

Teaching Foreign Trade in English Through the Modalities Based on Competences and Using Moodle

Enseñanza del régimen de comercio exterior a través de las modalidades centradas en el desarrollo de competencias y con el uso de Moodle

Ana María Correa Díaz*

Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Bucaramanga, Colombia

With the new approach to guide the learning process of students with a model based on the development of competences, and in comparison with the traditional lecture-based learning, it is necessary to start working with the teaching modalities that help to achieve this objective. With that in mind, the aim of the study reported in this article was to show that through the use of active teaching methods focusing on the development of competences we can improve the writing, speaking and research competences in English of the students who nowadays take university subjects in a foreign language in Colombia. The results showed that the support provided by the platform promotes student motivation in carrying out their self-learning, which contributes to the development of the mentioned competences.

Key words: Autonomy, competences, teaching foreign trade in English, using Moodle.

Gracias al nuevo enfoque que guía el proceso de aprendizaje de los estudiantes a través de un modelo basado en el desarrollo de competencias, en comparación con el discurso expositivo tradicional, se hace necesario empezar a implementar un modelo de enseñanza basado en el desarrollo de competencias. Con esto en mente, el objetivo de la investigación que se reporta en este artículo fue demostrar que mediante el uso de métodos de enseñanza activa centrados en el desarrollo de competencias se pueden mejorar las habilidades de escritura, habla e investigación en inglés de estudiantes universitarios que actualmente cursan asignaturas en una lengua extranjera en Colombia. Los resultados del estudio muestran que en este proceso educativo la plataforma Moodle favorece la motivación de los estudiantes hacia la realización de su trabajo autónomo y el desarrollo de las mencionadas competencias.

Palabras clave: autonomía, competencias, enseñanza del régimen de comercio exterior en inglés, uso de Moodle.

* E-mail: acorread@eafit.edu.co

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Introduction

Trying to respond to the challenges of global markets now that our country is taking part in free trade agreements with other nations, it is imperative to emphasize the development of University students' competences with the final aim to improving the competitiveness of the country while training future workers. This represents a focus on training based on real demands.

For that purpose, the Colombian Ministry of National Education (MEN) has been following the impact of the evaluation of competence-based programs in other countries such as Denmark, where Hans Peter Christensen, a Danish professor and teacher trainer, is widely recognized for his great knowledge and experience in the field of competences.

Indeed, the major concern of our educational community is to determine key competences and review curricula to fortify Colombian education. That is the reason why teachers also have the responsibility to create learning environments and communicative situations to encourage self-learning, research activities and collaborative work.

That is also why this paper shows the benefits of implementing the modalities of lectures, seminars, workshops, hands-on activities, and tutorials in *Foreign Trade Courses*, among students of the BBA program in International Business at UPB (Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana).

Those students motivated by their desire to develop communicative competences in listening, writing, speaking and reading in the context of international trade, opted for taking the class in English, instead of taking the class in Spanish, which is also offered by the Faculty. Therefore, in order to help my students to enhance their effective use of the English language as a communicative tool for an effective dialogue in their professional endeavor, I decided to spur their self-motivation with the

creation of a friendly learning environment, full of variety and using teaching aids, including Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment).

In the following paragraphs I present the results of my observation process and the survey results of the application of the teaching modalities based on competences in the new environment of technological revolution.

The Research Problem

The question to answer during this project was how to develop communicative language competences in a foreign language in the context of foreign trade while working with teaching modalities based on competences and using Moodle.

Description of the Context

This research was based on the observation and survey of seventeen students (of fifth semester in Administration of International Business at UPBU) who took the course *International Trade Regime* in English guided by their self-motivation, taking into account that the mentioned subject is also offered in Spanish.

During the second semester of 2011, the students were engaged in their work in a 4-hour weekly class, a typical 2-hour session; therefore, they were expected to study one hour at home. The mentioned students enrolled in the class with basic vocabulary about the topics of the course and with different levels of linguistic competence.

Literature Review

The concepts of competence, the teaching modalities based on competences, and Moodle are explained in this paper with the aim of understanding their contribution to the Faculty of Strategic Studies, now that UPBU is offering more subjects of the curricula in English.

Basically, this action is taken with the purpose of contributing to the government's role in establishing the conditions and rules to operate a system based on competences and guide the assessment. That system helps faculties and students to get a common understanding about the specific skills and knowledge that undergraduates should master as a result of their learning experiences; in that way, they will be able to perform professionally in the global market economy and in multicultural environments.

