ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY-BASED EDUCATION: TOWARDS A KNOWLEDGE BASED SOCIETY

Proceedings of the II International Conference on Multimedia and Information & Communication Technologies in Education

m-ICTE2003

Badajoz, Spain, December 3-6th 2003

Edited by
A.Méndez-Vilas
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ISBN Volume III, (Pages 1336-2026): 84-96212-12-2

Published by:
JUNTA DE EXTREMADURA,
Consejería de Educación, Ciencia y Tecnología (Badajoz, Spain), 2003
Printed in Spain
THEMATIC FORUM AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL IN AN “ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR BLIND PERSONS” COURSE

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A forum has been developed by the Electrical and Electronics Department of University of Cordoba and will be used by professors and researchers of the English Philology Department of University of Cordoba, in a collaboration agreement between both of them. The forum will be used as a virtual space where experts and students would expose experiences and researchings for the development of new methodologies for several teaching topics, ranging from blind person educational tools and techniques to cognitive methodologies for foreign language teaching. The usage of the forum suits perfectly with the concepts underlying the ECTS credits in which University will be involved in the following years.

This tool has been designed to work in an Internet environment, using a Web interface written in HTML and Javascript and using free software well-known libraries and tools such as PHP and MySQL. A flexible and robust “user control resource” has been integrated with 4 different kind of users with several capabilities: full administrator, messages administrator, registered user and guest user. Up to 3 different types of forums: opened to all users (even guests), closed to a set of users and moderated, in which some users could post messages but those messages have to be authorized by “censors”.

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the advantages of using thematic forums as a tool that can be fruitful for teaching and researching purposes. Our goal is to make use of this thematic forum to carry out a seminar on English as a Foreign Language for Blind People within the framework of a third course subject Psycholinguistics and Acquisition of English for students of English Philology at the Faculty of Arts, Languages and Humanities of the University of Córdoba (Spain). The usage of this tool will provide us with a very significant evidence about the way in which students are able to take an active role in an activity which has been designed to give them the opportunity to search for new information, compare with other students’ findings, get at conclusions and establish new goals. In this way, this thematic forum is intended to become a tool for them to learn to learn, which is one of the basic objectives of the application of the ECTS system to university teaching.

2 Theoretical foundations

2.1 Some notes on Teaching English to Blind People

Nowadays, the field of language teaching, and in more precise terms, foreign language teachings has become a fashionable one. Second language learning and teaching is an area of study that is continuously receiving the insight of different perspectives [6]. However, not all the methodologies used for teaching foreign languages are equally appropriate.

Bearing this in mind, at the Department of English Philology of the University of Córdoba we started to develop a cognitive methodology which is based on the learner [5], that is, it is based on the assumption that the psychological and physiological features of the learner determine the acquisition of any kind of knowledge, and as a result of it, the acquisition of a foreign language. So far, special attention has been paid to adults’ [2,3,4] and blind people’s acquisition of English as a foreign language. In both cases, there is a set of psychological and physiological peculiarities respectively that can receive a special treatment from the perspective of the so-called cognitive methodology.

In the case of interest for this paper, a specific method is being designed for blind people learning English as a foreign language. This method is based on two basic assumptions: the sensorial capabilities of blind people and the adapting it to new findings and research. In this sense, it appeared to be useful to give our students the possibility to take part in that research and, at the same time, to show them one of the practical applications of the theoretical foundations and background which is reviewed as part of the programme of the third course subject Psycholinguistics and Acquisition of English.

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The tool chosen for this purpose is the thematic forum. Apart from the technical specifications, which will be detailed below, the selection of this tool has been due to the huge possibilities that it allows to teachers and students in the future space of higher education.

2.2 Link to ECTS concepts

European Higher Education Space (namely, EEES), sponsored by European Council, tries to unify university studies all along European Union. First item for unifying is to structure these studies into two levels: Graduate and Postgraduate. To let students to be able to study in any country and any University in the European Union and their studies be recognized in any other country and University, and system based on Credits is been developed nowadays. Exchange Credit Transfer System, namely ECTS, is the system under development which are based on the number of hours a student spends to learn a specific subject. This system collides frontally with the traditional system which is the one nowadays in use in Spain. Traditional system is based on the number of hours a professor spends in teaching a subject to the students. This changes completely the conception of university studies: professor changes from a person who teaches concepts and gives specific knowledge about a subject to the students, to a person who guides students how to learn by themselves. A considerable reduction of magisterial lessons is proposed, which will lead to an increment in the amount of concepts the students should investigate and collect documentation by themselves to get the knowledge not explained in the magisterial lessons. This process will require the students to study harder by themselves and, of course, that would produce a larger number of doubts which will also be translated into a lot of questions to professors and broader use of tuition hours. When dealing with classes crowded with students, more than 150, it is completely unapproachable to cope with all of them in the traditional way. New tendencies of virtual education with Internet resources help, although don’t solve completely, these problems. The forum will become the virtual space where students will learn to look for new insight into the topic and will have the opportunity to exchange their own findings and opinions with their mates’ ones. Thus, the thematic forum will turn out to be specially helpful not only for teaching purposes but also for research purposes. No doubt, students’ findings can be interesting and relevant to the investigation of our research group.

