8 Learner generated digital content: from posters to videos to promote content acquisition in a language class

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Abstract

This article explores the use of Learner Generated Digital Content (LGDC) in the context of advanced Spanish language modules. An approach to learning and teaching frequently used and extensively researched in disciplines such as medicine and natural sciences, LGDC has in recent years made a cautious appearance in the area of modern languages (Lambert, Philp, & Nakamura, 2017). In the present case, LGDC becomes a powerful tool to address the challenge of introducing content acquisition in what is primarily a language module. Through the creation and sharing of a range of archivable learner generated digital material (posters and videos), learners and teachers collaborate to develop a living and open access information resource that can be expanded and used by successive cohorts of students in a cumulative process of knowledge generation and knowledge exchange. Scheduled at different points throughout the term and designed to result in texts of increasing linguistic complexity, these tasks encourage students to engage with the process of content acquisition and provide them with opportunities to practise and refine the linguistic skills required for the successful completion of their final assessment (an individual presentation). The introduction of LGDC in the module teaching and learning strategy led to a noticeable increase in student engagement, as evidenced by the results of questionnaires

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conducted with three consecutive cohorts. By sharing our experience, we would like to encourage fellow practitioners to introduce LGDC in the language classroom.

Keywords: learner generated digital content, Spanish for specific purposes, video production, poster design, content acquisition.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to share our experience of using LGDC for content acquisition in the context of an advanced language module (B2/C1), a year-long compulsory module for final year students on a Bachelor of Arts in international business at Regent's University London. The first half of the year is mostly devoted to general business content and the development of professional skills, i.e. negotiation skills, understanding business strategy, and researching investment opportunities in the Spanish-speaking world. The second semester places greater emphasis on developing critical thinking and exploring socioeconomic aspects of the Hispanic world, with an emphasis on Latin American countries. Additionally, the latter is one of the learning outcomes of this module and students are assessed on it. Integrating opportunities to develop content knowledge in the learning and teaching strategy of what is primarily a language module has been an ever-present challenge for the team in charge of developing and delivering these classes over the past decade.

In terms of language learning and teaching, the team subscribes to pedagogical practices based on a communicative approach and task-based learning. A similar stance is adopted for planning, structuring, and implementing tasks aimed at content acquisition. These tasks mimic situations where data and information are collected, manipulated, and made sense of for the benefit of an interlocutor, thus encouraging students to view content not just as a passive set of facts, but as the active ingredient in an intellectual process that involves acquisition, exchange, and creativity. Learning content successfully comes

through having to communicate real meaning, a belief that informs the tasks that over the years we have designed to provide students with a scaffold for content acquisition, from in-class global simulations to group presentations, and more recently LGDC.

2. Description of practice

Before discussing our current practices involving LGDC, it is important to provide a brief account of the learning and teaching strategies for content acquisition implemented previously in this module. By looking back at our experience with simulations and group presentations, we aim to reveal the canvas on which our current LGDC strategies are drafted on. They are also the result of a systematic process of critical inquiry into the effectiveness of our pedagogical approaches, and a profound commitment to enhance the quality of life in the classroom for both learners and teachers.

2.1. Our past strategies: simulations and group presentations

When the module was first developed, content acquisition was structured around several tasks that students would complete within the self-contained environment of a simulation. Our task required students to play a specific role, as representatives of a Latin American country, within a situation that is perceived as real, a Latin American forum. As discussed in Lecumberri and Suárez (2013), the use of a simulation in the language classroom stimulated the creation of language and encouraged interaction. Qualitative data collected as part of that earlier study seemed to indicate that students found the simulation engaging and a useful task to acquire knowledge about the countries:

> "I have learned a lot about various aspects of Latin America. It is a great and efficient way to improve my Spanish".

> "I learnt more in-depth knowledge about numerous countries as everyone did independent research on one specific country and we were

> able to exchange our weekly acquired knowledge in the mesas redondas (round tables)".
>
> "Everybody was interested, and everybody participated" (Lecumberri & Suárez, 2013, p. 72).

Conversely, other students pointed out that sometimes the exercise felt like "it was just giving numbers and then became a bit boring" (Lecumberri & Suárez, 2013, p. 72). This statement highlights the challenge of encouraging student interaction in order to avoid participants becoming passive recipients of information. For a simulation to be an effective learning tool, there must be a strong identification between the learner and the role they are playing – being that of presenter or respondent, so they can transition from a superficial performance to a deeper level of identification with the role, bridging the gap from 'pretending to be', to 'acting like'. However, over time we observed a lack of engagement with the exercise, students would come to class unprepared, they were distracted during the interventions, and reticent to ask or respond to questions. Therefore, a decision was taken to replace in-class simulations with group presentations.

