Chapter XXIX
WebCT Design and Users’ Perceptions in English for Agriculture

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ABSTRACT

The adaptation to the European Space of Higher Education and to the new demands of the labor market has produced a shift in university education, which has changed from being teacher-centered to being learner-centered. Following this trend, at the Public University of Navarre, a blended course of English for Agriculture was created using the virtual platform WebCT. In this chapter, we forward a description of content organization and resources used, analyze students’ attainments and perceptions, and finally conclude with a reflection on the effect various organizations have produced in students, together with future trends in the use of WebCT in our context.

INTRODUCTION

Spanish universities are immersed in a process of modernization due to the creation of the European Space for Higher Education, which should be a reality in 2010. The process started with the Bologna Declaration signed in 1999 and had among its main objectives the recognition and homogenization of degrees¹ to facilitate the mobility of students and university staff, and the adaptation to the new demands of the labor market, especially the development of new skills and lifelong learning, to increase competitiveness.

In the Spanish University community, the process is involving a profound change in methodology as the focus of education shifts from the teacher to the student in how subjects’ credits are measured and in the emphasis on students’ skills and lifelong learning.
The Spanish University system was based on a classical methodological stand, where the professor was the focus of the process of learning. University courses had credits assigned that accounted for the number of hours of direct tuition, and the transmitted knowledge tended to be theoretical and hardly transferable to the labor world. Moreover, all the courses were campus-based and thus unable to meet the demand for flexible and autonomous lifelong learning.

In contrast, the European Space for Higher Education introduces European credits—called ECTs—that measure the total number of hours a student has to work in each course, and thus represent students’ workload. Furthermore, it places emphasis on practical knowledge as “[in the labor market] it tends to be knowledge about processes that is highly valued—knowledge how, rather than knowledge about” (Dovey, 2006, p. 390), and on the development of inestimable skills such as teamwork, oral expression, organizational skill, public speaking, and planning, which are all transferable to the labor world. Consequently, methodology has to become more learner-centered, concentrating on specific students’ needs and trying to individualize their learning. Finally, the European Space for Higher Education also emphasizes the importance of flexible, autonomous, lifelong learning and the need to offer courses adaptable to workers’ time constraints at our universities.

The need to adapt our subject—English for Agriculture—to the new demands of the European Space for Higher Education and to create a virtual space for students unable to attend classes encouraged us to start using a virtual platform, WebCT, in combination with face-to-face classes to create a blended course.

Although the quantity of excellent research concentrating on new technologies and their use for language learning, especially on the design of CALL activities, task-based projects, and innovative ways of using technology (Chapelle, 2001; Felix, 1999, 2000; Warschauer, 2000, 2001) is large, and there is literature on the benefits and features of virtual platforms (Burgess, 2003; Jager, 2004; Ngai, Poon & Chan, 2007; Polisca, 2006; Yip, 2004)—one of the resources most widely used in universities—reports and analyses of how they are used, how resources are organized, and the effect various organizations may have on the final users, the students, are surprisingly scarce. These descriptive accounts are necessary because otherwise, “with much writing on CALL by those at the forefront of theoretical research, there is sometimes the danger that teachers are left behind in a cloud of publications” (Littlemore & Oakey, 2004, p. 96).

In this chapter, our aim is to provide such an account by describing the process of creating a course of English for Agriculture. First, a pedagogical background for the use of WebCT in our context will be forwarded. Then, the possibilities of WebCT for language learning and its use at our university will be explained to continue with a description of our project, which focused on how changes in the organization of WebCT and the addition of new features affected students’ attainments, use, and perceptions. Finally, future trends and general conclusions about our experience will be analyzed.

