Using Virtual Learning Environments for the Learning and Teaching of History of the English Language

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Abstract: The Bologna Process fosters the use of Information and Communication Technology to achieve an interactive learning process and promote autonomous learning. Virtual Learning Environments meet these requirements, as they provide both teachers and students with utilities that enable synchronous and asynchronous communication. This contribution reports on an experience carried out at University of Alcalá for the subject History of the English Language. Although it has traditionally been a theoretical subject, the introduction of activities through ICT, as well as the communication tools available in the Virtual Learning Environment, has given it a more practical focus. All these options are contextualized in its setting to demonstrate how teachers can make the most of Virtual Learning Environments in order to complement to face-to-face sessions and to plan and carry out the assignments for the tutorials according to the European Credit Transfer System.

Key words: *History of the English language, ICT, ECTS.*

1. Introduction

The Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education and the subsequent adaptation to the European Educational Space System involved the adoption of the European Credit Transfer System. In Spain, this new framework usually implied the modification of some teaching practices, such as

- The reduction in the face-to-face sessions.
- The enhancement of autonomous student work.
- The guidance on essays, assignments and exercises through the small group tutorial system.
- The switch from a final examination system to a continuous assessment procedure.

In this renewal of methological procedures, the Information and Communication Technology (henceforth ICT) plays an important role. Furthermore, Pennock Speck (2009: 183) highlights "if our university and state universities in general are to remain at the forefront in teaching and research in the future, we have to make sure that we implement ICT as effectively as possible in the new degree".

At University of Alcalá teachers have been working on these changes for some years now, as we have been part of a pilot programme since 2004. In the academic year 2007/08 we began to implement the group tutorial system, whereby students are assigned different tasks or projects. At present, our students are about to finish their degree in English Studies following the new methodology fully adapted to the new situation. This project was implemented during the academic year 2010/11 in the obligatory third-year subject History of the English Language.

My aims were various: On the one hand, to introduce Information and Communication Technology in a typically theoretical content subject to make it more attractive and engaging to students. On the other hand, to lighten the burden of constant correction as a consequence of the continuous assessment system. Teacher workload has increased since the introduction

of this methodology. Despite its positive aspects, such as the promotion of students' autonomy, the truth is that having undergraduates outside the classroom working on the course poses a series of problems in a Spanish context. Thus, I wanted to find a tool that could foster undergraduates' autonomy in a friendly environment without creating a burden for teachers, in the sense that task design and correction could be reduced to a minimum. Therefore, the project was a complement to face-to-face sessions. This is an instance of blended learning or what Vaughan calls *hybrid model* (2007: 82), as in the case of Pérez Cañado (2010: 137) "a significant number of learning activities has been moved online and time traditionally spent in the classroom has been reduced, albeit not eliminated". In fact, the theoretical contents were mainly covered during the face-to-face sessions and there were also practice exercises developed and corrected in the classroom, but computer-mediated systems could be a way to improve the students' comprehension and acceptance of the subject while acting as a tool to lighten the teacher's workload.

In this respect, ICT reveals to be useful in filing information. There are many options available, such as authoring tools (hotpotatoes, clic, markin, etc.), webpages, blogs, wikis, or others. However, I opted for the use of Blackboard, the current Virtual Learning Environment at University of Alcalá. In my opinion, it has advantages over the other systems: First of all, it allows the integration of all necessary utilities. It can also be easily updated once it has been implemented. Finally, it is private, given that only the students registered can access the information. It is true that a blog can also be made private, but it has to be organised properly, while in Blackboard all the utilities are already there and in addition, the teacher does not have to bother about inviting students to become members, because the technicians from the University of Alcalá automatically provide access to undergraduates that are enrolled in the subject. That is why, after having pondered on other options, such as wikis or blogs, I considered this one the most convenient in our specific setting.

