

Tourism websites in English as a source for the autonomous learning of specialized terminology: A CALL application

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Abstract

For years now, it has been an unquestioned fact that a large majority of textbooks available in English for Tourism, either in book format, CD-Rom or web site access are based on situations and professional contexts connected with the Anglo-Saxon environment, even though the vast majority of graduates in Tourism in Spain (and other countries) end up working in the region (autonomous community) of origin or in the province of reference for studies. There is, therefore, a clear dysfunction between the textbooks available in the market and the materials and situations that the students will face in their professional future. However, the Internet now allows us to exploit the availability of vast quantities of local resources (websites, blogs, etc.) with their corresponding versions in English, which include tourist information referring to, for example, hotels, restaurants, historical and artistic heritage sites, tour operators, travel agencies, trade fairs or specialized services at the national, regional or communal levels. All these sites offer a special showcase of all the linguistic resources available (be they lexical, syntactic or terminological) that the learners must acquire for their professional development. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to offer the results of the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) project entitled *Autonomous Learning of Specialized Vocabulary in English for Tourism* (<http://wdb.ugr.es/~afelices/>), which takes into consideration the previous premises in order to promote, as its title indicates, autonomous learning in a more realistic professional context and to serve as a model for the development of similar e-learning platforms in other regions or countries.

Keywords: English for Tourism, autonomous learning, terminology, CALL, vocabulary acquisition.

Resumen

Páginas web turísticas en inglés como recurso para el aprendizaje autónomo de la terminología especializada: Una aplicación ALAC/CALL

Durante muchos años no se ha cuestionado el hecho de que una gran mayoría de los manuales de inglés turístico disponibles, ya sea en formato libro, CD-Rom o página web, se basen en situaciones y contextos profesionales vinculados al entorno cultural anglosajón, aun cuando una amplísimo número de titulados en Turismo en España (y otros países) desempeñen su actividad profesional en su región o comunidad autónoma de origen o en la provincia donde culminaron sus estudios. Por lo tanto, existe una evidente disfunción entre los manuales disponibles en el mercado y los contenidos o situaciones en las que los estudiantes tendrán que afrontar su futuro profesional. Sin embargo, Internet nos permite actualmente aprovechar la disponibilidad de ingentes cantidades de recursos del entorno próximo (portales, blogs, etc.) con sus correspondientes versiones en inglés, que incluyen información turística sobre, por ejemplo, hoteles, restaurantes, lugares de interés histórico o artístico, operadores turísticos, agencias de viaje, ferias comerciales o servicios especializados. Estos medios en la Red sirven para mostrar claramente todos los recursos lingüísticos disponibles (ya sean estos léxicos, sintácticos o terminológicos que los aprendices deben adquirir para su desarrollo profesional. En consecuencia, el objetivo de este estudio es ofrecer los resultados del proyecto CALL titulado *Aprendizaje autónomo de vocabulario especializado en inglés turístico* (<http://wdb.ugr.es/~afelices/>), que parte de las premisas expuestas anteriormente y, como su título indica, promueve el aprendizaje autónomo en un contexto profesional más realista para servir como modelo de plataformas similares de e-learning en otras regiones o países.

Palabras clave: Inglés turístico, aprendizaje autónomo, terminología, CALL, adquisición de vocabulario.

1. Background¹

The development of the new European Space for Higher Education and the low level of instruction in foreign languages of so many students in the higher education framework in Spain (and other countries) require a very special effort to improve the present situation from all the instances involved (European Council, 2002). This is clearly put forward as a rather worrying fact in university degrees where the need for the language use turns out to be crucial. The degree in Tourism in Spain, for instance, can be considered one of the target studies which need an active implication of all the actors

involved (ANECA, 2004). One reason we consider it so relevant is the necessity to facilitate autonomous learning resources based on new technologies so that the students can make the best out of their possibilities and overcome their limitations in classroom teaching.

Along these lines, the teaching team of “English for Tourism” at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at the University of Granada, for instance, have, with much regret, checked the low educational achievements in English shown by the majority of students having access to the Degree in Tourism over the last few years, as well as the need to revise the student’s command of general English in the classroom. This situation is similar in most public Spanish universities, according to the widespread comments of professionals in the field in conferences and forums, even though specific research should be carried out in order to confirm this perception. On the other hand, a significant part of the specialized contents in English for Tourism could be directed towards alternative teaching tools in order to improve the situation and offer positive solutions. In this context, it is obvious that the Internet may facilitate the access to a huge amount of Tourism 2.0 resources in diverse languages with their corresponding translations into English at regional or local level. This considerable flow of the Internet portal data (hotels, restaurants, historical sites, tour operators, travel agencies, trade fairs, etc.) inserted in what Calvi (2010) called the website *macro-genre* offers a special showcase of the linguistic resources (be they lexical, syntactic or terminological) that linguists, translators, tourism practitioners and college students need to master for their professional development. What is more, contact with the Internet and computers is to be a constant task, regardless of the specific activity these target groups perform on the wide variety of occupations concerning this industry.