**BACKGROUND**

New technologies have a number of widely recognized advantages that are very useful for the new teaching methodology brought about by the new concept of learner-centered education demanded by the European Space of Higher Education. First, they are an element of innovation, which is highly motivating for the pupil, and introduce the student to “methods and ‘tools’ which may be applied in the workplace” (Dovey, 2006, p. 388). They also develop the capacity “to adapt to an ever-changing world and to compete in equal conditions with undergraduates from other countries” (Roldán, 2005, p. 302). Furthermore, they
make the individualization of learning possible since every pupil can work at their own pace, in agreement with his or her needs, and they “allow [individual] summative and process evaluation” (Canton & Gil, 2005, p. 175). Moreover, they involve a great economy in exam marking and a continuous control of the work of pupils.

Keeping these benefits in mind, it is not surprising that Canton and Gil (2005) affirmed that “the use of the new technologies will turn in the short term into one of the almost indispensable tools, facing the challenge of a tertiary education more centred on the new professional needs of the students” (p. 173). Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) added that language professionals who have access to an Internet computer classroom are in a position to teach students valuable lifelong learning skills and strategies for becoming autonomous learners.

Nevertheless, and although researchers on language learning or CALL generally acknowledge the possibilities of the Web for language learning (Felix, 1998; Murray, 2005; Warschauer, 2000, 2001), many of the activities that remain central in English learning sites are still exclusively based on the structure and drill practice of language and do not include any tasks to develop freer forms of language practice. Some recognized authors have already argued for the need to introduce more “student-centred learning, reflected in meaningful task-based activities” (Felix, 1999, p. 85) and “real-life tasks and real-life problems” (Warschauer, 2001) as research has identified motivation, exposure to authentic language in context, and opportunities for meaningful language use and autonomous learning as some of the main factors conducive to language learning (Mishan, 2004).

In addition, their integration in the curriculum is so arduous that new technologies have often been used as a mere add-on, and consequently, some authors claim that new technologies, especially the resources of the net, must be integrated into the English class “in an organized and comprehensive way in order to, pedagogically speaking, make the most of them” (Felix, 2000). Other researchers add that it is necessary to observe two criteria for the aforementioned integration, organization (Le-loup & Ponterio, 2001) and pedagogic relevancy (Sanz, 2003).

An appropriate use of new technologies could alleviate the three burdens for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Spanish universities. The first is the large number of students per class (Fortanet, Palmer & Ruiz, 2005; Pierce McMahon, 2004), which can vary from 50 to 100 and makes learner-centered and individualized learning impracticable. The second is the heterogeneous levels of English proficiency, which range from elementary to proficient and make creating a common syllabus that responds to individual needs problematic. The third is the fact that they all share mother tongue, and thus, communication is always more effective in their language so “students are not motivated to communicate, as the situation in the language classroom seems too artificial” (Conacher, Taalas & Vogel, 2004, p. 16). Solving those three problems, because research also “suggests strongly that both rate of learning and ultimate attainment level do very much depend on the acquisitional context” (Conacher et al., 2004, p. 14), and adapting to the new demands of the European Space of Higher Education became a priority in our course.

The decision to introduce WebCT—the virtual platform that was used at our university—in our course of English for Agriculture was based on two grounds: it incorporated most new technologies into the same package, even though “most of the individual functions are less powerful than their counterparts available as separate tools” (Jager, 2004, p. 42), and there was institutional training on it.

As in many virtual platforms, WebCT’s main components are:

- Content sections, which can include links to audio and video material from the Web,
practice and drill exercises, readings, and solutions.

- E-mail and discussion forums, which promote communication among students and teacher, and vice-versa, and among students themselves.
- Assessment sections, which can contain self-evaluation tests to keep record of progress and even the final exam, assignment due dates, and folders to collect work done.
- A calendar, which can state all the activities to be done in class as well as the homework or assignments with their due date.

The use of these features generated a more favorable context for language learning and contributed to the course’s adaptation to the demands of the European Space for Higher Education. Initially, it improved the four main factors conducive to language learning. Exposure to authentic material was possible because the content material was authentic and related to their specialty. The transmission of information extracted from authentic material in WebCT, the authenticity of the tasks, and the oral exchanges with students of English from other countries offered opportunities for meaningful language use. Autonomous learning was additionally promoted as individual decisions about what to do and when it had to be made (Littlemore, 2001). Motivation also increased due to the practical use of the foreign language and to the focus on individual needs and wants.

