

LAMS AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

In this paper we describe how LAMS (Learning Activity Management System) might help English language teachers to design and implement *e*-Learning-oriented *e*-Assessment and to enhance the techniques they employ to provide complete assessment units embracing all linguistic skills. In doing so, we present an example of an assessment unit in which such an implementation can be seen through the combination of different resources LAMS provides, thus improving the design of didactic syllabuses.

1. Introduction

In the teaching of English language not only the learning of content must be attained, but it is also crucial to develop the capacity of putting into practice the acquired knowledge in different situations and settings. Students need to learn how the ability of adapting to different situations and sorting out all problems that may arise.

In order to achieve these aims, it is necessary to develop transferable and useful strategies for lifelong learning, and for that reason it is a priority to improve the quality of assessment activities. Teachers have traditionally planned their teaching programme disregarding the influence assessment has on their students and the effects it has on learning (superficial or deep learning). Therefore, in such cases assessment has been considered as a final element of teaching design, only to check if students eventually obtained the expected knowledge (summative assessment).

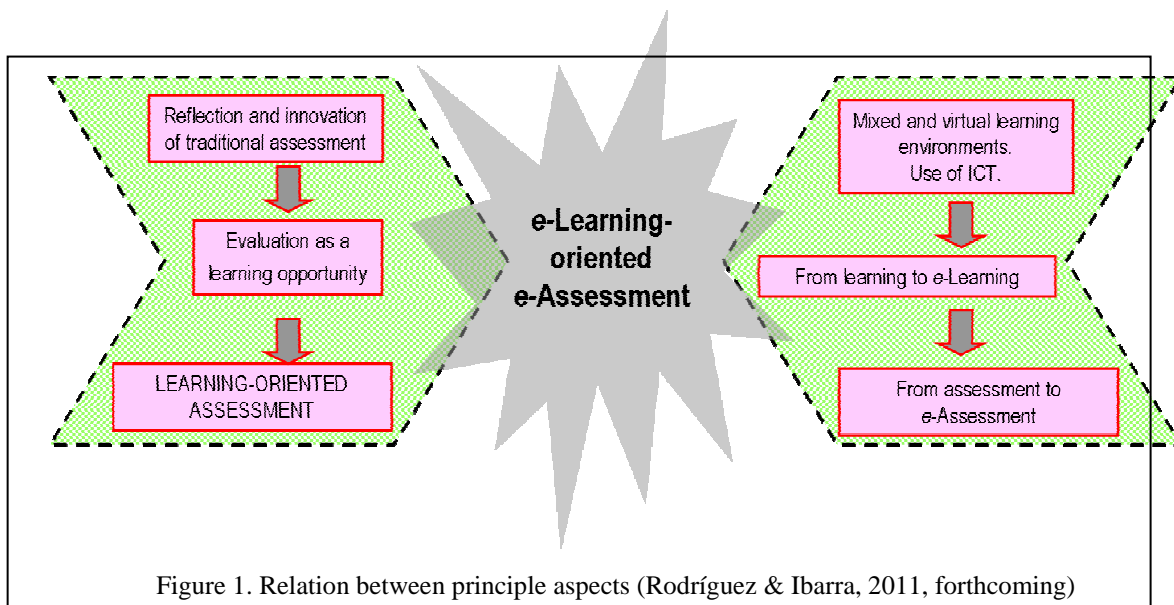
However, “assessment influences not only what parts of a course get studied, but also how those parts are studied [...]” (Kirkwood and Price, 2008, p. 5). Formative assessment is fundamental for a high-quality teaching-learning process, allowing students to enhance their

skills at the same time they carry out the pre-established assignment. As Asghar (2009) pointed out, Assessment for Learning (AFL) or Learning-oriented Assessment (LOA) are approaches which prompt self-regulated learning, having an effect on students' self-efficacy, and helping them to gain meta-cognitive competence and to become autonomous and lifelong learners (Boud 2000, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Consequently, Learning-orientated Assessment is thought to be a prevailing approach which enables the development of key skills, such as:

- Creative resolution of problems.
- Reflexive judgment.
- Efficient searching and use of information.
- Teamwork and interpersonal competence.
- Critical thinking.
- Inquisitive attitude.

In order to implement this approach in the teaching-learning process the essential features of Learning-oriented Assessment, or *authentic evaluation* (Carles, Jouguin & Liu, 2006:14; Carless, 2007) need to be put into practice. These are (figure 1):



a) Assessment tasks as learning tasks.

