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Index

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Using Technology to Motivate Senior Students in Second Language (L2) Learning

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Abstract

Several articles have been published about the digital gap between young and adult learners. This article focuses on the use of ICTs in L2 learning by Senior Students enrolled in the Permanent Program of the University of Alicante (UPUA). Students participating in the subject *English Communicative Workshop* learn how to use different technological resources to increase the frequency of use of English, learn more vocabulary, build up their self-confidence in Speaking and Listening and increase their motivation in and outside of the classroom. This article shows some of the benefits resulting from the meaningful integration of ICTs in L2 learning for senior students.

Keywords: L2 learning, senior students, technology, motivation.

Introduction

Although language acquisition has been traditionally associated with the early stages of life several studies have been published about the learning of a second language or L2 after the so-called "critical period" (Klein et al 2014). Modern societies are nowadays more multilingual and technologically complex and the worldwide spread of computers, smartphones and ICTs today has facilitated the lifelong learning of foreign languages to an unprecedented level. Indeed, recent publications have highlighted the neurological benefits of learning a foreign language at a later stage even after retirement, such as keeping a healthy brain and preventing some neurological disorders (Li et al 2014) but learning a second language after retiring and keeping updated with the New Technologies may not always be easy for senior students aged 50 or older.

Some authors (Premsky 2001) pinpointed the digital gap between the younger and older generations, namely digital natives and digital immigrants. These concepts have been widely adopted and followed by researchers who tried to investigate the methodological differences between young and adult learners such as more multitasking, memory retention, social interaction, accuracy, etc.

The Permanent University of the University of Alicante (UPUA) has designed and implemented state-of-the-art courses and methodologies based on modern technologies as part of their academic program. Senior students enrolled in the UPUA program have every year a wide range of subjects to choose in most fields of study, such as Humanities, Sciences or Technology. ICTs and L2 learning have become key components in this academic program. A subject of particular interest is the *English Communicative Workshop*, which will be analysed next.

Methodology

The *English Communicative Workshop* is divided into three consecutive courses corresponding with three different levels, Workshop 1 for beginners, Workshop 2 for intermediates and Workshop 3 for advanced learners. Each workshop includes fourteen three-hour class sessions and a group of approximately twenty students regularly meet twice or three times per week to learn English. First, students complete a pre-test about their technological affinity and about their level of English. Nearly two thirds of the students enrolled in this class are women, 40% of all the students are aged 50 to 59, 50% are 60to 69 and 10% are 70 years or older. All students have a computer at home and a smartphone and nearly 40% of them have also a tablet. According to the pre-test, 46% of the students spend between 1 and 2 hours a day on their smartphones, 31% spend less than an hour, and 23% spend 3 hours or more every day on their phone. The main reasons to use their phones are Instant Messaging or IM with 87%, voice calls with 67%, web browsing with 53%, e-mail with 50% and social networking with 40%, and only 14% spend time with on-line shopping and 10% playing games.

The communicative workshops are aimed at reinforcing the communicative skills of senior students, particularly Listening and Speaking. For this purpose, a handbook specifically created for these classes is distributed among students the first day. This handbook includes vocabulary exercises and a limited number of questions related with different topics. Students need to learn the vocabulary at home and get ready for the interactive exercises, games and debates in class. The topics for each debate depend on the level of difficulty, for example Communicative Workshop 1 includes such topics as *Countries and Cultures, Family and Relatives, Animals and Nature*; Workshop 2 covers topics such as *Stereotypes, Traditions and Health*; Workshop 3 is comprised of themes such as *Education, Technology, Human Rights or Quality of Life.*

In addition, an IM group based on the app *Whatsapp* Inc. is created to encourage students to practise English outside of the classroom. The lecturer uses this IM group to provide daily different English materials to the senior students and to motivate them to get ready for the next class through articles, videos and links related with the topic of the day. Senior students are expected to contribute and participate as much as possible and share their comments and experience with other classmates thus becoming *'chatmates'* as well. So, the frequency of use of English increases considerably thanks to the adoption of an IM group for the language class. According to the pre-test results, 80% of the students had some previous experience as members of other chat groups but only 13% of them were involved in some academic chat groups as opposed to 67% who had a family-based chat group and 54% of the students who had an IM group just for friends.

