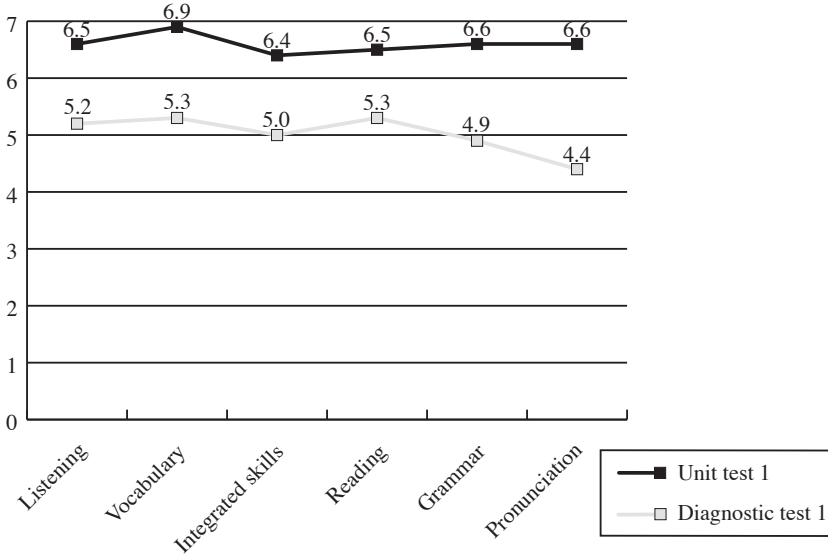
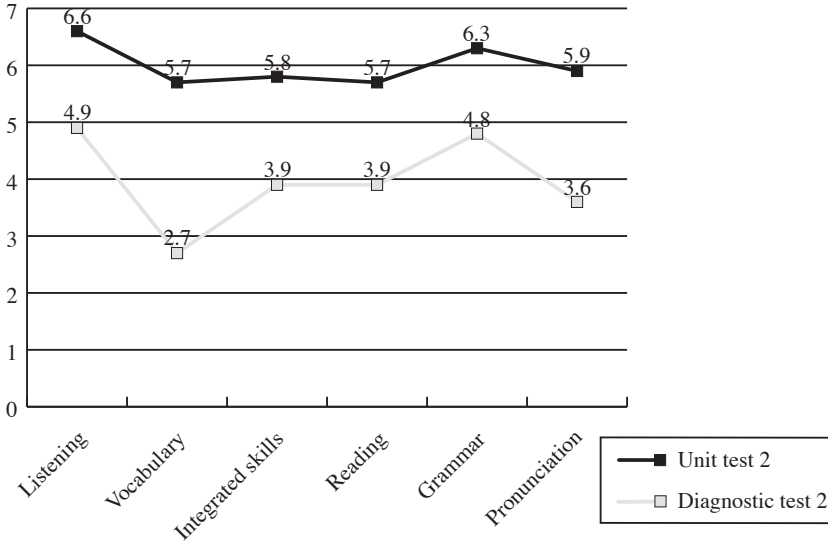


Figure 4
Comparison of Mean Scores on the Diagnostic Test 2 and Unit Test 2



Learners' Satisfaction with the English Program

Thirty-seven students completed a satisfaction survey at the end of module 1. The results expressed in average percentages on a 5-point Likert scale are summarized in the chart in the appendix. The questions focused on the b-learning system, autonomy, motivation, face-to-face classes, conversation classes, teachers, feedback, achievement of learning goals, assessment, and time allotment. As can be seen, the overall results are very favorable, showing a high level of satisfaction. There is some negative feedback related to the time allocated per section: 32% of the students felt they needed more time to finish all the sections contained in a lesson.

CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained with the pilot group in module 1 show a substantial improvement in the students' language skills, as well as high satisfaction levels with the entire Communicative English Program. The results support the success of the b-learning model implemented and are commensurate with the efforts of the team over 4 years to create an online interactive multimedia language learning environment.

According to some authors "a blend is an integrated strategy to delivering on promises about learning and performance" (Rosset, Douglis & Frazee, 2003). Our pilot group results have been rewarding enough to lead us to believe that these promises can become a reality. They give us new hope to believe that teachers and students can succeed in their goal of teaching and learning English more effectively, given the state of the art of ICT and government support to English teachers.

NOTES

[1] For a report on Cambridge diagnostic assessment see http://www.ingles.mineduc.cl/index_sub2.htm?id_contenido=685&id_seccion=28&id_portal=8

[2] MECESUP Project UCO-109, "Centro promotor de la innovación en la docencia."

[3] Vocabtool combines pictures, definitions, examples of use, and Spanish translations of lexical items.

[4] The feedback component of this paper is in the context of the Conycit FONDECYT-1040500 research project.

[5] The integrated skills component evaluates reading comprehension strategies and vocabulary use.

[6] Similar evaluation procedures continue to be carried out in the other modules.

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APPENDIX

Satisfaction survey

Results compiled from the surveys completed by students for module 1 of the Communicative English Program (N = 37)

A = entirely agree, strongly agree, agree
B = disagree, entirely disagree

	A	B
B-learning system and development of autonomy		
This method of learning has helped me realize that I am capable of organizing and carrying out autonomous learning.	97%	3%
The system of independent work with the software allowed me to have more opportunities to develop my linguistic abilities than a traditional class.	92%	8%
Working with the software was a great help for the learning process.	97%	3%
Motivation		
My level of motivation with regards to learning English has experienced a positive change as a result of the course.	95%	5%
I am very satisfied with the experience that I had through the English course.	100%	0%
Face-to-face workshops		
The face-to-face workshops were useful by helping me to clarify doubts that arose during my independent work online.	95%	5%
The face-to-face workshops helped me realize what linguistic points from the course were the most important.	92%	8%
Conversation classes		
The conversation classes helped me stop being afraid to speak English in front of other people.	84%	16%
Conversation classes are essential to improving the English learning process.	100%	0%
The native speakers were always prepared and willing to attempt to understand us when we tried to communicate with them in English.	97%	3%
The interaction with native speakers allowed us to become familiar with interesting aspects of a distinct culture.	92%	8%
Face-to-face class teachers		
The teachers used varied and interesting teaching methods.	100%	0%
The teachers showed that they were committed to helping us with the learning process.	97%	3%

Feedback		
The immediate feedback (finding out my grades and seeing my mistakes) was a source of motivation.	97%	3%
The feedback delivered by the software allowed me to become familiar with my weak areas and try to improve them.	97%	3%
The feedback that the tutors gave us regarding the Portfolio activities was useful and a source of motivation.	100%	0%
Achievement of learning goals		
I feel satisfied that I have been able to advance in my learning.	100%	0%
I was able to achieve the learning goals that I had made for myself at the beginning of the course.	95%	5%
Assessment		
The system of online assessment was adequate and satisfactory.	97%	3%
There were sufficient instances of assessments such that I could notice and take note of how much I had learned.	100%	0%
The assessments via interviews and interactions allowed me to evaluate how much I had learned.	97%	3%
Time allotment		
The stipulated amount of time (14 hours per lesson) for the online lessons of the course gave me enough time to work on each of the sections.	68%	32%
The duration of each English face-to-face class allowed for enough time to reinforce the material that I had learned independently.	81%	19%

AUTHOR'S BIODATA

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