2. Description of the Project

2.1. Participants

The group was made up of 40 students in their third year of English Studies. The course was compulsory. However, according to the old regulation, the undergraduates had the opportunity to follow the European Credit Transfer System, which involved being evaluated through continuous assessment, or take a final exam, which was worth 100% of the final mark. From 40 students, 34 signed a document stating that they wanted to be assessed through this continous assessment. The requirements concerning their commitment had to with with their attedance and participation in at least 80% of the face-to-face classes; attendance to one small group tutorial session and two workshops and, finally, submission of the assignments in due time. From the year, 2011/12 the University Regulation has changed and all students are within the system by default, but at the moment the project was implemented, they could opt for any of the two systems, either continuous assessment or final exam.

2.2. Research hypotheses

Due to the specificity of the contents covered in History of the English language, it has traditionally been considered by undergraduates a too theoretical course with little application in every day life. My initial hypothesis was that the introduction of ICT would make the subject more attractive for students. As ICT is completely integrated in their lives, if they could perceive the means as something they enjoy and value, their interest and motivation in

the subject would increase. Likewise, ICT would promote some compentencies like autonomous learning, which is a basic compentence for lifelong learning.

Likewise, my second hypothesis was that the design and implementation of the course online as an aid to face-to-face classes would lighten the burden of teachers' design and correction of activities, as the initial effort would be compensated in the near future by the reutilisation of the material and the automatic correction.

2.3. Course design and implementation

As it is widely acknowledged, a Virtual Learning Environment is

> A software system designed to support teaching and learning in an educational setting. A Virtual Learning Environment will normally work over the Internet and provide a collection of tools such as those for assessment (particularly of types that can be marked automatically, such as multiple choice), communication, uploading of content, return of students' work, peer assessment, administration of student groups, collecting and organizing student grades, questionnaires, tracking tools, etc. (Adapted from www.wikipedia.org).

As mentioned above, a Virtual Learning Environment like Blackboard meets all the requirements a teacher may need to make the class more active and to engage undergraduates in the subject. Other content knowledge management systems offer similar utilities, such as Luvit or Moodle, in such a way that the activities carried out using Blackboard can be replicated in any other suitable Virtual Learning Environment. Thus, Virtual Learning Environments are helpful for uploading contents and filing them properly in files. This includes units for students, articles, readings, either printed or electronic references with their corresponding hyperlinks, etc. All this material is there at student's disposal, but as a complement to the face-to-face sessions. An example of the organisation of the material in files can be seen in the following figure:
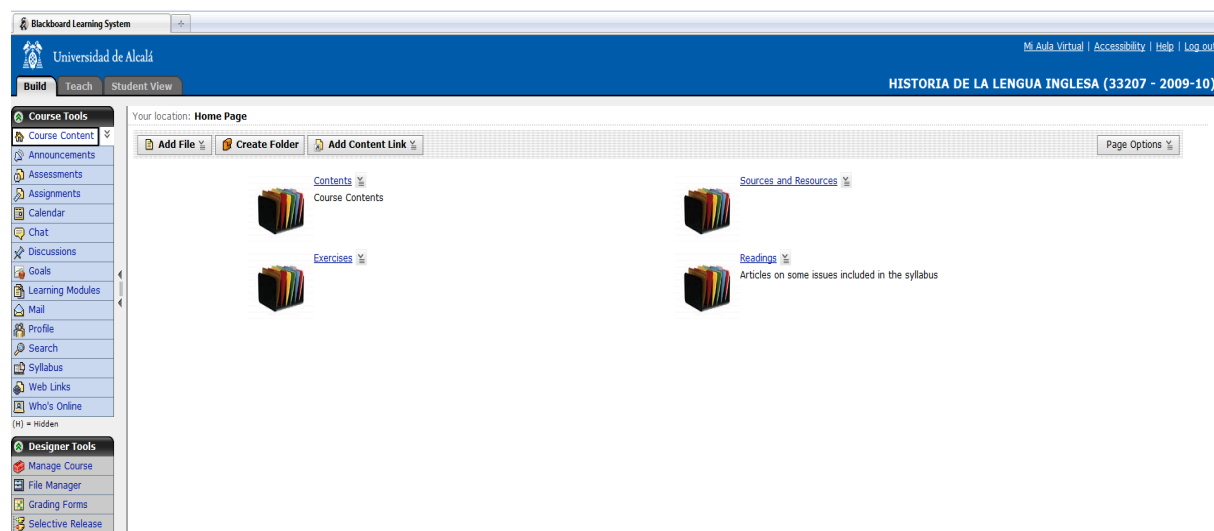

Figure 1: General layout of the course.

