A CASE OF UTILIZATION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR SELF-ACCESS IN EFL: DESIGNING FREE-ACCESS WEB-BASED CONTEXTS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT. *This contribution presents a project funded by Castilla-La Mancha regional government aiming to provide citizens in the region with free access to materials and instruments for self-directed EFL learning by means of the network of public Internet centres across the region. The paper describes the organisation of learning materials and the development of online resources facilitating self-students' autonomous learning through a free-access e-learning platform created on the regional government's website to this regard. The methodology offered to users to carry out their autonomous learning, which integrates experiential-learning theory and the CRAPEL self-directed-learning framework, is also presented. Some teaching and learning implications of the experience for language learning are finally discussed.*
KEYWORDS: *self-access, experiential learning, EFL, e-learning platform, free-access web-based learning context*

RESUMEN. *Este trabajo da cuenta de un proyecto financiado por el gobierno castellano-manchego tendente a ofrecer a los ciudadanos de la región libre acceso a materiales y herramientas para el autoaprendizaje de la lengua inglesa a través de la red de centros públicos regionales de internet. Se describe la organización de los materiales de aprendizaje y el desarrollo de recursos online que faciliten el aprendizaje autónomo de los usuarios a través de una plataforma de e-learning creada en la página web del gobierno regional a tal efecto. Se presenta también la metodología que se recomienda a los usuarios para su labor de autoaprendizaje, y que integra la teoría del aprendizaje experiencial y el modelo de aprendizaje autodirigido del CRAPEL. Por último, se apuntan ciertas implicaciones de esta experiencia para la enseñanza y aprendizaje de idiomas.*
PALABRAS CLAVE: *autoaprendizaje, aprendizaje experiencial, inglés como lengua extranjera, plataforma de e-learning, contexto de aprendizaje en red de libre acceso*

1. INTRODUCTION: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND SELF-ACCESS AT A CROSSROADS

'Self-access' in learning may taken to be "the capacity of materials to be used independently by learners without the guidance or direction of a teacher" (Richards and Schmidt 2002: 474). Autonomy in language learning has become a well-established issue within language education research, with a fundamental influence on related areas such as distance education, CALL, teacher's roles, classroom practice, curriculum design, and so forth (cf. Gardner and Miller 1999; Scharle and Szabó 2000; Benson 2001; Loughran and Russell 2002; Lavid 2005).

Within the range of approaches to learning processes, 'experiential learning' may be characterised in terms of "the insight gained through the conscious or unconscious internalisation of our own or observed experiences which build upon our own past experiences or knowledge" (Beard and Wilson 2002: 16). Although earlier antecedents to the theory of experiential learning have been traced back, this approach is greatly modelled on Kolb's (1984) theoretical model, which conceives of learning as a cyclic process integrating: (i) immediate, concrete experience; (ii) reflexive observation; (iii) abstract conceptualisation; and (iv) active experimentation[1]. Kolb (1984: 21) maintains that personal experience provides "life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts" plus "a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process". In other words, experience alone being an insufficient condition for learning, it needs to be processed through conscious reflection.

As substantiated by Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikkonen and Lehtovaara's (2001) thorough overview, experiential learning has become a well-established teaching approach in (E)FL and (E)SL teaching contexts all over the world. Nonetheless, as Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikkonen and Lehtovaara (2001: 52) reveal, there have been hardly any attempts to integrate experiential-learning perspectives within self-access approaches to language learning.

2. A PROJECT IMPLEMENTING A FREE-ACCESS CONTEXT FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH ICTs

2.1. *Project background and goals*

In the context of the above-mentioned theoretical framework, this paper presents an ongoing project funded by Castilla-La Mancha regional government (no. 05/25, Consejería de Educación y Ciencia, Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha) aiming to provide citizens in the region with online access to materials and instruments for self-directed EFL learning. This project contemplates setting up an e-learning platform available through the government's website, which is planned to be accessed by individuals by means of the public network of Internet centres spread across the region. The experience attempts to guarantee basic tools of language learning to users who are unable to follow institutionalised face-to-face EFL learning programmes due to the social, economic, geographical and demographic characteristics of this area of central Spain[2]. Admittedly, given the free-access nature of the e-learning platform and the impossibility of controlling factors like potential users' previous knowledge of EFL or their commitment to learning, the project may not mean to be ambitious regarding the extent of language proficiency that users may aim to achieve, or the complexity and elaboration of materials on offer. Therefore, the overall purpose of the project is the starting-up of an e-learning platform offering users a free-access web-based context for their self-directed learning of EFL using the regional government's website. Organising online self-study materials and providing users with self-study strategies for their use are likewise secondary objectives derived from the project's main goal.

