

# Using the iPad in a cooperative learning context: implications for creating narrative texts in the ESL classroom.

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*Abstract:* The study reported in this paper describes a Cooperative Learning (henceforth CL) experience in Secondary Education integrating mobile technologies –the iPad - to create free narratives/short stories in the ESL classroom. The line of research the present study belongs to is included in the project ‘Cooperative Learning in the inclusion of gifted students by the Autonomous Community of Madrid, (Spain; Reference: EDU 2013-47696-P, sponsored by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Spanish Government). The current case study was conducted during the 2013/14 academic year and the first term of 2014/2015 at *Colegio Nuestra Sra. de las Maravillas LaSalle*, Madrid (Spain). The main ideas which justify the study are presented in the first place. Secondly, the background and literature relevant to the study is reviewed. This is articulated in two lines, the first one about the current tendencies of educational technologies; and the second one based on the work about the creation of communicative written tasks using technological devices in the field of second and third language acquisition in CL contexts. In the third place, we describe the objectives and the research methodology; and finally, data and findings are analysed and discussed. Examples of experiences using mobile technologies which study the processes of learning generated by them in school contexts are still scarce. For this reason, it is important to explore and analyse didactic proposals which incorporate formative tasks in the classroom using the iPad, such as this case.

**KEYWORDS:** Mobile learning; Collaborative Learning; iPad; Technology; Creativity; Writing; ESL

## 1 Introduction

Mobile Learning (M-learning) is a relatively new term based on the learning processes generated as a result of using mobile devices with wireless connectivity –smart phones; iPad; PDAs, and so forth- producing meaningful learning experiences (Stevens and Kitchenham, 2011:3). Sharples (2003) claims the importance of M-learning in education and explains the outstanding potential of M-learning devices to design tasks which empower learning in formal contexts from a live-learning perspective.

Children and young people enjoy more flexible ways to learn since they live in a technological environment where they socialize in a spontaneous and unsystematic way. According to Livingston and Bovill, (2001); Lankshear and Knobel, (2003); Rideout, Roberts and Foehr, (2005), mobile technology has become a core component of almost every facet of their daily lives due to the following features. Portability is a crucial factor for technological environments of

socialization. Hybridization is another key feature. A single device has several in-built gadgets or functions to cater for different needs (messenger and phone services; camera and recording options; internet access, etc.). Ubiquity, immediacy as well as instant connectivity allow the user to liberate from spatial barriers so that communication takes place anywhere anytime; and finally, the adaptability of their interfaces and their growing and user-friendly wealth of Apps make mobile devices a cult among young generations.

The above mentioned features have an impact in culture; knowledge and, of course, education, impact which leads to a socio-cultural reconfiguration (Montague, Pimentel and Groisman, 2004). As a result, educators are placed in a new teaching scenario where traditional academic conceptions should be reconceptualised.

New ways of teaching and learning are needed. However technological devices do not generate learning by themselves (Zhao & Lai,

2005). Moreover, the introduction of M-learning in our contexts is a slow and painful process. Many people think that digital culture does not align school culture: mobile devices are usually seen for entertainment or, even worse, they are seen as vehicles for malpractice in coexistence and social relationships, which usually have punitive measurement responses. Furthermore, most educators contemplate them as disruptive devices for learning. The aforementioned assumptions make it difficult for educators to conceive mobile devices as an opportunity to work with a plurality of systems of representation to build up knowledge as well as new processes of communication and expression (Buckingham, 2013).

New approaches to put into practice the full potential of mobile technology in schools are needed. The present case study analyses the use of the iPad to create short narrative stories in the ESL classroom within a CL context. The teaching approach integrates formal and informal learning to explore the possibilities the iPad offers to generate an environment to represent knowledge with more than one system of representation (Buckingham, 2013). We intend the students use the iPad's full potential for creativity. Creativity understood as an act of invention on behalf of the students which leads them, as individuals, to think, imagine and put their ideas into practice (Goodwin, 2004) not as a significant discovery to change the world (Feldman *et al.* 1994).