The Meaning of Competence

Generally speaking a competence is formed by the combination of skills, abilities, and knowledge to respond to labor market demands and tasks; as such, it is a holistic concept filled by non-cognitive components. What is more, according to scientific literature, the concept refers to:

A contents component of a given ability in the form of knowledge, skills and aptitudes (Zimnyaya & Evdokimova, as cited in Lobanova & Shunin, 2008).

A general ability based on knowledge, values, aptitudes, enabling [one] to establish [a] relationship between knowledge and situation, to reveal a procedure (knowledge and action), suitable for a problem (Shishov, as cited in Lobanova & Shunin, 2008).

A slightly specialized system of aptitudes, abilities or skills necessary for achievement of a specific goal. It can concern both the individual abilities and the distribution of abilities within a social group (Weinert, as cited in Lobanova & Shunin, 2008).

An ability to successfully meet complex requirements in a certain context (Rychen, as cited in Lobanova & Shunin, 2008).

An ability to make actions in various contexts in adequate, responsible form integrating a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Van der Blij, as cited in Lobanova & Shunin, 2008).

Furthermore, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development -OECD- which started the work in the field of competences defined them as:

A system of internal mental structures and abilities assuming mobilization of knowledge, cognitive skills, practical skills, and also social and behavioral components such as attitudes, emotions, values and ethics, motivations for successful realization of activity in a particular context. (Saliha & Warda, 2010).

From those definitions, it can be said that the constitutive elements of a competence are:

1. Motivation
2. Personality
3. Self-concept
4. Knowledge
5. Skills

The development of competences is possible through these elements because when analyzing students in their learning process, it is remarkable that while some pupils just care about their grades others do more due to their vision or interest in being successful negotiators in organizations that deal with interactions in multicultural contexts enriched by international communications.

That is why one important competence to develop when studying International Business is the communicative language competence due to the need to deal with overseas partners. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate language, communication and culture to be competent communicators in a social language group (Hymes, 1985).

That means producing and understanding sentences according to the context, which implies the acquisition of not only linguistic skills but also communicative abilities (Widdowson, 1979) and the integration of communicative competences with others (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Consequently, taking into account that

in a new millennium when changes in all spheres of life are accelerating in geometrical progression, the communicative language competence development cannot be considered as the one for specific purposes; therefore, higher schools should prepare specialist[s] not just by providing them with professional knowledge, but also by encouraging them for self-development and self-realization in a global, multicultural environment, implementing all available resources, including language. (Lobanova & Shunin, 2008, p. 52)

With that in mind, the following innovative teaching methods can help to achieve the desired results.

Teaching Methods

As Schultz and Christensen (2004) have stated, realizing that traditional lectures and exercises did not provide the expected learning, other teaching methods were sought. Therefore, here I present the modalities for the development of educational activities to let others know how to renew and innovate their teaching methods.

Those modalities are important because the relationship between the study strategy and the learning outcome calls for a change in the paradigm in the teaching-learning process. Then, with the new methods, teachers may plan their activities and experiences according to the established competences of the curricula as student learning objectives.

More specific, the mentioned modalities based on the development of competences are scenarios where activities to be undertaken by teachers and students throughout the course take place; they differ from each other in terms of the purposes of educational action, the tasks to perform and the resources needed for implementation (Díaz, 2005). The modalities correspond to the following: lectures, seminars, group works, hands-on activities,

laboratories, tutorials, and self-employment, which are explained in the next paragraphs.

Lectures: Talking to the Students

They consist of expository sessions with explanations and demonstrations of contents (Andersen, Brady, Gibbs, & Weimer, as cited in Díaz, 2005). Hence, lectures are recommended to permit the discussions of the students in these sections where the following methods can be applied: case studies and problem solving. Actually, it is expected that the pupils read textbook material before it is presented in class.

Seminars and Workshops: Building Knowledge Through Interaction and Activity

Here, knowledge about a specific topic is built thanks to the discussion between the assistants, thus, personal efforts and motivation are required on the part of the students to activate the group. The most representative characteristics of seminars and workshops are interactions, discussions, reflections, critical thinking, and experiments (Brown & Atkins, as cited in Díaz, 2005). Therefore, the methods that can be applied in seminars are cases, simulations, group projects, analyses of texts and videos.

Students should read texts, prepare essays, create mind maps, and participate in reflection processes to think and communicate effectively. In that way, seminars contribute to students' self-learning and the development of competences because that communication process promotes dialogue and interpersonal relationships.