2.3 Forum as an Educational Tool

Seminars, practice courses and collaborative works among students, junior/senior researchers and professors, let us call them all generically “participants”, in their nowadays structure are limited to the presential classes, bounding the discussion and work to a room where professors and students meet and to the time reserved for those meetings in the agenda. On the other hand, Internet promotes ubiquity, free-timetable and universal access to data. These two facts solve the problem presented above: there is no need to reduce the seminars just to the sparse hours left in the schedule and students can work without the presence of the professors.

As a preliminary analysis of the solution, we can find a set of facts to be solved:

- Participants should be able to read and write comments independently, that is, participants do not need to be online to work; it should not be a chat-like program.
- There are different kinds of participants: plain participants (mainly, students and junior researchers) and administrators (mainly, professors and senior researchers).
- Seminars and collaborative works go as follows: An administrator opens up the discussion with a brief commentary and several branches are offered to be followed and discussed by participants.
- All participants could read and comment any idea expressed by any participant, but a previous censorship on the comments should be done to avoid off-the-topic, disturbing and/or not requested messages.

Thematic forums are a very good choice as an educational tool for helping professors with this task. These allow to keep track of messages of participants, to open new sub-forums, to censorship messages, etc. In order to maintain messages of participants a database should be used.

Several profiles should be designed: registered users (plain participants), full administrators (professors and/or senior researchers) and messages administrators (participants allowed to act as a censor for messages).
3 Thematic Forum: software implementation

3.1 Basic Structure

Best software solution to this problem is the usage of a web-based forum. After an exhaustive search for open-software forum, the ones tested did not satisfy our demands, so we decided to build a personalized web-forum up from the scratch. For this purpose we decided to use free software: an Apache web server with PHP-4 mod and MySQL mod extensions, MySQL database. First to design was the Entity-Relationship diagram which led us to a close-to-optimal internal data structure. This structure was translated into tables and relationships in the database. Web-forum would be the interface to/from this database, which would keep the coherency of the data entered by users.

PHP is a lightweight interpreted language, executed at server-side, with powerful extensions for database connection and management, widely used to produce dynamically web-pages using data stored in databases. PHP allows to be used inside HTML code in a transparent way for the end-user: web pages are written in HTML with PHP code embedded. The way it works is: the web server with PHP module executes the PHP code of the web page, sending the end-user a HTML page which is the original web page changing the PHP code with the results of the execution of it.

The bridge to the data inside the database developed was designed using HTML with CSS for the visual appearance for all the pages designed, Javascript was also used to provide the pages with a dynamic language to check the fields in the forms and to provide other structural stuff.

3.2 Forum behavior

The Thematic Forum software has been designed to fulfill several requirements:

- Thematic Forum users are classified into 2 main categories: registered and guest. Registered users could be subclassified into 3 categories: registered users, message administrators and forum administrators. A message administrator is also a registered user and a forum administrator is also a forum administrator.
- Users willing to write or read comments under forums should be registered once for the whole Forum system and then authorized for each forum or sub-forum chosen.
- Several forums could be opened with 3 different policies: Open (guest users are allowed to enter, read and write messages), Close (only authorized registered users are allowed to enter, read and write messages) or Moderated (authorized registered users are allowed to enter, read and write messages, but messages are not posted immediately, they must be censored by a message or forum administrator).
- Another valid classification for each forum is made upon a Generic or Subject matter. A Subject forum is linked to a particular subject of an University Degree Course, a Generic forum is not linked to any University Degree Course subject, but to any generic question/problem.
- As this Forum is closely related to University subjects, students and professors could be enrolled in the Forum database linked to the subjects they teach or they are taught.
3.3 Usage and other relevant statistics for teaching

Any forum would provide simple usage statistics, however in our case, closely linked to ECTS description, further statistics would be desirable. Students are supposed to use the forum as a teaching tool, so information about whether all the root items proposed by the professor have been read, discussed and replied and who have not done that. A second interesting branch for statistics is to control which issues have been read the most. This would allow to detect the most interesting topics for students and to keep track of them.

4 Discussion

The productive collaboration between different fields and departments within higher education can result into fruitful projects such as the one outlined in this paper. The design and supervision of a thematic forum as the virtual support on which students and teachers can develop an exchange of opinions based on investigations about the process of learning a foreign language by blind people is a good example of the way in which these tools can be of a great help in the application of ECTS system to university teaching, specially in the field of Humanities. By means of these teaching resources the teacher will find it easy to become an educator rather than a magister, which is one of the basic underpinnings of the new European space for Higher Education.

References