



## **Blended: face to face and virtual educational model at a Durango State University: the tutor's role**

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### **Abstract**

Even though authorities at the Durango State University; Universidad Juárez del Estado de Durango (UJED), have identified the need for undergraduates to be able to use English as a means of knowledge acquisition and communication, efforts had not been able to come about until the beginning of 2008. In mid-January 2008, a program for official approval of level of the English language was accepted and the certification of English by exam as a prerequisite for undergraduates was established. As a medium of offering all students equal opportunities to study this foreign language and make certification a reality the Modelo Educativo SEmi-presencial Virtual or MESEV was made accessible to university students. The Centro Universitario de Auto-Aprendizaje en Lenguas (CUAAL) is now faced with the challenge of addressing the university students who started their major in February 2008 under this new program. After the programs' first semester results were evaluated. They were not what were expected. The CUAAL's research body (Enseñanza-Aprendizaje de Lenguas) decided to concentrate its efforts on the identification of the most problematic areas that exist in MESEV's implementation. The present study will focus on the tutors' participation and role in MESEV. In the beginning of this research the background of MESEV will be established and preliminary assumptions will be made emerging from the first input from tutors. Tutors perceptions from the first anonymous questionnaire applied are discussed here. These results will guide on the course of action and path this research might follow.

### **1. Background**

In this section, we will be building on three areas which provide background to what is now the UJED language teacher's current situation. The first is the use of computers in English Language Teaching and how it has evolved to date. Second, the impact the introduction and use of computers in the English language has had on teachers. And lastly, how the aforementioned elements and the



UJED's language center's trajectory have become intertwined and now present a distinct dilemma for the university, its teachers and the roles they play.

### **1.1 Computers in ELT**

More than two decades ago, computers were introduced into English Language Teaching (ELT) (Chappelle, 2001, 1). Computers found their way into the language teaching environment and learning world to the extent that they now are also a part of the international testing services. Some examples of these include the newest version of the Test of English as a Foreign Language, the ibTOEFL (internet based TOEFL), the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), the Diagnostic Language Assessment (DIALANG), among others.

The use of computers as teaching and evaluation aids has influenced many institutions wherein teachers and centers have elected to prepare their students not only for the English language content required to surpass such examinations but as well as the abilities and skills required to take them. It has been noted that taking computer-based examinations may cause anxiety on the part of the test taker. However, it has also been noted that familiarity with computer operations and test format might have a direct relationship with the outcomes (Shermis and Lombard, 1998, 111,113). Therefore, it can be concluded that there is an evident need to provide extensive practice in the test format in order to increase the students' possibilities of scoring a passing grade on the exams. Computers, day by day, offer a greater variety of possibilities for interaction with software or geographically distant students who may be equal in terms of communication capabilities. Young students are attracted to computers and the versatility they offer makes them a very useful tool in English language teaching. Day by day, computers are more commonly used in different settings and for different purposes. The increase in its use in the ELT classroom is therefore not surprising. However, not all recipient parties have been as enthusiastic in receiving computers as young learners have. Teachers were not really prepared for the introduction of



computers in the language classroom since they have affected the roles teachers play.

## **1.2 Language, Teachers and Computers**

When computers were first introduced into the ELT world, their presentation was not at all welcomed by many teachers who envisaged computers replacing them in the classroom (Chappelle, 2001, 1). Computers have progressively found their way into the language classrooms from the 1980s forward. Nowadays, even in Mexican rural areas electronic whiteboards can be seen in which power point presentations prepared by enthusiastic teachers are presented to students.

Teachers have not been replaced, but are now playing, perhaps a different role. They may be participating in classes where computers are a learning aid, in language laboratories or self-access centers. They may also be electronic materials developers or tutors in distance education programs.

## **1.3 The Institution**

As may be the case with other state universities throughout México, the UJED had not and could not have foreseen the magnitude and importance of student's ability to learn and communicate in a second language.

The rapid technological advances have created an infinite number of routes for interaction between countries; routes of interaction that Mexican University students have not been able to take advantage of. University authorities realized students were not able to participate in this new technologically beneficial environment. The need to reconsider the abilities and skills of undergraduate students related to the language became apparent and thus the demand for English in the core curriculum or at least a consideration within became evident.

As a result, revisions were made to present and newly implemented plans of study of some disciplines within the aforementioned university's curriculum. Two of



the many points addressed in these modifications were the lack of academic value assigned to English and the importance of students' ability to use the language as a medium for learning and communication. This consideration is school or faculty specific as one has to bear in mind that not all UJED academic units are, as of yet, ready to make the transition. It must be also well noted that the university was unable (in terms of financial resources) to provide service to the entire student body in a traditional class mode and stay within means of the current budget. A new, innovative and aggressive solution had to be proposed (Reyes, Ma. del Carmen, 2005).

