Learning face to face and via a VLE, a comparative study involving beginner learners of Spanish
by Marisol de Lafuente Duff

Introduction

The growing popularity of mixed forms of learning has been fuelled by the rapid adoption of digital technologies such as Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). According to the recent report on *Multimedia Language Learning in Higher Education in the UK* \(^1\), 47% of the 147 respondents to their online questionnaire use a VLE to deliver multimedia learning resources to students; although as it points out, ‘the nature of these resources cannot be ascertained from the study’.

Throughout the preparation and piloting of the materials that constitute the King’s College London Modern Language Centre blended-learning course - ¡Qué alivio! Beginners’ Spanish for Medics (see Appendix 1 for a description of the materials) - we have been interested in how well undergraduates following mostly face-to-face higher education courses would ‘learn’\(^2\) discrete language points (e.g. there is/are) if they are introduced at a distance via the medium of a VLE.

The greater the value that students attach to a learning task, the more motivated they will become, the more willing to engage in it, and the more likely to succeed in it.\(^3\) To what extent is their understanding and acquisition of the rules of meaning and form determined by the medium of presentation and their perception of it? We were also very interested to find out how students perceived the E learning tasks in comparison with their face to face experience. Measuring these using quantitative and qualitative methods is the main objective of the project

A Pedagogic Research grant from the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies made it possible to carry out the small-scale research described in this report.

---

\(^1\) University of Ulster & Centre for Excellence in Multimedia Language Learning (2008)

\(^2\) By ‘learn’ here we refer to the early-stage accurate use of the language forms in a given context; as opposed to the later stage acquisition when learners can use the forms freely and creatively in authentic communication, be it in the real world or replicated in the (virtual) classroom.

\(^3\) Williams, M. and Burden, R.L. (1997)
THE STUDY

This study attempts to measure student perception and degree of acquisition of specific structures and functions presented electronically via a VLE using a presentation-practice-production paradigm, in comparison with language introduced face to face in a technology-enhanced classroom.

Participants

The participating learners are studying at King’s College London School of Medicine, they were doing the Spanish for Medics course as an optional, accredited part of their degree. Most of them will have done a foreign language other than Spanish at school to at least elementary level. A few have visited a Spanish-speaking country, all are beginners in the language.

The data are based on two cohorts: 44 students taking the course in 2006-7, and 36 students taking it in 2007-8.

Teaching and learning

The course is taught over 22 weeks, with a two-hour class once a week; students are expected to spend an additional 4-6 hours in private study.

¡Qué Alivio!, the class text, is organised round typical situations in medical practice and the communicative needs of the practitioners. Each of these situations is used to present and practice one or more functions and/or grammatical structures face to face.

The grammar is overtly taught following a PPP (presentation, practice, production) model. New language to be presented results form real contexts of use and is presented in clear situations that allow students to understand what the language means and how it is used. The learners are guided to understand, through inductive and/or deductive processes, the rules of form so that they can accurately (re)produce and practice the forms. The final stage provides contexts and tasks for the students to produce the language freely (see Appendix 2 for a sample of the language presentation stage in the materials).

There are also activities to encourage a ‘reflective attitude’ on how language works, and for the students to develop their own learning strategies and to take responsibility for their own learning. Students are given ‘Tips for learning’ and do a self-evaluation task at the end of each unit (see appendix 3 for a sample of a self-evaluation task).

---

4 Nunan, 1989
The activities done in private study involve revising from the book, doing written tasks, completing self-evaluation sections and logging on to the WebCT site of the course to revisit the audio, video and power point materials done in class; or to do the relevant interactive exercises (see the end of Appendix 1 for the WebCT students' homepage).

**Obtaining the data**

Online learning sessions were programmed to happen largely during the Reading Weeks for the School of Humanities. Since they don’t coincide with the School of Medicine’s they were considered the ideal time for the students to do the initial learning of some language points thorough WebCT. The disadvantage of this was that the items to be learned online could not be chosen in terms of their nature, complexity and causes of learning difficulty but according to the syllabus progression.

Teachers rely on materials they consider good. But even then they mediate between the materials and the students and manage the learning process: they observe their students’ reactions, they watch out for the ‘twinkle’ in their eyes that indicates comprehension, they ask concept questions to check understanding. They may also use further examples or (re)explanations, images, highlighting or charts on board/OHP or PPoint, etc. to aid the process. When they feel the students are ready, they move on to the first, more or less controlled practice stage.