Second, WebCT fostered the development of new skills and lifelong learning, and the promotion of autonomous learning without the presence of the lecturer. The progress of each student could also be followed more closely, and grades depended not only on the final exam but also on the work done and effort made, so the evaluation of processes was possible.

Third, it lessened the three burdens for teaching ESP in Spanish tertiary education. Despite the large number of students per class and the variety of proficiency levels, the use of the virtual platform allowed individualized learning as pupils could work at their own pace, in their own tasks, and make decisions about their path of learning. The artificial nature of communication when the mother tongue is common vanished as individuals were offered the opportunity to speak with students of English in other countries, and in pairs among themselves using Skype, a telephoning software to be used in the computer. Their speaking tasks were recorded and could be listened to afterwards. Communication was purposeful because, in the first case, it was authentic. Language was used to communicate with people who could not speak Spanish, so the only language for the successful transmission of information was English. In the second case, a task was fulfilled, and part of the purpose of the communication was to be able to monitor and correct their work, which was also an authentic task in itself.

Setting up WebCT was not an easy task. As many authors recognize, maintaining and managing a good learning site with good quality materials, links to other pages, and updates, and keeping track of students’ work and demands in the form of contributions to the forums or e-mail is very time consuming (Nelson & Oliver, 1999; Rocklin, 2001). As we were unable to create a good course in one year, we started using it in the academic year 2003-2004, and introduced changes the subsequent two years following some of the recommendations from evaluation questionnaires filled out by the users.

**ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN WEBCT**

**Context**

English for Agriculture is a compulsory course for undergraduates of Technical Agriculture Engineering, a three-year degree divided in three specialties. The degree has common core courses,
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others that are specific for each specialty, and elective ones. English is a common core course in the third year of the degree. The number of students is very high, from 70 to 85, and they are together in a one-hour class called theory and separated by specialty into groups of about 30 for another two hours called practice.

The course’s number of credits is 4.5—equivalent to 45 hours of direct tuition—and its main objective is the development of the four skills in the field of agriculture. The proficiency level of the students varies from preintermediate to proficiency, with the majority of them in the range of preintermediate to intermediate (in all the initial proficiency tests done in the last five years, nearly 70% of the class had scores at that level). Most of the pupils’ contact with English has been very limited for about four or five years (since they started at the university), and consequently, their entrance level has dropped significantly.

The decision to incorporate WebCT in our classes was made in the academic year 2003-2004. Apart from the development of the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, five further objectives were pursued that aimed to foster the new skills demanded from students by the labor market:

• The individualization of learning through free choice of tasks depending on personal needs.
• The promotion of learning to learn through the search, selection, and transmission of information.
• The improvement of computer skills through the use of the majority of the tools new technologies offer.
• The development of speaking skills through real oral use and practice.
• The advancement and support of autonomy, which is completely necessary for lifelong learning.

With all these objectives in mind, the sites (one for each specialty) were set in three stages over the period of three academic years.

Year 1: Academic Year 2003-2004

In Year 1, our main page on WebCT had four visible folders (see Figure 1) called “Calendar,” “Programme,” “e-mail,” “Dudas y reflexiones” (in English “Doubts and Reflections”), and a hidden “Evaluation” folder. Three of the visible folders were used. The “Calendar” stated each day’s tasks and activities. The “Programme” introduced...
material, and the “e-mail” allowed communication with students. The forum called “Dudas y reflexiones” was not used, and the folder called “Evaluation” was only used to do the final test and the end-of-course questionnaire.

In “Programme,” two folders called “Introduction” and “Modules” were created. In the former, there were the objectives of the course, the syllabus, a daily planning, and a grammar review. In the latter, six folders called “Module 1,” “Module 2,” and so forth (see Figure 2) were placed. In each of those modules, there were in turn three folders: (1) a folder called “Grammar” that contained links to pages of grammar; (2) a folder denominated “Listening” that had two sound files, one based on a lecture and another on aspects of academic life such as following instructions for an exam, introduction to a library, and so forth, and exercises related to them; and (3) a folder named “Solutions” that provided the answers to all the exercises and tasks.