Sadler (2010:03) suggests that assessment tasks require students to demonstrate higher cognitive skills or forms of professional proficiency and extended complex responses involving analysis, synthesis, creativity, evaluation, or critical thinking. The specifications of

task may be decided by the teacher or examiner, or be negotiated collaboratively with students.

b) Feed forward and Feedback.

Nicol (2009:339) points toward receiving “feedback from teachers”, what “means that students must engage in self-assessment and use that information to improve academic performance: that is, they must decode the feedback message, internalize it and use it to make judgments about and modify their own work”, now and in the future.

c) Students as appraisers.

Self- and peer-assessment give rise to more opportunities to learn provoked by the participation in the assessment process (an active role).

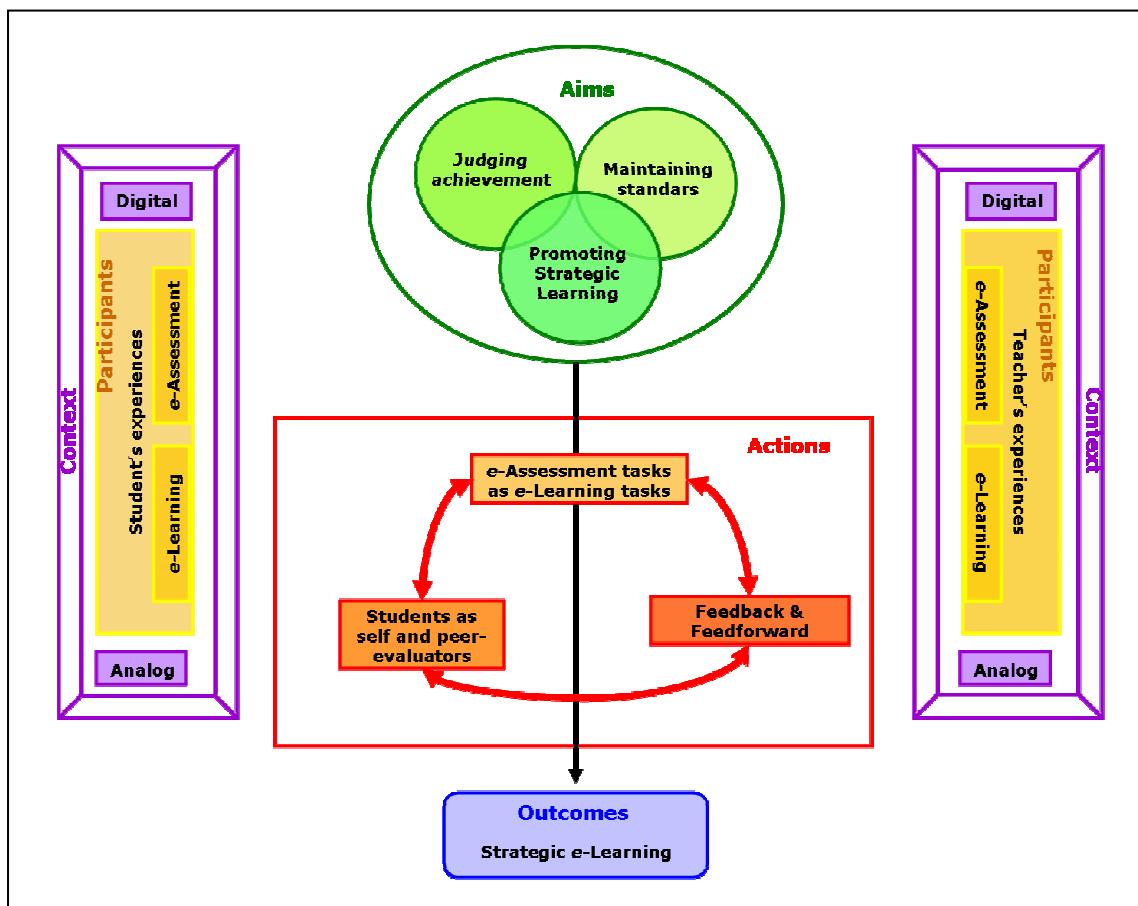


Figure 2. Framework for e-Learning-oriented e-Assessment (Rodríguez & Ibarra, 2011, forthcoming)

Another significant aspect to consider is that nowadays the implementation of the Information and Communication Technologies in the teaching-learning processes in Higher

Education is a reality (Learning Management System –Moodle, WebCT...-). As a result, adapting any teaching strategy to our virtual environment is currently indispensable.