As can be seen in the figure above, the menu is easily accessible on the left margin displaying all the tools students have at their disposal. The next figure shows the inside of one of the files of the previous figure. Here the teacher can organise the material; in this case, the links to the lexicographic works available on the web:
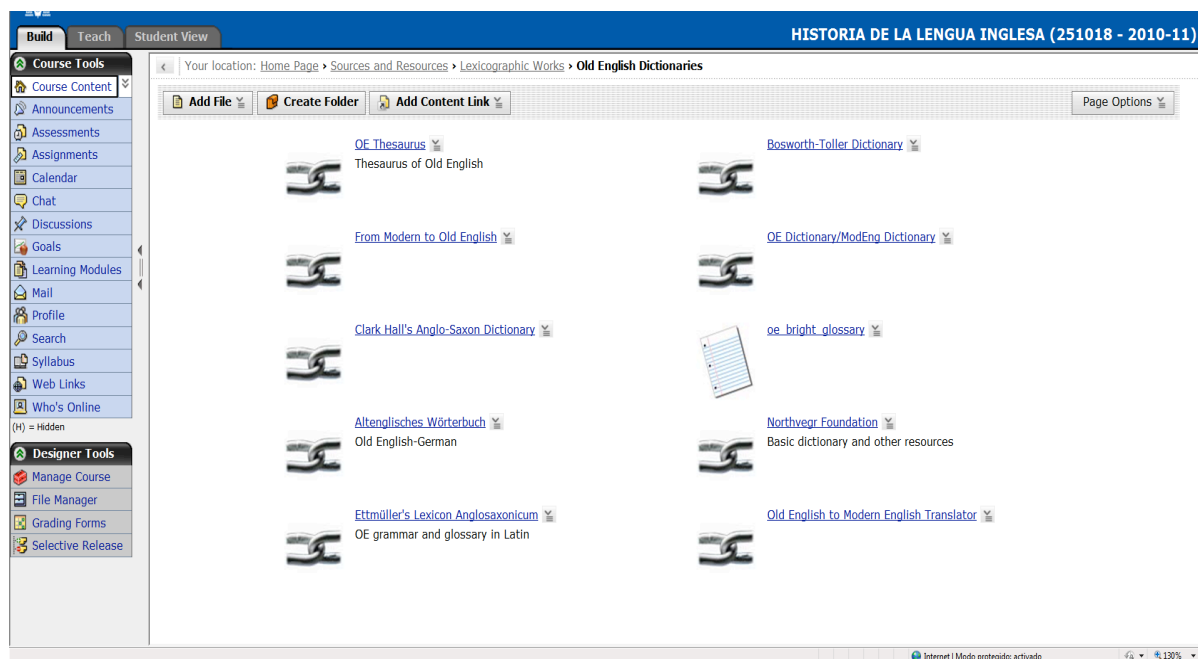
Figure 2: Links to Old English online Dictionaries.

Blackboard is also a relevant communication tool, as it allows the exchange of information among students, but also between individual students and the teacher, through the various options:

- E-mail: it allows student-student communication, but was mainly used to communicate with the teacher. Moreover, students consulted the teacher via e-mail much more than they usually do during the face-to-face tutorials. This confirms Pérez Lorido and Pérez Lorido's (2008) study on the increasing use of electronic tutorials. The reasons for this fact are: not being constrained by the teachers' office hours; they can ask for advice or help at any time and the teacher will answer as soon as possible. In addition to this, some students do not feel confident when asking their questions in class or in a traditional tutorial, so they prefer to e-mail their enquiries to teachers.

    As a variant of e-mail, the assignment *Dropbox* is used as well. Undergraduates could pick up the assignments and deliver the finished activities easily, even those who were working during the degree so that they did not have to come to University and hand them in. For me as a teacher, it is convenient to have every assignment organised in the allotted virtual space and not in my personal e-mail account.