2.2. *Methods*

Considering the broad spectrum of users that might opt to employ the EFL self-study materials made available on the regional government's website, it has been decided that the methodology drawn upon for the design of the e-learning platform and its utilization by self-directed learners should combine technology- and learner-based approaches to autonomous language learning. As Benson stresses, 'technology-based' approaches "are similar in many respects to other resource-based approaches, but differ from them in their focus on the technologies used to access resources" (2001: 136). This seems to be the case in a project addressed at potential learners accessing EFL self-study materials through the Internet at its applications for language learning, and being thereby unable to use further types of materials often found in resource centres (e.g. books, videos, cassettes, etc.).

However, given that the project does not allow potential users to count on teachers or counsellors supervising their learning activity, a 'learner-based' self-directed approach "in which learners are encouraged to train themselves through *reflection* on self-directed activities" (Benson 2001: 143, emphasis added) has been chosen for the display of learning materials. Potential students will thus need to assume full responsibility for their utilization of learning resources and be able to learn from their own experience with the materials available by reflecting upon their autonomous interaction with the e-learning platform. These basic

requirements come to indicate that users will need to be provided with methodological tools integrating experiential learning models within an all-encapsulating self-study framework[3]. The CRAPEL self-access methodology (Gremmo and Riley 1995; Riley 1995; Holec 1996) has been chosen in this regard as a learner-based approach systematically developing sets of strategies for students to engage in independent-learning processes[4]. Following the CRAPEL model, self-students' work is tailored on the basis of a number of key learning factors including: (i) identification of learning needs; (ii) selection of appropriate materials; (iii) choice of working procedures and techniques; (iv) organisation of personal work (scheduling, length, duration of sessions); and (v) self-assessment. As described in the following section, the user-friendly self-study guide produced in this respect is part of the project results to date.

2.3. *Preliminary results*

As of April 2007, the online platform is still expected to take no less than half a year to be activated. At this point, the online materials have already been sent to Castilla-La Mancha Education and Science Department and are currently being uploaded to the regional government's website at <http://www.jccm.es>. At any rate, before uploading materials to the regional government's website, a detailed and selective web quest for free EFL online resources has been carried out. Such websites have been stored onto a database and organised following significant variables for EFL learning. Initially, the basic criteria for the cataloguing of websites comprised (i) grammar; (ii) vocabulary; (iii) reading; (iv) listening; (v) speaking; (vi) writing; (vii) pronunciation; and (viii) culture and civilization. Nevertheless, at this stage, resources have undergone more thorough cataloguing, so that learners may direct their self-access activity as far as possible by selecting materials according to their personal needs. Online resources have thus been catalogued on the basis of more detailed classification parameters[5]. Such categories are as follows:

- level:
    * beginners
    * intermediate
    * advanced
    * (post-)Proficiency
- field/speciality:
    * English for general purposes
    * English for specific purposes (business English / English for tourism / English for engineering / etc.)
    * International exams preparation in EFL (Cambridge First Certificate / TOEFL / Trinity / etc.)
- overall learning objectives and communicative skills:
    * oral comprehension
    * written comprehension
    * spoken production
    * written production
    * grammar
    * vocabulary
    * pronunciation and intonation
    * culture and civilization
- type of exercises and activities:
    * level and self-assessment tests
    * cloze tests

* rephrasing
          * multiple-choice exercises
          * repetition exercises and drills
          * comprehension activities
          * dictations
          * translations
          * guided activities
          * creative activities
    ▪ further categories of practice:
          * British and American English
          * register (formal and informal English / slang / spoken English / etc).

Apart from the compilation and systematic classification of websites made available in the e-learning platform, special emphasis has been being placed on the development of ICT-based resources facilitating self-students' autonomous learning. Following recent work on CALL (Horton 2000; Warschauer and Kern 2000; Hung and Khine 2006), users are encouraged to employ Internet collaborative tools for language learning. Thus, in addition to promoting the use of email for interacting with other language learners through EFL websites establishing contact among students around the world, a special section of the platform has been reserved for chatrooms, forums and newsgroups, which, having been traced on different EFL websites, create opportunities for written interaction – and spoken too in the case of voiced chatrooms. Users are similarly urged to employ programmes like Netmeeting© or Skype© for listening and speaking with other language learners in real time. As the platform has not started functioning to date, no results may yet be provided concerning its use in this respect.