Some research (Gray, Rosemary and Hamilton, 2010; Kirkwood and Price, 2008; Kepell, Eliza, Au and Chan, 2006) explain that ICT and the e-learning strategies facilitate the improvement of teaching and learning empowering learners and equipping them with essential skills needed for their future. In this context, LAMS (Learning Activity Management System) is known as a powerful tool to make this enhancement available.

Thus, our objective is to develop teaching and learning strategies for English Language Teaching, applying the principles of *e-Learning-oriented e-Assessment* (Rodríguez, Ibarra & Gómez, 2010) through the design of LAMS units (Figure 3):

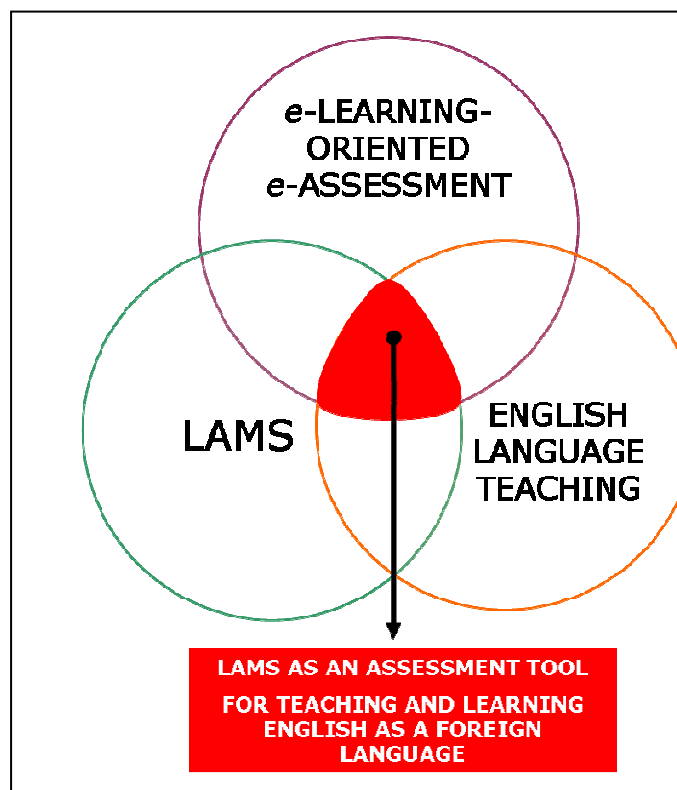


Figure 3. Contextual framework for this project

As it has been noted, LAMS is a valuable tool to systematise the assessment process under principles of an authentic evaluation beyond described, overall in the context of English Language Teaching, where the constant updating of the methodologies employed needs to be positively carried out. The case of English is particularly significant, since we are talking about a language spoken all around the world with an official or special status in at least seventy-five countries with a total population of over two billion (Dieu, n.d.). In such a

framework, those responsible for the training of the English language at all levels are incessantly trying to find new ways to improve and modernise the techniques used in the teaching-learning process.

This is the background in which this experience has been brought about. Both sections of the University of Cádiz (Spain): the English department of the *Centro Superior de Lenguas Modernas (CSLM)* [University School of Modern Languages]; and EVALfor Research Group, with their experience in the world of didactics, have worked together to give rise to this experience. The appropriate use of LAMS as a useful resource for assessment and learning English signifies the outstanding revelation that such a coalition has achieved.

2. Context

The CSLM was created as part of the University of Cadiz to encourage the learning of languages at all levels. Characterised by its modern, flexible and effective approach, it offers linguistic teaching services to both the university community and surrounding society. These members of the didactic English staff of CSLM have designed several projects in the training of English as well as the processes of accreditation of English levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). One of their tasks has been the teaching of English for the aforesaid members of EVALfor Research Group in the University of Cádiz. This English course started on September 2009 and is still continuing. The starting point of the project was the examination that the participants of the course took to assess their current level in order to set targets to be achieved at the end of the course. All participants obtained an A2 in English and therefore the main aim of the course was to finally obtain the level B1.