The class sessions were designed to include specific reading texts with comprehension questions and vocabulary expansion exercises; some speaking activities related to the grammar points dealt with in the module and some pronunciation exercises.

Year 2: Academic Year 2004-2005

In this second year of implementation, the organization of the folder “Modules” was modified, and the folder was renamed “Content.” Five folders were placed in it and titled “Reading,” “Grammar,” “Pronunciation,” “Listening,” and “Solutions” (see Figure 3). The first, “Reading,” held links to authentic readings from the Web related to each specialty—two common and four specific—and exercises to check comprehension, expand vocabulary, and summarize information to transmit it; the second, “Grammar,” contained all the grammar exercises, links to grammar pages from the previous year, and an additional page of links to pages of grammar explained in Spanish; the third, “Pronunciation,” included all the material related to pronunciation theory and practice exercises; the fourth, “Listening,” and the last, “Solutions,” comprised all the listening passages and solutions from the previous year, respectively.

Two self-tests were introduced and made available to the students in the “Evaluation” folder on the main page, and a new folder called “Project” with instructions to do a project and an oral presentation was placed in the “Programme” folder of the main page. At the end of the tuition period,
the end-of-course questionnaire was also added to the main page.

The class sessions were designed to include autonomous work and speaking activities, solve doubts, and help students on demand. After each student had completed a task, the “Solutions” folder, where the key to some exercises was available, could be checked, or if there was no key, his or her work was corrected by the lecturer.

**Year 3: Academic Year 2005-2006**

In the last stage, the main page was modified and contained nine folders (see Figure 4) since the folder “Project” was relocated there and two more folders (called “Assignments” and “Presentations”) were added. The first included all the assignments that had to be handed in and their due date. The second held video recordings of students’ oral presentations and audio recordings from oral exchanges with Turkish students and from oral speaking activities among themselves in pairs.

Inside the folder “Programme” on the main page, more new material was included: a page with instructions to use WebCT, which was placed inside the folder “Introduction”; a new folder called “Translation” with direct and inverse translation of specific texts and links to videos in the “Listening” section (both folders were inside “Content”). Finally, two more self-tests were introduced in the “Evaluation” folder, and the forum “Foro de debate” was used for the first time, although contributions were not compulsory.

The class sessions included autonomous work using the material in WebCT, oral exchanges, and speaking activities, which were recorded, and preparation of the oral presentation. As has been mentioned, the students engaged in oral synchronous exchanges with Turkish students every fortnight for 30 minutes; the topics dealt with were related to aspects of the foreign culture and society. The oral activities worked on in class were more technical and included tasks such as describing a piece of machinery to your partner, agreeing on the most beneficial and least dangerous pesticide to be used for a pest, and so forth. Both kinds of tasks were recorded and stored in the “presentations” folder on the main page.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of our study was to analyze how various changes in the layout and organization
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Figure 4. Main page Year 3: 2005-2006

of WebCT affected students. Factors that seem to influence the amount of use of WebCT are good organization of course and content, application of active and interactive learning principles, and provision of feedback (Frank & Barzilai, 2004). In this work, we aim at exploring how the changes introduced in its three years of implementation, following students’ suggestions as stated in questionnaires, affected students’ attainments, perceived usefulness, ease of use, and level of satisfaction with the course. The questions that guided our research were:

1. Can students’ questionnaires about a course from one specific year be useful when designing or modifying an existing Web-based course for the subsequent year’s students?
2. Do various organizations of content and the introduction of new tools affect students’ attainments?
3. Do various organizations of content and the introduction of new tools affect perceived usefulness?

4. Do various organizations of content and the introduction of new tools affect perceived ease of use?
5. Do various organizations of content and the introduction of new tools improve satisfaction levels?