- Discussion groups: although by itself it is a useful complementary tool to follow some activities, it turned out to be a wonderful way of exchanging information among students, as it enabled them not only to freely upload content and links in order to make them public to the rest of the class, but also to share problems and find solutions to them. In fact, they proved to be much more productive than initially thought. Students took the leading role and asked questions that were answered by their own classmates. They also shared ideas, links and resources, inasmuch as the teacher refrained from participating and did so just to reinforce or praise the undergraduates' participation.

- Chat: not so frequently used, it was available during all the term in such a way that students and teacher could make use of it, if required. This channel was

monitored by the teacher on some occasions, but most of the times it was used among students without the teacher's presence.

Once students got engaged in a discussion especially through the discussion groups and the chat, shy undergraduates dared to take part in it, reassuring their confidence and improving their competence in the English language.

Apart from the communication tools, Blackboard is a powerful generator of exercises of all kinds. I agree with Pérez Basanta's (2004: 28) claim about the necessity of designing materials that meet "students's needs, interests, experiences, and expectations". Thus, thinking of what kind of exercises could be the most suitable, interesting and appeling to undergraduates, a wide variety of them were designed. In this respect, Blackboard is a useful tool for the design of exercises that can be fulfilled by the students either within the lessons or for our purposes, outside the classroom: open-ended questions, attaching a document, filling in the gaps, matching, multiple choice with correction for self-assessment, etc. This is one of the functions that I really value: the capability of creating several types of exercises, exams, self-assessments and quizzes through the Virtual Learning Environment so easily. Before this experience, several cases of plagiarism were detected among students, in spite of the fact that sometimes students were required to sign a document stating the work was meant to be original and the different sources should be properly acknowledged. This is so, because unlike the Anglosaxon culture where plagiarism is severely rejected, in the Spanish culture there is a lot of work to be done to persuade students to follow the right track. I must admit that our students are learning to evaluate what plagiarism really means and the attempts can be said to have been reduced to a minimum, as we are making an effort to work on the value of avoiding presenting others' ideas as their own. Some years ago, in order to cater to the necessities of undergraduates and to prevent them from copying from one another, I was forced to design a different model for each student. That meant that I had to brush up my mathematical notions to resource to combinations, variations and permutations of a series of items that could be arranged in a different order; items or questions that could be absent or present with slight variations so that each student had the feeling that their exercises were unique and different from the other students' exercises. That involved an extra capacity for innovation, creativity and lots of hours devoted to designing about forty or fifty models from the master one in every single exercise or text that students were meant to complete at home as part of their evaluation.

Within the activities allowed in Blackboard, some of them are open questions or discussion of topics or analysis and translation of texts that require correction on the part of the teacher, but the design tools offer a wide variety of tests, self-assessment, multiple choice, fill in the gaps, ordering or matching exercises that are self corrected. This option is also provided by Author tools, such as Hotpotatoes or eXelearning, but the main advantages, as stated above, is the fact that all can be integrated into the Blackboard system. An example is found in figure 3.

Figure 3: Fill in the gap exercise on Grimm's Law.

As soon as students submit an exercise, like the one shown in the figure 3, they get feedback on their answers. They are shown how many and which answers are right and which ones are wrong. In this way they can keep track of their own progress and see what aspects need improving. The questions can be customised to meet our students' needs. Although there is an important bulk of handbooks on history of the English language, the practical part of the contents is not dealt with by so many scholars. That is why teachers constantly resource to the few books that offer practical materials systematically (Algeo 1993, Cable 1993, Millward 1996), even if they are not so adequate for our purposes as we would like to. This tool offers teachers the opportunity to create their own exercises that can be reused and modified more easily and inexpensively than printed books.