Despite the operational challenges posed by group work, scholars still argue that there are valuable gains to be made from introducing them in the classroom. According to Burke (2011, p. 88), group work gives learners access to wider resources as individual students can profit from the research carried out by other members. Furthermore, Burke (2011) argues that group work stimulates creativity, leads to increased levels of satisfaction, and fosters learning and comprehension.

For this new task, students worked in groups of two or three members to create a presentation that mirrored, both in structure and content, the individual interventions that in the past they would have prepared for the simulation. As members of the audience, students were asked to take notes and formulate questions, thus facilitating interaction. This in-class exercise was also the designated point to provide formative feedback for students in preparation for their final summative assessment (an individual oral presentation). A desire to

offer students an opportunity to develop the oral and presentation skills required for that final assessment also played a part in the decision to adopt this new format.

Whilst there was a noticeable increase in the levels of collaboration and interaction as evidenced by students' comments on the module evaluations, this format presented several drawbacks. First, it was time consuming and eventually led to presentation fatigue, which in turn had an impact on the level of student engagement with the process of content acquisition. Second, and more importantly, the ephemeral nature of the exercise made it difficult for students to have access to the presented content at a later stage for revision.

2.2. Our current strategy: LGDC (posters and videos)

Having identified the challenges posed by group presentations (too long, repetitive, lack of access to presented content), the development of LGDC suggested itself as a possible solution. For the purposes of our study, we define LGDC as a type of archivable content material created by the learner using digital tools and intended to be shared with the wider learner community to support their learning experience. Unlike simulations and group presentations, the materials produced as part of this LGDC project constitute a living and open access resource that can be expanded and used by successive cohorts of students in a cumulative process of knowledge generation and knowledge exchange. This approach, frequently used and extensively researched in disciplines such as medicine and the natural sciences, has in recent years made a cautious appearance in the area of modern languages (see Lambert et al., 2017). From the wide range of examples of learner generated materials at our disposal, the team decided that posters and videos would be the most suitable options to engage students in the process of content acquisition.

2.2.1. First LGDC task: poster design

Experiments with data visualisation in the form of poster presentations and infographics had already been carried out in other intermediate modules with various degrees of success. From those initial efforts, lecturers learnt that posters

were not suitable for assessment purposes but could be a valuable tool as part of a classroom exercise. Transferred to the context of the advanced module considered here, the task of designing and sharing posters about Latin American countries became not only a powerful tool to engage students with the process of content acquisition, but also a framework that facilitated the introduction of a wider range of shorter tasks involving collaboration and gamification.

The task, which takes place over the first three weeks of a twelve-week term, involves providing learners with a digital poster template that must be completed individually with relevant information about a Latin American country that each student has been assigned at random. Students are asked to refrain from sharing the name of the country with their peers or from putting the name of the country on the poster. These unnamed posters are then uploaded onto a module blog hosted on the university's virtual learning environment. At the following session, posters are printed and displayed in the style of a poster fair. Learners are then invited to engage with the material through games and fact-finding exercises. First, students work in pairs and compete against each other to identify the countries using flags. Once the countries have been identified, a set of questions is provided to encourage students to compare and discuss the socioeconomic conditions of two or more countries. For instance, they are required to classify the countries by economic growth, the level of access to the Internet, or their population. Posters are used as prompts in other sessions to support consolidation activities in the form of online quizzes, competitions, and group debates.

The process of students creating individual posters that are first shared in class and then stored in a permanent and easily accessible space encourages individual creativity and facilitates mutual learning and exchange. Moreover, by providing students with a set template for their posters, we ensure a certain level of consistency and quality, thus turning these materials into a lasting product that may be used as a learning resource for current and future students.

Furthermore, and as Wallengren Lynch (2018) concludes in his exploration of poster presentations in the context of social sciences, "poster presentations are a creative way to help students crystallize their own arguments and help scaffold

knowledge in preparation for final submissions" (p. 638). We concur with this statement of the value of posters to prepare for summative assessment. As part of our current research on the effectiveness of LGDC for content acquisition, we collected the views of students through written questionnaires. When asked if they found posters useful to prepare for their mid-term assessment (a written essay on socioeconomic aspects of Latin American countries), 80% of the students in the cohort agreed or strongly agreed (Lecumberri & Pastor-González, 2019). Therefore, we could argue that poster design provides students with a scaffold to develop their own learning materials in order to prepare for their formative and summative assessments.

Finally, poster design became a sandbox for students to develop basic skills in data management, as a first step to engage with more complex forms of LGDC such as videos.