## 2 Review of the Literature

The study is based on two lines of evidence: (a) one about the current research on the integration of mobile devices in teaching and learning. Research related to the integration of mobile devices in formal contexts which allow real time communication between students, teachers and families beyond the classroom walls; and (b) the creation of communicative written tasks using technological devices in second and third language acquisition in CL contexts.

According to White *et al.* (2011) M-learning goes beyond the classroom as the only place for learning and communicating. M-learning enables the students to collaborate and participate in meaningful learning experiences anytime and anywhere. As stated by their research, mobile devices fulfil four main categories of practice in the study of mathematics, these are: data capturing and collecting; communicating and collaborating; viewing and consuming; and designing and creating.

The study is relevant to our case because it introduces a set of practices which allow the students to understand how using the iPad in an informal way can be later put to practice in a formal classroom setting, i.e. instructing the students on taking pictures of their daily lives and using them as classroom material. In the same line of work, Gilksman (2011) and Liestol (2011) emphasize the implications generated by the use of mobile devices in the students' learning processes and advocate the situated and connected character of learning with the students' reality and social context. The results of these studies highlight the value of mobile devices to empower motivation and interest towards shared learning. Sharples *et al.* (2005) state that the use of mobile devices for learning enables a shared ubiquity among students situated in different places and at different times; as well as a shared construction of knowledge by means of learning tasks included in the community as an integral part of it. For the above mentioned authors, the most prominent outcomes are that mobile devices lead the students to link events, experiences and ways of communication which turn learning into a vivid experience, focused on the students themselves and their knowledge. The study of Kim *et al.* (2012) is particularly relevant to our study since these authors observed that students who use a mobile device individually experience a decrease in their motivation and efficiency compared to those who work in teams. This occurs because when students compete for the control of the mobile device they are more prone to show off their skills in the usage of the device to the rest of the members of the class group. Collaboration in tasks performance using mobile devices is a competence which develops in a natural way.

The second line of work about creating and communicating written texts using mobile devices in second and third language learning configures the other series of previous studies related to our case study. The New London Group (1996) became interested on the creation and communication of written texts using multimedia resources in second and third language teaching. In same line of work Warschauer, Knobel and Stone (2004) look for a connexion between the school and the digital and multilingual context where students are, integrating media and computer literacy with traditional literacy. Other studies point out the value of publishing the translation of texts written by students in a multimedia environment to promote the understanding of curricular subject areas (Chow and Cummins, 2003; Skourtu, Kourtis-Kazoullis and Cummins, 2006). The studies of Bautista

(2012), Bautista, Rayón and de las Heras (2012), although still at an initial stage, use the students' audio-visual narrative texts in multicultural contexts to promote mutual knowledge among them through textual-photo and video. The findings show that narrative texts facilitate reading and writing processes in those students who do not know the autochthonous language. All these studies claim the educational potential of written texts to create meaningful stories, where feelings are expressed, and imagination and creativity together with rational elements are developed (Vygotski, 1979; Bruner, 1991; Egan, 1994; Wertsch, 1999; Harris, 2005; Clandinin, 2006).

### 3 Methodological Design

The present case study combines observational and narrative strategies, as stated by Stake (1998); and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2009:289). These strategies enable the holistic understanding of the posed problem, not only in terms of results but also in terms of processes. An open-ended questionnaire for exploratory purposes; two focus-group with the students; the teacher's research diary; and the students' productions –a narrative story; movie trailers and a flyer- are the data collection and triangulation techniques employed. Understanding the educational value of the iPad in the ESL classroom requires the use of procedures and techniques to discover and understand what happens in the classroom considering two perspectives of analysis, the teacher and the students.

#### 3.1 Objectives

As a general hypothesis of work and taking the reviewed studies as a framework of reference, we assume the iPad engages the students in a series of meaningful and motivating learning processes, in such a way that they get involved in the creation of free narrative texts in the ESL classroom working in cooperative teams, increasing, thus, the quantity and quality of their learning. Taking this as our starting point we would like:

- 1.-To identify and explain how using the iPad improves the production of free narrative texts focusing on the competences that creative acts generate when writing a short story with the iPad in cooperative teams.
- 2.-To analyse which functions of the iPad are more significant for students and teachers who work in a CL context.

