EXPLORING VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR TOURISM

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Abstract: English learning/teaching can be optimized by employment of virtual environments where students can extend their practice outside the classroom walls towards forming and consolidating their basic skills, in a pleasant, creative, and relevant way. The current paper will showcase several Web 2.0 tools uploaded on Edmodo virtual learning environment in order to enhance collaboration and communication through creation of student-centered activities that would adapt to the students' learning styles and maximize their involvement in learning English for Tourism. Evaluation of the platform work was based on the students' unstructured feedback, which took the form of a creative Final Reflections Edmodo-assessment survey.

Keywords: virtual learning environments, English for tourism, Edmodo

I. Introduction

Among the crucial general competences that students majoring in Tourism need to form and consolidate during their undergraduate studies are the digital and communication in English skills, which are likely to assist them in facing the challenges of an ever growing competitiveness and internalization of the tourism market.

Current students are "digital natives"[6], exposed to an information boom and therefore, multitasking, fast in online communication, and avid users of technology. That is why our exploitation of social media and virtual environments [8] in English language teaching starts from the premise of their salient digital presence on Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo groups, etc.

Moreover, research on the impact of technology on teaching and learning shows manifold positive results such as improvement of performance in English, development of research skills, increase in the time devoted to reflection and task commitment [3]. Likewise, cooperation and collaboration between students as well as teacher-student communication, higher autonomy levels and possibility of adapting the material to the student's needs are high on the list of reported advantages [2, 4, 7, 8, 9].

The hypothesis of this class-size project-based empirical study is that exploitation of communication in teaching English to higher education students through Edmodo virtual learning environment is likely to maximize the students' contributions, involvement and motivation, which in turn conducts to the students' positive perception and satisfaction as far as the method of course delivery is concerned.

The next sections will focus on leveraging Edmodo virtual learning environment in English for Tourism classes, with a presentation of the platform features as well as Edmodo-customized activities to suit different learning styles and proficiency levels.

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1.1.Edmodo Virtual Learning Environment

Edmodo is a safe virtual environment similar to Facebook in many ways but whose features have been enhanced, so as to comply with the requirements of a learning platform [1]. Teachers can create groups and subgroups and therefore customize the students' learning, different students being able to work on different tasks simultaneously, with the teacher following their individual progress or obtaining statistics for the progress of the whole class. Posts can be filtered by: latest posts, assignments, recent replies, students, teachers, alerts, and quizzes, which make filtering an indispensable tool for ease of navigation. Assignment set-up is easy for any type of activity, either written or oral and multimedia (links or embeddings are supported); features such as: deadlines for turning-in with statistics (Fig.1), mentioning whether the homework was turned-in with revisions, in due time, or late, make Edmodo a practical, "green" and time-saving method, assisting teachers in a more objective, continuous evaluation. Teachers can also send regular notes, alerts, polls, quizzes and exploit applications for mobile learning



Fig. 1 – Edmodo-generated statistics

Unlike in real classes, privacy and autonomous work are ensured since assignments cannot be viewed by peers, unless the teacher chooses to make them public. In initial stages of assignment turning-in this may be desirable, therefore, it is up to the teacher to make certain contributions public by sending them to the group or by assigning them an *url*-address in order to provide best practice models.

II. Case study

2.1. Course Design Elements of English for Tourism

During the first year, Tourism undergraduate students of Dimitrie Cantemir University of Tirgu Mures have four contact hours/week (lectures + tutorials), the course purpose being the formation of all four basic skills, stress being laid on the oral skills during first and writing skills during the second semester. From the point of view of course design, English for Tourism is an *English-through* course [5], and the context is that of a large, mixed-ability group, leaving limited space for adjustment to the student's proficiency level and learning style as these have been evident during the introductory needs analysis.

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Therefore, in order to adapt to the students' proficiency levels, their preferred learning styles, and to maximize the time spent in the foreign language environment, we introduced the project-based evaluation, exploiting the Edmodo assignment feature, alongside a series of speaking and writing Web 2.0-based activities, after proper teacher modeling as well as online and class tutorials.

