

Implementation of Social Strategies in Language Learning by Means of Moodle

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Abstract—The methodology of second language teaching has varied considerably in recent times. It has changed from mere translation and memorization of linguistic structures, which was carried out by learners of classical Latin and Greek, to constructivist learning, in which the student has to build structures with the help of the teacher, and above all, must develop and employ strategies throughout the process, leaving aside structural learning and memorization. There are many researchers who have studied learning strategies, for example, Brown (1994), Chesterfield & Chesterfield (1985), O'Malley & Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), Tarone (1981), Thompson & Rubin (1982) and Wenden & Rubin (1987). In spite of the fact that there is not a universal concept of strategy, all of them agree that there are techniques used by students to facilitate learning. The strategies have been classified according to their characteristics in the following groups: metacognitive, cognitive, social and affective. In this study, we analyze the social strategies that a second language student employs using the Moodle e-learning platform. The reason why the use of social strategies have been studied within this virtual platform is that it was built around constructivist philosophy and with the aim of promoting cooperative learning, which is closely related to the use of social strategies. For this investigation, a group of students from the University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU) was selected and a questionnaire developed bearing in mind four kinds of social strategies, namely, asking, cooperating, empathizing and practicing.

Index Terms—language learning strategies, languages, Moodle, Web 2.0

I. INTRODUCTION

Socio-affective learning strategies have been analyzed and studied by an important number of researchers, among them, Brown (1994), Chesterfield & Chesterfield (1985), O'Malley & Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), Tarone (1981), Thompson & Rubin (1982) and Wenden & Rubin (1987). Logically, this list of specialists evinces the importance accorded to the application of socio-affective strategies in the process of language learning. These strategies have been applied in both second language learning (L2) and foreign language learning (FL) processes.

Nevertheless, the appearance of Web 2.0 and especially that of e-learning platforms, such as Moodle, has caused an important technological transformation and a change of attitude towards learning and teaching, turning students into real protagonists in their teaching-learning process, guided by their teacher or tutor. In this context, the teaching-learning of a language will be carried out in a cooperative context in which the concept known as collective intelligence becomes the basis of cooperation. Furthermore, it must be pointed out that the concept of strategy applied to e-learning relates to the principles of cognitive psychology and to the constructivist perspective of knowledge and learning, which emphasizes the importance of procedural elements in the process of knowledge construction (Benito, 2009).

Therefore, we consider that socio-affective strategies are fundamental in the learning activities of a language as a way to improve the motivation of the students who are learning it. Moreover, on many occasions, the participants use such strategies unintentionally. Logically, we must not forget that they are social beings with previous experiences and knowledge which, one way or another, they share among themselves. It is at this point that the Moodle virtual platform shows all its potential, prioritizing cooperative learning and basing itself on a methodology focused on a communicative approach.

This paper intends to outline the arguments put forward by different authors on the concept of learning strategy and, specifically, to focus on social learning strategies. At the same time, it reports on the impressions collected about the use of Moodle from students at the University School of Education in Bilbao (UPV-EHU). Therefore, in the context of e-learning and taking the virtual platform Moodle as a basic tool, it seeks to investigate the practice of these social

strategies in language virtual courses at university level, and extract the characteristics which favour language learning. Based on this, the different social strategies which can be applied in such a process are recommended, transferring the information onto several tables. In this way, we can observe, on the one hand, the typology, characteristics and advantages of social strategies according to different researchers and, on the other hand, the implementation of these social strategies by means of the Moodle platform.

II. SOME THEORETICAL NOTIONS: LANGUAGE LEARNING, STRATEGIES, VIRTUAL PLATFORMS

In this section we are going to establish the theoretical basis for its subsequent practical application.

A. *Language Learning from the XIXth Century until the Present Day*

From the end of the XIXth century, second language teaching methods have varied remarkably. At first, the application of the direct method was preferred, which proposed the learning of structures which were useful in real situations. From the 1940s to the 1960s, the formal method in language learning predominated and, by means of audiovisual techniques, an attempt was made to teach structures that could be used in typical conversations. Villanueva defines this type of method as follows: "Rejection of translation and use of L1, designation exercises and description of reality. Teaching living languages in a different way" (1997: 82-84).

During the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, the situational and global structural audio-visual method, which focuses on the process of language learning by means of real situations, became stronger. Therefore, mechanical exercises were used which made use of recorded conversations and for this reason importance was not given to the communicative value of the language but to the grammatical structures that make up the language (Larrea, 2003). In 1990, Bogaards defined it as a system which focused on the relationship between stimulus and response.

At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, Vigotsky's ideas began to spread and the concept of communicative competence began to be heard, so language practices in communicative media began to be fostered. Throughout the 1980s, a step forward was made and the student changed from being a simple apprentice to being an apprentice and a user simultaneously. Therefore, oral ability was considered to be more important than writing or reading from a communicative point of view. In this theoretical communicative production framework, corrections in oral production were left aside and priority was given to personal, communicative production, minimizing the importance of linguistic correction. In 1986, Littlewood distinguished communicative from pre-communicative activity, the latter being a series of skills or knowledge which must be practised individually to be integrated later into communicative activity.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as a result of the boom of constructivism and cognitive theories, an attempt was made to promote the autonomy of the second language apprentice, and metacognitive activities acquired significance. Burón (1993) defines metacognition as follows: a field which became important from 1980 and focuses on the strategies used by the student in his learning process.