2.2.2. Second LGDC task: video production

For their second LGDC task of the term, students were asked to work in small teams to produce a short video for a foreign direct investment fair, promoting one Latin American country to potential investors. This assignment was due on week seven of the term and students were encouraged to expand on the data presented on the posters. These videos are shared online, and they are viewed and discussed in class. Since the aim of the exercise is to identify the most attractive country for foreign investment, students must complete a set of relevant questions for each video, which are then discussed by the group. To conclude the session, students use a polling app to vote for the best work in terms of content, originality, and creativity. Given time constraints it was not possible to provide students with training in video production, but the submitted assignments were of a good quality overall. Some students simply recorded themselves on their phones, whilst others used screencast and other forms of video editing software. This experience made us realise that as teachers we should capitalise on the knowledge that students acquire in formal and informal contexts outside the classroom space and provide them with opportunities to showcase them to fellow learners.

Whilst for the posters, students work with a predetermined format, video production provides them with a space to develop creativity and critical thinking. Creativity was evident in the variety of formats presented – from a conversation between two students in a restaurant, to more traditional screen capture videos, and short documentaries. Free from the constraints of a poster template, we found that in making this video the most committed students displayed a capacity to step beyond data collection, and a willingness to explore the reality behind the numbers, as illustrated by the best video in the cohort. A paradigmatic example of the remix practices so prevalent in today's digital era, this video combined existing footage of lithium mining in Bolivia with a musical soundtrack, to which the students added their own recorded audio commentary and captions. In terms of content, they fulfilled the brief by providing relevant data about the sector and a list of the financial advantages of investing in the mining industry. However, they then expanded on the topic by focusing on the environmental costs of extractivism in Latin America, and, in the closing section, encouraged viewers to adopt a critical stance when investing in the sector.

3. Analysis and discussion

We conclude that by adopting tasks linked to or supported by LGDC, the challenges of integrating content acquisition in this module have been addressed.

As Reyna (2018) suggests, LGDC promotes "the development of professional skills, research and inquiry, critical thinking, creativity and can motivate learners to further engage with the content" (p. 14). Throughout the processes that we outlined in the previous section, we observed in-class behaviours in our students – enthusiasm, interest, and willingness to exceed assignment requirements, that have been identified as examples of positive engagement (Trowler, 2010, p. 6). The questionnaires previously mentioned on section 2.2.1. also addressed engagement. To the statement *I found creating the poster engaging*, 94% of the students agreed or strongly agreed (Lecumberri & Pastor-González, 2019). Reyna (2018) also argues that in producing their own digital content "learners feel empowered when showcasing what they learn to the wider community"

(p. 14), a positive outcome that was particularly noticeable in the case of video production. Ultimately, these tasks encourage learners to shift from being a passive recipient of content to becoming an active prosumer of content with the capacity to self-select which materials are more suitable for the completion of the task.

The decision to stagger content acquisition related tasks throughout the semester rather than concentrate them on a couple of sessions helps with linguistic scaffolding, as each task demands increasingly sophisticated forms of language production. Whilst the guided posters focus on the process of finding facts that are presented afterwards in short, itemised statements of limited linguistic complexity; the independently produced videos require students to establish comparisons and make judgements, to develop a coherent and cohesive narrative and to use more advanced grammatical structures and lexis. Moreover, the variety of tasks allows students to develop the key linguistic skills required to approach their final oral assignment, with reading and writing skills being mostly practised through poster design, and oral and listening skills taking centre stage for tasks involving video production.

In addition to a growing engagement with content acquisition and providing students with tools to prepare for their summative assessments, the introduction of LGDC in our curriculum may contribute to enhance the profile of learners beyond the limits of this module. We believe that our current LGDC tasks are designed to develop critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication, some of the core skills underpinning digital literacies (Vuorikari, Punie, Carretero, & Van den Brande, 2016).

4. Conclusion

Given the success of introducing poster design and video production in this module, we would like to explore further formats of LGDC. Formal and informal feedback shows our students have a strong interest in Latin American current affairs and therefore they may be interested in producing short news segments

discussing the latest headlines. These learner-generated audio clips could then be shared with peers and the wider student community through podcasting.

As mentioned in this article, student feedback indicates that tasks involving LGDC are perceived as useful and engaging. So far, our conclusions on the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach are based on quantitative data collected from a single cohort of 33 students. We believe there is a need for a more rigorous mix-methods approach to validate our assumptions. Therefore, we conducted two focus groups with our Spring 2019 cohort to collect qualitative data (13 students). The next step in our research is to analyse those results and collect further qualitative and quantitative data from our Autumn 2019 cohort.

LGDC may be a newcomer in the area of modern languages learning, teaching, and research but, considering current digital practices that encourage remediation, remixing, and content sharing via digital platforms, it may be ideally placed to encourage students to view language learning not just a practical skill but as a space for cultural exploration, appropriation, and meaning making.

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