Another important advantage over printed sources is that questions and options can be randomised. The questions are presented one by one to students, in such a way that question number 2 will not appear on the screen until question number 1 has been answered and saved. This means that, if two students are taking the same test at the same time, the question that will appear on their screen will be different to each one. Furthermore, the answers are also randomised. Therefore, in a multiple choice test, such as the one in figure 4, not only the questions but also the answers are to appear in a different order. It is also timed, inasmuch as undergraduates are given enough time but not so much as to linger indefinitely on the same question.
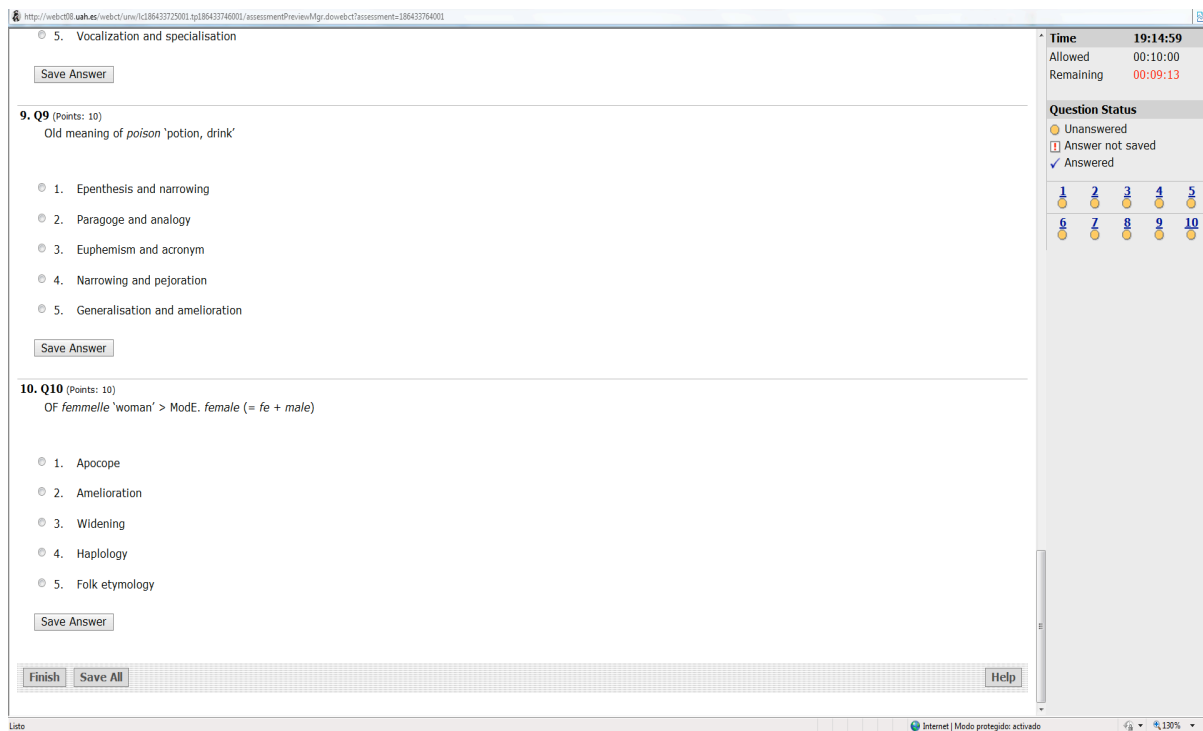
Figure 4: Quiz on linguistic processes.

The quiz in figure 4 is designed as a multiple choice test, where as many possible answers as required can be established. This one shows five possible answers, but it can be easily adapted to meet other teachers' needs. There are other methods of designing the exercises, such as matching or linking the right and the left column, apart from the ones already mentioned. Likewise, the Virtual Learning Environment can have other applications that have not been explored by us yet. For instance, we are all aware of the potential of portfolios. Blackboard can be used to store each student's portfolio as recommended in the original documents (Council of Europe, 2000).

Thus, it can cover all the elements and pedagogical functions explained by the Council of Europe:

1. Language **Passport**, which shows the level of competencies and provides a summary of the most significant language learning and cultural experiences.
2. Language **Biography**, which contains a personal language learning record of self-assessments, checklists, styles and strategies, plan for future learning, etc.
3. **Dossier**, a collection of documents. Traditionally that was carried out by writing, but now ICT allows us to register not only written work, but also audio and video files, projects, etc.