Hands-On Activities: Showing Them How to Act

It is represented by any type of classroom practices such as case studies, diagnostic analysis, lab practices, and computer lab activities, among others. With respect to case studies, they require

the description of a real or hypothetical situation that must be studied in an analytical and comprehensive way with the aim of finding the solution to the situation in question. At this point students have lots of opportunities to apply the acquired knowledge (Beard & Hartley, as cited in Díaz, 2005).

External Practices: Applying What Has Been Learned

It consists of training conducted at companies and organizations outside the university to put into practice skills, techniques and resources (Lobato, González & Ruiz, as cited in Díaz, 2005). Basically, it is an out-of-class learning opportunity.

Tutorials: Personalized Attention to Students

They represent a personalized relationship in which the teacher guides the student in the learning process to overcome difficulties, doubts, or to obtain additional research sources. It is more rewarding when it is focused on the development of competences and combined with other modalities (Michavila & Garcia, as cited in Díaz, 2005).

Group Work: Having Them Learn From Themselves

This interactive approach allows students to learn from themselves through the preparation of seminars, lectures, research papers, reports, procurement and data analysis to be presented in class and prepared in groups; thus, it develops competences of social interaction. As broadly recognized, “collective learning in the organization becomes the basic of core competence” (Prahalad & Hamel, as cited in Delamare & Winterton, 2005); this is so because in dynamic environments firms must sustain the capacity for meta-learning in order to develop core competences (Lei, Hitt & Bettis, 1996). Likewise, pupils work during the course as partners in a collaborative process and the teacher gives continuous feedback about the development of the group work.

Autonomous Study: Developing Self-Learning Activity

It includes preparation of seminars, lectures, research papers, reports, procurement and data analysis as well as library work, preparations for exams, complementary readings, problems and exercises by the students themselves, who regulate their own learning process (Howsan, as cited in Díaz, 2005). Specifically, it is a constructivist activity carried out by the student.

The mentioned **modalities** based on competences are supported by **methods**, which are procedures to undertake and resources to be used in different phases of a plan of action; hence, methods are organized in accordance with the intended objectives of the curricula. What's more, different methods can be applied under the same modality; for instance, seminars can be prepared through cases, projects, cooperative work, or problem based learning.

According to Díaz, the most recommended methods are:

- Lectures
- Case studies and exercises
- Problem Based Learning
- Project Based Learning
- Cooperative learning
- Self-learning

Lectures are organized by the teacher who presents and explains contents of the curricula. This method is really helpful for developing competences of knowledge (process information, and solve professional problems), skills (communicate ideas, elaborate conclusions, learn how to listen, discuss with others relevant ideas) and attitudes (lifelong learning), even though they do not help at working autonomously.

Case studies permit the analysis of real problems to interpret, make diagnoses and understand solution procedures. They allow for the

development of knowledge about decision making processes and the judgment of complex and professional situations. In terms of skills, cases permit the elaboration of conclusions and resolution of problems.

Also, cases permit the acquisition of good attitudes toward complex situations. When discussing the solutions, students may be able to express their arguments in public with clear communication, respecting others and their points of view.

Exercises and problem solving, where the students process information and interpret results, foster the development of strategies to manage time and resources and develop motivation, effort and attention.

Problem based learning helps students to think about complex situations (problems) in the real world. This method is used by teachers to develop the competences of argumentation, revision and precision.

The development of projects deal with real problems through the realization of some activities in a period of time to generate new knowledge and develop competences of analysis and synthesis (knowledge), systematic and critical thinking, oral expression (skills) and responsibility (attitudes).

Cooperative learning is a philosophy when the students have group goals. It also develops competences of cooperation and social interaction because it invites people to express themselves and establish questions.

Finally, the learning contract is a formal agreement between the teacher and the student that promotes self-learning, critical and creative thinking and helps to make decisions that promote the autonomy of the student. It implies self-regulation and self-evaluation.

In brief, the use of either method depends on the type of competence to acquire, the context

and the characteristics of the students. Thus, it is necessary to combine the methods to develop competences as well as to motivate students. In the end, the new knowledge should be applied to solve problems and make decisions.

Nonetheless, the focus on the acquisition of communication competences in a foreign language, with the aim to help students to think and produce knowledge in English, is necessary to respond to the actual needs of the society to guarantee a sustainable employability. That is why Moodle, a platform which creates interactive and dynamic spaces for the development of the English language communicative competence, is essential in this research (see Table 1).

