

**RESOURCE CENTRES, ICTS AND SELF-ACCESS:  
IMPLEMENTING BLENDED LEARNING  
PROGRAMMES IN EFL UNIVERSITY TUITION**

**Eduardo DE GREGORIO-GODEO**  
Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha (Espagne)

Résumé

Cet article examine l'utilisation et l'applicabilité de l'apprentissage autodirigé dans une démarche d'*e-learning* intégrée à un enseignement conventionnel face à face pour des étudiants d'anglais langue étrangère à l'université. On analyse en particulier la fonction des technologies de l'information et la communication disponibles dans des centres de ressources et leur rôle par rapport à l'acquisition de l'anglais langue étrangère. L'article rend compte d'une expérience d'implantation d'un programme de *blended learning* à l'université qui comporte l'emploi d'un centre de ressources en complément des enseignements traditionnels pour des étudiants de licence d'anglais en Espagne.

Abstract

This paper addresses the use and applicability of self-access approaches in e-learning integrated within conventional face-to-face classroom tuition for EFL university students. In particular, the role of ICTs available in resource centres is discussed in relation to the acquisition of EFL at university. This contribution accordingly reports an experience implementing a blended learning programme at university, where a resource centre is used as a complement to traditional instructional processes for English undergraduate students in Spain.

## **Introduction: Implementing a blended learning programme in EFL university tuition, a case study**

This paper explores the execution of blended learning programmes integrating e-learning processes within conventional face-to-face tuition for EFL undergraduate students. Our contribution tackles the use and applicability of self-access approaches to e-learning processes incorporated into ordinary teaching-and-learning practices involving the full-time presence of a teacher in the classroom. In particular, the role of ICTs in resource centres is discussed in relation to the acquisition of EFL at university. This case study accordingly reports a recent experience in the Modern Languages Department of the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) using the Department resource centre as a complement to traditional instruction processes for undergraduates following a BA in English. The experience was developed over a four-year period as a pilot programme for the forthcoming introduction of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in EFL university courses.<sup>1</sup>

The experience reported here was triggered by the need to research mechanisms helping undergraduate students of English Philology to improve their linguistic competence in EFL. Both the insufficient allocation of EFL tuition time in the official curriculum of the degree in English Studies and the students' poor level of English when they start their degree have traditionally tended to be major hindrances in helping learners to achieve linguistic competence on completion of their studies.

In the light of this situation, a number of compensating strategies were contemplated by EFL staff in the Modern Languages Department:

- a) promoting self-access abilities and autonomy on the part of the students;
- b) incorporating self-study work into conventional face-to-face tuition;
- c) drawing upon ICTs available in the Department multimedia language laboratory;
- d) converting the multimedia language laboratory into a resource centre for the students to carry out their independent-study activity;
- e) integrating e-learning sessions into the ordinary teaching-and-learning practice of EFL subjects.

Considering these compensating mechanisms, we came to articulate the fundamental objective of this experience, namely to establish a blended learning programme for the teaching-and-learning practice of EFL in the English Department by actively drawing upon ICTs and online learning resources from a self-access perspective and integrating such resources into the ordinary “fully-frontal classroom teaching” (P. Riley, 1995: 112).<sup>2</sup> In aiming to incorporate online learning within conventional-classroom tuition, we took the flexibility of self-access approaches to language learning as a basic premise, that is, the fact that “it can be incorporated into

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<sup>1</sup> As a result of the introduction of ECTS programmes over the next few years, conventional face-to-face tuition time will be reduced, so that students will have to develop self-access learning strategies. This autonomous work will be greatly dependent on the use of online learning materials; hence the testing of the blended learning programme presented here.

<sup>2</sup> *Blended learning* may be understood as the combination of e-learning and “conventional” face-to-face instruction, or, as defined by Heesen (2003: 14), “the introduction of E-Learning as a supplement to traditional classroom instruction”.

a language course or it can be used by learners who are not taking courses” (D. Gardner & L. Miller, 1999: 11).<sup>3</sup>

The methodology employed to achieve the purpose of the experience, and the corresponding implementation of the blended learning programme, comprised three major variables, to wit: a) choosing an appropriate self-study approach for the students to use the online resources in the resource centre; b) defining learners’ utilization of ICTs; and c) institutionalising the blended learning programme in the BA curriculum. The results expected from the experience were therefore directly related to all three stages of the method devised. Thus, in addition to delineating undergraduates’ self-access strategies, and the curriculum design of EFL courses, the experience aimed to start using the Department multimedia language laboratory as a resource centre and make full use of the wide range of ICT applications. In particular, the new way of using the language laboratory involved consideration of such factors as facilities, cataloguing of materials and personnel.

The results of the experience are reported here. As stated above, such results are directly dependent upon all three variables of the method followed to achieve the overall objective guiding the implementation of the blended learning programme in the English Department of the University of Castilla-La Mancha.