This English course was carried out thanks to the EduTraining Project 2009 – *Desarrollo de competencias comunicativas en lengua inglesa en el ámbito educativo* (Development of English communicative competence in the educational field) (Ref. CIA07) and financed by the Vice-rectorate of Information Technologies and Teaching Innovation.

The main goals of the programme were the following:

- Communicative objectives of level B1 in the CEFR.
- Specific debates and conversations characteristic of the educational field.
- Written skills developed through the generation of professional texts used in the academic life.
- Reading skills developed through professional texts used in the academic life.

All their courses are based on the intensive and constant practise of oral communication through the use of a varied range of motivating activities. Such a distinguishing focus on the oral skills is principally caused by the traditionally written-based quality of language methodologies in Spain. Consequently, English learners from our country tend to master the written skills of the language in an easier and faster way than the oral ones. Our experience has shown we have to pay special attention to pronunciation, intonation, fluency and other features of oral communication in their English classes. Consequently, the assessment criteria were negotiated between both the teachers and students, giving to the latter an active role.

3. Why LAMS?

When researching on different and new resources to employ in our teaching projects we debated together the question of using new methodological techniques at all levels and fields of the assessment and teaching-learning processes. These members of EVALfor Research Group presented the possibilities the Learning Activity Management System offered as a highly effective tool for the designing, managing and delivering of online assessment tasks that enable a profitable evaluation of the planned skills (Rodríguez, Ibarra & Gómez, 2010; Ibarra, Rodríguez & Gómez, 2008).

The reasons in detail for using LAMS were:

1. LAMS is compatible and easily suitable with other Learning Management Systems (LMS), for instance: MOODLE, WebCT and Blackboard. Moreover, LAMS units can be shared effortlessly.
2. LAMS can be used in an easy way, both by teachers and students.
3. By means of LAMS, we can devise an appropriate and detailed sequence of assessment process, which together with its possibilities of monitoring and personal evaluation enables us to provide constant and useful feedback.
4. LAMS is an adequate tool to develop collaborative work, an essential aspect of the teaching of a language.

In order to verify the convenience and effectiveness of the use of LAMS as a resource bank to design English language projects, we have planned an *e*-assessment unit designed for adult students in the university environment. In brief, this sequence will be available in LAMS Sequences Repository (Higher Education & Training) at <http://www.lamscommunity.org>.

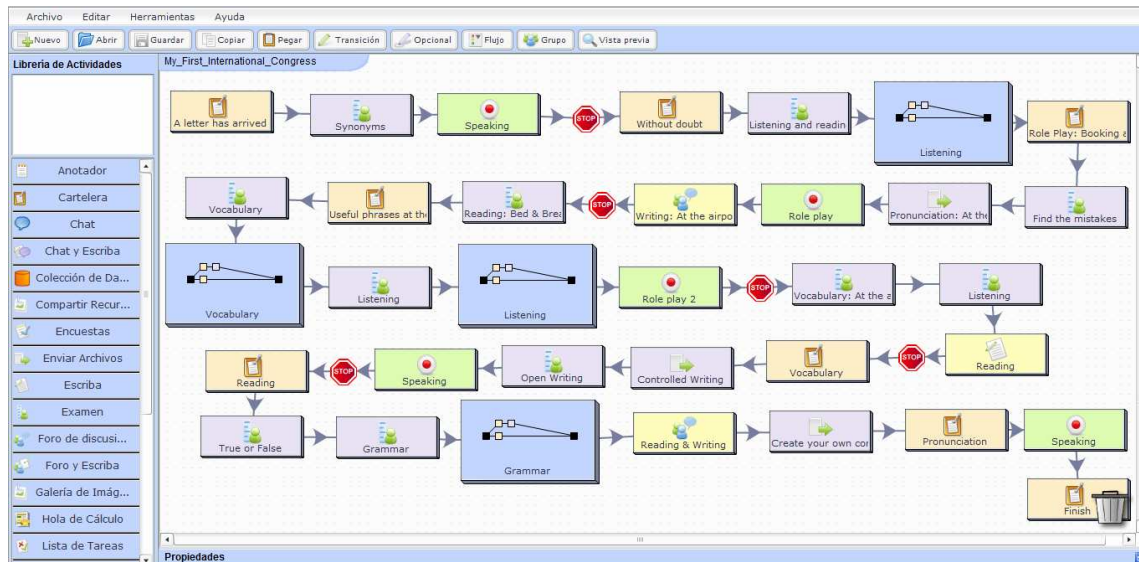


Figure 4. Structure of the sequence titled “My First International Congress”

4. How is the proposed *e*-assessment unit structured?

As previously mentioned, our language teaching projects always emphasise the communicative skills their students need to develop. That is the foundation of the *e*-assessment unit titled “My First International Congress” which has been created for Spanish students of English, paying special attention to the role of a formative assessment that enables students to enrich their knowledge of the language as well as manage the pre-established skills.

