Integrating the communicative component into b-learning instruction

F. Arcos García; P. Ortega Gil; A. Amilburu Osinaga

Departamento: Filología Inglesa
Universidad de Alicante

ABSTRACT
Apparently, at least from a standoffish point of view, e-learning activities are in no way compatible with communicative language learning methodologies and thus with little or no value at all for meaningful language practice and consequently unacceptable for achieving significant, far-reaching competencies in the English Language. In this article we will demonstrate how this is far from true and how both collaborative, cooperative learning, and task-based communicative language practice can be achieved using an LMS (Learning Management System). Ever since a communicative-driven approach to language learning is said to be the most comprehensive and direct way of acquiring a real competence in whatever language we might be learning, our b-learning courses and all the resources, activities, lessons, etc., in our LMS pursue only one aim: To satisfy the final purpose for which it was conceived from the beginning, which is no other than mastering the corresponding competencies. In this way, both face-to-face classes and activities in the LMS are pieces of the same puzzle which dovetail accurately to make up our UoLs (Units of Learning).

Key words: language b-learning, communicative b-learning approach, second language b-learning, b-learning design, b-learning activities.
1. INTRODUCTION

Although we have been using blended learning for some years, the concept has only recently gained currency in the world of computer assisted learning. Blended learning uses each of its two elements (computer assisted learning and classroom interaction) for what each does best (Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003). Together the two elements of blended learning combine to create a whole system, which is stronger than its constituent parts.

For some years we have been investigating the impact of b-learning in and outside our classrooms. Primary, secondary and university classrooms have been the target of determined, in-depth investigation and practice. Our articles, which are the result of direct intervention in the classrooms either by ourselves or by other collaborating tutors, teachers and lecturers, range from the sophisticated, state-of-the-art routines included in the IMS Learning design specification to the more common and down-to-earth practice in rural primary schools. On the whole, we are satisfied so far (Arcos and Ortega, 2009) although there is still a long way to go to be able to say that b-learning is a positive alternative to the anxiety and uneasiness technology and this changing world is inflicting on stakeholders of educational institutions.

As blended learning emerges as perhaps the most prominent delivery contrivance in education, it is vital to define it, as well as explain where it is useful and why it is important. And in the case of b-learning to learn languages, we need to find the mechanisms to adapt traditional face-to-face methodologies, such as the communicative approach, to the great advantage the new technologies represent in today’s world.

1.1. Second language b-learning

When confronted to provide a definition of blended learning and look at what others have said about it, three global trends seem to take shape (Graham, 2006): That which combines instructional modalities or delivery media; that which combines instructional methods and that which combines online and face-to-face instruction.

All three modalities are the result of the same thing. All of them combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction but with a distinctive perspective: each emphasizes where the essential part of the learning will take place. The first and the last do not make any reference to the methodologies employed whereas the second is more insightful as to the style and modality of instruction and that one is our preferred line of work.
The emergence of Learning Management Systems (henceforth LMSs) has made delivery more specific and methodology-biased. For instance Moodle is said to follow the principles laid down by Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, Paulo Friere and Howard Gardner and what is known as “social constructivism” based on different kinds of thinking and interaction. The combination of face-to-face classes and the LMS, Moodle, promotes that kind of instruction.

Another point of view that we must also consider is the amount of time dedicated to both sides of the instruction, face-to-face and online and the type of blended learning. Some people would consider leaving most part of the drilling to the learning platform and use the face-to-face classes for debates and explanations. Others may think otherwise and use the LMS only occasionally. In general, these possible combinations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTENSITY</th>
<th>BLEND</th>
<th>SPACE</th>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>LEARNING STYLES, MODALITY</th>
<th>HUMAN INTERACTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZERO</td>
<td>No blend</td>
<td>All live (face-to-face)</td>
<td>Live Synchronous (very short lag time)</td>
<td>Note-taking, teacher-centered classes</td>
<td>E-learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>Low blend</td>
<td>Low virtual</td>
<td>Short lag time</td>
<td>Textbook only</td>
<td>Low human interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
<td>Medium blend</td>
<td>Mixed reality</td>
<td>Medium lag time</td>
<td>Text and sound</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>High blend</td>
<td>High virtual</td>
<td>Asynchronous (long lag time)</td>
<td>Rich all senses</td>
<td>No machine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In our case, we have taken the middle route and have opted for really making sense of the word blend and combine activities that were started online and finished in the in-person classes or the other way round.

