**Article**

**ESELE: Independent language learning resources for Spanish at the University of Manchester**

**Abstract**

This paper describes ESELE (Enhancing the Spanish E-learning Language Experience), an innovative project that presents a comprehensive virtual learning environment with a wide variety of inbuilt e-tools and resources that aims to boost the independent learning of students of Spanish at all levels at the Language Centre, University of Manchester. The main objectives of the project are presented together with the structure of the various learning modules. Subsequently, the results of a student survey are put forward in order to provide an indication of the frequency of use, the usefulness and appropriateness of the materials, as well as the impact on the students' language skills. Finally, some comments and recommendations about the course components are suggested by the students. The outcomes indicate that the Blackboard-based e-learning platform resources proved to be beneficial, helped to improve the students' motivation and confidence, and encouraged autonomy by providing guidance and support throughout their multiple forms of interactive and collaborative practice.

**Keywords:** Independent language learning, Spanish

**1. Introduction**

Learner autonomy underpins language learning pedagogy (Benson 2001, Little 1991) as well as a wide range of CALL applications and computer-based educational materials (Warschauer 2002). For successful language learning it is paramount that learners take responsibility for their own learning i.e. planning specific goals, challenging themselves with motivating language input and evaluating their performance on a regular basis.

The combination of the Internet as a vast collection of authentic resources where educational content is freely made available together with the VLE as the platform for new technologies where content specific modules and good models with appropriate feedback can be disseminated university-wide helped us develop a compilation of interactive and hyperactive learning resources for the blended learning of Spanish via Blackboard at the University of Manchester Language Centre.

Given the extensive syllabus to be covered in language courses within the limited number of contact hours available it is a challenge for language tutors at the University Language Centre to include in their lessons significant components and specific activities aimed at raising the students' awareness and at the same time enhancing the comprehension and further practice of grammatical, lexical, functional, cultural, strategic and communicative issues. These weaknesses were addressed by developing and delivering a range of e-learning components that focus on a variety of topics catering for the interests, needs and learning styles of a broad spectrum of students from different degree programmes.

With the challenging coming of Blackboard as a new VLE at the University the Spanish tutors at the Language Centre decided to get the most of this time and revamp the resources available to students. This was the beginning of the ESELE project aimed at complementing face-to-face teaching and enhancing the students' language learning
experience by presenting them a variety of resources from relevant language specific content modules to interactive online assessment directly linked to the specific learning outcomes for each level, without ignoring synchronous and asynchronous discussions to promote sociocultural and collaborative language learning.

2. ESELE

ESELE (Enhancing the Spanish E-learning Language Experience) is a Blackboard-based project that focuses on the development and implementation of e-learning models catering for various levels of the CEF from Introductory Spanish (level A1) to Further Spanish (level C1), and provides a variety of independent language learning resources for an average of 300 students per academic year.

Figure 1. Main site of one of the Spanish courses.

The main aim of the project is to supplement and support the classroom-based linguistic activities with a view to raise the profile of the teaching and also to enhance the students' overall language learning experience.

The main objectives of the project are the following:

- To increase students' language acquisition
- To help them gain more motivation and autonomy by means of independent language learning resources.
- To make them more aware of the importance of involvement and engagement, good models, collaborative work, adequate resources and relevant feedback to notice some progression in their language skills.
- To boost their sociocultural learning by means of online authentic input and interaction.

The project developed seven general Spanish modules, namely, Introductory Spanish, Beginners, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Intermediate Business, Post-Intermediate and Further Spanish. Each learning modules presents:

- course information and course program with main objectives and learning outcomes, formative and summative assessment information, academic policies
for disability and mitigating circumstances, course outline and important dates, an overview of the course lessons and contents per week and a list of required and recommended books

- content-based language learning modules adapted for each level and with special emphasis on grammatical explanations of the aspects of the language that cause more difficulty to students

Figure 2. Snapshot of one of the grammar language content modules.

- a compilation of independent learning web links for each module divided into reading, listening, grammar, vocabulary, writing, speaking, culture and language tools
- a media library or database containing text, audio, video and image entries for each course
- interactive online assessment in the shape of cultural quizzes and self-tests (one per course programme unit, different for every course) containing reading, listening, grammar and vocabulary practice activities of various kinds (gap filling, multiple choice, true or false, jumbled sentence, matching and short answer) with hyperlinks to audio files and podcasts created by the tutors and also to online video extracts from authentic films, tv programs/series or videoclips providing automatic immediate feedback to the students
Figure 3. Snapshot of one of the online assessments.

- **Voiceboard** or tutor developed podcasts for pronunciation and intonation practice via peer learning activities that foster listening, guided and free speaking practice depending on the level
- discussion fora for directed collaborative writing practice revolving around topics seen in class and easily controlled by tutors via Group Manager

Figure 4. Extract from asynchronous written discussion.
Figure 5. Extract from one of the Pronunciation Voiceboard components.

- A glossary with target language definitions and bilingual terminology for specialised courses such as Business Spanish
- Language learning strategies to help students manage their own learning
- Other resources such as sample tests from previous years, role plays (audio files and transcripts), photos, PPPs and recommendations of books, music and films related to the Spanish-speaking world

Figure 6. Snapshot of some film recommendations for advanced students.