The purpose of this research is to analyze the tutors' role in MESEV, their beliefs, strengths, weaknesses and their influence on the situation. This with the intention of optimizing the positive aspects of the role or roles that tutors play and identifying strategies to resolve primary obstacles impeding the complete success of MESEV. Throughout this paper we will try to gain knowledge of the tutors' willingness to work in the MESEV program by examining their teaching and learning beliefs. We will try to identify what, according to the tutors, works well within MESEV as well as what could be improved, and finally bring to light the tutors' viewpoint about working in MESEV on a personal and professional level.

## **2. The Situation at UJED**

In January 2008, the University's English Language Learning and Accreditation Program PUAALI (Spanish acronym) was approved. Since then, as an under-graduate requirement, at a gradual pace, students will have to demonstrate the ability to communicate in English. This prerequisite has two components, using the language in everyday situations as well as in academic settings related to the students' area or field. The level for general English knowledge and the English for Specific Purposes is intermediate.

Very few schools have one or more semesters of English as part of the undergraduate study programs, therefore, there is not enough faculty to teach the incoming population. The university has two main language centers which are



open to the general public. However, classes have a cost which is difficult for many university students to afford.

## **2.1 PUAALI and MESEV. A brief introduction**

The Programa Universitario de Aprendizaje y Acreditación de Lengua Inglesa or PUAALI (Spanish acronym) (University English Language Learning and Accreditation Program) as it is stated in its name, includes the learning of the language. In order to provide equal learning opportunities for all UJED students it was necessary to provide a language learning opportunity at a low cost. The response to this need was MESEV; a new mode of working in which most of the work is done by the student engaged in semi-independent educational activities via computer and internet. It is a program focused on learning processes and the demonstration of the competencies acquired during the course.

MESEV was implemented in the first semester of 2008, having had a pilot semester from September to December of 2007. The university hired English language teachers temporarily to become tutors, materials designers and programmers of this new educational model. By the end of May 2008, the results of the first semester of MESEV were not what were expected. Among the participants who may influence the outcomes of the model are the school authorities, the tutors, the school facilities (access to computers and competent internet connections), the materials, the students and the MESEV authorities and or coordinators.

MESEV is a blended learning model, a hybrid course if you will. Hybrid courses are not clear cut and defined because they are relatively new teaching and learning modalities that are quickly gaining supporters. In “hybrid courses... a significant portion of the learning activities have been moved online, and time traditionally spent in the classroom is reduced, but not eliminated.” (Ganrham & Kaleta, 2002; 1). The proportion of online activities in relation to class time is not definite and can vary from a higher percentage devoted to face to face sessions



and a very low amount of time for online activity to the complete opposite of the total course time. This relationship will depend on several variables: the tutor, the subject, access to appropriate equipment, the students among others. Hybrid courses offer the flexibility of online work for both tutors and students, while maintaining the benefits of face-to-face interaction. Therefore, provided they both have internet access (i.e. home, school, internet café, etc.), they can decide what time of the day or week, depending on the course format, to dedicate to this class.

In hybrid courses, tutors can decide to handle lectures online as streaming videos or reading materials and use class time for more active and participative discussion related to the topic of the lecture. However, instructors designing hybrid courses in the University of Wisconsin reported a significant increase of time needed to be devoted in developing these compared to the amount of time necessary to develop traditional courses (Ganrham & Kaleta, 2002). This needs to be considered when pondering the design of hybrid courses.

## **2.2 MESEV. The beginning**

The implementation of MESEV could not be prepared in advance as would have been appropriate since its implementation was decided rather shortly. The quantity and availability of tutors was scarce. A result due greatly to the relocation of the tutors, who had the experience of working in MESEV during the pilot semester at the end of 2007, from the PUAALI staff to the B.A. staff. The semester was to start mid March. Quick teachers' recruitment was made at the end of February and early March 2008. Materials had to be designed by the new tutors. Training had to be on the go.

## **2.3 The “Teachers” and “students”**

MESEV, the new learning option, challenges most university students and teachers to work in a different ways. Both come to the situation with unique pre-conceived ideas and beliefs about the roles each of them should play. The MESEV presents these actors with a new scenario and expects actors to play a



role which, most probably, have never played before. A key element in the successful implementation of this new proposal of working is the teacher stops being a teacher and becomes a tutor. Changing the “name” of the activity of the language educator is simple. The challenge comes when modifying the concepts and attitudes towards language learning and teaching since they have become imbedded in the minds and habits of teachers and students alike for a very long period. According to Adams and Chen, especially in the case of experienced teachers (1981), the tutor needs to take off the teachers’ hat and put on a tutor’s hat. If this hat is not well built into the teacher, the play will not have a good start, needless to say about the ending. It is therefore, necessary to look closely at the role tutors are playing, at one semester of the implementation of MESEV. Strengths need to be identified and exploited and weaknesses need to be recognized and worked on to overcome them.