1.2 Communicative language practice

The background for communicative language teaching and learning stars in Britain in the 1960s as a replacement to the earlier structural method and its evolutionary variation, also called Situational Language Teaching. This was partly in response to Chomsky's criticisms of structural theories of language and partly based on the theories of British functional linguists, such as Firth and Halliday, as well as American sociolinguists, such as Hymes, Gumperz and
Labov and the writings of Austin and Searle on speech acts. Once the initial hubbub had died down and people really started to apply this so called Communicative Method three lines of application emerged, which clearly streamlined the shape of this approach and got rid of the frayed edges which reminded people of the earlier static and unnatural perspective towards language teaching:

a) activities that involved real communication,

b) activities in which language was used for carrying out meaningful tasks,

c) activities wherein language was meaningful to the learner and which promoted learning.

The cornerstones of this approach are:

1. Focusing greater attention on the role of learners rather than the external stimuli learners are receiving from their environment.

2. Focusing greater attention on the learning process rather than the products that learners produce.

3. Focusing greater attention on the social nature of learning rather than on students as separate, de-contextualized individuals.

4. Focusing greater attention on diversity among learners and viewing these differences not as impediments to learning but as resources to be recognized, catered to, and appreciated.

5. Along with this emphasis on context comes the idea of connecting the school with the world beyond as means of promoting holistic learning.

7. Helping students to understand the purpose of learning and develop their own purpose.

8. A whole-to-part orientation instead of a part-to-whole approach. This involves such approaches as beginning with meaningful whole text and then helping students understand the various features that enable texts to function.

9. An emphasis on the importance of meaning rather than drills and other forms of rote learning.

10. A view of learning as a lifelong process rather than something done to prepare students for an exam (Richards, 2006).

However, all this being said, what remains of interest to teachers, who are supposed to be writing a b-learning syllabus bearing these precepts in mind, is the nature of the dynamic activities one is to design, especially for the online part, in order to remain communicative; even though the nature of LMSs appears somewhat static.
Most of the activities that a communicative approach proposes are those that engage students into developing fluency rather that accuracy; or best gaining fluency through activities that are meaningful and which, at the same time, teach accuracy. Activities that should be avoided are those mechanical drills or controlled practice activities which students can successfully carry out without necessarily understanding the language they are using. Examples of this kind of activity would be repetition drills and substitution drills designed to practice use of particular grammatical or other items.

Communicative language teaching advocates the use of meaningful practice and communicative, open-ended practice; however this last cannot be fully achieved unless the language proficiency of the students is high. The first, meaningful practice, is quite common and many textbooks include it in their lessons. A typical example would be to give the students a list of prepositions of place and a map of the town they live in with different locations and then ask them questions about where this or that place is. Communicative practice refers to activities where practice in using language within a real communicative context is the focus, where real information is exchanged, and where the language used is not totally predictable. Examples of this kind take place in CLT (Content Language Teaching) when for example students have to draw a map of their town and then give directions to other students who do not where this or that place is.

So when we design activities for communicative language practice we should bear in mind what we said above: progressively move away from controlled, mechanical drills and include more meaningful and communicative activities as students’ mastery of the language increases. The diagram below shows this progress as the learner’s proficiency improves:

---

Image 1. Progression of activities as learner’s proficiency increases.

