

ESP as a Method in order to learn Civil Engineering Vocabulary Through Blended Learning for Students of Superior Education.

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Abstract: *This study describes how students of a university developed their learning abilities to learn new vocabulary in Civil Engineering academic program through the implementation of a Platform -Moodle which offered a unit of work designed in order to enrich ESP competences. Also, the implementations of methods were empowered under a theoretical framework which studied Methods such as: ESP, Blended Learning, Design of materials, Virtual Education and vocabulary acquisition. This research developed qualitative methodology which was applied in this research and can be categorized as action research and design of materials, since the proposal started from a detected problem (in this case, the necessity of fulfilling students' expectation of more specialized vocabulary in their classes), with subsequent analysis of the students' opinions and perceptions of having seen a work unit on a platform, the latter as a means of support to ESP vocabulary learning based on Blended learning. Moreover, three research instruments were applied such as: questionnaires, a survey type Likert and a Students' logs. Finally, with the discussion could know the students' perceptions and opinions about the implementation of a virtual course in order to enhance ESP according to the needs of superior Education.*

Key Words: *ESP, platform, civil engineering vocabulary, Blended Learning, Autonomous Learning, virtual course.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The following paper is a research project based on vocabulary acquisition by means of blended learning with the design of unit of work on a platform. It is a well-known fact that the educational system demands an improvement in the teaching-learning process with the help of technology. Consequently, the support of virtual tools is implemented in order to enrich learning and teaching experiences inside and outside the classroom. Thus, (Ministry of National Education, 2004) has implemented a plan in order to foster the use of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) among teachers and students, as an alternative to enhance motivation, the use of different teaching strategies and students' autonomous learning. Colombian government has granted to ICT for language teaching and learning offers important advantages for both, teachers and students, such as the possibility to obtain online training and updates on the use of technology, study a foreign language, and be more competitive in personal, professional and academic fields. (AMoses, 2014)

As a result of these requirements, the following study has the aim of analyzing the results of learning outcomes of the Civil Engineering Program in Universidad Santo Tomás (USTA). This analysis was done after the implementation of a unit of work on a virtual platform which was intended to support the acquisition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) vocabulary learning. A recent trend in higher education is ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses. These courses are designed around students' needs based on their field of study. This proposal responds to learners' needs because Civil Engineering students require knowing key vocabulary in their field of expertise. The vocabulary learning was done through a Blended Learning approach supported by an extensive exploration and reading of theoretical background on the topic, the virtual course, ESP, and the design of a unit of work in order to learn Civil Engineering vocabulary.

Concurrently, the design of a unit of work for learning basic Civil Engineering language was carried out by the English teacher, using the Learning Management System (LMS) Moodle, where participants had to select activities taking into account the most relevant topics of their subject "Introduction to Civil Engineering".

Furthermore, the author's objective, in order to develop this project, is to know how blended learning can contribute in the creation and implementation of a unit of work focused on an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course, developed through online and in-class activities, seeking to find out how students establish their needs and how they do so. As a teacher, the author has worked for over 2 years with university students who have different learning needs based on the major of their choice. Hence, this study will show how teachers could use their university class to guide specific language and motivate students learning.

Finally, this study was conceived as a result of some important observations and perceptions as teachers and with my students which have shed light about their needs at the moment to learn a language and specific vocabulary. There are some issues which were determinant, such as the fact they have not felt motivated because the textbook used in class is monotonous, it does not provide a virtual platform and there are a few grammar activities, such as fill in the gap, which they consider boring. In addition, class time is very short, independent work is almost null, and the opportunities for expanding knowledge outside the university through different online materials are scarce.

Furthermore, class time is very short, independent work is almost non-existent, and the opportunities for expanding knowledge outside the university through different online materials are scarce. All this is especially ironic when one considers that these students are considered "digital natives", and they could easily learn through mobile technology or any other kind of device. This research considers all these factors and also offers some ideas on how teachers could design ESP material on a virtual platform.

II. METHODOLOGY

Description of the research methodology

This study was carried out according to the mixed method approach (interview, observation), with a "waterfall" methodology (structured system analysis and design method), whereby a step by step approach is implemented to achieve a logical project design, thus enabling the verification of an efficient and reliable user system.