Table 1. Contribution of Teaching Methods to the Development of Competences

Method	Communicative competence to develop in English
Lectures	Communicate ideas, elaborate conclusions, learn to listen to others
Case studies	To argue and elaborate conclusions in different situations, for different audiences
Problem based learning	Presentation of information
Project based learning	Oral and written expressions, management of information
Cooperative learning	Oral expression, planning of the speech, invite pupils to express themselves
Learning contract	Argumentation, use of information and communication technology

Developing a Course in Moodle

Moodle is an e-learning software platform developed by Martin Dougiamas that allows educators to create and manage online courses for university students; therefore, the participants or learners can access the modules of those courses as a virtual classroom. As such, Moodle is one of those scenarios where activities to be performed by the Faculty and students take place.

According to moodle.org, "Moodle is a software package for producing Internet-based courses and web sites. It is a global development project designed to support a social constructionist framework of education" ("Moodle," "Definition," para. 1)¹. Consequently, Moodle is a tool for learning online that allows the professor and the student to interact and collaborate in multiple ways.

With respect to Moodle's basic structure, it can be said that each course homepage generally has a three-column layout, visually organized with blocks on the left and right sides and with a center column containing the course content. Course content will appear in the middle section, usually broken down into Weeks or Topics. Every Week/Topic might have some content and matching activities (University of Minnesota, 2009-2011). Thus, via the Internet, teachers post their texts and multimedia learning resources for the students.

Moreover, the right and left columns of the course homepage will have blocks with additional tools and features, such as calendar block, course administration, my courses, etc. Particular blocks and their location on the Course Homepage may vary from course to course, since blocks may be added, hidden, deleted, and moved up, down and left/right by the instructor (2009). A good picture of how a Moodle course looks like can be found at <http://www1.umn.edu/moodle/images/screenshot.jpg>

¹ Retrieved from http://docs.moodle.org/22/en/About_Moodle

In brief, the common Moodle homepage includes a list of participants, a list of assignments, and glossaries of terms. Additionally, it can contain links to other web resources (blogs and wikis), digital readings rooms, online quizzes, and discussion forums where students comment on content and ask questions through instant messaging. All these tools are used to teach classes completely online, to enhance face-to-face classes, and to support blended learning environments.

Additionally, courses can be packaged as a zip file using the Backup function. These can be downloaded to a local computer and restored later on any Moodle server. In that way, copies of forum posts and instructor feedback can be mailed in HTML or plain text.

Furthermore, through Moodle, teachers find the following advantages: the flexibility to define their own scales for grading, the possibility to choose the course formats (by week, or by topic) and the easiness of the creation and edition of entries at WebPages. So, the course can be highly customized by teachers.

Students, on the other hand, find an online space for collaboration and group participation because

the Moodle modules are designed for discussion, reflection and learning. The discussion forums allow students and teachers to engage in discussion on any topic; this ability to discuss is a key component of the social constructionist philosophy. The idea is that when students construct meaning and then share ideas with other students, learning is enhanced. (Moore, 2003, p. 18)

As such, Moodle facilitates the process of working by competences due to the motivation it spurs in the students who access the platform to participate in forums, watch videos, write reports on paper and take tests. That means producing, presenting and understanding information and accessing and searching the contents of the course.

Inozu, Sahinkarakas and Yumru (2010) have pointed out that “considering the global interest in the use of technology, and the privileged place of computers and Internet in their lives, students’ interest in using these materials is a natural outcome of today’s world” (p. 17). That is why “we need new competences to master a whole new digital world, not only by acquiring technical skills, but also by gaining a deeper understanding of the opportunities, challenges and even ethical questions posed by new technologies.” (Figel, as cited in European Commission, 2007).

That is true because through Moodle, the cluster of knowledge, skills and personal attitudes that affects an individual’s ability to perform, encounters a favorable context. Thus, the students show a good attitude to the broad information presented to them and exploit it in a critical and systematic way. More specifically, Moodle encourages the use of new technologies for effective communication in a scenario that is more advanced than the traditional contact teaching.

Taking into account the focus of this research on the communication of future international negotiators in a foreign language, the potential of using this platform is remarkable, thanks to the interaction among peers via Moodle’s activities and texts (including audio and video). These learning situations are necessary to improve the students’ language skills in English.

Thus, it is possible to integrate the Internet for language learning goals (Brandl, 2002, 2005) in the curricula of Colombian faculties as it complements conventional classroom instruction.