---
1.3 IMS Learning Design Methodology

The aim of the IMS Learning Design Specification is to provide a model within which to describe the structure of tasks and activities, their assignment to roles, and the workflow of a unit of learning as a ‘learning design’, and also to provide a platform-independent notational convention to allow sharing and re-use of these designs in the LMSs.

What we have outlined above are in effect two related but independent ideas that affect the creation of software tools to support learning design. The first is the general concept of learning design (activities, collaboration, workflow etc.) and the second is the particular instantiation of that concept in the IMS Learning Design specification (IMS-LD). It is important to understand that the two ideas need to be treated separately in reviewing software tools in this field, since some of them are aimed at implementing the IMS-LD specification, whilst others may not implement the specification yet they do embody their own model of learning design, albeit one that is not necessarily transferable between systems.

In our case we have assumed the model for the design of our online learning activities and have followed the recommendations given by IMS LD specification to create our units of learning with our LMS, Moodle. Table 2 below distinguishes the various activities involved in the process of learning design and how each of those stages is handled within IMS-LD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Design Process</th>
<th>IMS-LD Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Define Learning Objectives</td>
<td>Specify Learning Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop narrative description of learning and teaching scenario</td>
<td>Not defined within current scope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assign resources, tools and people to activities</td>
<td>Specify Roles, Resources Environment and Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create learning activity workflow from Narrative description</td>
<td>Create a Method using Play, Acts and Role-Parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner support and on-the-fly adaptation</td>
<td>Use a Learning Design aware player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting (including sharing outputs for peer reflection)</td>
<td>Not Defined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Comparison of both processes.*

IMS Learning Design works around the concept of establishing three levels in the design process:

**Level A:** This includes all the elements outlined in the table above. The main added value to e-learning of Level A learning design is that it defines Activities and Roles as reusable components that can be designed into a workflow using the Method element.

**Level B:** This allows the inclusion of properties and conditions.
Level C: This provides a notification capability that allows messaging between system components and means the flow of events could be adapted at run-time based on event triggers such as completion of earlier tasks. This paves the way for adaptive sequencing capabilities as well as role-play and event-driven simulations.

The image below shows the schema of a Unit of Learning as designed by Rob Koper and René van Es the original ideologists of IMS-LD (Koper & van Es: 2003).

Image 2. The Unit of Learning model as Koper and van Es conceived it.

In our LMS, Moodle, we have got round the instantiation of activities and collaborative tasks proposed in level A above, by adding them manually into our LMS activities; levels B and C offer no difficulties whatsoever after the advent of Moodle 2.0 and the inclusion of properties and conditions within the activities themselves.

2. Integrating the Constituent Parts

What follows is a precise account of how we conceive blended learning for language acquisition and how we have planned out our units of learning within our learning platform. We are not going to give an exact account of the tools and resources we have used and how we have used them (see Arcos & Ortega: 2011) but of the philosophy lying behind the paradigm.

2.1 Computer-based instruction

If we pay now some attention to the evolution of blended learning in later years and make the effort of imagining that evolution plastically displayed along a timeline, most people would agree that blended learning has greatly exceeded its initial promise. Among other things, it has become a building block for the new university thanks to two of its most
remarkable features; flexibility and convenience. These features fit very well with the
demands of ordinary students and working adults who decide to pursue postsecondary
degrees. It is a hybrid of traditional face-to-face and online learning so that instruction occurs
both in the classroom and online, and **where the online component becomes a natural
extension of traditional classroom learning**. Blended learning is thus a flexible approach to
course design that supports the blending of different times and places for learning, offering
some of the conveniences of fully online courses without the complete loss of face-to-face
contact. The result is potentially a more robust educational experience than either traditional
or fully online learning can offer (Ortega & Arcos: 2011).

Perhaps the finest form of blended learning is to supplement learning (organized prior
to beginning a new job-task) with practice (using job-task (…) simulation models) and just-
in-time performance support tools that facilitate the appropriate execution of job-tasks.

Cutting-edge productivity tools provide ‘workspace’ environments that package
together the computer based work, collaboration, and performance support tools (Singh: 2003).