Description of research tools

Survey

A survey was carried out with the learners through the virtual platform of the university in the English virtual course section. In order to obtain a more efficient assessment of the attitudes and opinions of the survey responses, a Likert type survey was applied. The responses were then contrasted based on the survey criteria, such as level of agreement or disagreement within the perceptions of the students based on their responses to the survey items, the results were then used to come to some possible conclusions. As mentioned in Macintyre (2000), "The interviewer is hoping to be able to give explanations of why people's views are as they are..." (p.84). The qualitative survey is an exchange of ideas, meanings and feelings about the world and events. (see appendix A and B, p. 81,82).

Questionnaires

The purpose of implementing the questionnaires was to collect more information as a means of complementing general information acquired from the survey and field notes, so as to contrast the information collected and obtain results. Students were asked to answer the questionnaire individually and in writing, responding to six questions regarding their perceptions and opinions of the content and activities of the ESP Basic English Civil Engineering vocabulary work unit they saw; They were also asked about how they felt they had performed in the activities. This step was implemented at the end of the virtual course process. Burns, (2000) assures that when a questionnaire is carried out this way, it "not only provides systematic data as the basis for reflection, evaluation and further diagnosis of the research issues, but also contributes to a more open and positive classroom environment..." (p.127). (see appendix C, p.83).

Student's log

In this case, the use of a "Post section" on the platform virtual course encourages students to post their comments. At the end of each activity, the students are welcomed to post their comments, suggestions, and opinions about their strengths and weakness in relation to the use of vocabulary and technology, the motivation and feelings about their performance with an unfamiliar tool which is the virtual course and the process of vocabulary acquisition. As Progoff (1992) notes, "View journal students' log as a type of connoisseurship by which individuals become connoisseurs of their own thinking and reflection patterns and indeed their own understanding of their work as qualitative researchers" (para.4).(see appendix H,p.90)

Description of Approach Adopted for Material Design

Before beginning the research, it was necessary to analyze the issues around the specialized vocabulary for Civil Engineering students at Santo Tomás University Colombia. In general terms, students showed concern for their lack of specialized vocabulary for texts pertaining to their field of study. Preliminary data were collected using a Likert type survey with 6 questions answered by 32 students. The learners' needs, interests, opinions and approval were considered a key factor in the creation of the work unit and the design of relevant materials, said unit and materials being the possible solution to the problems evidenced by the students themselves.

The application of this different approach allowed students to widen their specialized vocabulary in English through the use of a virtual platform. Consequently, the teacher planned the design of a work unit which took into account both the level 1 English and the Civil Engineering first semester syllabuses at the University. The unit titled “Jobs in Construction” was uploaded to the Campus Virtual USTAVIRTUAL (Moodle) platform. The contents of the unit related to topics studied in their main syllabus subject Introduction to Civil Engineering, and included an introduction to Civil Engineering, structures vocabulary, building materials and jobs in construction.

III. RESULTS

The results showed learners considered that using virtual tools as a resource of learning is innovative and relevant. Also, this first instrument demonstrated that learning vocabulary focused on specific areas and fields is significant in motivating English learners.

The following questions are part of a questionnaire and some excerpts from students’ logs on the Platform, which were applied to students and during and at the end of the work unit. This instrument was answered individually by 32 level-A1 English students of Civil Engineering of first semester at Santo Tomás University. The results are shown below:

1. Do you consider important the use of virtual courses learn English?

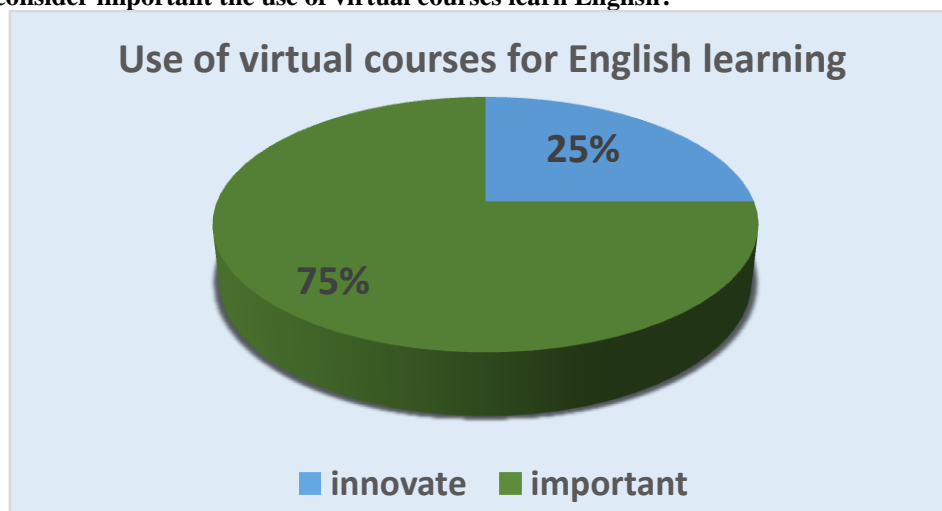


Figure 1. Results of Questionnaire, Question # Prepared by the author.

From the previous figure, one can see the participant’s satisfaction after incorporating online resources in their learning process in order to boost English language learning. Thus, to continue to justify a discussion, some of the explanations given by the participants in this same question are revealed as follows.

2. Does the use of technological tools in languages learning contributes to your professional life?.

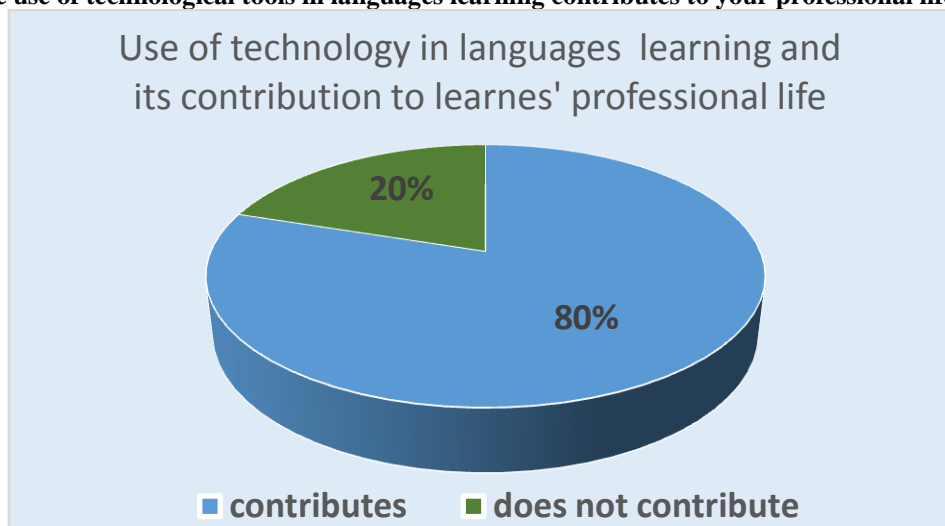


Figure 2. Results of Questionnaire, Question # 2 Prepared by the author.

Based on the first question, in the previous figure it is clear that for the 32 students surveyed, more than 70% consider the incorporation of ICT in English classto be very important. This demonstrates one more time the positive impact that the involvement of ICTs has in the academic performance and students' professional life of a large number of students and the justification for the dissertation.

3.what is your opinion about the use of Usta virtual platform for learning basic Civil Engineering vocabulary in English?.

