

# LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES THROUGH E-LEARNING PLATFORMS

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## ABSTRACT

During the school year 2005-2006 the University of Extremadura (UEX) authorized the use of *Moodle*, the open source e-learning platform, as virtual support for the teaching of subjects and courses distributed in all the levels and university cycles.

In this essay we present some of the conclusions obtained after the completion of an analysis on the opinion of the students about the learning of a foreign language through virtual platforms, in particular, in the subjects of English for Specific Purposes at the Centro Universitario de Mérida.

Some subjects were taught face-to-face (*Technical Computer English, Technical English in Topography and Technical English in Industrial Design*), courses in which the platform acted as a teaching complement to the classes and the tutorials, whereas in others (*Technologies of the Information and the Communication Applied to the Learning of Languages and English Online*), taught through a blended-learning approach, *Moodle* became an essential tool for the follow-up of the subjects.

Once presented the results of the previous analysis, also regarded as the context of our research study, some results derived from teaching / learning of skills and linguistic components through e-learning platforms will be described: access to materials exposed by the teacher and accomplishment of activities and proposed exercises through both approaches; participation in work groups for the accomplishment of collaborative tasks and the like.

### 1. Theoretical Foundation

Within the great deal of advantages ICTs offer for L2 learning, we stand out: the use of authentic materials, the communicative approach on collaborative basis and the multimedia potential applied to a successfully linguistic acquisition.

As far as the methodological approaches are concerned, they can vary according to the role attached to the teacher and the students, being possible to occur the following perspectives:

*Teacher-centered approach*

*Student-centered approach*

*Task-based learning*

Likewise, one of the most relevant principles underlying L2 learning through computers support is *NBLT (Net-based language teaching/learning)*. As Warschauer & Kern (2000) state, NBLT involves the use of computers connected by local or global networks. The relationship between users —the socio-cognitive paradigm— is essential for the development of NBLT.

Finally, *CSCL (Computer-supported collaborative learning)* is the third pedagogical trend our context is based on. An interactive and varied communicative context allows the learners to work together both in a synchronous and asynchronous way: “Working together to accomplish shared goals” (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Thus, as Rosenberg (2001) claims the use of Internet technologies is delivering a great de la of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance.

Reaching this point and as a central issue of our work, table 1 summarizes some of the main differences between *face to face* and *blended* learning, a mixture of distant and face to face approach.

<b><i>FtF</i></b>	<b><i>Blended-learning</i></b>
Attending	Non attending
Teacher -centered	Student -centered
Knowledge transmittion	Skills development
Written environment	Audiovisual environment
Traditional methodology	New Technologies

**Table 1: *Ftf vs. Blended learning***

In this context, the usage of e-learning platforms, virtual teaching / learning environment as Moodle, *is based on facilitation of the communication among the participant in an educational context* (Adell, J., 2004).

The selection of Moodle, as the learning management system of our proposal, is supported, in turn, by its user friendly interface, the increasingly growing community of users and because it is the open source platform used at the University of Extremadura for online teaching both at undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Our research, aimed at exploring the effects of online environments on L2 acquisition, is supported by previous research experiences such as:

“Models of Asynchronous computer Conferencing for Collaborative Learning in Large College Classes” Siat-Moy Chong (Indiana University)

“Sharing Aspects Within *Aspects*: Real-Time Collaboration in the High School English Classroom” Deborah H. Cooney

“The Use of Computer-Mediated Communication: Electronic Collaboration and Interactivity” Inae Kang. (University of Seoul)

“A closer look at Blended Learning: parameters for designing a blended learning environment for language teaching and learning” Petra Neumeier (Munich, Germany)

“Can it be as effective? Distance versus blended learning in a web-based EAP programme” Mihye Harker y Dimitra Koutsantoni (University of Luton)

## **2. Objectives of the research**

In the light of the premises and contextualization seen above, our study aims, in general terms, to analyze the impact of technologies (*Moodle*) on students; in detail:

1- To examine students’ evaluation of *Moodle’s* resources

2- To explore the relation between students' access to *Moodle* and their results according to the teaching modality (Blended-learning vs. Face-to-Face).

### 3. Methodology

#### *Participants and Courses*

Courses on FACE-TO-FACE basis (50 students) in which *Moodle* is used as an additional complement to other teaching face to face practices:

- Technical English (Industrial Design) (ITDI)
- English in Computing (ITIS)
- English in Land-surveying Engineering (IT)

Courses on BLENDED-LEARNING basis (123 students) where *Moodle* is used as the major /unique tool in the execution of tasks and development of non-attending sessions:

- Technical English Online (ITO)
- ICTs applied to L2 teaching and Learning (TICAI)

#### *Tools*

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out to reach conclusions on the effectiveness of Moodle, the opinion of students and the effect of such CMS on their final marks. The following tools were used to implement the research:

- Questionnaires : which provided quantifying and objective data about the students as well as relevant information about Moodle, used in the qualitative research (I.- Personal academic information; II— General questions on Moodle; III.- Moodle Interface; IV— Moodle Activities; V— Interaction at Moodle: teacher—student / student—student; VI—Others (technical support, etc.)
- Moodle access (*Logs, Chats, Forums, Wikis, E-mails*). This e-platform allows us to keep track of the student's activity, participation and contribution at the above mentioned tools.
- Excel /SPSS: both statistic programs were used to analyse data making it possible to carry out a quantitative research.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Objective 1.- Students' evaluation of Moodle

Help to understand course content:	A LOT 41.3% SOMETHING 44%
Help to improve English proficiency:	A LOT 13.3% SOMETHING 57.3%
Clarity to present tasks:	QUITE 67.6%
Clarity to expose objectives:	ADEQUATE 77%
Interface:	GOOD 80.6%
Navigation:	EASY 72.2%
Functionality:	GOOD 80.8%
Communication with teacher:	ADEQUATE 45.9% POOR 9.5%
Communication with classmates:	ADEQUATE 45.9% POOR 41.9%

**Table 2: Objective 1: Moodle evaluation (I)**

As seen in table 2, there is a significant percentage of students who show a favourable opinion on the use of *Moodle*, both as a way to access course information and as a vehicle to master subject contents, and as an easy way to establish contact between them and the teachers. It's also significant the number of students who considers that *Moodle* is not an adequate medium of communicating with other classmates.

**Results: Objective 1**

Reasons not to use Moodle:	percentage
<i>It is effective</i>	4%
<i>Difficulty to access Internet</i>	20.3%
<i>Not Useful</i>	1.3%
<i>Regular classes are enough</i>	8%
<i>Unable to work with moodle</i>	12%

Reasons to use Moodle:	percentage
<i>It is compulsory</i>	52%
<i>It is effective</i>	35.1%
<i>Easy</i>	36%
<i>It is an useful help</i>	48%
<i>It is a fundamental tool</i>	46.7%

**Table 3: Objective 1: Moodle evaluation (II)**

Table 3 summarises the reasons some of the students remark to justify why they have not used Moodle as frequent as demanded (*difficult to access Internet*). We consider it to be an extrinsic cause to explain such percentage, since all students were provided with the facilities needed to carry out courses and tasks online (*access to a computer; available computing lab*). On the other hand, being a compulsory subject is the main reason to access the e-platform; being also noticeable the number of students who regard *Moodle* as an useful (48%) or fundamental tool (46.7%).

Finally, as far as the students' evaluation on Moodle is concerned, we would like to remark the percentage of those who consider the e-platform an easy way to access content (51.4%), an easy way to contact teachers (46.7%) and an adequate complement to the traditional classes (46.9%).

<i>An adequate complement</i>	46.7%
<i>A fundamental tool</i>	25.3%
<i>An easy way to access content</i>	51.4%
<i>An easy way to contact teachers</i>	46.7%
<i>An easy way to contact classmates</i>	21.3%
<i>An interesting tool</i>	22.7%
<i>An entertaining tool</i>	13.3%
<i>An useful tool</i>	41.3%

<i>An additional resource</i>	26.7%
<i>A necessary tool</i>	5.3%
<i>An obstacle</i>	5.3%

**Table 4: Objective 1: Moodle evaluation (III)**

*As conclusions of the first objective we can state:*

- 1.-Moodle evaluation has been highly positive, being no substantial differences between sexes, L2 level, computing expertise or learning approach followed (FtF or blended),
2. - There are no reasonable causes to explain the difficulty to Internet access.
3. - Though it is an useful tool which could promote collaborative learning, integration of interactive tools -chats, forum, etc.- to enhance communication among students should be further exploited.

**4.2. Objective 2: The relation between students' access to *Model* and their results according to the teaching modality (Blended-learning vs. Face-to-Face)**

<b>PRÁCTICAS MOODLE</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>BLENDED</b>	<b>FTF</b>
<i>LAB practice 1 (activity 1)</i>	59.2%	59%	59.5 %
<i>Lab practice 1 (activity2)</i>	76.3%	76.9%	75.7%
<i>Lab practice 2 (activity 1)</i>	47.4%	<b>69.2%</b>	<b>24.3%*</b>
<i>Lab practice 2 (activity 2)</i>	63.2%	<b>89.7%</b>	<b>35.1%*</b>
<i>Lab practice 3 (activity 1)</i>	59.2%	<b>71.8%</b>	<b>45.9%*</b>
<i>Lab practice 3 (activity 2)</i>	51.3%	53.8%	48.6%

**Table 5: Objective 2: Students' access to Moodle**

Table 5 shows the access to the lab practices content through *Moodle* in both approaches (FtF and Blended).