Indeed it is intuitively understood that to attain any kind of competence in any
language one has to be able to master specific situations by means of linguistic skills and this
is what we do with our practice activities and learning design. In a sense ours is a three-
pronged instruction which takes into account theory, practice and real linguistic performance
in real or unreal situations. This last part is accomplished within classroom proper.

Another common belief is that learning is the same as knowledge transfer (Koper &
van Es: 2001), a belief which brings another idea in its tail: that it is enough to make
knowledge available to learners according to some pedagogical structure. However, providing
adequate knowledge is not enough: it has to be **learned**. And, for that reason, our focus is
fixed on this learning process when we discuss instructional design or learning design. Before
we move on, we must grasp all the implications of the previous statement. So, let’s begin by
asking yourself a somehow bewildering question: ‘where is the learning’ in eLearning? In
answer to that, we guess many people will admit right away that a lot of learning does not
come from knowledge resources at all, but clearly stems from the activities of learners solving
problems, interacting with real devices, interacting in their social and work situation or in the
classrooms. It could be considered a sort of metalearning.
Abundant research about learning processes support and clinch the theory that learning doesn’t come from the provision of knowledge solely, but is also the result of all the learners’ activities in the learning environment. This raises an issue of fundamental import, because we are not implying that knowledge objects are secondary or of no importance in learning situations; rather, we are highlighting the importance of the process itself in effective learning processes.

Once these general matters have been established, it’s time to delve into some particulars of our course. Traditionally second language learning practice was performed along four main lines:

- Comprehension (reading and listening).
- Use of English (cloze tests, gap-filling exercises, rewriting, etc.).
- Speaking.
- Writing.

In a blended course such as ours, all the mechanical activities that involve “comprehension” and “use of English” have been shifted to the LMS, where they can be trained, with the great benefit of immediate feedback and remedial practice activities.

Now, if we compare this arrangement to traditional classroom practice, anyone with even the shortest teaching experience will know that the just referred areas (comprehension and use of English) were done in a painstaking, choral and in-turn manner with no attention to individual needs. And in this respect, “listening comprehension” was especially challenging for the teacher because it took for granted that all students in the group understood the spoken test at the same speed and with equal skill. But this is far from being true and, first the language laboratory, and now the computer, help us build exercises both for reading and listening comprehension that allow students to work at their own pace and go back and forward, stop, listen/read again, check grammar appendixes, etc. whenever and as often as they need. In contrast to this scenario, picture yourself in the situation previously depicted: trying to respond to the many different demands that a listening comprehension exercise implies in a mixed-ability class. It’s quite overwhelming, and for that reason we are convinced that some exercises are best done in isolation because their very nature calls for such diversity of action on the part of the learner. The difference in linguistic competence in most language classrooms is unquestionable, and from this point it is but a single step to the
conclusion that most exercises done in a computer and in an LMS should adjust to meet the student’s individual needs and his own rhythm of learning.

The same occurs with “Use of English” activities. Hot Potatoes is especially suited to work with cloze and multiple choice exercises to practice grammar and vocabulary in a communicative way. Practically all of the activities that pertain to what we usually call “Use of English” can be designed with this authoring software with some variations and enhancements of traditional exercises. We can include video comprehension activities, phonetic transcription, etc.

Speaking and writing activities which require some sort of direct human intervention have been left for the face-to-face lectures or asynchronous review, correction, checking of delivered materials. These could either be written essays or audio feeds sent for evaluation. About these last two activities, a more profound feedback must be given in the classroom since they entail questions related tasks in connection with style, register, unity, cohesion, etc.; aspects which are not easily explained unless you are in front of the learner.

So far we have mentioned three general types of activities which can be done in the LMS for second language acquisition. As for the properties, we have made use of the following:

Theory presentation and Adaptive Hypermedia (henceforth AH) links to overcome the difference in students’ knowledge and the aforementioned LD levels are also included.