Moreover, it helps to know that research on travel and tourism genres from an LSP² perspective has flourished in the last few years, particularly in Italy (Balboni, 1989; Calvi, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2010; Pierini, 2006, 2009; Maci, 2007; Garzone, 2008; Calvi & Mapelli, 2011) and Spain (Chamizo-Sánchez, 2003; Suau, 2006; Mira-Rueda, 2008; Sanmartin, 2012; Edo-Marzá, 2013). This represents a positive development and a dramatic change if compared with research in previous decades (Dann, 1996). However, open access tools for the learning of this specialized terminology based on CALL applications are still scarce, despite the fact that projects such as *COMET.VAL* or *Lingua Turismo* have a great potential to implement language teaching resources in the future³. Taking that into consideration, and if we take the case of Spain

as a model sample, it can be observed that most of the teaching materials available in English for Tourism, either in book format, CD-Roms or Internet websites are based on situations, or topics, connected with the British or American cultural environments (Varela Méndez, 2007), even though most tourism graduates in Spain end up working in their native region or province. There is, therefore, a clear dysfunction between the contents and the contexts provided by leading international publishers in English as a foreign language and the contents and the contexts that the students will face in their professional future. This aforementioned problem does not prevent the use of textbooks or other teaching resources available in the market. On the contrary, the possibility of introducing the local context in the curricula should always be seen as a complementary task to those materials.

2. Objectives

It is well-known that the autonomous learning of a foreign language in connection with CALL systems has attracted close attention from applied linguists over decades (Holec, 1988; Benson, 2001; Blin, 2004; Reinders & Hubbard, 2013), but the number of similar projects in the area of LSP has been limited by comparison (Luzón-Marco & González-Pueyo, 2006; García-Laborda, 2011; Bosch & Schlack, 2013). Consequently, in an era where emerging genres like *cybertourism* are gaining ground, the design of new tools to facilitate specialized language acquisition is of utmost importance, particularly for English learners (Edo-Marzá, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to offer the pedagogical results of the CALL project entitled *Autonomous Learning of Specialized Vocabulary in English for Tourism* (<http://wdb.ugr.es/~afelices/>), which takes into consideration the premises referred to in the previous section and includes some relevant objectives below.

The most necessary goal is to improve the level of linguistic competence in General English and, particularly, in Specialized English for future graduates in Tourism, as well as for postgraduates and practitioners. Other closely connected goals are to develop the learner's independent learning by means of the implementation / integration of basic and specialized contents in the guidelines posited by the ESHE (European Space for Higher Education) and to supplement and adapt the characteristic contents, contexts and situations of

English for Tourism to the contents, contexts and situations that the learners are going to be familiar with once they finish their studies and continue their professional careers at anational, regional, provincial or local level.

Moreover, the creation of a website containing all the resources available in English from the corresponding professional fields, institutions and companies related to tourism, especially in regional and local environments, is an innovative task, as well as the development of an on-line tool with the suitable instructions to guide the student for the tracking down of resources in internet according to the methodological purposes (usually, vocabulary acquisition and specialized expressions) programmed beforehand by the teaching team.

3. Technical design of the website

For the website graphic design we included a computer scientist in our research team who, in cooperation with the other members of the team, implemented well-known computer programs (*Adobe Photoshop*, *Corel Draw* and *Paint.NET*), particularly for the design of all the graphics that the portal site contains: icons, banners, headers, footers, image, etc. In Figure 1 an example of the website header can be seen, as well as two banners with links to the Innovation Center Unit and the Department of English and German at the University of Granada.



Figure 1. Sample of header and banners.

This article also aims to explain each of the parts of the website, as well as the tools deployed for this task and compatible with Microsoft Windows 7 operating system. The main sections of this portal site are the following:

1. Header.
2. Footer.

- 3. Pull-down menu including the relevant topics and activities.
- 4. Calendar.
- 5. Teacher’s login.
- 6. Banners.

