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## Students' perceptions and attitudes towards asynchronous technological tools in blended-learning training to improve grammatical competence in English as a second language

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of our quantitative study is to explore students' perceptions towards some asynchronous tools to acquire the objectives of the subject of English Morphosyntax. The research was based on a sample of 358 students who were recruited from a population of 451. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 58 with an average age of 29.49 and were divided into four age groups. The results showed the students' perceptions about the efficacy of the technological tools in Blended-learning training to improve their grammatical competence in English as a second language (L2). The students highlighted the opportunity provided to have a greater autonomy to be able to set and organize their own pace of study and individual learning. They pointed out the potentiality of the VLE implemented to supply a natural environment to learn and practice English grammar in real experiences and situations, and emphasized the benefits of the e-activities to carry out a continuous assessment and the students' self-assessment. The present study brings some light on the students' perceptions towards the effectiveness of asynchronous tools (podcast, videocast, online tests, online glossary and forums) in teaching English grammar to foreign language learners.

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## 1. Introduction

The present study is conducted in the framework of the blended learning method, technology and university teaching, specifically in the teaching of English as a second language in the Degree in Primary Education: English. The aim of our study is to investigate learners' perceptions towards some technological tools to know their opinions about their benefits to learn English grammar. Blended learning is one of the fastest growing trends in university and is a large-scale opportunity to develop new formal education programs in which structure, tools, roles, strategies, communications, and access change (García-Peñalvo & Seoane-Pardo, 2015;

García-Peñalvo, 2015). According to Graham (2006:5) blended learning can be defined as “part of the ongoing convergence of two archetypal learning environments. On the one hand, we have the traditional face-to-face learning environment that has been around for centuries. On the other hand, we have distributed learning environments that have begun to grow and expand in exponential ways as new technologies have expanded the possibilities for distributed communication and interaction” Thorne (2003:18) also points out that “blended learning represents a real opportunity to create learning experiences that can provide the right learning at the right time and in the right place for each and every individual, not just at work, but in schools, universities and even at home. It can be truly universal, crossing global boundaries and bringing groups of learners together through different cultures and time zones. In this context blended learning could become one of the “most significant developments of the 21st century”. It has become the kind of education that responds to the demands of the current knowledge society (González, Rodríguez-Conde, Olmos-Migueláñez, Borham, & García-Peñalvo,

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2013), since this instruction eliminates the inflexibility of traditional education towards a more open education in which students are more involved (Bachman & Palmer, 1982; Scott, 2015). It can be assessed as an adequate instruction that adapts to learners' personal and professional duties (Sánchez-Gómez, Pinto-Llorente, & García-Peñalvo, 2010). Students learn, practice, and communicate with all the protagonists of the teaching-learning process. And this enhances a collective construction of knowledge in which learners have an active role, different from traditional professor centered method with little collaboration between students (Gan, Menkhoff, & Smith, 2015; Pinto-Llorente, Sánchez-Gómez, & García-Peñalvo, 2015).

Technological blended instructional delivery mode can be the alternative beyond the limits of the traditional face-to-face learning environments for the communicative language teaching (CLT) pedagogy. This method focuses on the development of the communicative competence. Applied linguists have contributed to the development of this concept. Hymes (1972) defined this competence not only as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of situations. Savignon (1972) in her study at the University of Illinois defined the communicative competence as *"the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors"* (Savignon, 1972:8). Later in the work carried out by Canale and Swain (1980) this competence is defined as a concept comprised of three skills: grammatical competence (the mastery of the linguistic code: grammatical rules, morphological and syntactic rules, vocabulary, etc.), strategic competence (the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which allow learners to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns and problems arise in the communication process) and sociolinguistic competence (the knowledge of the sociocultural code, the rules and conventions of language use in different sociocultural contexts). This definition is further elaborated by Canale (1983) and adds another component, the discourse competence (the ability to combine language structures into different types of written texts or meaningful units of spoken language). Regarding the previous definitions the communicative competence in second language teaching is defined as a term that not only includes the linguistic forms of the target language, but also the ability to use grammatical competence in different communicative situations (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1997). Grammatical competence can be defined as the ability that students must have to understand and express meaning. It is concerned with the mastery of the linguistic code (lexicon, syntactic, semantic, phonetic and pragmatic rules), which allows students to use these grammatical features to express and understand the meaning of utterances (Bachman & Palmer, 1982; Canale & Swain, 1980; Larsen-Freeman, 1991, 2003). In 2001 the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2001:113) published the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which includes a similar definition of grammatical competence as *"the ability to understand and express meaning by producing and recognising well-formed phrases and sentences in accordance with these principles (as opposed to memorising and reproducing them as fixed formulae)."*