In fact, since 1988, at King College University –just to mention an example– researchers and educators have suggested that “group training in computer literacy, critical thinking, or writing across the curriculum is necessary for faculty to

become responsible for the total education of their students” (Farmer, as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Method

This research was an action research project whose terms “action” and “research” highlight the essential features of this method: trying out ideas *in practice* as a means of increasing knowledge about improving curriculum, teaching, and learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, as cited in Ferrance, 2000). The project was supported by multiple data sources such as online exchanges, surveys, and tests. Observation also played an important role because the innovative action research was used as a new method to teach an essential subject of the curricula at UPBU. Thanks to this methodology, the participants and I worked in a collaborative environment using Moodle. Therefore, the research was carried out under a constructivist approach and within Swain’s concept of collaborative dialogue. Moreover, the ultimate goal of improving language learning was achieved.

Research and Pedagogical Procedure

Based on action research, my purpose with this paper is to develop a model based on competences at UPBU in order to help students who take subjects in English. To do so, my role is to achieve an outstanding role while applying the modalities that will guide the building of inimitable competitive advantages. In turn, the steps taken to accelerate the learning efforts have been as follows:

- Planning. Setting up the objectives to determine the competences to be developed during the semester.
- Selection of the activities to accomplish the objectives. Hence, the number and distribution of activities during the course are influenced

by the credits of the subject and the number of students in a course. Besides, the didactic resources and their availability are established at this point. In this theoretical context, the time assigned to each activity is determined according to its complexity because different activities develop different competencies. Therefore, an activity is selected because it is practical in the context with the available resources (Biggs, 2005).

- Determination of the evaluation criteria. An example of the list of evaluation activities is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Evaluation Activities

Questioning
Error detection
Critical comments
Oral presentations
Information search
Writing reports

To do so, students were informed of the aforementioned steps at the beginning of the semester. Lastly and broadly speaking, the results of the lesson observation and the outcomes of the surveys were juxtaposed to analyze the context and methods of development of key competences; this research method was reinforced with analysis of scientific literature and educational documents.

Data Collection

The present research relied on two techniques: questionnaires and a collection of Moodle material (forums, workshops, exams, etc.) throughout the course. Similarly, the accumulated experience in previous courses helped us to check the progress

that can be obtained with the new approach grounded in the learning process of the participants. Besides, a deep observation and analysis of the students' evolution helped me and the Faculty to come to conclusions about how competences have been improved because the development of language skills implies a continuous evaluation.

Results

The following results show the scenarios that were possible to apply during the semester in *Foreign Trade Courses*. For instance, during lectures, the students had the opportunity to interact with me and among themselves in English, especially when they had read the assigned chapter before the class. Taking into account that the vocabulary in the field of International Trade Regime is completely new for the pupils, a previous reading has been shown to be necessary in order to speed up the opportunity to use the oral language of the students.

With workshops developed in groups, the competences of communication and share work permitted more dialogue to increase human relations, which are very important for international negotiators. Those proposed workshops were assigned with the intention to improve good writing; for that purpose, students were required to present ideas shaped, organized and refined properly even though business writing is typically characterized by a simple and direct style.

Furthermore, as writing is a part of communication that includes the skills of listening, speaking, and reading (Cortese, 2001), the students spend a great deal of time on composing essays and reviews of papers, articles and videos; that is why writing also comprises the analysis of visual and verbal texts. For instance, when asked to write about *the lessons that Latin America can learn from China's*

rapid economic development outside the classroom, where learning continues, some of the answers were full of clear arguments like the ones found in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Sample of a Draft Article

China is the actual example of a country that has been through many rapid changes to be where they're at right now[.] [It] has sustained its economy [for] many reasons[;] one of those reasons[;] I'd like to say[;] is the astounding education system they carry. As one columnist said – "One reason China is likely to overtake the United States as the world's most important country in this century is that China puts more effort into building human capital than we do".

Completely assertive of this analysis, facts are stated and if we compare how China was in the 1980's [to now, we see] it is completely different now. And what have those changes been? More schools, more colleges, and more than 60% of students enrolled, more hours of learning and more discipline. The continuation of this Chinese trend will soon make this country the greatest of them all.

What should the world learn from China? Simple, we should all develop hunger for education, and of course, [continue efforts to raise] our standards, not to conform. There is no wonder why Brazil targeted China to be the main market for the coal it will produce in Colombia. Every country seems to be benefiting from it and Colombia's coal production will grow this year to 80 million tons from 74 million last year[.] [T]o conclude, China must be doing something right to be where it is at [present], and we should all follow their footsteps.