Coming to work in MESEV has been a new experience for most of the new teachers, especially due to the variety of activities they have been involved in within a very short period of time. Language educators taken off the “teachers’ hat” and have become materials designers. In the experience of Hayes (1995), teachers’ involvement in the preparation of the courses is one of the twelve basic principles in teacher development programs. Teachers were not really designing the course, but participating in the development of the materials to be used. However, by doing this, they became more familiar with the course contents and participated collaboratively in the design of the electronic materials.

Since there has been very little time to produce the necessary materials to start running the course. Training was limited to very basic explanations of the three cycles within MESEV as well as orientation of the formats that were to be completed by tutors and students. Some elements were left undefined due to time constraints.

Tutors were assigned their schools. Some students attended classes CUAAL’s facilities while others at their respective centers with some tutors being



sent to the schools. At the beginning some schools had many students attending MESEV sessions. Other schools did not. Additional cooperation was requested from the Academic Coordinators. Problems varied; Equipment was insufficient as well as inappropriate, students did not have time to attend sessions, etc.

### 3. Implementing Change

By the end of May numbers attending MESEV sessions had greatly decreased. Immediate measures were taken to recover the semester. Each tutor provided a list with the students who were attending sessions regularly and those who were not. Letters were sent inviting them to 'submit' late or unfinished work. The letter served another purpose: as a reminder of the importance of attending MESEV sessions. Results were not as expected. Numbers continued to be very low. Posters and flyers were made and distributed in schools announcing a final written exam. A higher number of students than expected showed up. However, since the exam was only 20% of the overall grade, passing it was insufficient to pass the course. Students needed to have participated in the forums, attended conversation sessions, taken the oral exam and had done at least 80%, if not all, of the competence units which composed the A1 program.

The semester had ended. As a result of the satisfactory outcomes (low attendance, incomplete unit activities, etc.) UJED authorities began to exert pressure on the director of the CUAAL. By mid June the CUAAL's research body convened to analyze the situation. However, it was necessary to identify problems areas. Adjustments had to be made in order eliminate or minimize problems areas before the beginning of the new semester. Three main aspects were to be looked at: the materials, the tutors and the students. This paper looks at the tutors' points of view on the activities realized within MESEV and their participation.

### 4. Results and Discussion

This research proposes to answer three main questions in this first part of the research. It is very important to identify what the tutors, a key element in the implementation of MESEV, recognize as aspects of the blended learning model that work well and those aspects that need to be improved. If critical issues are identified and properly addressed the probabilities of better outcomes in the following semester are higher.

The first data gathering questionnaire was applied to tutors. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire was applied in Spanish in the belief that when using ones' mother tongue it is easier to expand than when using a foreign language, regardless of how proficient the speaker may be. Each question will be stated and the summary of the most important answers will be discussed. The questionnaire was answered by ten tutors.

*1.- Do you think it is possible to equal or improve results when learning English through this new program as with traditional class (face-to-face) mode? Explain why.*

All 10 tutors consider that this new blended model can yield similar or better results in learning English than those from the traditional face to face methodology. However, some comment that the change to a blended or hybrid model should be gradual. In one tutor's words "teachers and students still have much to change", referring to beliefs and attitudes towards language learning and teaching. As stated by Hayes (1995) "change is a slow process". Changing the conceptions deeply rooted for ten years or more about the way language classes should be and the roles each of the participants should play (students and teachers) requires careful planning and time. However, it is reassuring for MESEV authorities to realize that tutors do believe in the potential of this blended model. Much of this might be perhaps due to tutors' previous or present experience as learners in distance courses or being them technological advocates themselves.

*2.- What do you think works well in MESEV?*

Answers were not as uniform as in the previous question. Tutors have different perceptions on what is working well in MESEV: 40% think what works well in



MESEV is the team of designers, they seem to value greatly the cooperative environment built among the MESEV designer team (all tutors were involved in materials design). However, 30% think what works well is the students' interest in the model due to its technological aspects. Another questionnaire<sup>1</sup> aimed at analyzing the impact of materials in the implementation of MESEV and reported by Masse, H. et. al. (2008) was applied. In it, most tutors expressed the participants' commitment and hard working attitude as a group was an important MESEV strength.