2.2.Edmodo Project

Students were introduced to Edmodo during the first classes and given the opportunity to interact with one another and the teacher, have access to materials in the Edmodo library and upload their productions as part of the final assessment. Of the 70 first year students, 37 (52.8 %) joined the platform and contributed in different proportions to the assignments whereas 10 students joined the platform and lurked, taking part in class discussions and polls but bringing no other significantly quantifiable contribution to be considered in the evaluation. Each of the nine teacher-modeled assignments envisaged consolidation of all four basic skills while exploring different Web 2.0 voice and writing tools. The next section will showcase writing/speaking assignments on Tourism English employed with first year students of Dimitrie Cantemir University during the academic year 2012/2013, and results of the Final Reflection Survey.

2.3.Tourism English-specific tasks

VoiceThread, Littlebirdtale and Storyjumper, among others, were selected and customized to the students' specific learning purposes:

1. **Speaking for Tourism** with *VoiceThread* (VT) on tourism topics, bringing arguments (destinations for Romanian tourists), explaining (trends in tourism), exemplifying (flying experiences) and using specific vocabulary (creation of a touristic product) while working on fluency and accuracy (Fig.2).



Fig. 2 Preparing a touristic product (https://voicethread.com/#q)

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This project generated 176 comments by 18 students, which, on a rough approximation would mean an extension of the students' talking time by at least three hours, without taking into consideration the time involved by the students' preparation and re-recording, the latter representing premise and evidence of learning.

2. **Advertising My Town** – with *Littlebirdtale* is a speaking and creative writing project. Students were advised to speak about those aspects of the town they were familiar with and employ commendatory language specific to advertising in order to attract potential tourists. Besides accuracy and variation of the language used, the evaluation grid was based on the use of discourse markers, originality, as well as exploitation of visual and linguistic advertising techniques (e.g. repetition, invitations, etc.) (Fig.3) .



Fig. 3 Advertising my Town (by Toni)http://www.littlebirdtales.com/tales/talePreview/story_id/224574/story_page_id/618993/

3. Students' opinions as to their satisfaction with the course content and delivery were obtained via the unstructured Reflections survey: **Final Reflections** with *StoryJumper* (http://www.storyjumper.com) a different kind of creative unstructured survey, which collected the students' reflections on their degree of satisfaction of working with Edmodo: how they learnt in the virtual environment, what was difficult and what was the added value of employing tools for English writing and speaking. As the project took the form of a digital book that was meant as a final present for the colleagues and the teacher, students perceived it as such rather than as a rigid survey and, accordingly, they felt less thwarted in expressing their opinions while at the same time practising the language and creating (Fig.4).

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Fig. 4 Final Reflections
(http://www.storyjumper.com/book/index/10713682/VentelAnne)

Almost invariably, students enjoyed the variety of tasks which could be solved by beginners and advanced alike since each student had the opportunity to work autonomously and at self-established pace and level. Students were proud about their final mini-projects and confessed that their confidence in speaking and writing in English increased significantly.
Listening and speaking tasks were invariably considered more difficult than writing. Creation of a different account for each assignment was an inconvenience, while in other cases technical issues (lack of headphones for recording) prevented some students from working more.

III. Conclusions

With Edmodo students significantly extend their English language exchanges outside the limited contact hours and are offered a large choice of activities that stimulate creativity and content creation, meet more learning styles and, through embeddable Web 2.0 speaking, writing and listening assignments, engage them in attractive and meaningful communication with one another and the teacher. Students involved in the project were extremely motivated to keep in touch with colleagues and the teacher, to visualize each other's contributions and presence and enjoyed creating in English with the suggested tools.
While teachers may appreciate the convenience of just-in-time evidence of class progress and continuous backchannel communication with their students, the latter, as evident from the final survey, express enthusiasm at the novelty of the approach, pride in their creations and more confidence in their ability to communicate in English.
Although our empirical findings are limited and need to be substantiated by further larger-scale studies, it is evident that Edmodo is a great learning management system that can be employed in stimulating student-centered foreign language communication

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