Note: Edited for the purpose of this publication. Corrections are shown as follows: [xx].

Students were able to allow more time for the act of writing, shown to be very rewarding because as long as pupils had time to think and commu-

nicate they could produce a more compelling and complete document, a fact that is reflected in the grades obtained. As has been the conclusion of some studies, "It looks as if students getting a high exam score have a steady workload throughout the semester, and work a little more in the week before handing in a report and not in the last moment" (Christensen, Vigild, Thomsen, Szabo & Horsewell, 2009, p. 5).

More important, followed by their intrinsic motivation and creativity, some students added pictures to their texts to reinforce their ideas and self-expression. That initiative was very intelligent because those visual ads fulfill a pedagogical and an analytical function (Lund University, 2007).

Another writing activity seeking the highest level of writing competence, but based on the modality of autonomous work, involved students being asked to write a short report after watching a video at home.

Actually, with this activity I was able to assess not only the writing skills, but also the motivation of the participants while doing the activity due to the dedication of each of the students in developing a report with the proper instructions and sequence of ideas. It was motivating to find that some students used connectors to guide the reader to a clear understanding of the topic; it was also valuable to include a conclusion in the report. On the other hand, it was very disappointing to find that some students just presented the ideas to have the teacher know that the video was understood and the activity was done.

Some good examples of that activity are:

First of all I want to talk about the aims of Doing Business in Colombia which provides a quantitative measure of national regulations, departmental and municipal authorities on starting a business and opens up opportunities for business activity.

According to the video, Colombia is located in the top 10 countries that reformed the way of doing business for a third consecutive

year. In Colombia, the paperwork with the government to get any kind of permit or license was very long and tedious.

To sum up, in the video there is a number of people who said that doing business is making their life easier and that is really helpful for our country because we must think big, we must take advantage of our nature and the riches our country has.

Finally, there is a very interesting program called TALK TO THE WORLD, which seeks to train new employees and people in areas related to trade who are interested in learning the English language.

Other texts show errors as follows:

I saw in the video, is the process of how Colombia would generate greater foreign investment through the opening of its processes.

According what I saw in the video the doing business is very important in Colombia because when the world bank and his partners arrive they was helping the government and private sector in simplifying business regulations and generating investment since two thousand and five.

These kinds of assignments are necessary just as being able to write reports is crucial for businessmen to support decision-making or to solve a problem. They are an essential part of doing business and one's ability to be proficient in this area is critical toward the pursuit of commercial success (McCarthy; Ronstadt, as cited in Thompson, 2005).

With respect to Hands-on activities, by the use of the software known as Syscomer (to calculate the costs of an import/export), this modality has proved to encourage students to work on the computers to take the adequate steps to resolve a problem with real costs. This connection with reality greatly motivates the pupils because it allows the applications of the contents, especially since external practices are not available until the seventh semester.

Regarding tutorials, these happened in a non-systematic mode, and sometimes just via online, but they were useful in supporting the students in a personalized way because as has been mentioned above, they started the course with different levels

in their communicative competence in a foreign language. And

since the development of communicative skills in language learning requires social interaction between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves, the use of computers has for a long time been regarded only as a support tool with regard to certain skill areas. Rapid advances in technology and more compatible cross platform applications now make the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous learning tasks, in oral and written modes" (Cziko & Park, as cited in Brandl, 2005, p. 16).

Further, tutorials facilitate individual and immediate feedback about how to approach the activities in the new university scenario.

With regard to the distribution of the time in each modality, it is appreciated that the students spend most of the time reading and attending lectures (55%), and about one third (25%) participating in workshops which included computer labs simulations; and almost another third (20%) in autonomous work via Moodle and tutorials using forums. Those forums, which were available for a limited time to help students to respond to the others, represented virtual seminars. In that context, students posted their answers following the online instructions in an environment of inquiry and discovery which provided an excellent potential to enhance the interpretative reading and the presentational writing skills.

And considering the results of the survey via <http://freeonlinesurveys.com>, the pre-test determined that the student's pre-knowledge of the vocabulary of the course was limited to the following words: *exports, imports, tariffs, DIAN, chamber of comm* during the course, because just 27% of them had studied in a bilingual school. Consequently, for the question, *Which words related to the Colombian regime did you know at the beginning of the semester?*, some answers were the following:

- I honestly didn't know much of it.
- Not so many, just the ones that are similar to Spanish.
- None of them, I learnt all the worlds in the semester.