Through a username and a password, the platform has been designed to allow subjects to create their personal online working space in an H-drive as part of the regional government's Internet server, which also supplies self-students with free email. Users may accordingly work in made-to-measure learning environments, saving their work online and monitoring their progress. Producing a simple and user-friendly guide suggesting self-study steps based on experiential-learning premises is thus part of the results to date. As it is, users are invited to devise their autonomous-learning programmes on the basis of a brief and unpretentious self-study guide designed in accordance with the organisation of materials in the online platform. The theoretical framework underlying this simple proposal for self-directed learning takes Kolb's (1984) experiential-learning cycle as a basic procedural pattern within the CRAPEL self-access model. Such guiding principles for the self-student are as follows:

1. Before beginning to work:
   a. Identify your learning objectives
       i. Choose your field of speciality in EFL
       ii. Select your level or take a level test
   b. Attempt to schedule your e-learning sessions regularly
2. Getting started – prioritise your communicative needs:
   a. Choose a language skill or an area of study
   b. Combine detailed explanation and practice
3. Try to learn from your own work:
   a. Start experimenting with the theoretical and practical materials that you have chosen

        b. Give yourself some reflection time to observe and analyse how the language works within the particular area in focus
             i. Use any supporting tools if necessary (e.g. further theoretical explanations)
        c. Aim to build up and remember the theory behind all your practice
             i. You may make notes on a learning journal to fix concepts and rules in your mind
        d. Move on to further experimentation with extra practice and look for connections in other areas (e.g. in grammar, skills…)
4. Don't forget:
        a. to do regularly the self-assessment tests provided on the website to check your progress
        b. to think about the progress that you are making and where you want to get
        c. to use this guide not only at the beginning of each session, but also to monitor your overall use of the materials of this website as a whole.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE

Self-access in language learning involves the use of "materials that are designed and organized in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own" (Sheerin 1991: 43). This is the philosophy underlying the free-access web-based learning context presented herein. As pre-negotiated with our funding body, the e-learning platform will not be operative until within at least half a year, but most of the materials have already been selected and organised, and currently being uploaded to the server of Castilla-La Mancha government's website. The contract signed with this institution involves a regular update of materials over a five-year period, which may be extended. Throughout this initial five-year period, logged users will be invited to submit online forms with questionnaires on the selection and organisation of online materials and their perceived value for learning English. The research team carrying out the project will consequently receive invaluable feedback for the updates of the online learning materials and their suggested self-access use.

Apart from the compilation, creation and cataloguing of learning materials, the production of a user-friendly guide for their self-directed utilization, and the current uploading process onto Castilla-La Mancha regional government's website at <http://www.jccm.es>, further results may not be provided as of April 2007, as the platform has not yet started functioning. At the time of delivering this paper in April 2007, the regional government still needs to complete the technical process whereby potential users will be able to save their work onto the website server's H-drive, thereby accessing their independent online working space through a username and a password. Whether individual users' personal-working environment will be possibly accessed not only from the network of public Internet centres (i..e *red de centros de internet de la JCCM*) across the region but also anywhere else, is still under Castilla-La Mancha's Education and Science Department's consideration.

Experiences like this may serve as a model for other institutions (e.g. regional and local governments) investing in lifelong-learning programmes or committed to facilitating language learning among citizens constrained by circumstances preventing them from following face-to-face learning programmes, for instance, in language schools. Different teaching institutions (e.g. universities, high schools and other public and private schools) may be similarly inspired by experiences like this to develop e-learning platforms offering backup programmes for their students. In fact, as we discuss in different works focusing on tertiary-education contexts (de

Gregorio-Godeo 2006a, 2006b), such free-access web-based contexts for language learning may be benefited from for the implementation of blended-learning programmes integrating traditional learning approaches and e-learning.

NOTES

1. For a thorough insight into the field, see Moon (2004: 103-121 and passim).
2. Being one of the largest regions in Spain, Castilla-La Mancha is highly underpopulated in comparison with the rest of the country. Public services are concentrated in a few major towns and cities, which has an isolating effect throughout the extensive rural areas (Cf. Díaz, Sierra, Vázquez and Zárate 1990).
3. Kohonen (1992) or Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikkonen and Lehtovaara (2001) are examples of adaptations of Kolb's (1984) framework to language teaching.
4. Somewhere else we substantiate the potential of the CRAPEL's self-access approach for learning programmes based on ICTs resources (de Gregorio-Godeo 2006a, 2006b).
5. Given the space constraints of a paper of this type, it would be impossible to provide the list of websites incorporated in the platform. Self-access cataloguing criteria are based on work by Cembalo (1994) as conforming to the CRAPEL self-access approach.

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