Most students learning without the presence of a teacher- be it online or not-would have to be good autonomous learners or else need careful step-by-step instructions, probes to check their understanding as they progress, and suggestions as to what to do if they feel they need help.

This is probably one of the reasons why, apart from the excellent Open University online learning materials in which the units start with real examples of language in context, there seem to be few instances of sites which follow this methodology. A brief survey of a few of the 395,000 sites to learn Spanish grammar listed in Google showed that the ones that offer free practice (as opposed to the large number of sites which are really attempting to sell courses) consist mostly of grammatical explanations in English. These explanations are followed by interactive exercises for students to practice the forms by filling gaps, often in disconnected sentences.

There are of course notable exceptions such as Barbara Kuczun Nelson’s or Indiana University’s Proyecto Ancla which use clear contexts of use for the interactive practice.

---

5 [http://www.colby.edu/~bknelson/exercises/index.html](http://www.colby.edu/~bknelson/exercises/index.html)
6 [http://www.iub.edu/~ancla/](http://www.iub.edu/~ancla/)
In the first WebCT learning session for each of the cohorts, students were given rather specific instructions on what to do. These are 2 extracts from the instructions Emailed to the 2007-8 cohort before their first online learning experience:

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Online learning- Week 4

This week, you are going to learn using your book and the online materials in the WebCT, Spanish for Medics pages. Your task is to revise the first part of Unit 2 and to cover the second part. Here follows a suggested procedure for you to follow.

If you feel you need a grammar explanation in English, go the Grammar Summaries section on WebCT which we are constructing. It is divided into: 1 Nouns and Articles, 2 Pronouns, 3 Adjectives, 4 Verbs, 5 Prepositions.

You can also contact your tutor- use the ‘Who’s online’ facility- to ask about anything you don’t understand or need help with.

[....]

A) Talking about how people are feeling and courses of action

- Do activities E and F

E. Listen and number the parts of the body. Check your answers in the ‘solucionario’

F. You are going to listen to two dialogues and say whether the statements are V (verdadero = true) or F (falso=false).

- Read the statements first and check anything you don’t understand in the glossary. This will help you predict what the dialogue is about, which makes understanding it easier. The statements also tell you where to focus your attention. (See ‘Listening’ in Tips for Learning)

- Listen (Audio Files in WebCT) several times until you feel confident you have got most answers.

- Read the dialogues (G) and check your answers. Check your answers in the ‘Solucionario’.

- Read the dialogues aloud several times. Cover more and more of the text until you can say them without looking.
• Do Interactive Exercises *Dolor de muelas* and *Está enferma*

• Now try to change parts of the dialogues (symptoms, suggestions). Try to do a dialogue online: go to Who’s online and invite one of your fellow students to complete the dialogue with you.

  You will be asked to practice them next week with a classmate (w books closed!)

• Do Interactive Exercise ¿*Tiene o está*? If you get less than 75%, look at the Grammar Summary: 4.2. Expressions with *tener*.

The students in cohort one were asked to learn:

1) *Hay/es/tiene* (there is/It is/It has) – In the context of describing a hospital-
   Week 6, Sem 1- The difficulty presented by the combination of these three structures is a conceptual one, especially for native speakers of English. The forms themselves don't pose much of a problem.

2) Present simple tense- 3rd person singular- Used to describe personal routines-
   Week 6, Sem 2- The difficulty here lies not so much in understanding the concept, but in remembering the forms themselves, especially irregular verbs.

The students in cohort two were asked to learn:

1) *Estar/tener* – Used to describe moods and states of being- Week 4,
   Sem 1- The difficulty here lies in remembering which verb is used to form which phrase.

2) Past simple tense- Used in a report on how a patient spent the previous evening - Week 6, Sem 2- The difficulty is, as in the case of the present simple, not one of understanding, but one of memory.

**How well did students learn new structures when these were presented through a VLA?**

In order to measure the amount of learning done online, the students took written, contextualised slot-and-fill discrete-point tests on the week after each of the online learning sessions. This is an extract from the test on the Simple Past:
Complete the text with the correct form of the past tense of the verbs in brackets.

Ayer fue domingo, así que Luis no (ir) _______ a la Universidad, (pasar) ________ un día muy tranquilo…

The results of the tests varied, as can be seen from the graph. The bars show the average points (out of ten) students scored for each of the 4 tests, the key indicates the grammar points.