- Other communicative and collaborative tools (tutors and students' profiles, announcements, calendar, chat, who's online)
3. Student survey results

The ESELE project was to be developed from July 2008 to June 2009. By May 2009 the majority of the independent learning Blackboard-based resources were complete and we decided to run a general survey to test the level of satisfaction of our students regarding the various tools and functions implemented along the project. The survey was delivered to students in class at the end of semester 2 and contained some questions about their frequency of use, the sections that they found most and less useful, whether they had noticed any improvement in their language skills after having accessed the materials on a regular basis, and, finally, it also included some questions enquiring about the logicality of the site structure and its navigation, as well as the appropriateness of the learning materials themselves. Altogether 254 students from all levels participated in the survey. In the following lines we present a summary of our findings:

- Frequency of use: A majority of the students (62%) confessed having accessed the Spanish Blackboard site "sometimes", against a 22% who did it "rarely", a 15% who did it "very often", and only an 1% who never entered the site.

- Tools use: Grammar Tools was the most widely used tool (25%) by the students followed very closely by Discussions (23%) and Assessment (21%). In a lesser extend were the tools Weblinks (13%), Course Program and Information (9%), and Other resources (5%) accessed by the students. To our surprise Voiceboard (4%) was the less used tool.

- Usefulness: Most and less useful sections: Grammar Tools (24%) was the most useful tool for students followed by Course Program and Information (22%) and Assessment (18%). The students also regarded Discussions (15%), Weblinks (10%) and Voiceboard (5%) as useful for their learning and found the Chat and Who’s online functions (1% each) rather useless though.

- Improvement in language skills: A great majority of students agreed that the Spanish Blackboard resources had helped them improve their writing skills (40%) followed by grammar and vocabulary (27%) and reading comprehension (21%). The less developed skills according to students were oral comprehension (8%) and oral production (3%).

- Site structure and navigation: A majority of students agreed that the site was “rather/very” logical (73/20%) and “rather/very” easy to navigate (65/24%).

- Appropriateness of learning materials: Most of the students categorised the materials as “rather”/“very” appropriate (56/42%) and “rather”/“very” inspiring/motivating (68/20%).

In general the students provided very positive comments and suggestions about the new components. We present some of them below:

- Grammar Tools: It was regarded as “good practice and very useful, especially for revision”. The students found the grammar notes “concise and straightforward” as well as “quick and easy reminders that help simplify the tedious process of learning the intricacies of the language”.

- Course Program and Information: As expected they expressed it provided them with the information they needed to organise themselves e.g. constant deadlines, exams, etc. and helped them prepare for the classes.

- Assessment: This component received a wide range of encouraging feedback comments and proved to be one of the most efficient independent language tools to test progress prior to exams. Some of the students' comments that illustrate this are the following: "I find I can test myself on elements of Spanish that I need to improve”. "I find the unit exercises are especially useful, with the short audio and video clips because you can do it at your own pace”. “It provided me with interactive, constant feedback that helps to prepare for the exam”. “It allows for more independent learning and extra practice”.

...
receive an immediate report on progress that makes it easy to identify problem areas”.

- **Discussions**: Judging by the students’ comments, they enjoyed this tool because of the social element attached to it and because it had a positive impact on their written skills. Some of the students’ comments were the following: “It enables to know better our classmates and practice written skills”. “Discussions help me to use what I have learnt in the grammar session and improved my writing skills!” “You get the feeling of teamwork”. “It provides the opportunity to practice prolonged writing outside of class”. “It allowed me to see how other people work and to compare; it gave me ideas”.

- **Weblinks**: The students found that this tool introduced them to very interesting sites and resources they would not otherwise have found. Various students agreed that it helped them to improve their Spanish outside of class everyday and learn about the Spanish culture in a fun way.

- **Voiceboard**: The comments regarding this tool were few and diverse. A minority of students pointed out that they disliked the fact that their oral output was made public and that they either lacked the equipment or the confidence to explore its full potential. On the optimistic side some students from various levels reported that this tool can actually help you to improve your pronunciation at the same time you revise grammar and vocabulary and that it can actually help to increase your oral confidence.

4. Conclusion

The ESELE project developed a Blackboard-based learning environment, which combines content-based language learning materials with interactive online assessment activities, hypermedia and communication tools providing appropriate and motivating learning resources to foster the learners’ autonomy and supplement in-class program materials via a blended approach that is relevant to specific learning outcomes and attempts to accommodate different learning styles aiming at academic and personal development, thus making the learning progress more engaging and efficient in the long term. We believe that, like with any project, this is still work in progress and it is our intention to continue taking on board students suggestions to improve our site. In the future we would also like to incorporate new software such as blogs, wikis and e-portfolios and explore the potential of online social software and video conferencing for language learning purposes.

**Bibliography**


**Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to the Spanish language tutors at the Language Centre, University of Manchester, more in particular to Mayte Álvarez, Dr Sandra Torres, Esther Heredero and Ascensión Aguilar. Without their hard collaborative work and commitment this project would have never come to an end. I am also indebted to the e-learning team in particular to Hilary Pooley and Linda Irish, who have always been there to help us with continuous technical support and new ideas for improvement.
Related links

Spanish courses at the Language Centre, University of Manchester [http://www.langcent.manchester.ac.uk/foreign/leap/spanish/]

Ana Niño
University of Manchester, UK