## **1. Selecting a self-access framework for using ICTs in the resource centre**

The self-access<sup>4</sup> approach guiding the students’ autonomous use of ICTs for their language-learning process was based on the work of the CRAPEL at the University of Nancy 2, France. Within this framework, self-access is conceived of as an approach to language learning where all the decisions in a learning programme are the learner’s responsibility: “Les apprentissages autodirigés ont pour caractéristique commune fondamentale le fait que toutes les décisions concernant le programme d’apprentissage sont de la responsabilité de l’apprenant lui-même” (H. Holec, 1996: 85).

In accordance with the work of these practitioners (M-J. Gremmo, 1995a, 1995b; M-J. Gremmo & P. Riley, 1995, 1996; H. Holec, 1987, 1996; P. Riley, 1995), the student’s independent study activity is guided by a counsellor helping him or her to define a self-study programme. In Gremmo’s (1995a: 34) view, the counsellor will help learners to develop their learning competence and facilitate the use of various resources in the self-access centre according to individual needs:

*La structure de soutien définit un nouveau rôle pédagogique, différent du rôle de l’enseignant, le conseiller, qui se situe dans les deux grands axes de l’autodirection. Le conseiller a pour tâche :*

- *d’aider l’apprenant à développer sa compétence d’apprentissage, dans le cadre de conseil,*

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<sup>3</sup> As early as the late 80s, Sheerin (1989: 22) maintained that “there are ways of turning a classroom into a mini self-access centre once or twice a week or however often seems appropriate”, suggesting different strategies to do so.

<sup>4</sup> According to a definition by Sheerin (1991: 43), self-access may be seen as “a way of describing materials that are designed and organized in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own”.

- *d'organiser la mise à disposition des ressources, et d'adapter le centre de ressources aux demandes des apprenants.*<sup>5</sup>

The blended learning programme in EFL courses was thus based on a series of interviews between students and counsellors leading to the definition of autonomous learning programmes. The first counselling session served to establish a number of fundamental variables for the student's independent activity in the resource centre, for example:

- a) identifying learning needs;
- b) selecting appropriate materials, in particular online resources;
- c) choosing working procedures and techniques;
- d) organising personal work in terms of timetable, length and duration of sessions;
- e) encouraging self-assessment.<sup>6</sup>

These initial needs and procedures could be renegotiated over subsequent tutorials depending on the student's progress and accomplishment.

## **2. Using ICTs in the resource centre**

### **2.1. Turning the multimedia language laboratory into a resource centre**

Although the Modern Languages Department was equipped with a high-tech multimedia language laboratory, until the implementation of this experience the use of this space by both teachers and students had been rather limited. On the one hand, teachers found it very difficult to teach their EFL courses in the laboratory, for it was impossible to accommodate an entire group at once in the laboratory due to space constraints. On the other hand, students had never been particularly enthusiastic about using the laboratory in spite of its availability at free-entrance times.

Converting the multimedia language laboratory into a self-access centre involved taking full advantage of existing equipment, changing the philosophy of use, and implementing new roles by committed teachers participating in the project. By and large, for the blended learning programme to be implemented, the resource centre started to be operated in accordance with the following variables.

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<sup>5</sup> Gremmo and Riley insist on these key ideas as they claim elsewhere: "Les conseillers ont deux grands rôles: d'une part, ils aident les apprenants à développer leur compétence d'apprentissage [...]. D'un autre côté, ils créent les conditions pratiques favorables à ce mode d'apprentissage de langue [...] en mettant à la disposition des apprenants les ressources adéquates" (1996: 96).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, within the CRAPEL approach to self-study, such factors are fundamental in defining a self-access programme. As Gremmo (1995b: 11) puts it, "l'apprenant doit savoir prendre toutes les décisions nécessaires à un apprentissage réussi: définir des objectifs, choisir des contenus et des supports, choisir des techniques de travail, gérer le déroulement de son travail (notamment en termes de temps, horaires et durée) et aussi évaluer son apprentissage".

### *2.1.1. Facilities*

The resource centre was organised on the basis of three main areas: a) a language-laboratory area; b) a reading-and-reference section; and c) a speaking-and-counselling space. Firstly, language laboratory facilities were maintained in the form of individual booths equipped with DVD, video and cassette, satellite television and a PC for the use of language-learning software, and which allowed every user to access different internet resources. Secondly, the reading and reference space included a stock of various types of reading and reference materials. Documents were made available on shelves and there also existed desks for individuals' personal work. Finally, the speaking-and-counselling section was designed to facilitate interaction between learners and counsellors, satisfying students' speaking necessities as well.