Participants

The three classes of English for Agriculture of the academic years 2003-2004, 2004-2005, and 2005-2006 participated in this study. Eighty-two students participated the first year, 78 the second, and 83 the last. Their level of English proficiency, as found in the pretest, is shown in Table 1. Their ages ranged from 22 to 34, but the majority of the students were 23 or 24. In each of the three years of the project, about a third of the students were bilingual in Basque and Spanish, while the remaining two-thirds were monolinguals and their mother tongue was Spanish. The majority had studied English for longer than five years.
Table 1. Pretest level of English proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>Year 1 2003-2004</th>
<th>Year 2 2004-2005</th>
<th>Year 3 2005-2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper-Intermediate to Proficiency</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Intermediate to Intermediate</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary to Pre-Intermediate</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

years but had had no contact with English in their last four years at the university.

In Year 1, 70 students did the pretest, 78 the posttest, and 65 the evaluation questionnaire. In Year 2, 62 did the pretest, 70 the posttest, and 55 the evaluation questionnaire. In Year 3, 80 students did the pretest, 78 the posttest, and 75 the questionnaire. The results of the pretest of students not taking the posttest were not used in the analysis of the data.

Instruments

During the course, students were asked to complete three survey instruments:

1. A proficiency level pretest was administered in the first session of the course. It consisted of 50 multiple-choice questions in context (the sentences were part of a text, and the correct option among three or four had to be selected) and a listening passage with 10 multiple-choice questions to check understanding.
2. A postachievement test, which was the exam for the subject, was done at the end of the 15 weeks of tuition time.
3. A 19-item questionnaire was administered in the last week of the course. It consisted of six yes/no questions, four five-point Likert scale questions, five questions that rated the usefulness of aspects of the course and aspects of WebCT, and four open-ended questions. For the purpose of the study, only some of these questions will be analysed in this chapter.

Methodology

Quantitative data were collected from the grades of the students in the pretest and posttest and from the answers to the six yes/no, the four five-point Likert scale, and the rating questions in the end-of-course questionnaire.

Quantitative data from the tests were analyzed using the means and standard deviations and compared. The quantitative data from the end of course questionnaire were compared using percentages.

Qualitative data were collected from the four open-ended questions in the end-of-course questionnaire. These data were searched for significant concerns and comments related to satisfaction levels and common demands. Only the number of times a specific request or satisfaction and dissatisfaction statement appeared was recorded.

Results

As can be seen in Table 2, the results of the students regarding attainments showed a steady progress. The difference between the means from pretest to posttest grew from 1.51 to 1.76 to 2.28. The standard deviation decreased in the first and third years, but it increased in the second.

With reference to the satisfaction of students with the course and the use of WebCT (Table 3), there was a significant increase in all aspects. The perceived usefulness of the content increased from 50% in year 1 to 62% in year 3, and the usefulness of WebCT from 40% in year 1 to 55% in year 3. Whether WebCT is easy to use was
answered increasingly positively from 42% in year 1 to 60% in year 3. Using computers in the classroom was not rated so positively, and although the number of positive answers increased from 33% in year 1 to 50% in year 3, the final value is still quite low when compared to the rest of the values. As to the question of whether the class should be separated by specialty or by level of proficiency, most students preferred the separation by level of proficiency, though the number of students who had noticed the advantages of the separation by specialty increased from the first to the third year.

An interesting factor arising from the questionnaires was the enormous variation that existed in the selection of the three aspects most useful for them, most necessary for their profession, most difficult in the course, best covered in WebCT and most time invested. Especially significant seemed to be the variation from one year to the following due to the fact that more material and thus more work on various areas and through various means was possible.

It should be noticed that despite the variation, there is consistency in some factors. The self-tests and listening texts are considered the most useful aspects in WebCT from their introduction onward. Reading is selected as the most necessary the first two years, while the oral components appear as the most necessary in year 3 coinciding with the availability of recordings of their performance and links to videos. The oral presentation steadily emerges as the most difficult aspect. It should also be pointed out that the difficulty of other skills such as reading or listening seems to increase as authentic material is incorporated. Grammar is both the aspect best covered and the one most time invested.