The average points scored for 'hay', are noticeably higher than for the other teaching points. The online learning session was successful in helping the students understand the concept. By their nature, the other teaching points need considerable practice.

With the exception of the 'hay' test, the scores are generally lower than the scores in the course progress tests (which included skills work, as well as use of Spanish) the students took a couple of weeks later when they had had more opportunities for practice, both online and face to face.
Students work for assessment, since the discrete item tests did not count towards their marks, students did not work online for long enough to get the practice necessary to remember verb forms. WebCT traffic records show that in the week when ‘hay’ was learnt, students were online for a total of 42 hrs 35 min. – on average less than one hour per student.

There were of huge individual differences: some students just did not log on at all, one was online for a total of 5hrs 43 min. that week. One must of course take into account that even when students are logged on, there is no absolute certainty that they are actually engaged in learning; and some students forget to log off.

How did the students feel about their online learning experiences?

To ascertain the students’ perception of their learning experience, we used two types of data collection:

- questionnaires as a source of quantitative data
- partly-structured interviews as a source of qualitative data

The questionnaires

Students were asked to complete a short questionnaire the class after their online learning. They were given the questionnaires 10 minutes before the end of the class. The questionnaires were completed anonymously: the teacher asked a student to collect them and take them to the office, then she left the room.

King’s students are familiar with opinion questionnaires. All students at the Modern Language Centre are asked to complete feedback questionnaires at the end of terms one and two. Some students (in other courses!) have commented that the teacher will probably recognize their handwriting, so they don’t feel free to criticize. The alternative of online feedback, processed centrally to cut out the possibility of identifying the sender, has been considered. It was rejected as: a) the numbers giving feedback would diminish significantly, b) the senders would have self- selected: the comments would probably be written only/mostly by learners who have adverse comments.

The questionnaires included two questions on a Likert scale, and a multi-choice question in which students could tick any number of options.
Did you find the WebCT materials user-friendly?

____ yes  ______ alright  ______ no

How would you compare your autonomous learning experience last to the learning you’ve done online?

_____ better  ______ the same  _____ worse  _____ don’t know

Which of the following materials/activities did you find most useful? You can tick any number.

_____ Listening  ______ Pairwork done synchronically

_____ Learning Tips  _____ Pairwork done asynchronically

_____ Grammar Summaries  _____ Reading comprehension

_____ Interactive exercises

These are the results obtained, both cohorts have been put together.

1. Did you find the WebCT materials user-friendly?

![Pie chart showing the results of the question about WebCT materials user-friendliness.]

- Yes: 65%
- Alright: 28%
- No: 7%
The percentage of students who said ‘yes’ was the largest by far, which was encouraging. The fact that the unenthusiastic ‘alright’ was the central alternative could have increased the possibilities of it being chosen, but the fact that 28% of students chose it probably means that there is room for improvement, the interviews threw some light on this.

2. How would you compare your autonomous learning experience last week to the learning you’ve done in class?

Most students found the materials user friendly or ‘alright’; and yet the majority found the online learning experience less satisfactory than the classroom. The negative reaction could be at least partly due to the materials, or to the functioning of WebCT as a platform; whatever the reason, the students found learning online more difficult than in the classroom.

It is likely that the students’ attitudes to self-directed learning have been conditioned by the educational culture which they have experienced/are experiencing\(^7\). Autonomous learning is not always fostered or even considered desirable, and the use of computers in schools was not yet as popular when these students were schoolchildren.

Some students will be happier doing autonomous learning activities, enthusiastic students tend to feel more positive about self-directed learning. While working on this report on a Sunday afternoon, I went into WebCT to get information on the traffic. I was amused but not surprised to see that the only other person logged

---

\(^7\) Harmer, 2002
on happened to be one of the students with the highest score in the in-class tests done after the online learning sessions. This student was obviously not only enthusiastic about learning and positive about self-directed study, she was also comfortable working online.

3. Which of the following materials/activities did you find most useful? You can tick any number.

The numbers indicate the number of students who chose each option.

The most useful activities were the interactive exercises, closely followed by the audio files. This is not surprising given that:

- listening is the skill that most worries students
- practice is needed to assimilate another language: Spanish verb conjugations require a lot of repetition to be mastered, especially when the learners are native speakers of English, in which verbs are virtually uninflected. Students seem to value opportunities for practice, they like to do it interactively, but also value the exercises embedded in the lessons.