*3.- What do you think does not work well in MESEV?*

Even though there were several opinions in relation to which aspects need improvement, there seems to be a consensus in that organization deserves special attention. For this question, 70 % believes organization ought to improve for things to work better; 60 % considers planning needs attention. Another 30% considers communication and organization with the academic units MESEV worked with is not helping in the implementation of the model. From the report made by Masse et. al. (2008), it can be seen that organization and time pressure are the most important aspects tutors perceive as elements which have hindered satisfactory results in MESEV implementation.

*4.- What do you think you need (personal and professionally) to improve your performance in MESEV?*

Answers varied greatly here. However, they can be grouped as to generalized perceptions: better organization (present again), even though there are other opinions such as work overload, lack of respect for non-working hours, and working under pressure. All these elements could be resolved through better organization. The other three opinions could be interrelated; failure to recognize tutors' capacities along with lack of job security resulted in lack of motivation. If there is no confidence in tutors' capacities there could be a weakening of tutors'

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to M.E.S. Masse T. Hugo R. for granting access to the transcripts of the questionnaire applied to MESEV tutors in June 2008.



production quality. Tutors have agreed that if they work in constant fear of their job their motivational level will continue to be very low. This endless cycle of lack of timely organization prior to semester start dates, work loads that exceed professional and personal capacities, as well as the hindering job security question are jointly a vicious cycle that if not resolved will continue to render similar results (Masse et. al., 2008).

The needs expressed in terms of training involved guidance in competence units and in technological aspects.

*5.- What kind of training do you think you need to improve your performance in MESEV?*

Half of the tutors consider they need more training in using technology while almost half of them (40%) considers the e-tutoring course they were all taking when this study was conducted is an answer to their needs. More knowledge about the model and its theoretical background was expressed by 20% of the tutors.

*6.- What do you think are the three biggest challenges faced by MESEV? Explain. Do you have any suggestions to overcome them?*

Many opinions were expressed regarding this point. Not surprisingly, however, almost all (90%) the tutors expressed planning was, in their opinion, the biggest challenge. Tutors perceive the amount of time required to develop all the necessary materials for the program to operate was not carefully planned and they were not appropriately prepared to cope with the incoming new activities as materials designers (Masse, H. et. al., 2008). Among other comments, 40% expressed another big challenge was to convince students of the benefits working with MESEV and 30% suggest the challenge is to gain support for MESEV from the authorities at UJED.

## **5. Conclusions**

One of the research questions mentioned above was to learn about tutor's readiness to work in MESEV, this, first of all, based on the tutor's perception on the potential of the hybrid teaching and learning model. All participants expressed they



considered students could learn English through MESEV. It is crucial for MESEV authorities to know that tutors believe in the possibilities the program offers. However, there were some comments on the pace the program was being implemented. They added that students would not only learn the foreign language, but technological skills as well. In regards to the tutor's point of view about working in MESEV, many consider as a principal strength the supportive and dedicated work ethic shared by all MESEV tutors and design team. This opinion has prevailed throughout the questionnaire.

On a professional basis tutors considered they need to improve their technological skills. Also, they identified a need to learn how to tutor students online. Fortunately, the opportunity to take an e-tutoring course was offered. The tutor's enthusiastic participation in it reflects their awareness of this need and their desire and commitment in becoming better MESEV tutors.

On a personal basis, they perceived the biggest challenge MESEV faces is better planning and organization, a stress-free work environment (reasonable work load, adequate design time frames, etc.) as well as a respect for non-office hours. From the tutors' point of view, the time estimated for the design of materials was not realistic. They consider much more time needs to be dedicated to this fundamental activity. These first findings reflect the tutors' perceptions of the activities within and those that surround MESEV as well as their participation. It would be necessary to gather the authorities' perceptions as to draw more precise conclusions on an administrative level. This is a key source of insight that has not been investigated. The implementation of MESEV is a responsibility of colossal proportions. Administrators are unaware of conditions that exist within all UJED sub-centers that truly hinder successful implantation of MESEV. Responsibility of the success and or failure of the program are a situation that is at University level. The successful implementation depends on a cohort effort of entities within the UJED, from UJED administrators, center administrators, language center authorities, tutors and finally down to the students.



Changes have already been implemented towards better organization. It is not possible to change situations from one day to the next. Time is needed for appropriate adaptation to new conditions to take place.

These preliminary conclusions will lead into more in-depth study yet to be confirmed and, if so, identify more specific aspects on the role(s) tutors are playing, their appropriateness and tutors' readiness for them. Questionnaires will be applied and interviews will be held to both tutors and authorities involved. Changes implemented will be included in the data gathering instruments to be designed in the future.

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### Datos biográficos

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