Figure 2 is a screenshot of the website home page with each section represented in its context.

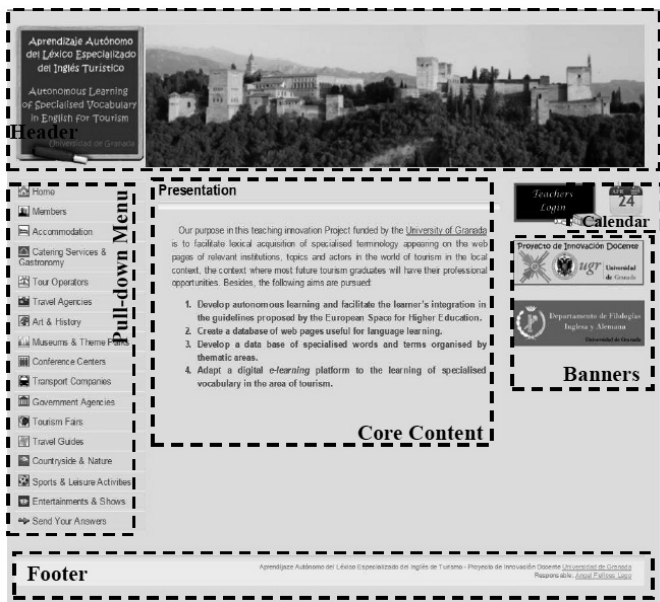


Figure 2. Parts of the website.

The following tools and technologies have been applied in order to implement the necessary functionality for the website⁴:

Adobe Dreamweaver is technically described as a web-design and development application which provides a design view and a code editor with standard features such as syntax highlighting, code completion, and code collapsing. It also provides more sophisticated features such as real-time syntax checking and code introspection for generating code hints to assist the user in writing code. In this case, *Dreamweaver* has been used to edit all types of text files in *HTML*, *javascript* or *PHP* in a simple way by means of the autocompletion of tags.

HTML (“*HyperText Markup Language*”) is the standard markup language used to create web pages. It is used to describe the structure and the content of the page in text form and render it into visible or audible material, even if browsers do not display the *HTML* tags and scripts. Evidently, this website is entirely written in *HTML* because it is the language read by browsers.

CSS (“*Cascading Style Sheets*”) is a style-sheet language used for describing the appearance and formatting of a document written in a markup language such as *HTML* or *XML* (and by extension *XHTML*). *CSS* is designed primarily to enable the separation of document content from document presentation, including elements such as the layout, colors, and fonts. It has been extensively used to design the look of this website, its menu, calendar, etc. *CSS* has also provided more flexibility and control of the presentation characteristics.

PHP (“*PHP Hypertext Pre-processor*”) is a server-side scripting language designed for web development but also used as a general-purpose programming language. *PHP* code can be simply mixed with *HTML* code, or it can be used in combination with various templating engines and web frameworks. After the *PHP* code is interpreted and executed, the web server sends the resulting output to its user, usually in form of a section of the generated web page. *PHP* has been used in most sections of this website, mainly for its management and for the *HTML* markup of the static parts of the web page such as the menu, the header and the footer. This system facilitates the implementation of changes because it is not necessary to modify more than just one file. For instance, the *PHP mail Function* has been introduced so that the learners can send their answers to the activities proposed in this site. See Figure 3 below:

The screenshot shows a web page titled "Activity 1 - Accommodation". On the left is a navigation menu with categories like Home, Members, Accommodation, Web Links, Activities, Catering Services & Gastronomy, Tour Operators, Travel Agencies, Art & History, and Museums & Theme Parks. The main content area contains the following text:

1.- As you can see, the accommodation area is divided into two sections, "urban" and "rural".

Explore all the information available and explain in a few lines, the noticeable differences you have perceived between these two sections. Refer, particularly, to content descriptions, ways of presenting information, topics included and vocabulary.

Send Your Answer

First Name:

Last Name:

E-mail:

Answer:

Send a copy of the answer to my email (only available for ugr email addresses)

Submit Clear

Figure 3. Sample of the website PHP mail Function.

JavaScript is a dynamic programming language. It is most commonly used as part of web browsers, whose implementations allow client-side scripts to interact with the user, control the browser, communicate asynchronously and alter the document content which is displayed. This language has been particularly useful for the development of numerous sections of this website. For example, the design of the pulldown menu (or the calendar) required an adapted version of the code with GPL license. Figure 4 shows how the menu can be displayed.