With the development of this study we deal with relevant aspects in the communicative language teaching (CLT) pedagogy, especially in the component of the communicative competence that refers to grammatical competence. We want to explore the learners' perceptions towards the effectiveness of the technological tools offered through the VLE in a blended instructional delivery mode. The tools analyzed were: the transmissive (podcast and videocast), the interactive (online tests and online glossary) and the

collaborative (forums). These tools were used to provide materials and e-activities to acquire and improve the grammatical competence. There are many studies about the benefits and effectiveness of these technological tools to improve written and oral skills, as well as English pronunciation (Bamanger & Alhassan, 2015; Pinto, Sánchez & Palacios, 2014; Richards, 2014). However, educational research studies are necessary to assess the use of these asynchronous technological tools to learn the grammatical competence in second language learners since most present researches focus on other competences.

In the following parts of our paper, we provide an overview of the research. Firstly, we introduce the study by providing the quantitative research method used, an ex-post-facto design since we do not have control over independent variables, so we only record the measurements since the phenomenon occurs naturally. The present study is based on a sample of 358 students who are recruited from a population of 451 and are enrolled in the subject English Morphosyntax, developed under blended learning modality. To operationalize the variables and collect the data of our research, we use a pre-test and post-test which are hosted on the VLE. Secondly, we present the main quantitative results of the data analysis, based on the overall evaluation of the technological model implemented. For the purposes of the present study, we focus our descriptive and inferential analysis on the obtained data on the following two sections: Technology-B-learning modality and English as a second language. Finally, we show the main conclusions of our research according to our students' perceptions and attitudes towards the asynchronous technological tools used (podcast, videocast, online tests, online glossary and forums) to improve learners' English grammatical competence.

## 2. Method

In order to investigate students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the asynchronous technological tools (podcast, videocast, online tests, online glossary and forums) to acquire the objectives of the subject of English Morphosyntax, a quantitative study was employed. It was an ex-post-facto design since we did not have control over independent variables. We only recorded the measurements since the phenomenon occurred naturally. It was defined as a *"systematic empirical inquiry in which the scientist does not have direct control of independent variables because their manifestations have already occurred or because they are inherently not manipulable"* (Kerlinger, 1986:348).

We used a descriptive research method in our study. We utilized a survey method to obtain data from the participants, using techniques of descriptive and inferential analysis of the different strata sample of the study (Arnal, Rincón, & Latorre, 1994).

We carried out our research in three phases. First of all, we established the objectives and hypothesis of our research. Secondly, we selected the sample, the students of the subject: English Morphosyntax, and we decided the variables of the two questionnaires. Finally, we carried out the register coding and data analysis, to obtain the results and conclusions of our study (Buendía, Colás, & Hernández, 1997).

### 2.1. Objectives and hypotheses

The aim of this quantitative study was to explore students' perceptions about some technological tools offered via a Blended-Learning training course to know their benefits for learning English grammar. The course had a modular structure consisting of four modules (general information of the subject, parts of speech, kinds of sentences and word formation) that was implemented through the open source course management system Moodle. The

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