#### 3.2 The Context and the Participants.

In response to the socio-cultural change analysed in the Introduction of the present paper, Colegio Nuestra Señora de las Maravillas, Madrid (Spain) introduced the cooperative learning methodological approach in the academic year 2009/10 and the use of the iPad -1:1 format- in the first stage of secondary education (Year7 and Year8) in the academic year 2013/14. Regarding to the iPad, the introduction was not done gradually and both, teachers and students, started to work with it from the very first day in all curricular areas, just as an instructional means (Gonzalez and Zariquiey, 2014), that is as a word processor and e-reader. Since this case studies the use of the iPad in the ESL classroom, we will focus on this area without taking into account how it is used in the rest of the subjects.

During the academic year 2013/14, the students had no restriction on the iPad use: the App Store and the camera were open and they could download and visualize videos from Youtube. However, a minority of students misused it and, in the academic year 2014/15, the App Store and the camera are closed to them. They cannot watch videos from Youtube either. The present study starts in the academic year 2130/14 and ends in January 2015. The participants are 48 students aged 12-14 from secondary education (Year 8 and Year 9). They work in cooperative teams, 12 teams in total.

We decided that 2013/14 would be a year for reflecting and studying the possibilities the iPad offers as an educational resource; the way to integrate it into the syllabus; and also training the students in its more instructional/technical side. To this end, they are taught how to set up mail accounts, activate in-built facilities –camera and microphone; dictionaries; language sets; multi-tasking, speak selections, privacy, and so forth- software update; and back-up copies, etc. The text books are on the iPad and the students are free to use Pages or any other productivity App that they can download from the Apple Store as a word processor. Some free educational Apps, aimed at the ESL field<sup>1</sup>, are also recommended. On the other hand, the teacher uses Socrative for administering tests and questionnaires and Showbie for content delivery and storage of material. This allows teacher-students' communication inside and outside the classroom. Grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading are covered, however, writing and speaking are treated in the traditional way: using the iPad just as a notebook. It is soon felt by the teacher and the

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<sup>1</sup>Letris; Scrabble for iPad; Duolingo

students that the potential of the iPad is not fully or even partially exploited. In order to involve the students in their own learning process (Zhao and Lai, 2005) and also to integrate the four skills of language, they are asked to bring part of their informal learning with the device to the classroom and recommend the teacher some of the Apps they know to record music and voice; draw; photo editing; video; etc. In such a way that their learning experiences with the iPad in the school context become meaningful learning experiences.

*'...students already have a great knowledge about the media – almost certainly more than they have of other areas of the curriculum (...) teachers are no longer the experts'* (Buckingham, 2013:198).

After an analysis of different Apps, it was decided that the students would use Book Creator to write their narrative texts attending to the following criteria: (a) it is free -the teachers cannot recommend paid Apps-; (b) Book Creator integrates media facilities such as recording -music files can be imported from the iTunes library and background sound and voice can also be added; images and video can be added to the book from the camera roll; and different letter fonts, sizes and colours are also available; (c) it is user-friendly; and (d) the resulting books can be exported to other Apps, for example iBooks. This is particularly interesting for the students because the books created with Book Creator, when exported, are real e-books which can be stored in their iBooks library. In this way, the students become the authors of their own digital content (Zhao and Lai, 2005) and writers of their stories.