Judging by the very few occasions on which ‘learning tips’ was ticked, students either consider they already know how to learn a foreign language or are not interested in learning about ways to do it.
The Interviews

In order to get a broader and deeper understanding of the students' perception of online learning, we held partly-structured interviews with around 9% of students from each cohort – four from the first and three from the second. The students were chosen at random and included males and females. They were clearly and unequivocally informed that they would remain anonymous, and that their comments would not in any way affect, either positively or negatively, their final exam marks. Examinees are identified by number, not by name until papers have been double-marked.

These are the questions which formed the basis of the interviews:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How regularly did you use the Web part of the course?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you use it for?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think about it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In reading weeks you were asked to do learn new grammar points. If you did it, how did you find it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were away on electives/peripherals for 6 weeks during the course, do you think you would be able to keep up by going online and cover 1 ½ units that way?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you need extra support?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What? (Email to tutor, (conference) calls, pairing up to do work online)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The answers from all six students were remarkably similar: they all said they liked learning via WebCT, in spite of having said that the experience was less effective than face to face. They prefer using WebCT for practice rather than presentation, especially as they find the interactive exercises very helpful.

A number of the comments drew comparisons with traditional learning methods. They thought a VLE is no substitute for the teacher, ‘it could never be as good as Nuria’ (one of the teachers) said one student. Another student rather touchingly said ‘I didn’t realize all the things you [the researcher, who also happened to be her teacher] had to keep in mind when you get us to do all those things in class!’

There were very few comments about the content itself, only about the amount: a student said he felt ‘overawed’ if there was too much to cover.
In spite of the popularity of websites, some in the generation at present at university find studying with computers challenging. A student commented she had found it very easy as she was good with computers, but she could imagine her less computer-savvy classmates would have problems. Another said she had found it easy to work during the introductory group online practice in the Open Learning Centre, but confusing when working alone; she concluded: 'I prefer working with books'.

Other students thought the technology could be improved: one student commented on the time it takes to access the listening texts; another said WebCT kept crashing, although wasn’t sure if this was to do with the workstations in the university dorms.

In terms of support, students would have liked:
- more initial guidance
- to have designated times to call a tutor if learning online
- to meet sometimes
- to review in a later class the points seen online

**Tentative conclusions**

The findings in this small-scale study indicate that VLEs can be used to help language students understand language meanings and that interactive online practice activities are very popular. Online listening materials are also popular.

The present generation of university students- one used to playing and socializing online and learning face to face, still finds it challenging to learn via a VLE and feels the need for a tutor’s support.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my colleagues at the Modern Language Centre, King’s College London:

Cecilia Trevino, who conceived and co-authored the course and led the team working on its WebCT format. Cecilia also played an important part in its monitoring, including keeping an eye on the WebCT traffic and designing questionnaires to get feedback from students

Nuria Guasch, excellent teacher of two of the pilot groups

Luis Poza García, who produced the graphs.

And last, but not least, the students taking the course in 2006 -7 and 2007 - 8,
for their participation and valuable comments on their learning experience.

Marisol de Lafuente Duff
Modern Language Centre
King's Collage London
Appendix 1

¡Qué alivio!  The learning materials used in the research.

Background

Students of medicine and health sciences form the largest cohort of undergraduates taking foreign languages at the Modern Language Centre, King’s College London. Many opt for Spanish because they intend to spend their elective period of practice in a Spanish-speaking country; or because they recognize that in a globalised world, medical practitioners who speak more than one language can provide better care and are in a better position in the job market.

The large majority of those who choose Spanish are total beginners who are academically very good but not necessarily good linguists. They are based in a campus 30 minutes away from the campus where the language classes are held. In addition, some of them may also be doing periods of hospital practice even further afield at several points in the year.

A grant from the King’s Institute of Learning and Teaching allowed Cecilia Trevino and me to produce a course for these students. The project was started in 2005-6: the materials have been piloted for 3 academic years and the materials adjusted and added in the light of results and feedback. The project will be finished in the summer of 2008.

Description

¡Qué alivio! is a 4-skills, blended learning communicative course for special purposes covering the language will equip Medics with the basic Spanish they need to do everyday work in the health sector.