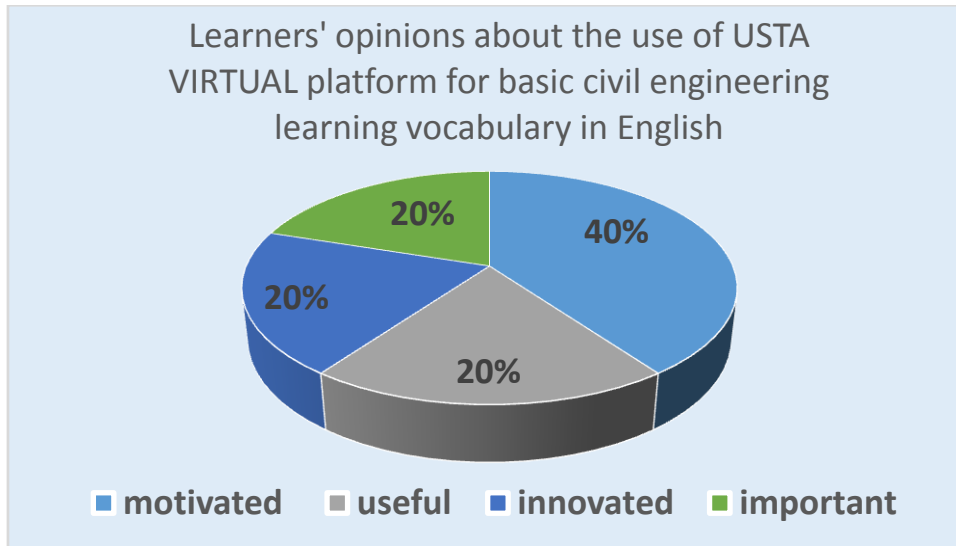


Figure 3. Results of Questionnaire, Question # Prepared by the author.

Considering the previous sample, the members of the groups validate that the online resource used facilitated learning of basic vocabulary in Civil Engineering and therefore this tool is motivating for their learning by some 40%.

The use of virtual tools to enrich basic vocabulary in English: development of
4. what are the advantages of the use of a virtual course for learning Civil Engineering English?.

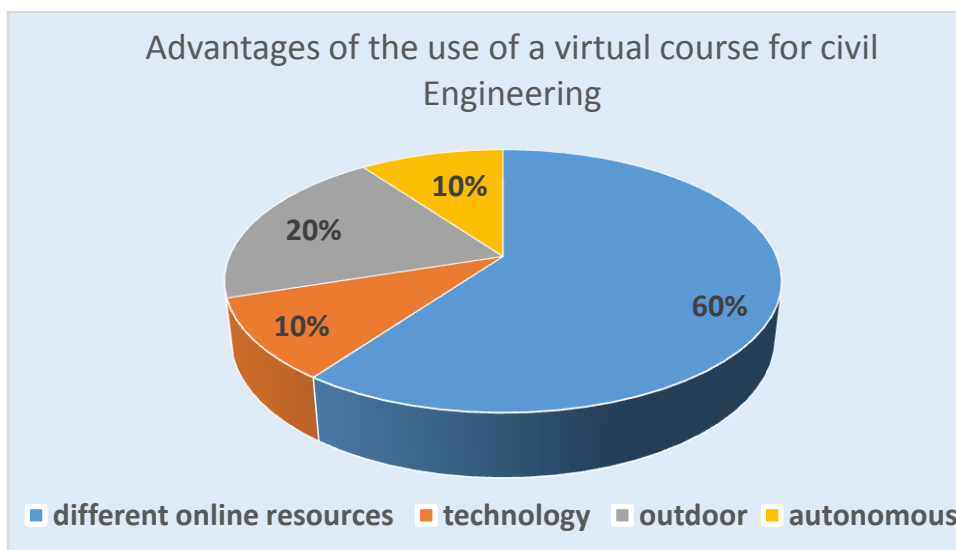


Figure 4. Results of Questionnaire, Question # Prepared by the author.

Interpreting the previous diagram, 60% of the learners of the groups agreed that they think the advantage of using a virtual tool is that they can use different online resources to help them learn basic vocabulary in Civil Engineering.

5. ¿ # 5 which are disadvantages of the Use of a virtual course for learning Civil Engineering English?