### *2.1.2. Document cataloguing*

The resource centre incorporated a wide range of documents of various types, for instance: a) didactic material (eg general language-learning courses, skill-practice methods, teacher-created activities, film- and documentary-exploitation exercises, EFL web sites, etc); b) authentic material (eg TV and radio recordings, press articles, films and theatre plays, leaflets, etc); and c) various kinds of supporting documents (eg grammar books, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, level tests, questionnaires about learning needs, self-assessment tests, etc).

Documents were catalogued in a computerized database which learners might consult to find the type of materials needed. There also existed a manual catalogue with individual paper records of every single document in the resource centre. Cataloguing included such parameters as:<sup>7</sup>

a) Reference information:

- 1) title
- 2) code and internal reference of document and accompanying material
- 3) format: book, cassette, video, DVD, web site, etc
- 4) author
- 5) publisher
- 6) type of document: authentic material, didactic material, reference material, theoretical work, test, film, documentary, etc

b) Contents:

- 1) type of exercise: drills, comprehension exercises, repetition, cloze tests, translation, dictation, free activities, guided activities
- 2) level: beginners, (pre-/upper-)intermediate, advanced
- 3) field: English for general purposes, business English, English for tourism, etc
- 4) communicative objectives
- 5) learning objectives: speaking, listening, writing, reading, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, culture, etc

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<sup>7</sup> These cataloguing variables were devised by integrating the range of parameters proposed for the description of self-access materials in language learning by authors like Cembalo (1994, 1995).

- 6) genre: film, documentary, news, soap opera, comedy, review, etc
- 7) summary

c) Further linguistic information:

- 1) accent: British vs American English
- 2) register: formal, informal, neutral, colloquial, etc
- 3) speed
- 4) duration
- 5) quality of recording

### 2.1.3. Personnel

Due to financial constraints, the staff in the resource centre was limited to the technician in charge of the former language laboratory and a team of counsellors, most of whom were Department teachers collaborating in running the self-access centre. The technician was responsible for maintaining equipment, installing software and computer programmes, and copying materials. This person's role was essential in familiarising students with the use of various computer applications and solving difficulties on-site. As Lonergan (1994: 131) acknowledges, "technical support is essential where there is a range of equipment in use".

The team of counsellors consisted of teachers involved in the experience and a number of collaborators from the Department, chiefly postgraduate students. The majority of counselling sessions took place in teachers' offices. As stated above, as much as one third of the course tuition was developed in the form of independent work in the resource centre. During these weekly sessions, the teacher remained in his or her office counselling small groups of students so that they could carry out their self-study activity. Nonetheless, committed teachers and collaborators were willing to surrender part of their tutorials to be available in the resource centre in order to satisfy the students' use of the self-access centre at free-entrance times.

As a result of financial and architectural constraints very often arising in the establishment of resource centres (cf J. McCall, 1992: 40; P. Riley, 1995: 107-110), the full-time presence of the technician in the multimedia language laboratory meant he ended up performing hosting duties for the students. For the same reason, teaching staff collaborating in the programme as counsellors often carried out secretarial work as well.

## 2.2. The role of ICTs

By the mid-90s, the use of ICTs had become central in resource centres, their use being particularly profitable for self-access environments. Fox (1994: 37) announced that "instruction by computers may be particularly productive in certain language learning situations, for example those where learners themselves control the learning process". Authors like Motteram (1997: 17) thus posit a long-standing association between autonomy and the use of ICTs:

*There has always been a perceived relationship between educational technology and learner autonomy. This is taking educational technology in its broadest sense and*

*taking learner autonomy as the superordinate term. This has become increasingly true for computers and self-access.*

In this context, the use of ICTs in the resource centre for self-access purposes focused on the possibilities and applications of network-based language teaching, that is, “language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks” (R. Kern & M. Warschauer, 2000: 1). Thus, we proceed to discuss the use of applications such as selected web sites, search engines, e-mail, chat, newsgroups, distribution lists and NetMeeting, in the implementation of the blended learning programme presented in this contribution.

### *2.2.1. Selected web sites*

As Fernández-Toro and Jones (2001: 83) claim, “surfing the net” can provide the self-access student with virtually all kinds of materials. Following the establishment of the blended learning programme for EFL courses in the Department, a selection of web sites specifically devoted to EFL learning was made available in the resource centre. These sites appeared on the screen in the form of links. As we have discussed elsewhere (E. de Gregorio-Godeo, 2003a, 2003b), such internet sites were organised on the basis of a number of relevant categories for the teaching-and-learning process of EFL, for instance:

- writing (eg <http://writing.englishclub.com>)
- reading (eg <http://reading.englishclub.com>)
- speaking (eg <http://www.speaking.englishclub.com>)
- listening (eg <http://englishlistening.com>)
- grammar (eg <http://www.grammarnow.com>)
- vocabulary (eg <http://www.vocabulary.com>)
- pronunciation (eg <http://soundsofenglish.org>)

### *2.2.2. Search engines*

Direct access to major internet search engines allowed students to find immediate information about various kinds of learning materials. Search engines available in the resource centre included <http://www.altavista.com>, <http://www.google.com>, <http://www.yahoo.com>, <http://www.lycos.com>, <http://www.terra.es>, etc.