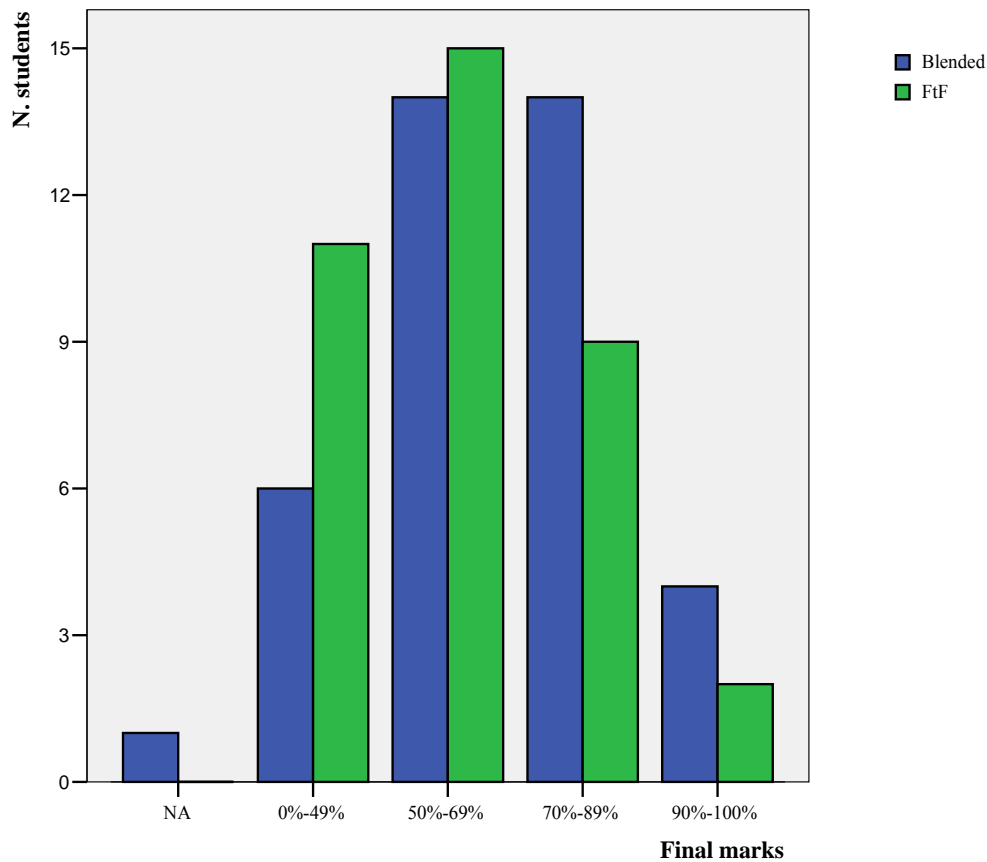
There is significant differences between the number of *blended students* accessing to lab practice 2 & 3 (69.2 % and 89.7% respectively), and the percentages of FTF students visiting those activities (24.3% and 35.1%). This table shows Blended students work on the practices carried out in *Moodle* with a percentage of 70.06% whereas only 48.18% FtF students acceded so frequently to the same activities.

<b>Total Mark</b>	<b>Lab practice 1 *</b>		<b>Lab practice 2 *</b>		<b>Lab practice 3 *</b>	
	<b>Blended</b>	<b>FtF</b>	<b>Blended</b>	<b>FtF</b>	<b>Blended</b>	<b>FtF</b>
<b>25%</b>	<b>18.4%</b>	<b>45.9%</b>	<b>13.2%</b>	<b>37.8%</b>	<b>10.5%</b>	<b>64.9%</b>
<b>50%</b>	<b>44.7%</b>	<b>48.6%</b>	<b>26.3%</b>	<b>27.0%</b>	<b>10.5%</b>	<b>29.7%</b>
<b>75%</b>	<b>26.3%</b>	<b>5.4%</b>	<b>31.6%</b>	<b>35.1%</b>	<b>26.3%</b>	<b>5.4%</b>
<b>100%</b>	<b>10.5%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>28.9%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>52.6%</b>	<b>0%</b>

**Table 6: Objective 2: Lab practices' marks**

As seen, 100% being the top mark and 25% the lowest mark students got in all three practices. Table 6 shows a remarkably high percentage of Blended students who obtained top marks compared to the low percentage of FtF students getting such positive results in the same practices.

Also, we should point out the higher number of FtF students who failed all practices (in bold) and the low percentage of Blended students who failed.



**Figure 1: Final Marks**

Figure 1 presents the final grades Blended and FtF students obtained at the end of the course (50 % is the minimum pass mark). Despite the lower access to the activities in *Moodle* shown in the previous section, FtF students (in green) seem to do as well as Blended students regarding their final marks. *Further research is needed.*

*Conclusions to the second objective:*

1- The access to *Moodle* implies better results in the lab practices completed during the course.

2- The higher access to *Moodle* in Blended-learning shows higher results in lab practices

3- There are no differences between Blended and FtF students in the final marks.  
Further research

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