The course they participate in is focused on level B1 and is particularly characterised by its context located in the University of Cadiz and its relationships with other universities’ staff. This is the reason why the first unit of the course is titled “My First International Congress” since it deals with a very typical situation the members of any department at the UCA need to undergo, that is, attendance at a congress abroad. In such a situation, attendees need to manage a relatively fixed set of situations in which they will have to socialize with other people and deal with certain documents. The unit is structured in the following way:

- **Stage 1: My First International Congress: Preparing our trip from home**

Assessment Objectives: in this first stage, students familiarise themselves with new vocabulary connected with booking a flight, the airport, booking the accommodation from home and useful expressions at the hotel. They also start recognising the terminology employed in a more academic environment, which in this case will be related particularly with the invitation to a congress and the letter confirming the students’ attendance to it (see

figure 5). In addition to vocabulary, the unit combines activities to practise all the language skills such as listening and writing.

The screenshot shows the LAMS interface. On the left is a navigation pane titled 'Vista previa' with a vertical flowchart of activities: 'A letter has arrived', 'Synonyms', 'Speaking', 'Puerta', 'Without doubt', 'Listening and re...', 'Listening', and 'Role Play: Booki...'. The main content area is titled 'A letter has arrived' and contains a letter from Jane Nelson to professors. Below the letter, two characters, Candela and Antonio, are shown in a conversation. Candela says, 'Hi, Antonio! We have been selected! We are going to participate in our first congress in an English-speaking country!' and Antonio replies, 'That's great news, Candela! We've got lots of things to prepare!'. The interface also features buttons for 'Continuar', 'Salir', 'Exportar', and 'Finalizar'.

Figure 5. Introductory listening-reading task for Stage 1: Preparing our trip from home.

Assessment: as it was shown in Figure 4, in stage 1 students need to carry out two role plays that are recorded by means of the tool LAMS offers them. However, while in the first role play students only have to upload the file to be able to go on to the next activity, the second role play (“Role play 2” in figure 4) means the third stop gate of the whole unit and at the same time the final step before starting to work with stage 2. Therefore, this part of the unit includes, apart from self-assessment items, collaborative assessment in which students upload their own recordings so that other students are able to analyse their classmates’ work as well as comment on it. Moreover, it also comprises a closing assessment controlled by the teacher who decides the moment in which the student can start working with the following stage.

- **Stage 2: My First International Congress: On our way to England**

Assessment Objectives: in the second stage, students learn how to manage the different situations they will go through from the moment they land at Heathrow Airport such as understanding signs and talking about the characteristics of the accommodation they have

already chosen. Students will revise skills in understanding academic documents they will need to complete or create, for example, accommodation application forms from the university.

As well as in all stages of the unit, at this phase students employ a completely innovative tool LAMS offers them in order to practise their speaking skill. This tool can be seen in figure 6 and it allows teachers of English to carry out communicative activities in on-line or non-presental courses.