As the Common European Framework of References for Languages (2002) points out, nowadays the autonomous character of the student for second language learning continues to be encouraged and the development of learning strategies which promote the autonomy of the individual are considered to be very important: "The skills and learning strategies which facilitate the execution of the task and which consist of: knowing how to perform correctly when linguistic resources are insufficient, being able to discover by oneself, plan and monitor the implementation of the task" (2002: 159).

B. *The Concept of Learning Strategy: Definition and Classifications*

The concept of learning strategy acquires such importance that The Common European Framework mentions it as an essential and facilitating element for second language learning. In spite of the many definitions of this concept, most authors agree that it embraces the techniques and methods which assist second language learning (Cyr, 2000; Ellis, 1997; Licerias, 1992).

Throughout history, a wide range of learning strategy classifications have been put forward. The first ones date from the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Wong Fillmore mentioned two types of strategies: "The social and the cognitive" (Skehan, 1997: 73).

In the same year, Bialistok identified four types of strategies:

Formal and Functional Practice. The first strategy is a general concept of practice that refers to the attempts that the student makes to increase his exposure to the language [...] Functional practice refers to the increase in the exposure to the language with a communicative objective and it can include going to the cinema, speaking to native speakers, reading books, activities in which the meaning is the most important aspect [...] Monitoring and Inferencing. These are somehow complementary, given that the first is fundamentally a production strategy whereas the second can be regarded as its counterpart, comprehension. (Licerias, 1992: 187).

In 2000, Cyr published a book in which he collected some of the main learning strategy classifications; he mentions the one by Rubin (1981), in which she distinguishes two types of strategies, called direct and transversal; that of Oxford (1990), which follows the path of the previous contributor but defines the classifications in much more detail; and

finally, according to Cyr, the most complete and accepted is that of O'Malley and Chamot (1990), which distinguishes three groups of strategies: metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective.

In 1997, Villanueva set forth the following group of strategies based on the concept of dimension from a psychological, affective and social point of view:

Learning strategies related to information perception strategies and to attitudes towards learning according to certain psychological characteristics [...] Communicative strategies characteristic of the pragmatic functioning of language which are used by the user-apprentice of a foreign language [...] Social strategies related to the cultural representations of linguistic interaction [...] Cognitive strategies. (1997: 54-55).

In the same year, and in a similar way, Ellis distinguished between cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective strategies. Finally, in 1999, Alfaya mentioned two types of strategies which can lead us to make mistakes:

So, concerning the strategies or attitudes that students adopt to learn a new language, we could say that learners take up at least two different learning processes and that these strategies which they assume unintentionally will inevitably lead to failure [...] I may say that at least half of the errors are due to both of the previously commented on learning strategies namely, transfer and generalisation" (1999: 100).

C. Social Strategies: Essential Components in Language Learning

The importance of social strategies is unquestionable, given that they are part of the learning strategy typology of the afore-mentioned authors. Although many link them with affective strategies, we consider that a distinction should be made between both types, and in this paper we will focus exclusively on social strategies.

Oxford defines social strategies as follows: "Language is a form of social behaviour; it is communication, and communication occurs between and among people. Learning a language thus involves other people, and appropriate social strategies are very important in this process" (1990: 145). Besides, Oxford considers that a good student uses more social strategies than a poor one. As we have observed, social strategies correspond to those social acts which the student carries out to be able to understand and study a second language in a better way. Therefore, some authors have identified the actions listed below as part of the so-called social strategies.

In 1978, Bialystok considered social strategies to be going to the cinema, talking to native speakers, reading books, that is, activities in which the meaning is the most important thing. Oxford, in 1990, came up with three groups of social strategies: on the one hand, the actions used for asking, among which she enumerates the following: asking for explanations and/or checking them and asking someone to correct mistakes; on the other hand, the actions aimed at cooperation, which lead us to carry out activities with a classmate or native; and, finally, those actions which enable us to use empathy, being open to culture and to the way of thinking and feeling of other people.

That same year, O'Malley and Chamot enumerated the same social strategies named by Oxford in a simpler way: asking and/or checking and cooperation.

In 1989, Rubin (Cyr, 2000), and subsequently in 1997, Villanueva and Ellis, introduced one more action within social strategies: the search for situations in which a second language can be practised. Taking into account types, characteristics and advantages of social strategies, we can complete the following table 1.