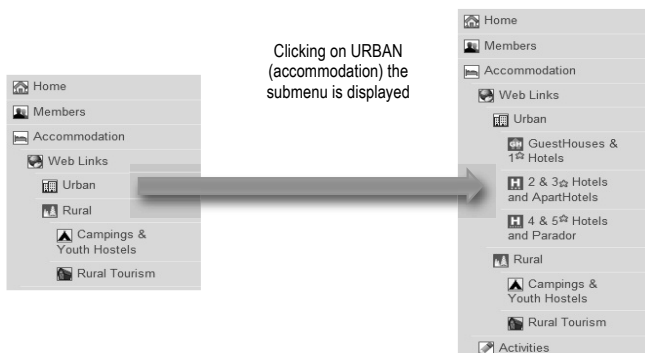


Figure 4. Sample of the pulldown menu in progress.

JavaScript has also been used for the header, which can load and display images in a time-controlled sequence, as can be seen in Figure 5.

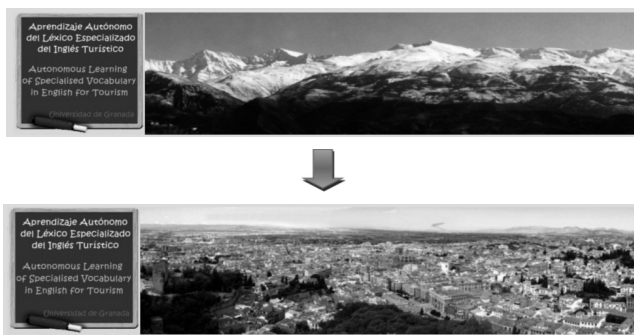


Figure 5. Dynamic image loader of the header.

4. Methodology

As indicated above, the configuration of the technical side of the website has required the close cooperation and communication of all the participants involved in the project, including the linguists and the computer expert. However, we should not overlook the fact that the key guidelines must be connected to the pedagogical purpose involved in this task and described in section 2. Consequently, the academic design of this project has been roughly inspired by the scientific-inductive method applied as follows:

1. Hypothesis based on a set of goals and previous experiences.
2. Corpus collection of websites (input).
3. Selection of the most relevant websites (data analysis).
4. Design of activities (output) and supervision.
5. Hypothesis confirmation.

In order to accomplish this process, a number of steps have been followed:

1. The analysis of the learners' communicative needs has been conducted by means of a close scrutiny of the teaching materials available in the market and a revision of the theoretical and practical approaches to the language of tourism, and its pragmatic and semiotic implications in professional contexts (Dann, 1996; Calvi, 2000, 2010; Mira-Rueda, 2008). Moreover, this study has taken into consideration the employability data of post-graduates at the University of Granada and other universities, as well as the diagnoses provided on the Degree in Tourism and its impact on society (*Libro Blanco del Título de Grado en Turismo*, 2004; Luque Martínez et al., 2008, 2012, 2014).
2. The consistent gathering of websites (corpus data) and the subsequent selection of the most relevant sites connected with the tourism topics which are used as a source for the implementation of the tasks to be done by the students, either individually and / or in groups. This implies the previous commitment of the teaching team to agree on the list of difficulties that the learners normally encounter when they acquire specialized vocabulary.

3. The design of the teaching objectives and activities (instructions to spot the specialized lexical units, collocations, professional expressions or idioms) and the recommendations that the learners should consider in order to put into practice the information search.
4. Once the learners have done the activities using the website application, the results obtained may be publicly shown to the other students in the classroom (keeping the identity of the authors unknown) and may be compared with previous studies conducted by the teaching team. Then, a data base including all the activities and their corresponding solutions can be registered. The whole process can be known as student-task performance (and storage) and gradually improves and expands the global corpus of specialized lexical units and expressions, which can be organized in thematic fields.

As a consequence of the results previously obtained, complementary tasks may be designed in order to promote the student’s autonomous work, including the extension of lexical resources to the benefit of future potential learners. Additionally, the website gathers the results of all the previous steps to store and reuse the information, if necessary.

5. Application

In the introductory chapter we outlined the potential utility of the website macro-genre for the exploitation of linguistic resources due to the immense flow of data available. Accordingly, we have selected some relevant websites linked to each of the following 14 topics in connection with the world of tourism and included in the pull-down menu in Figure 6:



Figure 6. Topics of the website in the pull-down menu.