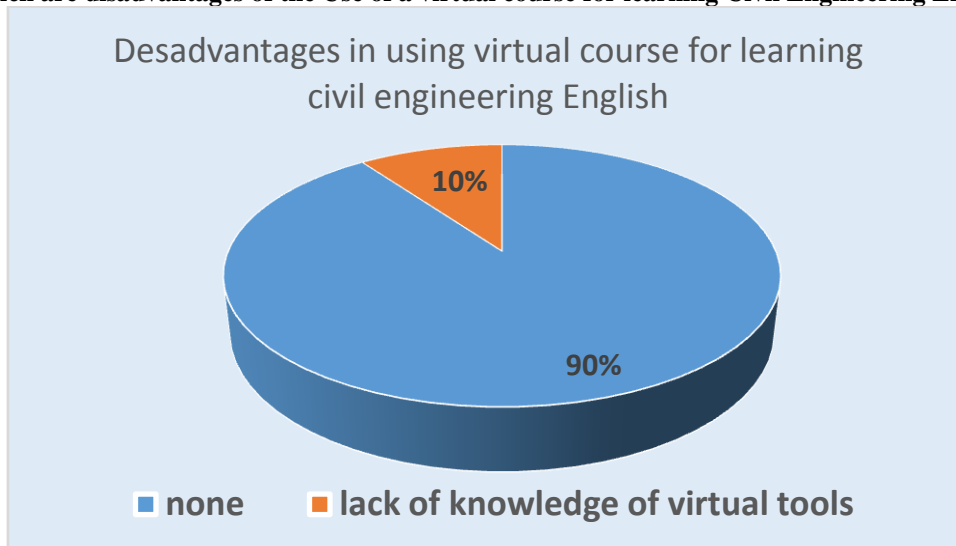


Figure 5. The questionnaire, Question Prepared by the author.

According to the previous diagram, most of the learners considered that a virtual course invited them to work using their own mobiles and they needed to know more about virtual tools, which would help them not only to acquire civil engineering language, but also key knowledge on other subjects in their academic program. 10% of the students considered that they had to learn and know more about the use of virtual tools, because they were aware that technology is important to improve their learning.

6. 6 would you like to work with virtual platforms for learning English in an academic learning?.

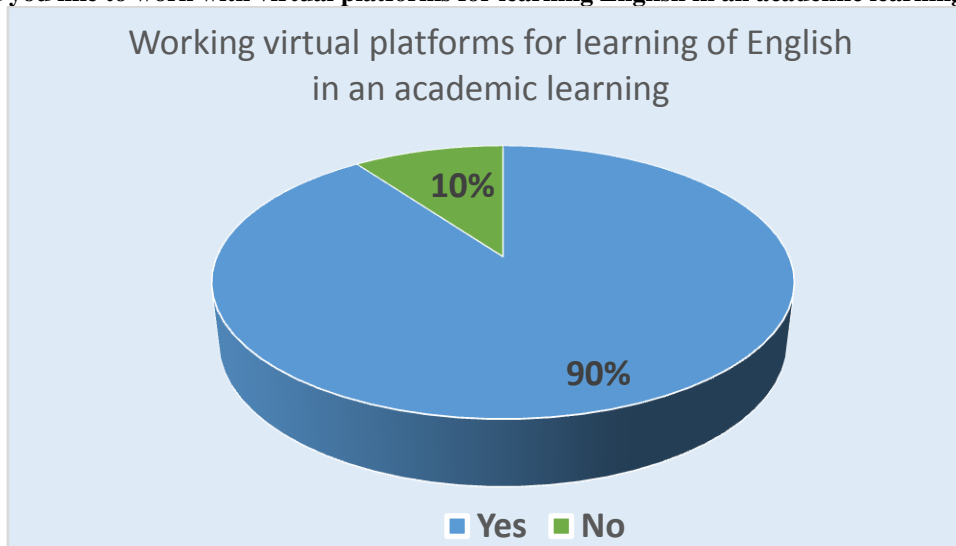


Figure 6. Results of Questionnaire, Question # Prepared by the author.

Figure 7 shows the performance of the students involved in the classroom experience of teaching English for specific purposes. It can be inferred that the students involved presented a final grade represented in the superior range with values between 5.0 and 6.0 and a tendency to improve the performance in relation to the motivation presented can be observed students throughout the classroom experience with English for specific purposes (ESP).