Realistic communication is at the forefront. The syllabus is based around the main communicative needs of medical practitioners:

Interlocutors- Who is talking to whom:
- Health professionals
- Patients / relatives
- Students themselves

Topics- About what and with what purpose:
- Obtaining patients’ data, preventive measures, symptoms, examining the patient, establishing a diagnosis and course of action, discussing the patient’s progress and cure
- Students’ own life

Contexts- In what situations:
- Hospital, surgery, college
There is also a focus on grammar, the structures necessary for each of the situations forms the language core of the course. The functional syllabus is woven around the situations and grammar points.

The materials are in two forms:
- conventional book
- E-learning materials on the King’s VLE, WebCTVista (the book units, interactive exercises, videos, listening texts and Power Point shows as well as interactive exercises, glossaries and a chat room). The students use WebCT to reinforce the face to face learning (for extra practice and to revisit videos and listening tasks) and to follow the course if they cannot attend class.

**Students’ homepage in WebCT.**

(The name of the course has been changed from ‘Ánimo’ to ‘¡Qué Alivio!’ to differentiate it from a recently published course)
Sample of the language presentation stage in ¡Qué Alivio!

UNIDAD 4

TEnGO QuE ir AL DOCTOR

**Objetivos:**
- Expresar obligación en forma impersonal y personal
- Hay + que + infinitivo
- Tener + que + infinitivo
- Expresar preferencias y deseos
- Objetos de uso cotidiano
- Prendas de vestir
- Demostrativos
- Verbs ir, preferir y querer

**Aims:**
- To express obligation in a personal and impersonal manner
- One has to ...
- To express preferences and wishes.
- Everyday objects
- Clothes and garments
- Demonstratives
- Verbs ir, prefer and querer

1. Consejos para una vida sana.

A. Mira estas fotografías y relacionalas con los consejos para una vida sana.

1. Hay que comer cinco porciones de frutas o verduras al día.
2. Hay que hacer ejercicio regularmente.
3. Hay que dormir siete horas diarias.
4. Hay que tomar dos litros de agua diariamente.
5. Hay que evitar el estrés.
6. Hay que meditar.
Tengo que ir al doctor

B. Marca cuáles de estos son consejos para llevar una vida sana.

- No hay que tomar mucho café.
- Hay que tomar mucho alcohol.
- Hay que hacer yoga.
- Hay que meditar regularmente.
- No hay que llevar una dieta balanceada.
- Hay que evitar usar el ascensor.
- Hay que dejar de fumar.
- Hay que comer alimentos procesados.
- Hay que practicar algún deporte.
- Hay que caminar 10 mil pasos al día.

C. Escucha los consejos de una doctora para llevar una vida sana y marca si es verdadero o falso.

Los tres puntos clave son la alimentación, la disciplina y el descanso.
Hay que caminar mil pasos diarios.
Hay que dormir dieciséis horas al día.
Hay que hacer ejercicio.
Hay que evitar los alimentos procesados.

D. Ahora escribe otros tres consejos; puedes usar tu diccionario.

Hay que ____________________________

Hay ____________________________
Appendix 3

Self-evaluation task at the end of each of the 10 units of ¡Qué Alivio!

Auto evaluación- U 3

What have you learnt in this unit? Have a look at the objectives stated at the beginning.
How well have you learnt it? Test yourself by answering the questions:

Without looking at the unit, can you remember:

Vocabulary

- a) eight items in a typical first aid kit
- b) five departments in a typical large hospital
- c) six ordinal numbers
- d) the names of your 2 favourite days of the week

Phrases- How to

- a) ask if there is a chemist in a specific area
- b) ask where it is
- c) answer the above questions
- d) ask for a thermometer in a chemist
- e) ask the price of the thermometer

Grammar

- a) How would you explain to an English-speaking friend the meaning of está, hay and tiene and when to use each?

On a scale of 0 to 5, how would you score yourself in each of the above?

0= Can’t do it at all
5= No problem

If you score 3 or less:

- look through the unit and the glossary to answer the questions, check the ‘Helping yourself learn..’ section for tips
- do the interactive exercises (again!)
- read the relevant grammar explanations in the unit and in the grammar summary (Ser/estar, hay)
- ask your tutor if there is something you don’t understand

Language learning is a cumulative process, don’t fall behind!
Bibliography


Websites

http://www.colby.edu/~bknelson/exercises/index.html