In this way, apart from the reporting function of recording the progression of students, it will also cover the pedagogical function, as:

1. It is a collection of items that show how each individual goes through the process of achieving some given competences.
2. It helps students to ponder on their learning process by recording the documents, planning their learning and learning autonomously.

3. General assessment

The technical service at University of Alcalá administered an anonymous survey among students enrolled in this course to see to what extent they were satisfied with the use and the possibilities offered by the Virtual Environment for this specific subject. The questionnaire was fulfilled by 15 students out of the 40 undergraduates enrolled in the subject. Even if the figure can seem low, it requires some comment. Out of the 40 enrolled undergraduates, 34 started the process. However, some either decided to opt for a final exam (not following the continuous assessment system) from the beginning or dropped out during the term. 21 students out of the 34 that initially wanted to follow this kind of assessment completed all the tasks, which means 15 is 71.43% of the total number of involved students.

A further explanation must be provided. This was the first experience and some undergraduates were not used to the engagement it required on their part. However, the experience was repeated during the first semester of the year 2011/12 and the rate of students who dropped out was significantly lower. If in the year 2010/11 just 21 people out of 34 completed the process, in the following academic year, out of 32 people 28 did. The results are compared in figure5.
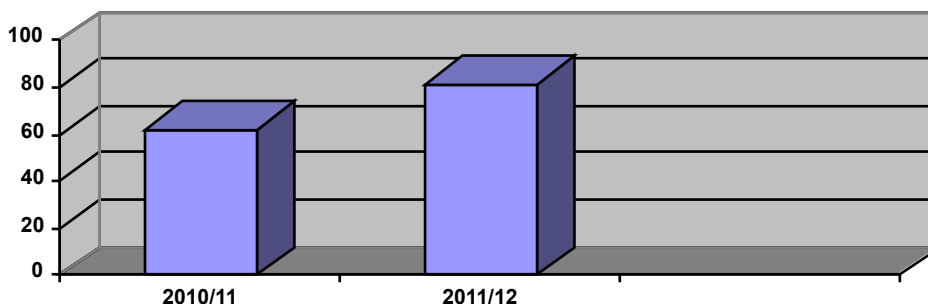

Figure 5: Percentage of undergraduates completing the process.

It can be observed that the number of undergraduates that completed the process has increased notably. Students are gradually adapting to the requirements of the new system. In fact, during the academic year 2011/12, all the students who dropped out came from the old degree, English Philology. They did not pass enough subjects or felt the time was passing and fewer chances remained for them to take their exams and applied to be transferred to the new degree, English Studies.

If we focus again on the students from the previous year, 2010/11, their level of satisfaction with the project is measured through the survey, which provides both quantitative and qualitative data, as there was a section to assess different aspects from 1 to 5 with 5 being the maximum, but there were also open-ended questions and suggestion for improvements. The questionnaire was made up of 20 questions, some of which were included for statistical reasons and had to do with the students' background, such as whether they were combining their degree with some kind of part-time job or the place from which they accessed the Blackboard system. Others were directly related to the service provided by the technical staff at University. Among the latter, students were asked whether they had problems with their passwords and user names and whether the assistance from technicians was useful and as quick as they expected.

Nonetheless, the most enlightening information for our research is the one that had to do with the contents of the project. Part of this information was contained in the items, but

there was also an open section to comment on the most positive aspects and the ones that should be improved. Among the items were the following:

Q1. Information provided by the teachers on how to carry out the project.
Q2. Clarity and suitability of the objectives.
Q3. Structure and layout of the materials.
Q4. Sequencing and timing of the tasks.
Q5. The number of activities (discussion groups, assignments…)
Q6. The contribution to the activities to students' learning.
Q7. The degree to which the activities have fostered collaborative learning among classmates.
Q8. The level of interaction with the teacher (how quickly answers to questions were provided, degree of tutoring, etc.)