More significantly, the preferred activating teaching elements in the group were group activities (36%), theoretical classes (27%), workshops (18%), individual activities (9%), and simulations (9%). Therefore, practical exercises combined with work on cases, developed under the modality of group work, are more appreciated by the pupils as approaches to learning. This preference to work with colleagues permitted students to listen to the others (in PowerPoint or Prezi presentations in front of the class) and to respect differences of opinions. Thereby, oral and listening communications skills were assessed not only by the teacher but also by the rest of the class.

Other speaking and listening opportunities occurred when inviting guest speakers, in debates, by retelling the text in one's own words, when asking questions, while watching videos and in group discussions about exports and imports.

Herein, we had the opportunity to follow what research works have identified as essential communicative abilities: correct speech; rich vocabulary; understandable and fluent expression; tactful expression of one's opinion and clear pronunciation; appropriate intonations and regulation of loudness and pace; pauses in speech; the use of correct standard language; the use of facial expression and body language; attentive listening; eye contact with an interlocutor and an attentive and tactful attitude in the process of communication (Strakšienė, 2011, p. 131).

Nonetheless, a future proposed activity will be to ask students to use an open-source recorder like *Pamela for Skype* to save their recordings about trade issues in English; with this program, students

can upload the MP3 file through the assignment module. For sure, this task will enhance the conventional classroom instruction.

Besides, more reading activities should be assigned in the future because the reading of texts for retention and comprehension requires the discipline of researching for papers in databases in order to complete the knowledge provided by the teacher in printed articles or via Moodle. To quote Strakšienė (2011), "the act of reading means conveying the information encoded in the written text in a verbal form; to be able to master and convey all the information of the text, one has not only to perceive the content but also to feel the correct intonation of the text" (p. 129).

In the end, it would be good to know how to stimulate reading on their own due to the difficulty of changing study habits. Anyway, the use of Moodle has that objective and it is a matter of time before we see how study strategies develop during a reasonable period.

In the meantime, Moodle's tools have served as a supporting agent of the conventional classroom instruction. It has served as a constructivist approach to the learning process of the international topics taught in a foreign language, which in real life may help to develop new products for existing or new markets. Needless to say, this whole series of developments has been planned in a sequential and progressive manner and the students were actively involved in the learning activity; as such, by the end of the semester all of the students felt they had improved their communicative skills in English.

Improvement of Specific Competences and Language Abilities

The intention to develop and improve specific competences and language abilities in the students was achieved to the extent that they recognized

they had better achievement in writing as they had plenty of time to think and produce at their pace. Listening and reading were also easier for them because Moodle was enriched with creative features such as pictures, cartoons, and illustrative videos. Additionally, quick feedback was given throughout the course via one-to-one messages within the platform.

With respect to exams and quizzes, students were always eager to answer them in an online format, which in the end saved a lot of time. Those online tests provide immediate results to the participants after the test is completed; therefore, learners did not end up with doubts about what was evaluated.

Students also said they had had less fear expressing themselves in English via Moodle as they were not in front of others. The reason was that while some students have studied English abroad, others have just studied in Colombia; therefore, there were different levels of language abilities in the course. Nonetheless, those differences were easy to handle thanks to the progress tracking feature that Moodle offers.

In brief, Moodle was worthwhile due to the fact that it is “written by educationalists for educationalists” (Chidwick, as cited in Moore, 2003). Besides, the platform is friendly and supportive to the Moodle Community, which also worked together outside of class.

With that in mind, it can be said that bilingual teachers at UPBU or at any other university have the responsibility to make sure that students not only achieve the competences stated in the curricula but also acquire the competences in the foreign language which will help them to perform as successful professionals.

Among those competences, we find writing and speaking (productive) and listening and reading (receptive), in English, in order to respond

to the globalized context. Therefore, it is recommended to start planning classes using active teaching modalities and the supporting methods, focusing on the development of competences and, if possible, evaluating based on those competences.

As mentioned earlier, Moodle has represented to me to be a useful tool to motivate the students to develop the planned activities in order to help pupils acquire knowledge regarding foreign trade and, more importantly, to being able to communicate like ambassadors in any culture in which they do business. For that purpose, the factors that influenced the development of the components of expression of pupil’s communicative competences played an important role, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Components of Expression

Correct speech
Clear and fluent expression
Rich vocabulary
Clear pronunciation
Intonations
Loudness
Pauses
Pace of speech
Facial expression
Body language
Attentive listening
Ability to interfere in the conversation

Furthermore and notably, values-based attitudes towards the communicative competence also deserved detailed attention (see Table 4).