The workshops are mostly practical and interactive based on ICTs and *gamification*. Rather than using a traditional approach and spending the whole class time reading texts and completing grammar-based exercises, students are encouraged to communicate in English and to put the vocabulary and knowledge they have previously acquired to practice. For this reason, different technological resources are used such as flashcards and mind maps, on-line videos, social networks and English-based apps and games. For example, students download free apps onto their mobile phones such as *Cram Flashcards*. Then, the lecturer shares with them through *Whatsapp* a different *Cram-based*. Students learn the words at home and use them as brainstorming to exchange their first opinions through the *Whatsapp* group.

Once in class, students play several interactive games based on different free apps such as *Kahoot* and *Quizziz*. Students can also watch a video while completing some questions on their mobile phones. Finally, a face-to-face debate about the topic of the day takes place and all students participate with their own ideas and comments.

Results and Conclusions

The post-test administered to the students the last week of class included a self-perceived progress level of English by the end of the course based on a seven-point Likert scale. All students indicated that the use of ICTs and an IM group were very positive as it helped them speak English more frequently, learn more vocabulary and improve their reading and writing skills through the *Whatsapp*. Besides, the adoption of an IM helped them build up their self-confidence in English and reduce their face-to-face language anxiety in class thanks to their sense of belonging to a group of *chatmates* and friends. Students also reported to know better their classmates thanks to the use of the *Whatsapp* group in English and to socialize and feel more motivated to learn about English and ICTs in general.

Instead of using technology to isolate students, ICTs were used to reinforce student interaction in and outside of the classroom and to adopt a game-based methodology in class in which all students could participate through cooperative learning and be more independent and self-confident in their own language learning progress. A few students also used some technological resources to practise and play together with their grandchildren at home as an example of intergenerational communication. This methodology has some challenges for the lecturer, such as time investment and dedication (on-call learning), implementation and monitoring and self-made created materials based on ICTs and synchronized with the in-class lessons and topics. A meaningful integration of ICTs in the English class for senior students can be a great success if well designed and implemented as clearly evidenced by the academic and personal benefits of the UPUA program at the University of Alicante.

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CV
Dr. Concepción Bru Ronda

Concepción Bru Ronda, who received her PhD in Geography from the University of Alicante in 1986, has been a Senior Lecturer at the Regional Geographical Analysis Department since 1987. She has taught at degrees, post-graduate programmes and master's degrees ever since. Since 1994, she has held various academic positions after the corresponding appointments, including those of Director of the Official Tourism School of the Generalitat Valenciana [Valencian Regional Government], Vice-Dean of the Humanities Faculty, Director of the International Maritime Institute, Director of the Official Tourism School of the University of Alicante, Director of the Alicante Town University Venue with the rank of Deputy Vice-Chancellor, and Director of the Permanent University of the University of Alicante, her current position, which she has held since 2002. She forms part of the (Spanish) State Association of University Programmes for Older Adults since this organisation was created in 2004, and on behalf of the UA –being its president since 2010. One of her main lines of research focuses on University Education for Older Adults and Lifelong Learning, a field within which she has published numerous papers, organised Encounters and Conferences and participated in research teams both nationally (5 projects) and internationally (13 projects) as the University of Alicante coordinator. She additionally collaborates as an expert and advisor of the Spanish Ministry of Education and the IMSERSO [abbreviation for Institute of Seniors and Social Services], as well as of the European Union's Directorate General for Education and Culture in a variety of initiatives (European Year of Active Ageing).

CV
Prof. José Belda-Medina

Dr Jose Belda is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of English Studies from the Universidad de Alicante (Spain). He has taught Language and Linguistics for 18 years both in Spain (Alicante, Valencia, Murcia, Barcelona) and overseas (Germany, United Kingdom, Ireland, United states). He has participated in the development of different English and Spanish language teaching programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He has been the Academic Director of the International Summer Program Rafael Altamira (2006-2012) and Academic Director of International Mobility (2012-2016) at the University of Alicante. He has been involved as professor and researcher in the Universidad Permanente de la Universidad de Alicante (UPUA), teaching several English languages courses to Senior students for more than 10 years. His research interests are Second Language Acquisition, Applied Linguistics, Terminology and the New Technologies. He has participated in different international conferences (BAAL, TESOL, AEDEAN, etc) and research projects and published several articles in scientific journals (Target, Meta, Translation and Terminology, Babel, Porta Linguarum, etc).