Self-check activities which were built by the lecturer beforehand and when they are done by the student they get immediate feedback and possible solutions to overcome weaknesses by means of AH links.

For activities (tasks or workshops in Moodle) which can be handed in using the LMS but that require a more personal feedback from the lecturer either to individual students or groups, we have provided an “agreement box” which will inform teachers whether the students understand and agree with the feedback provided and the mark given.

No need to say that there are other management or communication tools within the LMS we have not mentioned, such as the “grading book”, the “announcement board”, “the forum”, “chat”, etc. All those are of great help both to lecturers and students as they keep everyone informed of what is going on in and outside the classroom and are constantly building a sense of community we are particularly fond of.
Finally, another important feature of our “Language Blend” deserves individual attention, and that is the use of collaborative tools within the LMS to promote group work and a feeling of belonging. The regular use of “wikis” and “workshops” in our learning devices fosters social constructivism. Collaborative groups are important because we can test our own understanding and examine the understanding of others as a mechanism for enriching, interweaving, and expanding our approach to particular issues or phenomena. More often than not we give students tasks which involve working in groups to develop written assignments or oral presentations.

This framework we have depicted hitherto, as far as the technological infrastructure is concerned, presents many great advantages, both from a pedagogic and technological viewpoint. We have taken advantage of all this in our courses and the result is that while in the past there were only in-person lectures to communicate and interact with the students, always as a group; they were geared towards the average rather than the exceptional, now they have a feeling, so they say, that the attention span is greater than before and that more individual support and chances for participation is administered.

2.2 Face-to-face communication tasks

It can be inferred from the ideas garnered above that the overall goal of face-to-face communication activities is to enable students to recognize how the patterns of communication are established and maintained in order to foster participation and thus shape the ways in which they use language for classroom learning and their opportunities for second language acquisition.

For example, it is often the case that university lecturers are often challenged by teaching communication skills. Their students have already spent most of their lives speaking and listening to a second language and, sometimes, they are overtly reluctant to being taught what they think they already know. However a new disposition must be adopted: one which dissembles previous negative preconceptions and adopts a new positive, content-based and significant attitude towards language learning.

It may well be asked if this trend can be extrapolated to everyday life, and our own view is that it actually is. When natural and man-made disasters unfold on the news, horrified viewers seek out in-person opportunities to share their grief and gather information. It is easy to strike out a conversation about something everybody knows about and is of interest to him.
Who could forget the sight of the pilgrimages to makeshift shrines following accidents such as Princess Diana’s car crash or John F. Kennedy Jr.’s downed plane?

In the 21st century, men and women continually lurch between the impersonal nature of technology and the intimate reality of human relationships. There are many situations—often those involving learning a second language or real situations that could very well be exploited in the classrooms such as: escalating conflict, sensitive feelings, high priority, important authority, or a great deal of money—that demand people who are learning take the time and trouble to get into the same room to exchange information or practice by doing. Or at least they try to simulate face-to-face communication when individuals are in remote locations. Face-to-face communication skills remain one of the primary roads to learn to master a new language, achieve career success, or obtain many other personal assets, even in this computer age.

Everybody knows that most communication is carried out face-to-face with other individuals: asking for information, offering advice, your intervention in the classroom, or telling someone what you think of their performance—all tend to be done in a one-to-one situation. We strive to exploit and develop this general skill because we are convinced that this is one of the most critical areas of communication to get right and, for that reason, this is what we try to practice in our time with our students in the classroom.