Table 4. Communicative Attitudes

Openness and sincerity
Empathy
Politeness
Tolerance
Respect for speaker or listener
Self-respect

With those components, lessons planning will be easier.

Conclusions

After one year of using Moodle to teach a university subject in English, I feel it can be concluded that the growing interest in integrating computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools into language learning along with the development of Internet technology have proved to be effective (Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009). This is because Moodle impacts the language learning of the students who interact among themselves and with the teacher as it offers a social context that spurs engagement and motivation. It can be said that UPBU students enrolled in the course of the present study improved their writing, speaking, listening and reading skills by doing exercises and interacting with peers at any time, and anywhere. In that process, learners communicated language form and content (Swain, as cited in Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009). Moreover, they collaboratively learned language, learned about language and learned through language (Warschauer, as cited in Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009).

As students are nowadays more comfortable using computer-mediated communication, Moodle helps to improve their levels of language proficiency because it provides many opportunities to develop their abilities thanks to the meaningful

activities uploaded in the platform. It was real in our case, due to the connection of the tasks given in English with the real business world.

Moodle also served to enhance the language learning of the students in and out of class because it builds a sense of community, thanks to the frequent peer-peer interactions and conversational exchanges via texts. So, engagement, motivation, and mutual understanding among peers facilitated the co-construction of knowledge. Moreover, students asked for assistance, gained confidence to express their opinions and respond to others, and practiced oral and written English. As stated by Zeng and Takatsuka, “language learning is seen to emerge through social mediation of collaborative activity” (2009).

Other reasons to support the opportunities to improve the receptive and productive skills in English were the quick feedback given to the students, the real time interaction, and the creative tools uploaded in the platform. By using Moodle, students felt the desire to use it even more to share ideas. Interestingly, the assertion about the increasing development of language competences was provided by the students themselves through their comments in surveys. To sum up, in today’s world online learning is a must (Moore, 2003), Moodle is an accessible learning tool and UPBU students learned from it. Therefore, the results were positive and the theoretical framework of recognized authors proved to be valid.

Limitations

The principal limitation encountered was that there is not a unique and formal process in the Faculty to get feedback or value the competencies that should be assessed at the courses offered in a foreign language. This happens because broad knowledge is still given more credit than competences and skills, in particular because the

model of active learning has not been established in our universities.

That is the reason why grades are basically being given based on the students' specific knowledge of the prescribed course contents. In turn, the research into the development of the competences in high schools in Colombia and, more specifically, the acquisition of communicative competence are still at the initial stage.

Moreover, the high absenteeism of the students of the 4-hour weekly module, even though it is compulsory to attend classes according to university regulations, reduced the potential to increase the learning outcomes (verbal expression, attentive listening, rich vocabulary, clear formulation of thoughts, among others).

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About the Author

Ana María Correa Díaz holds a Master's degree in Business Administration from Universidad EAFIT, Colombia. Her research interests are ICT, foreign trade and intercultural issues. She is currently a professor at some universities in Bucaramanga, Colombia.

Appendix: Questionnaire Used for Student's Feedback on the Development of Competences During the Semester

Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana-Bucaramanga

Goal: To obtain information to improve the development of the classes taught in English.

Instruction: Please take a minute to complete this survey based on your critical opinion.

1. Did you study in a bilingual school? Yes____ No____

2. Which words related to the Colombian government did you know at the beginning of the semester?

3. Which of the following modalities do you prefer to study under?
____ Theoretical classes
____ Group activities
____ Individual activities
____ Simulations-Syscomer
____ Workshops

4. Do you prefer a quantitative measurement from a questionnaire? Yes____ No____

5. How many books in English do you read during the year?
____ 0
____ 1
____ 2
____ 3 to 5
____ 6 to 10
____ 11 or more

6. Do you usually read before class? Yes____ No____

7. Were you highly motivated to do well in the course? Yes____ No____

8. Do you feel a fear of making mistakes? Yes____ No____

9. Do you think communication in business English is difficult? Yes____ No____

10. Do you use English outside the classroom setting? Yes____ No____

11. Have you developed effective critical thinking skills during the class? Please explain.

12. What is your learning outcome now that we have finished the course?

The survey is now finished. Thanks for participating in our study!