Lastly, there were five questions using Likert scales, which measured the students’ perceived

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation in pre- and posttests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th></th>
<th>Posttest</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1: 2003-2004</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2: 2004-2005</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3: 2005-2006</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Satisfaction of students with the course and WebCT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has the content in WebCT</td>
<td>Yes: 50% No: 50%</td>
<td>Yes: 60% No: 40%</td>
<td>Yes: 62% No: 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped you in this subject?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the course in WebCT useful?</td>
<td>40% Yes: 60% No: 47%</td>
<td>63% Yes: 55% No: 45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is WebCT easy to use?</td>
<td>42% Yes: 58% No: 55%</td>
<td>45% Yes: 55% No: 40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should some aspects be worked</td>
<td>33% Yes: 67% No: 45%</td>
<td>55% Yes: 50% No: 50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>into computers?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should the class be separated</td>
<td>25% Yes: 75% No: 42%</td>
<td>58% Yes: 48% No: 52%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by specialty?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should the class be separated</td>
<td>75% Yes: 25% No: 58%</td>
<td>42% Yes: 52% No: 48%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by level?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
learning in the subject, the relation between their learning and the time they had invested in the subject, the relation between learning and assistance to class, and the relation between learning and use of WebCT. Instead of numbers, the rating values were “nothing” as the lowest value and “excellent” as the highest. The intermediate values were “little,” “good,” and “very good.”

Regarding their perceived learning, the majority of the class considered it “good” in the three years: in the first year, 70%; in the second, also 70%; and in the third, a slight rise to 71%. Nobody chose “nothing” in any of the years of implementation, while people choosing “excellent” or “very good” were a mere 10% in the first year; 16% in the second year, and 15% in year 3. The others (20%, 14%, and 14%, respectively) chose the option “little.”

The relation between time invested and learning was rated as “good” by 60%, 65%, and 58% of students throughout the years, as “very good” or “excellent” by 20%, 21%, and 30%, while 20%, 9%, and 12% thought the relation was “little” or “none.”

The relation between learning and assistance to class was ranked “good” by 72%, 74%, and 59% of students, respectively; as “very good” or “excellent” by 20%, 21%, and 35%; while 8%, 5%, and 6% considered the relation as “little” or “none.”

Finally, considering the relation between learning and use of WebCT, 48%, 57%, and 60% of pupils estimated the relation as “good”; 15%, 16%, and 23% rated it “very good” or “excellent”; and 37%, 27%, and 17% rated it as “little” or “none.”

The answers to the open-ended questions asking students to justify their decision regarding the separation by level of proficiency or specialty, what they would not change in the course, and what they would change, will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion

From the quantitative data drawn from pretest and posttest, it can be concluded that attainment levels increased. This may not be due to the use of WebCT, but it can be affirmed that attainments do not apparently get lower when direct instruction decreases and more autonomous forms of working are introduced in a regular course.
Regarding the quantitative data collected in the questionnaire, content seems to be perceived as better, more helpful, and more useful when more features and authentic texts are placed in WebCT. Paying attention to students' suggestions regarding the increase of folders in the main page, the rearrangement of modules into skill folders, and the creation of a specific folder with instructions and due dates for assignments resulted in increased positive perceptions of ease of use and usefulness of the platform. As reported by Roach and Lemaster (2006), course structure and design appear to be key elements related to student satisfaction. Ngai, et al. (2007) add that there is a significant relationship between the perceived usefulness of a Web site and ease of use. Our data corroborate these findings and suggest that organizational changes affect considered ease of use and usefulness.