Two communication tasks are felt to be needed in our face-to-face sessions:

a) Those connected with the writing activities. Reading examples and eliciting from students the framework for our writing tasks. Whether they be paragraphs based on examples, contrast, definition (something which pertains to technical English), etc., or descriptions, narrative writing, discursive articles (general English), etc., the idea is to pull together a number of writing rubrics which will be the source for the writing activities. Using a Moodle tool called workshop, we set up a collaborative environment wherein, having explained and agreed upon the rubric for every specific writing task, students embark on this exhilarating, constructivist activity working in partnership to learn and monitor other fellow colleagues and help them improve their writing essays.

b) Those connected with oral presentations and discussions. Oral, aural activities are central in our lectures and take up most of the time of our face-to-face classes. These classes are well organized and prepared meticulously so as to avoid improvisation. Any loose ends in oral classes lead to a secure and downright failure, so we need to set up the adequate material
and make sure it works well. Whether it be picture description, short presentations based on
prompts, group discussion, exploitation of situational dialogues, function dialogue practice
etc., we need something well prepared and leave nothing to chance. These activities prepare
students for oral competence and are essential to practise the most common aspects of oral
skills in current, meaningful activities.

This distribution of machine-aided instruction together with in-person communication
programs, constitute what for us should be the ideal framework for second language learning
today. Our language Blend aims at setting up a standard to course builders and lecturers of
foreign languages who seek to make the most of e-learning and face-to-face instruction. And
we feel we’re on the right path.

2.3 The Structure of the Language Blend

Let’s now see with greater detail how our language blend is internally structured. We
have elaborated a good number of learning objects and practical activities per unit, most of
which are self-check, instantly-graded (with immediate feedback) and auto-regenerating (the
exercise changes every time it opens), all of which offer self-monitoring paths to cater for all
levels and knowledge. A few collaborative or individual assignments link on-line instruction
with face-to-face classes, such as the writing tasks, workshops and speaking activities.

In this article we have laid the foundations of each half of the instruction: the
computer-based activities and the face-to-face lectures. This diagram illustrates what we
understand should be second-language, blended learning and the gravitational forces that have
a bearing on each and every part of the instruction.
Each side of the octagon leads to the hub or centre where all the learning blends in one single nucleus that distinguishes no sections or subdivisions. The top and bottom sides share both halves of the instruction, viz., the writing and collaborative tasks. Management interaction and social communication with learners in the LMS is done by means of e-mails, chats and forums, all of them inside the LMS. Also, and especially at the beginning of each course, there is a lot of LMS support in the face-to-face classes to lay the groundwork we wish to apply for the rest of the course and make everything dovetail accurately.

3. CONCLUSION

The World Wide Web hypertext/media system allows the user to freely navigate between nodes by following links in an extensive, decentralized network of information and knowledge. The open, free-browsing nature of the web affords exploratory and inquiry-based learning. At the same time however, given the extensive growth of the World Wide Web, the potential is great for user disorientation in such a large knowledge base. A further problem
with hypermedia navigation is that it is not specifically designed to differentiate between and to accommodate users with different interests, goals and needs. Thus, traditional hypermedia systems present a disadvantage for educational use of the World Wide Web since without direct teacher or system support, students' learning experiences may not be very efficient or effective. While a discovery or inquiry-based type of online learning may be envisioned as an effective model, it nonetheless needs to be coupled with some type of system control or support. With Moodle and AH (Adaptive Hypermedia), we have tailored a system which caters for individual needs and knowledge focusing on specific tasks we wish to develop. At the same time we provide some system support and control to users which a free roaming of the web does not.

Our “language blend” (Arcos, Ortega & Amilburu: 2008) clearly breaks up into small sections what should be taught / learnt with a computer (using a computer for practical purposes), in an LMS (as part of blended learning) and in the face-to-face classes. Essentially, the most common exercises which fall within the scope of “Use of English training” (rephrasing, listening, reading, word-formation, etc., exercises) can be done in the LMS in a meaningful way and adhering to the IMS-LD as we explained above; while direct, open-ended communication activities are left for classroom instruction.

This three-pronged impact into ESL has brought great benefits into our teaching at the University of Alicante, and we have received numerous appraisals from university officials, but the ones we truly appreciate are those that come from our students and from the figures we get by the end of the year’s term. Since its application, successful student figures have risen considerably and more importantly, the quality of instruction is also on the upgrade.

4. BIBLIOGRAPHY