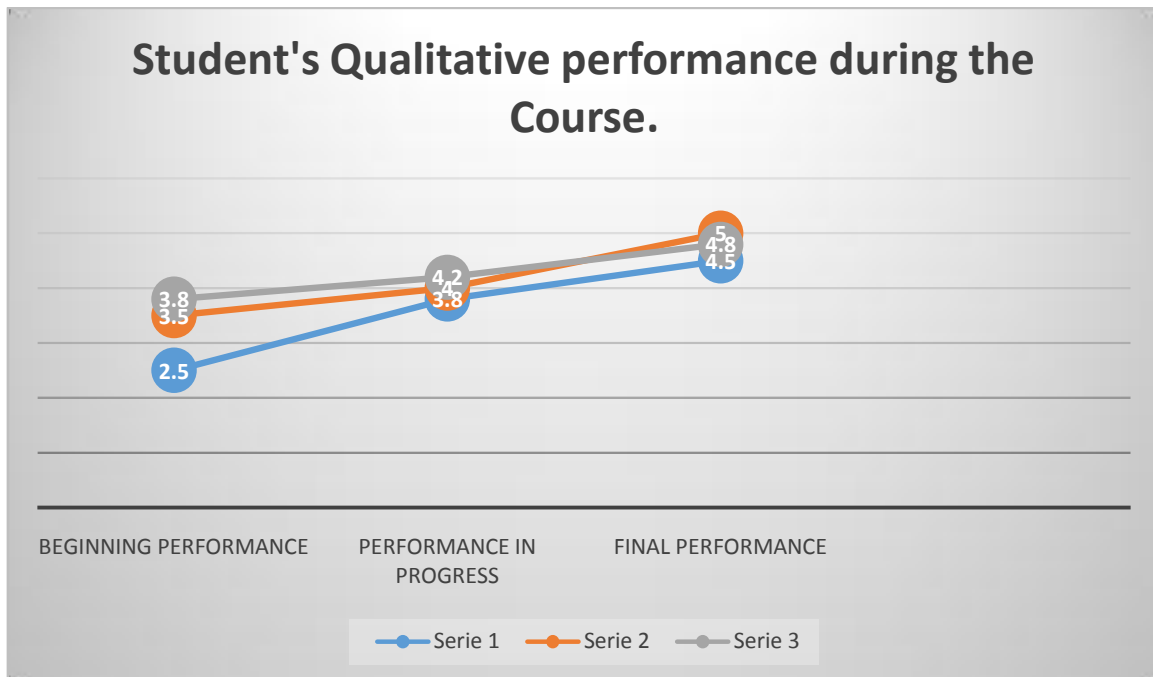


Figure 7 Students' Qualitative performance.

Based on the sixth question, in the previous figure evidences that out of the 32 surveyed students, more than 90% consider as positive working on virtual platform in the future with a view to enrich their English learning in their academic field. Furthermore, the virtual platform contributes to learning, both in and out of class taking advantage of BL.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

To conclude with the definition of ESP provided by Dudley- Evans (1998), it is clearly influenced by that of Strevens (1988), although he has improved it substantially by removing the absolute characteristic that ESP is "in contrast with General English" (p. 298). It means that ESP should be considered another good option or alternative as an approach to teaching, or what Evans (2007) describes as an 'attitude of mind'(p.6). This is a similar conclusion to that made by Hutchinson et al. (1987) who stated, "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (p.19).

Based on the results of this study, on the one hand it was found that students had a specific purpose for studying English using ESP as a simple approach for vocabulary acquisition which would help them in their professional life as engineers. On the other hand, blended learning can be defined as the combination of multiple approaches to pedagogy or teaching, e.g. self-paced, collaborative, tutor-supported learning or traditional classroom teaching, since it helped students to enrich their reading skills when it came to tackling an academic article during Civil Engineering subjects. As a result, they could use virtual tools as a strategy to enhance their autonomous learning and to be more confident when facing new challenges to learn a specific language. Moreover, blended learning is reaffirmed as an approach that works in class in group, as is the case for example, of a game to evaluate which collaborative task must go along with the communicative approach and reinforce this activity on the virtual platform. Besides, as is the case for tutor-supported learning or traditional classroom teaching, blended learning works when, the students need a guide in the classroom and need to be monitored or motivated according to their learning styles. For that reason, the teachers must be responsible for motivating learners in class from the very first warm-up activity and go through the different stages of topic introduction, presentation, learners production, evaluation, self-assessment in both individual and group mode, whole-class and one-to-one feedback. The teacher must also consider possible redesign of material or create combinations of the activities with different language use.