The use of computers in the classroom seemed to be perceived not so positively. This might be due to two factors. First, at the university level, traditional lecturing has been the norm, so students are not used to autonomous learning. Conacher, et al. (2004) stated that “well-meaning efforts to transfer decision-making responsibilities from the teacher to the learner may equally well be interpreted by the learner as an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher” (p. 21). Second, students tended to think that the pace of the class was too rapid because low-level students had to devote time outside class to the completion of tasks, and thus worked harder than in a traditional lecture class. This consideration was supported by their answers to the question of whether the practice class should be divided by level of proficiency or specialty, and their justification for that decision. The majority selected the separation by level of proficiency and justified their choice, stating that the pace was too quick and that too much autonomous work was demanded. This complaint may be explained by the large number of students that scored in the preintermediate level and who requested that the high-intermediate class level should have been lowered to match theirs. Even though more students every year noticed the advantages of the division by specialty and thus favored that option, the demand for a slower pace was a constant in commentaries such as the following:

*The teacher should concentrate on explaining grammar to the students who have a low level and wait until everyone finished the exercises before going on.*

*Students with a low level should only be doing grammar because we cannot do anything else.*

Obvious as it was in the various skills and aspects reported as the most difficult in the three years of implementation, it should be stated that the introduction and modification of material had a direct effect on the options chosen. Although the scope of this chapter is not to analyze all the changes, it is worth pointing out that the self-tests arose as one of the most useful aspects every year. It should additionally be mentioned that the improvement of speaking skills should be our next objective, as the oral presentation kept appearing as the most difficult aspect. Interestingly, reading and listening appeared as most difficult at the same time that authentic readings from the Web, authentic conversation with foreigners, and videos were included in the site. Students also believed authentic readings and listenings were the most necessary for their future job. Finally, the positive value of the relation between learning and the use of WebCT increased as more material was introduced and as the organization was changed to improve its ease of use.

The qualitative data obtained from the answers to justify the decision to separate the class by level of proficiency or specialty have already been discussed in this section. More data were extracted from the questions of what students considered should not be changed in WebCT and what should be modified. In the former, students
expressed a growing satisfaction with the content and structure of WebCT, considered it valuable and helpful, praised the availability of resources in WebCT. Furthermore, many (nearly 60% every year) believed that everything should remain as it was. A repeated comment was related to the usefulness of the sound files and to the authenticity of the tasks, as it can be seen in these students’ comments:

The best are the recordings because you can listen to them all the times you want. Before I never understood anything because the teachers only played the recording a few times and I got nervous.

I like that everything is about and for our future job.

Regarding the question of what should be changed, the most demanded modifications were the reorganization of the material in “Content” from modules to skill folders and the introduction of explanations of grammar in Spanish in year 1. The following year, the demand for more interaction and videos materialized. In year 3, the claim was for more recordings of their performance. All of these requirements have been (or will be) satisfied, and after changes are adopted, the demands usually disappear. Requests for more individualized learning and more motivating and authentic material and tasks, which constantly emerged in the end of course questionnaires administered before the introduction of WebCT, also vanished.

There was another series of modifications requested by some students that may illustrate some of the drawbacks of using a virtual platform. Students considered that they worked harder than in traditional lectures as the process of searching, selecting, and transmitting information was very time consuming; they also believed the abundance of material made the location of specific things difficult; teacher explanations were preferred to computer-based ones or Web links; and generally speaking, activities not so focused on agriculture were favored. Finally, and not within our power, it should also be mentioned that there was a continuous demand for more courses of English throughout the degree instead of only one subject in the last year.

FUTURE TRENDS

Three new innovations will be introduced in our course. First, instead of writing a report on an elective topic and a presentation based on it, students will have to work on a project in various phases, and both the phases and the process will be evaluated. The project will most likely be a mini Web page and an oral presentation based on it using the material on WebCT. Another innovation will be the use of the forum to create a community of learners. Two contributions, explaining their progress and perceptions about the project, will be compulsory. Furthermore, students will have to analyze their own recordings from oral exchanges with Turkish students and from their presentations.