### *2.2.3. E-mail*

Students were encouraged to get an e-mail address as a fundamental tool for their language-learning process.<sup>8</sup> E-mail proved to facilitate two main types of communication for learning purposes:

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<sup>8</sup> Although some of the students already had their own e-mail address, the university provided them with a free e-mail address dependent on the institutional university server upon request.

- a) Communication among EFL learners. Students were thus able to interact with other EFL learners to practise written English.
- b) Communication between the students and the counsellor. In this case, although students happened to attend a number of interviews with their counsellor so as to negotiate their self-study programmes, counsellors were available at certain times via e-mail as well.<sup>9</sup> E-mail also guaranteed the exchange of written work between the learners and the teachers collaborating in its correction, either in the resource centre or on various web sites.<sup>10</sup>

#### *2.2.4. Chat*

A special chat for the students was activated during the group's sessions in the language laboratory. This chat was also available at various other times during the week, the teacher being present as well. Moreover, students could use this application which was available on a number of web sites for EFL learners on the internet. In particular, voiced chat-rooms facilitated oral exchange among EFL learners.

#### *2.2.5. Newsgroup*

This application was used as a form of delayed communication among learners themselves as well as with their teacher. The newsgroup enabled students to ask questions or make different comments, which could be answered both by the teacher or by other students in the group, thus creating the opportunity for debate.

#### *2.2.6. Distribution list*

A distribution list received by students in their personal e-mail was activated so as to make them aware of important advice from the teacher or other students: common mistakes, useful web sites, announcements and assignments, etc.

#### *2.2.7. NetMeeting*

This application was used to produce opportunities for conversation in real time on the internet. This instrument for live interaction was employed at certain prearranged times between the students in a group and those from an exchange institution in Spain or in other countries. This tool happened to be particularly useful for promoting communication between institutions collaborating with each other through Erasmus exchanges.

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<sup>9</sup> Makin (1994: 106) claims that, "experience suggests that advising in a broader sense can use this form of communication".

<sup>10</sup> As Benson (2001: 139) stresses, "a key characteristic of the internet as a resource for self-directed learning is the opportunity it provides for collaborative learning".



### **3. Curriculum design**

Blended learning programmes are organised on the basis of a combination of e-learning and conventional face-to-face learning in various degrees (cf J. Daurella Nadal, 2003: 13-14). As conceived of in this experience, the blended learning approach to the teaching of EFL subjects consisted of two thirds of full-time face-to-face tuition and one third of online learning sessions taking place in the resource centre. Self-study sessions in the self-access centre drawing upon e-learning resources aimed to compensate for individual needs and personal deficiencies within general course requirements. Thus, as much of one third of EFL courses were covered by students in the resource centre, the remaining two thirds of tuition being taught to the group as a whole. Students had to write reports after every single session in the resource centre, and only those who had completed a number of compulsory counselling sessions were entitled to take the final exam.

### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

One major obstacle in the implementation of the programme had to do with some practitioners' reluctance to change from a traditional to a self-directed learning environment. These difficulties are typical of what Holec (1999: 97) depicts as "le passage d'une situation de monopole de l'apprentissage hétérodirigé à une situation de choix possible entre apprentissage hétéro- et apprentissage autodirigé par l'introduction de ce dernier type d'apprentissage". For some teachers, this approach implied relying on learners' responsibility far too much.

The establishment of the resource centre in the language laboratory premises meant that no proper hosting area could be designed. For the same practical constraints, the personnel in the resource centre were forced to collaborate by performing duties which should have been carried out by other professionals.

In spite of such difficulties, the experience proved to be most positive, and, according to the surveys carried out among students, they were generally satisfied with the opportunity which they had to compensate for individual weaknesses and deficiencies by undertaking independent study work. Undergraduates thus claimed to be highly motivated by and enthusiastic about the fundamental role which they themselves acquired in contributing to the definition of their own learning programmes within overall group work requirements in EFL subjects. For many of them, the counselling activity in the resource centre served to guide and systematically organise their autonomous work with online resources and ICT facilities which they had not been able to take full advantage of before.

The overall evaluation of the experience was highly encouraging, and most EFL practitioners in the Modern Languages Department agreed on its suitability for the forthcoming establishment of the ECTS in EFL tuition. In the light of this positive feedback and results, other non-EFL professionals teaching degree courses within the English BA claimed to be considering the integration of blended learning approaches into their courses. This would mean incorporating a number of sessions using online resources used from a self-access perspective into conventional face-to-face tuition.

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