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## **On-line vs. face-to-face development of English oral interaction: a contrastive study**

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This paper presents an empirical study undertaken in the UNED as part of the COPPER research project to evaluate the relative advantages and limitations of working on oral English interaction in both the traditional face-to-face classroom and via the use of on-line tools (Read et al., 2005). With the widespread availability of computers and the Internet, and the educational possibilities they offer, the methodological tendency in the UNED nowadays is to structure teaching around the university's e-Learning platform, aLF/dotLRN (Read et al., 2009).

Before virtual (online) courses existed in e-Learning platforms, students essentially studied in isolation using printed books and materials. The *tutors* from the UNED regional study centres constituted a key element for narrowing the distance between the *teaching teams* (in the university's base in Madrid) and the students. Our nature as social learners is particularly evident in the case of foreign language learning, where the development of language-based communicative competences necessarily require interacting with a community of native speakers or fellow students. The development of aLF/dotLRN in the UNED (together with the appearance of the Bologna agreement, with which it coincided in time) brought deep changes in the teacher's roles, the student's

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level of autonomy and control, and the evaluation process. Furthermore, the supportive role of the tutors was also redefined to reflect these changes and a new figure was created to provide methodological and technological guidance in each on-line course, namely that of the *TAR* (Network Support Tutor) (Boticario & Gaudioso, .

The question that arose in the teaching team of the English for Tourism course was whether the use of aLF/dotLRN could improve the oral interaction skills of its students more than the standard classes available at the regional study centres. An empirical study was then designed and performed during the 2008-09 academic year on a selection of 20 volunteering students from one of the regional study centres in Madrid (group A) and another 16 volunteers from the on-line course with whom all contact was computer mediated (group O). The experiment focussed on the performance of two activities in two two-month periods (one in each term). The activities were a role play and a localization project, which were divided into tasks (so that they integrated in the topics dealt with in the respective modules of the course). The tutor of group A handled both activities at the study centres in the conventional way (trying to help the students break down the initial anxiety and other emotional filters, providing occasional feedback, etc.); the *TAR* of group O provided similar help on-line.

This paper focuses on the analysis of the preparation process undertaken by both groups, and presents the fine-grained evaluation of the results. Group A obtained better results than group O. Close inspection of the dynamics of both group's workflow showed that the on-line group did not improve their oral competence as much as the face-to-face group, not because of any inherent limitations of the e-Learning platform and its tools (i.e., that they had learnt less efficiently by using the tools provided) but due to both their behavioural patterns online and the insufficient time they had spent connected! The few students that had actually made an active use of the on-line tools had comparable results to group A. It is therefore argued here that rather than looking to improve the usability of online e-Learning tools to improve learning, more effort should be given to changing the behavioural habits of the students to help them acquire the discipline of working in on-line environments.

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