The content of narrative in the ESL Spanish curriculum is only studied from its grammatical point of view: narrative tenses –structure and usage- and the connectors associated. It was decided that rather than practicing the narrative tenses in the traditional way, that is, gap-filling and drilling tasks, and based on the literature reviewed, the students wrote free short narrative stories in their cooperative teams using the cooperative learning strategy 'Collaborative Writing' (CoLT 28), as shown in Barkley et al. 2007. As previously mentioned, Showbie was used to deliver material and also for revision purposes. The teacher submitted a template for the teams to organize themselves and also to assign individual responsibility within the members (Slavin, 1983; Johnson, 1984; Barkley et al. 2007). The students had four sessions for this stage. After each session the secretary of each team uploaded the team's piece of work to Showbie for teacher revision and proofreading. Once the stories were outlined and the responsibilities assigned, the

students started to use Book Creator. The use of multimedia was left at the students' will. They were free to add images, music, background noises, etc. Writing was the only compulsory requisite. They could enlighten their stories the way they liked. For this stage, the students had another four sessions. They were offered the possibility of using available school rooms to keep on working after their lessons.

The 12 teams (100%) wrote their short stories. However, 8 teams (66.6%) decided to create 'something else' to complete and accompany their stories. 7 (87.5%) Teams out of 8 created a movie trailer with iMovie and 1 (12.5%) team out of 8 a poster to advertise it.

#### 4. Analysis and discussion

The findings obtained with regards to the first objective show that the students moved easily from using the iPad for instructional tasks during the first academic year to more open and complex ones. These complex processes deal with decision-making which requires to link creativity and the use of more than one system of representation to write a short story on the iPad.

The students point out that the fact of adding pictures to their short stories is vital when dealing with creativity and imagination.

Their role of authors/writers of a story is evident since some of the students in Year 9 openly say they have created their stories to be shared with an audience, not just with the teacher, ultimate addressee of their productions. In this respect, the iPad facilitates and encourages sharing their learning tasks with a potential audience. The 48 students (100%) enjoyed the project and would like to repeat it. The reasons they give are they have worked in their CL teams, as real CL teams, and everybody's ideas have been taken into account. This has, subsequently, empowered their stories. Enjoyment is another important aspect present in their responses. The learning task has not been contemplated as a writing task since it has not been performed *'in the traditional way'*. The students also value that the teacher did not set a topic to write about. The words 'creativity' and 'imagination' appear constantly both, in the focus-groups and the questionnaires. Regarding to team working and organization, they also think their teams have been productive; and are also satisfied the way they distributed their tasks since all of them, as individual members, have fulfilled their individual responsibilities towards the final task (Slavin, 1983; Johnson, 1984; Barkley et al. 2007).

The engagement and enjoyment they admit to underlying in the project lead them to turn narration into a multimodal text where they combine written language with the powerful language of images. It is particularly significant to contemplate how the students move from the instructional use of the iPad towards a more creative one, with Book Creator as a means, to construct an illustrated and multimedia narrative text. The students employ images not only to make their stories more realistic and vivid, but also to illustrate those details or aspects which they consider important to impact on the audience. The students also value the fact the task does not have an anticipated result – at this point it is important to stress they were just asked to write a short story-. One of the conclusions which is important in order to benefit from the full potential of the iPad is to grant the students the freedom to decide what to tell and how to do it since it favours individual responsibility when using the iPad giving the task a shared meaning agreed by the team members, rather than imposed by the teacher.

However, it is highly significant to emphasize that 7(58.33%) out of 12 teams voluntarily decided to illustrate their narrative texts and create a movie trailer. The students employ the iPad from the editor, producer and screen/scriptwriter perspective, in such a way that the images they select, become a sequence of frames with a soundtrack and pieces of written text to gain the spectator's attention. These 7 teams have generated, using iMovie, a series of audio-visual documents of an extraordinary expressive and communicative force, giving the written text an added value. Following Bruner (1991) and Egan (1994), the movie trailer gives, once again, a new perspective to the narrative text, that is to say, the iPad allows for a resignification of a previously written story, different and special for each of the teams. It is also important to highlight that in the questionnaires and focus-groups the students admit to writing for an audience who goes beyond the teacher. The iPad is revealed as a resource which helps construct a learning context attending to the diversity of the students; with their different ways of expressing themselves and communicating by using images. It is important to consider that each movie trailer reflects the plot of the stories they are related to. In one of the trailers, for example, intrigue is transmitted by means of a powerful soundtrack and a sequence of frames which appear in a fast and strong way. Another trailer refers to a lighter and superficial story where images, soundtrack and sequences are cleaner and more dynamic.