As can be seen in Figure 7, every topic is divided into “Web Links” and “Activities”. “Web Links” include the target websites for each topic and “Activities” refer to the pedagogical tasks proposed to the learners. Taking the link “Accommodation” as an example, it can be observed that it is displayed in two submenus: “Urban” and “Rural”. “Rural” is also subdivided into “Camping & Youth hostels” and “Rural Tourism”. In Figure 7 the display of the selected websites for “Rural Tourism” can also be seen, as well as the links to the seven activities proposed for the whole topic.

Figure 7. Selected websites for rural tourism.

Figure 8 shows an example of one of the activities. The student or user should explore the web pages available in the “Accommodation” section (including those of “Rural Tourism” in order to obtain the data requested, offer the solution and submit the results to the rest of the group for a debate (if requested), etc.

Figure 8. Example of an activity in the website.

The “Teacher Login” is a user-friendly restricted area which allows the teacher (or teachers) to control and change the activities and the selected websites offered to the students. It does not require previous programming knowledge and, at the same time, it allows the instructor(s) to manage the groups of students, correct the activities and offer the solutions. Changes may be implemented at any stage of the process, as can be seen in Figure 9.

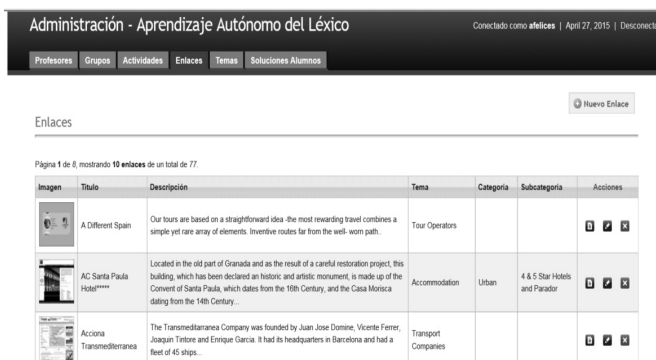


Figure 9. The teacher login.

6. Pedagogical implications

The didactic implications of this CALL project and the resulting website can be summarized as follows.⁵ As explained in the first two chapters, the fundamental nucleus aims at engaging students in autonomous work and self-learning through the searching activities, the information selection process and / or task performance. Consequently, this portal site design intends to be flexible. The tasks, according to the number of students and the pre-established methodological objectives, can be fulfilled individually or in groups (regardless of their classroom participation or attendance), as they can be contacted through e-mail, chats, etc. These instruments can also be helpful for teacher-student communication. The longer or more complex tasks can be accomplished in groups of two or more students and, by doing so, develop the well-known model of cooperative learning (Slavin, 1990; Brown & Ciuffetelli, 2009).

Sections 1–6 in the Methodology section intend to describe the collaboration among lecturers teaching English at the *Degree in Tourism*, supported by other teachers of English and / or teachers of Computer sciences, working together to accomplish the objectives of this project. The user-friendly

character of the platform makes it accessible to those members of the faculty with more basic computer skills. These may easily get used to the introduction and implementation of additional digital resources necessary for the students' learning process. Moreover, this website already offers one of the few virtual English language teaching platforms on display at the University of Granada. By extension, it may encourage similar proposals in other public and private higher education institutions in Spain and worldwide. The learner-centred approach currently claimed by most educators as the leading goal for the teaching of modern languages, either professional or general, can also be implemented through this website. The self-learning character of these resources makes them adaptable to any learning pace, without any time or place restrictions whatsoever. On that score, the learning process turns out to be even more motivating and amusing for the students and leads to an authentic adaptation to their social environment as a consequence.

The assessment of the contents and skills learned by the students is a subsidiary goal of this platform. Some of the limitations to achieve this objective have to do with the main skill to be developed, the acquisition of specialized terminology, and to a lesser extent, of other communicative skills, since they would rather benefit from classroom activity support. Once the results are obtained, the teachers can outline the assessment criteria for the acquisition of lexical units, terms and stereotyped expressions. Nevertheless, the student's autonomous work (searching for information, data collection, study and synthesis for the presentation of the collected information, etc.) allows for the evaluation of cognitive competences and not only for the assessment of their levels of linguistic acquisition. This approach offers several pedagogical advantages compared to traditional systems of language learning assessment. For instance, the task-based approach enables the assessment of abilities such as resolution, planning, problem analysis, inference and synthesis, initiative and decision-taking. In this respect, Carracedo-Gil's (2004) views, originally designed for social psychology, involve a highly relevant contribution to the area of language for specific purposes, particularly to the specialized language of Tourism.