We think the future lies in these last innovations. The first one, task-based projects, has shown to be a wonderful journey toward learning and autonomy (Chapelle, 2001). The second one, the use of the Forum, contributes to the creation of a community of learners among individuals in different physical spaces. Finally, the third one, their contribution and analysis of their own recordings, aids in the improvement of our students’ most pressing need: real communication with real people exploiting new technologies.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, we will provide answers to the five questions this project posed. To the first question of whether students’ questionnaires about a course
from one specific year are useful when designing or modifying an existing Web-based course for the subsequent year’s students, the answer has to be positive. Every change introduced following students’ recommendations has improved the site and its perceived usefulness and ease of use, and moreover, negative considerations about the same points have disappeared from the questionnaires of subsequent years.

The answer to the question of whether different organizations of content and the introduction of new tools affect students’ attainments should also be positive. However, this consideration should be cautious, as the rating of the relation between perceived learning and use of WebCT was an intermediate value for most of the class, so WebCT did not seem to have been perceived as the decisive factor for attainments. Nevertheless, the relation might also have been rated less positively due to perceived drawbacks such as harder work, difficulty in locating material, computer-based explanations, and so forth.

To the third question of whether different organization of content and the introduction of new tools affect perceived usefulness, the answer should also be yes, as every change in the organization and the introduction of new tools meant an increase in the positive consideration of the perceived usefulness of WebCT. The same holds true for the question of whether different organization of content and the introduction of new tools affect perceived ease of use. Both seem to correlate and increase at the same time.

The answer to the last question of whether different organizations and the introduction of new tools improve students’ satisfaction levels should also be positive, as students reported higher satisfaction levels with the changes in the organization of content, which made it easier to locate material, and with the introduction and use of new tools.

Summing up, careful planning is necessary as, from the results of our research, we can tentatively suggest that organization of content and the introduction of new tools play a key role in its success, especially regarding ease of use, perceived usefulness, and students’ satisfaction levels and attainments. The effort is profitable owing to the fact that it provides an inestimable tool to promote a more learner-centered approach to learning and the development of valuable tools, such as communication skills, computer skills, management of time, teamwork, and so forth, that the labor market demands. The use of WebCT as a complement to face-to-face interaction in the classroom proves useful as attainment levels and satisfaction with the subject improved. Furthermore, Conacher, et al. (2004) admit that “even in a less structured form, this type of combination has the advantage that it allows conventional teaching to branch out in many different directions according to the learners’ interests and learning styles, without this branching out implying the use of a haphazard flurry of materials and activities” (p. 23).

Last but not least, learning platforms in traditional courses should also contribute to lifelong learning by providing support for online learning, by teaching self-management tools, and by developing autonomy in language learning. There is an urgent need for an increased use of these platforms at our universities if lifelong autonomous learning is to become a reality in European countries.

REFERENCES


WebCT Design and Users’ Perceptions in English for Agriculture


**KEY TERMS**

**Autonomy in Language Learning:** Learners taking control over their learning.

**Blended Learning:** A system that combines face-to-face education and online learning.

**Course Design:** Setting learning objectives, choosing media applications, planning evaluation, and preparing instructional strategies in advance of student recruitment.

**Distance Learning:** The process by which technology is used for education in ways where the student does not have to physically be in the place where the teaching is taking place.

**New Technologies:** All technologies related to computers, such as virtual platforms, chats, MOOS, blogs, and so forth.

**Virtual Platforms:** A spatially distributed network of individual vehicles or assets collaborating as a single functional unit and exhibiting a common systemwide capability to accomplish a shared objective.
**WebCT:** Online management software that aids students in their classes by creating, managing, organizing, and housing a Web-based learning environment.

**ENDNOTES**

1. The declaration established that there should be undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries, with first degrees no shorter than three years and relevant to the labor market.

2. For information about blended learning, see Kupetz and Ziegenmeyer, 2005.


4. For an account of such exams, see Bueno, 2004.

5. This time distribution will change with the introduction of the European Credit, as it promotes new kinds of activities and arrangements such as seminars or collective tutorials. Up to now, credits were associated to direct tuition to all the group, and the only possibility of dividing a group of less than a hundred students were practice hours.

6. The level required for university entrance is higher-intermediate.

7. As reported in the answers to the open-ended questions of the end-of-course questionnaire to be explained later on in this section.