Regarding to our second objective, the CL context highly benefits from the facilities the iPad offers. The students openly say in their focus-groups that the stories would not have been so elaborated if they had not used the iPad. Team work had not been real cooperative team work; and no other product – movie trailer or poster- had been created. It can be stated that using the iPad provides favourable environments for social interaction since the team members put different roles into practice: the student who looks for images, the one who edits them, the one in charge of the book layout, and so forth.

Thus, it can be stated that the iPad in our groups of reference has been vital for working on an open task without a specific aim or predetermined results within a context where social interaction is essential. The iPad also promotes group cohesion and stimulates conflict-resolution mechanisms. All the students declare that they have had to reach agreements while constructing the narration and doing the movie trailer. It is evident from the students' testimonies that the iPad has a clear engagement and motivational component which facilitates a positive interdependence of tasks, resources, aims and rewards, basic foundations of cooperative learning strategies. The students' reward is the final product itself.

The strong implication of the students and how they have been working with the written text, the images, and the sound lead them to think they have not been doing an ESL writing task. The students are placed in the writer's/producer's role since team work and the iPad make it possible.

Other interesting set of data reveals the students as insiders, they know the device, want to know more about it and make their contributions to their academic life in order to get it. However, they find difficult to identify how to use the iPad at school but they are against using the device as a notebook and/or e-reader. They value positively other Apps they use in their spare time and vaguely suggest how to use or integrate some of them into the school context.

The restrictions imposed by the school due to misuse and the dilemma the school is facing are serious issues which deeply affect the students. They are well aware about a responsible use of the iPad and feel the need of learning about it. Some of the students suggest a change in the punitive measures adopted by the ICTs department although they do not agree on this point. They all agree on the fact that some of the Apps they use in their spare time –their informal learning- could be employed with educational purposes and the school

restrictions are affecting the full integration of the iPad.

## 5. Conclusions

With regards to our first objective, i.e. how using the iPad improves the production of free narrative texts focusing on the competences that creative acts generate, we can state that the iPad is not only favoured by the different Apps and facilities it includes but also promotes a series of complex thinking processes on the students. The students participating in the present study invent, construct and write a short story; they select images to illustrate them; and edit and make the layout of the pages. Moreover, they carry out a resignification of their stories by creating an audio-visual document, where frame sequences, soundtrack and written text are selected to transmit their content with the clear intention of creating expectation on an audience, potential readers of their stories. They are involved in a marketing strategy belonging to the film industry. Their conception of knowledge is not based on a linear perspective since while creating their audio-visual document they deal with a diverse semiotic: text, images, sounds –their own voices recorded– and music. It is clear that the students master other semiotic frameworks and these are empowered by using the iPad. The iPad in-built camera facility will allow them to take/film their own pictures/videos which, in a future piece of research, will be part of their future learning journals and help them regulate their own metacognitive processes.

On the analysis of our second objective, the iPad has revealed itself as an invaluable tool to support cooperative team work. It creates the right learning climate promoting positive interdependence. Each student in the team contributes to the learning of the group by giving his/her ideas on the task. At the same time, positive interdependence fosters group cohesion because the pupils feel part of a group working together to reach a joint end. The students in this study have listened to each other, achieving a consensus, valued others' opinions and used conflict-resolution strategies, interpersonal skills needed for team work. Individual accountability is obtained by using the diversity of students as a strength. They assign themselves different roles within the teams depending on the tasks they feel more comfortable with or know more about when using the iPad, so that individual responsibility is not diluted in the group. By bringing the pupils' informal learning to the classroom, they teach each other the use of different

Apps building up a teaching network among them. Positive interdependence of resources, tasks and rewards have been benefited from the use of the iPad.

Learning is not only mastering concepts. The act of learning involves a joint creation of an own product to be shared and communicated.

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