Blended learning often refers specifically to the provision or use of resources which combine e-learning and face to face learning with other educational resources. Hence, in this study it was found that Blended Learning works when learners are motivated through the use of in-class and out-of-class instructions, helped by technology and the use of virtual tools in their English learning process. This study revealed that the creation of a work unit based on the Civil Engineering syllabus and elaborated under topics studied in the subject of introduction to Civil Engineering is established in order to implement topics of interest for learners during their academic program and in their professional life. Consequently, students showed motivation during development of each activity proposed by the teacher on the virtual platform and during the acquisition of specific

vocabulary. This process became significant academically and student interest for reading articles focused on academic areas increased whenever they felt more involved in their knowledge.

Although the study provides good results, it would be interesting to conduct this research to explore students' needs to use technology in other subjects of their academic program in order to learn, read and research, bearing in mind that some learners were sometimes not comfortable facing technology, except for the use of Facebook and messaging applications, among others. These virtual tools were used in order to establish communication but not for learning. It would be pertinent in a future line, how teachers are implementing technology as a pedagogical tool in other areas.

Developing teaching/learning materials for ESP is more demanding than for general English because the availability of public ESP learning materials is very unusual. Because of this, there is not free online material which teachers can use in their classes, on a platform or in a virtual course, given that it is very expensive and it requires credits online. As a result of this, teachers need to design which best suits the needs of their ESP learners. In developing the ESP learning materials, every teacher can follow any approach he/she is familiar with and he/she can develop his/her teaching materials by applying the principles and procedures of language teaching materials, including the formulation of their teaching objectives and syllabus, as well as the adaptation and or complementation of existing materials, and the creation of new materials.

Consequently, teachers can design ESP material highlighting some important factors that they must center in on in a learning centered-approach, including but not limited to:

- the analysis of the learning situation;
- the creation of interesting and enjoyable materials;
- the revision of language and skills;
- the content of materials;
- adaptations as needed;
- the analysis of target situations;
- Establishing general syllabus of topics and tasks.

Therefore, the creation of an ESP work unit on the platform was focused on TBL, which helped to plan the activities developed by students and these were organized taking into account learners' needs and characteristics, following principles of pre task, during task and post task. Teachers can take advantages of this approach, given that it is founded in proving learners' autonomous learning, meaningful learning, responsibilities, achievement and challenges in their language acquisition and motivation for using virtual tools. Similarly, TBL should aid the teaching experiences in class, since teachers can guide their practices through it and reinforce their roles as motivators of their learners, who make decisions on roles and how to present the final result.

In terms of instruments, qualitative and action research methodology, the data in the questionnaires evidenced good characteristics which showed that students preferred virtual tools for enriching their English learning, even more so when ESP is a possibility and opportunity to be more motivated to learn a foreign language.

All this stated, some limitations have been detected and acknowledge during this study. The first limitation, at the beginning of these activities, was that some students refused to work on the platform because they admitted that it was difficult; however, as they progressed with their work they became more comfortable, to the extent that the activities on the platform were presented with some selected tutorials on the website. The second limitation is that, although the time scheduled for doing the activities was programed with the learners, some of them were not able to accomplish it. Unfortunately, they highlighted that other subjects were more important, despite acknowledging the relevance of learning civil engineering language. A further limitation evidenced was that the bibliographic material used for doing the activities was limited, considering that most of the websites designed to work with ESP in Civil Engineering are not free. However, this is an invitation to a line of enquiry that may create free virtual material to supporting language learning.

Finally, these recommendations can enlighten teachers who might want to design units of work in their classes. For that reason, the learners suggested and recommended that the platform should have interactive activities in order to practice and learn more Civil Engineering vocabulary. Moreover, they suggested there should be tutorial videos on the site for them to watch and learn with new virtual tools. Learners proposed to teachers the permanent use of technology in their classes that involved the use of their gadgets or cellphones, since these instruments enhance their motivation and English learning. Furthermore, as a teacher it is important to highlight that ESP is a variation of a course which must be included and adapted in all the syllabus of any academic program in any university around the world, because it maximizes students' motivation for learning English making it meaningful learning.

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