Concerning the problem-solving skills and the innovative practices, the student has to deal with complex tasks such as website information searching, classification and selection of general information and data or the classification and selection of terminology and collocations in the area of tourism. The initial phase would involve the search of relevant information

in the English version of the relevant websites (in contrast with the Spanish versions of the same web pages), bearing in mind the teacher's programmed parameters in the portal. Subsequently, the student should contrast the information with other students sharing the same task, ending up with the discussion and conciliation of different opinions to reach a final agreement. Moreover, the student's autonomous reading skills through on-line content will contribute to a substantial improvement of the necessary scanning and skimming reading operations. This tendency will also be enhanced by checking new links, associated web pages, on-line translations, etc. Virtual team-work is another non-cognitive, but social, skill which may also improve with the new multimedia, technological or audio-visual culture. In conclusion, virtual bilingualism (contrasting texts in English with their equivalent in Spanish or vice versa), autonomy and discovery learning are innovative practices for the students involved in these motivating technologies.

An additional pedagogical implication is the improvement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) applied to teaching. The potential of this portal site can be proved with the tools available: the platform itself as a didactic application supporting the teaching of English for Tourism, a web page comprising the relevant contents, instructions, data bases, etc. All in all, the best feature of the system is the enhancement of the students' ability to make the best out of the large amount of resources which Internet has currently on display and their integration in the teaching-learning process. Not only can the autonomous learner benefit from these tools, but also the teacher and the enrolled student who can save time, facilitate their homework or get in touch with the future professional instruments of the student. Obviously, specialized terminology is just the iceberg tip in the countless possibilities which Internet opens to this potential student or user; interactive skills such as oral and written specialized communication should also complement this innovation project in the future.

The following pedagogical conclusions can be drawn from the previous proposals. A rough development of autonomous e-learning through the task-based method may highlight abilities such as problem-solving, planning, initiative, decision-taking, inference and synthesis. In this respect, the learner has to solve problems such as the active search of information and data, the classification and selection of information, technical vocabulary and/or specialized collocations in the area under scrutiny. At the same time, the class-based learner should compare that information with that of the group

sharing a previously assigned task, and conclude with the discussion and conciliation of diverse viewpoints.

The autonomous reading through on-line material (link browsing, associated pages, translations, etc.) can be substantially improved, as well as the skimming and the scanning operations with the material on screen. Moreover, the instructors have the possibility to renew and update activities or contents, register the learner output and, at the same time, monitor the groups of students independently.

7. Concluding remark

It is obvious that in a period where emerging genres like *cybertourism* are gaining ground, the design of new tools to facilitate specialized language acquisition is of utmost importance. This evidence is particularly relevant for English learners (or professionals) in hospitality management, catering, leisure or, in other words, the area of Tourism: one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. In consequence, the basic concern of this study has been to offer the technical description and the pedagogical implications of the CALL project entitled *Autonomous Learning of Specialized Vocabulary in English for Tourism* (<http://wdb.ugr.es/~afelices/>), which was designed in 2009 at the Department of English and German (University of Granada) and gradually implemented in the following years. As we have tried to demonstrate along these lines, the final purpose has been not only to promote autonomous learning in an authentic professional context but also to serve as a model for the development of similar e-learning platforms in other higher institutions in Spain and beyond.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to the colleagues and friends that collaborated so generously in the project described in this paper. In alphabetical order: Francisco Araque Cuenca, Sergio Calvo Oliver, Ana Corral Hernández, María Enriqueta Cortés de los Ríos, Cándida Fernández Morales, Germán Ruipérez García and Alberto Salguero Hidalgo.

Article history:
Received 29 April 2015
Received in revised form 25 September 2015
Accepted 12 November 2015

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NOTES

¹This article is based on research carried out within the framework of the Project FFI2014-53788-C3-1-P, which is funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

²LSP stands for Language for Specific Purposes.

³COMET.VAL is a project to build a multilingual corpus and an online dictionary in the area of tourism. It is led by the University of Valencia. (See www.uv.es/cometval/). *Lingua Turismo* is a research project led by the University of Milan and funded by the Italian Ministry for Universities and Research. Its main concern is to study in detail the language of Tourism in Spanish and Italian, particularly the lexical, pragmatic and intercultural aspects.

⁴The general definitions of the tools and technologies described in the following paragraphs have been taken from the corresponding company websites or diverse encyclopaedic sources.

⁵These pedagogical implications are inspired in a previous teaching innovation project (Hewitt, 2006-2008) and extended to the context of specialized language in the area of Tourism.