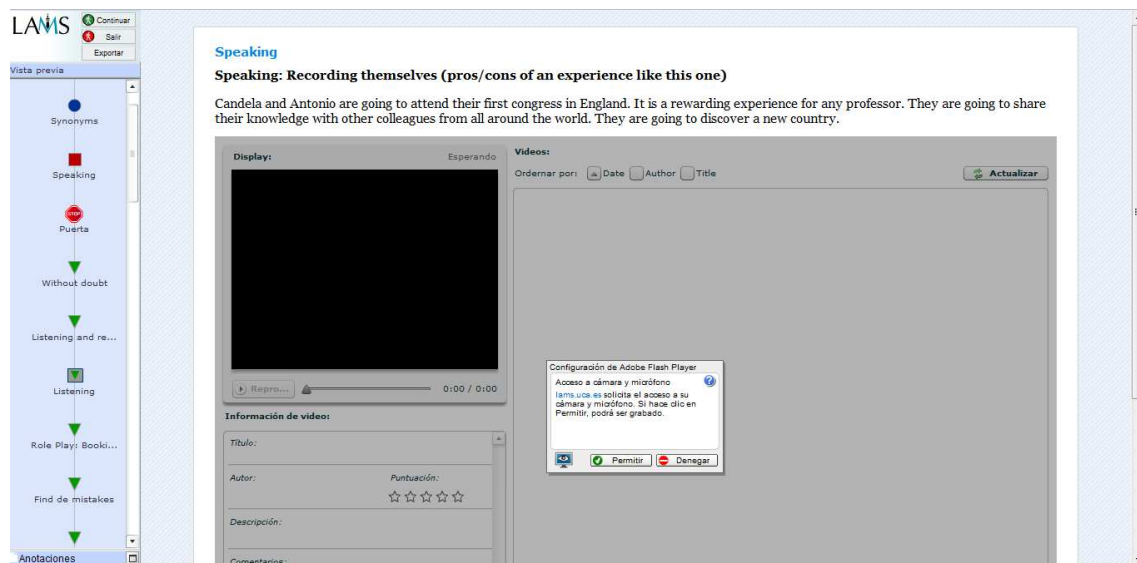


Figure 6. Speaking task.

The recording of students' speeches highlighted an innovative and new resource to be included in our unit. This has created a revolutionary way of prompting communication with students, a controversial aspect of the language which had been neglected in all virtual courses and previously represented a challenging difficulty in the learning of English for Spanish students.

Assessment: since the oral skills have always meant an intricate objective for Spanish students of English, the second stage of the unit concludes in a speaking activity as the first stage did previously. The purpose of doing so is that students are always reminded of the importance of such skills. Then, the teacher is here as the assessment leader and as the person who has the power of allowing the student to go through the stop gate to begin the third stage (check this sentence is ok). The difference between this kind of assessment and the one which signified the end of stage 1 is precisely that in this case, students are evaluated individually,

and consequently assessment focuses on different skills. This strategic appearance of the teacher at certain points of the sequence is a major characteristic of the whole unit.

- **Stage 3: My First International Congress: The congress**

Assessment Objectives: finally, the third stage takes place in the actual congress students are to attend, and is known as “Comics, a Way of Teaching”. In this last section, the unit focuses on motivating activities connected with the world of comics. This culminates in a closing debate in which both students (who are at the same time professors) and their English students discuss the pros and cons of applying such motivating techniques in any academic field. Students always conclude, that by experiencing this methodology themselves, they have increased awareness of new ways to improve and enhance their own teaching styles.

Assessment: this last stage of the unit is once more full of self-assessment activities which prevail all throughout the unit, facilitating the progress of e-learning and e-assessment. This self, though, teacher-controlled assessment is particularly present in those tasks which are centred on grammatical aspects of the language. In fact, there can only be found certain brief post-tasks focused on grammar, since the proposed unit attempts to pay special attention to the competence acquired rather than the grammatical content which is inferred all through the unit explicitly trained at this final stage.

Finally, this section of the unit is also finished by the insertion of a speaking task which enables students to continue enhancing the oral competence, which is being assessed from the very first moment the sequence is started until its end.

5. Conclusions

The *e*-assessment “My First International Congress” confirms how LAMS can offer teachers a wide range of opportunities to enhance the teaching methodologies as regards the assessment procedure, applying them both in presential as well as non-presential language courses.

The first and foremost achievement of the implementation of this project has been the finding of new motivational resources which help the teaching-learning process to be more successful by employing an *e*-Learning-oriented *e*-Assessment approach. Likewise, we have to mention the following accomplishments:

- The assessment tasks have been designed to engage the learning of English by connecting them with real-world applications (an international congress), and to

improve the higher-order learning outcomes that characterise higher education (reflection, critical thinking, analysis...).

- The student plays an active role in the assessment process (self-assessment and co-assessment).
- By the use of feedback, the student's planned competence is undoubtedly improved (formative assessment).

As well as innovation, our assessment unit was enriched through the advantages LAMS offered them in contributing to the development of communicative tasks. The possibilities LAMS presents allowed us to ease the practice and assessment of the speaking skills included at all levels of the CEFR, whilst leaving out the difficulties of a virtual language course.

Creating motivational and communicative lessons has been a challenging process English language teachers have incessantly tried to attain. Nevertheless, as this paper demonstrates, it can now be facilitated by the diverse resources LAMS puts at the disposal of teachers.

Note

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