The average for the different items is presented in figure 6. All the items related to the course got more than 3 points with 5. The only item that was below this rank was the one about the promotion of collaborative learning. In fact, all the assignments were designed to be worked on individually. In the future, it could be interesting to plan an activity that requires pair or group collaboration to fulfil students' expectations.
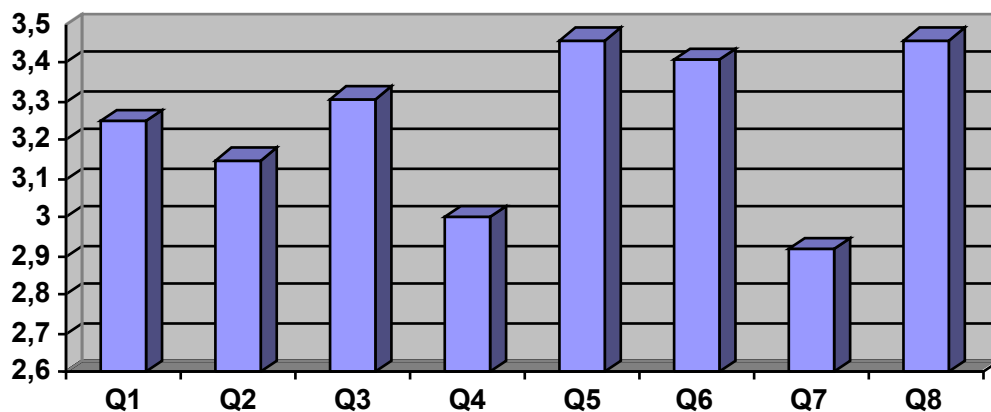

Figure 6. Students' mean score of some closed questionnaire items.

All undergraduates showed great satisfaction on the use of ICT. The positive aspects highlighted by students were the following:

- Easy access to information from the very first day of the course.
- Availability 24 hours a day. Absent-minded students can always download the files again, in case their notes were lost.
- Tests, quizzes and self-corrected exercises are a good way of measuring students' progress.
- The experience was interesting and sucessful, as it improved their knowledge of the contents related to the course.

Nonetheless, some issues should be improved. Most of them had to do with technical problems at weekends or at specific periods when the assignments had to be submitted and to the above referred fact that it did not promote collaboration between students. After learning

this latter fact, some activities are planned to be implemented in the future that require pair or group collaboration.

4. Conclusions

Information and Communication Technology reveals as a powerful aid to teachers and students. Particularly Virtual Learning Environments are useful resources, as they allow course management; they facilitate both student-student and students'-teachers' communication; they hold all the information and material needed by undergraduates in one integrated system. The experience is positively evaluated by students in different ways: as a method to increase autonomy, as it allows them to follow their own pace; as a methodology that facilitates the understanding and acquisition of content knowledge and as a wonderful channel to communicate with the teacher and with other classmates. Furthermore, the use of ICT gives students not only the chance of acquiring discipline-specific content, but also "competencies, including the ability to communicate confidently in English" (Pennock Speck 2008: 70). Thus, the survey data confirm our initial hypothesis: the use of ICT within the ECTS is appealing to students and gets them engaged in the course more than traditional methodologies used to do.

From the teacher's perspective, the experience is highly commendable as both original objectives were fulfilled: the introduction of ICT to motivate students' participation and the help to design and correct tests, self-assessment and exercised by means of the tools included in the Virtual Learning Environment. Indeed, the project meets the three requirements that must be contemplated according to Pennock Speck (2009) when using ICT in language teaching: it has not been excessively time-consuming or expensive and has contributed to improve teaching practice. Although the initial tasks of organising and uploading the materials require spending some time on the part of the teacher, the good aspect is that, once the course has been implemented, it can be renewed with few amendments, as old materials can be reutilised.

The project has fostered pedagogical renewal in a History of the English language course, as it has intregrated some of the latest trends in teaching (blended learning, autonomous and lifelong learning) as well as a wide variety of learning modalities (face-to-face sessions, small group and individual tutorials, independent study and group discussion via the discussion groups).

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