TABLE 1.
TYPES, CHARACTERISTICS AND ADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL STRATEGIES

Types	Characteristics	Advantages
Asking (clarification, checking, asking for mistake correction) (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Cooperating (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Empathizing (Oxford, 1990). Practising (Bialystok, 1978; Ellis, 1997; Villanueva, 1997).	Promote feedback and interaction to learn a second language and control the affective part (Cyr, 2000; Skehan, 1997). They are social actions for understanding, learning and keeping information (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).	Higher self-esteem (Oxford, 1990). Confidence increases (Oxford, 1990). Aims are achieved sooner than expected (Oxford, 1990). Greater respect towards teacher, classmates and school (Oxford, 1990). The use of cognitive strategies is increased (Oxford, 1990). Concern for others increases (Oxford, 1990). Greater motivation (Oxford, 1990). There are more opportunities to practise the language (Oxford, 1990). Greater feedback on mistake (Oxford, 1990).

As observed in this table, we find mainly four types of social strategies: asking, cooperating, empathizing and practising. As their name suggests, the main characteristics of these strategies are related to actions carried out with surrounding people: teachers, friends or simply classmates who are studying the same language (target language). Social strategies have principally two characteristics: on the one hand, they encourage feedback and interaction; on the other hand, they are actions carried out with the help of others and are useful for understanding, learning or keeping information.

From the characteristics mentioned above, it is derived that they are used for controlling the affective part of the student, that is, the person who is learning a language and maintains an interaction with somebody, not necessarily a teacher, who is feeding his affectivity, given that he fosters his self-esteem and self-confidence, apart from increasing his motivation. Moreover, such interaction influences the way of dealing with and understanding others, and some think that both respect and concern for the teacher and the rest of classmates increases.

The advantages of these strategies not only focus on the affective aspect, but also on the cognitive one. Feedback, apart from helping us to practise the language often focusing on the mistake made by the student, also increases the use of cognitive strategies which lead the student to achieve his aims sooner than expected, according to Oxford.¹

D. Web 2.0 and Social Strategies: The Practice of Social Strategies in 2.0 Language Courses

Both in the process of teaching-learning in general and in second language teaching-learning in particular, Web 2.0 defines itself as an advance. Not only is it a technological transformation; it is also a change of attitude both towards learning and teaching, since it compels the student to become a real protagonist, at the same time as the teacher's role changes from being the only source to being a guide and motivator. Thus, it is a change of perspective in which vertical hierarchies turn to horizontal ones, which promotes learning based on cooperation, which in language learning has an effect on communication. This is the ultimate aim of all languages in any context. Therefore, language teaching-learning will be carried out in a cooperative context, in which the concept known as collective intelligence becomes the basis of cooperation.

In spite of all the afore-mentioned assets, we cannot forget that what is proposed as new continues to be a mere tool and its correct functioning depends on what is done with it, that is, its use and the perspective from which it is used. And it is here where language learning strategies gain importance. The Internet becomes a virtual place, but real at the same time, where we can develop such strategies in a planned way by means of communication, which is also real and virtual at the same time. The application of social strategies coincides with what are considered to be the advantages of using Web 2.0 and its philosophy, as shown in the following diagram (Fig. 1).

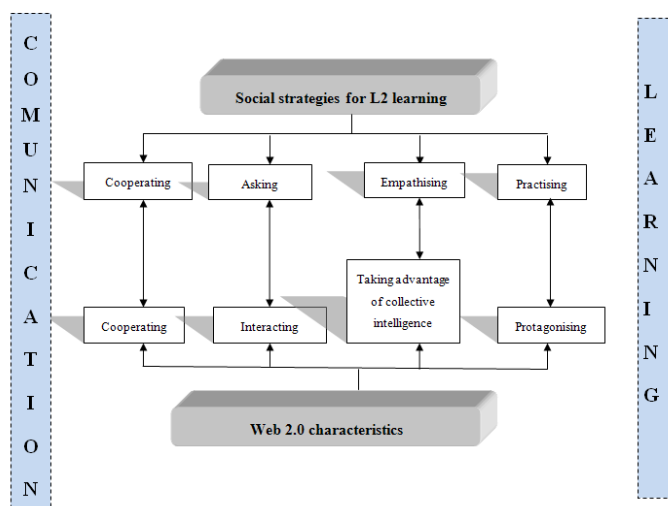


Figure 1. Social strategies and Web 2.0

Therefore, tools such as blogs and wikis applied to language teaching establish channels for expression, linguistic cooperation among students and between teacher and student(s). But in this paper, given the impossibility of studying all the tools that Web 2.0 provides, we will focus on one tool that is in vogue at present: the so-called e-learning platforms and, among them, one of the most popular: Moodle.

E. Moodle: What Does the Use of this Platform Provide in Relation to the Development of the Language Teaching-Learning Process?

The Moodle platform is a virtual platform, and as we can read in its English acronym *Course Management System*, it is a free system of course management. Moodle was created in 2002 by Martin Dougiamas, professor at Curtin University, who based its development on constructivist theories of learning and what is known as cooperative learning development. This is why the several work formats established from the first visit to the portal include cooperative work,

¹“Cognitive strategies are those organizations of cognitive, affective and psychomotor functions and resources which the subject carries out in the processes of fulfilment of reasoning, memory and learning. They are real configurations of functions and resources, generators of action schemes for a more efficient and economic confrontation with global or specific learning situations, for the selective incorporation of new data and its organization or for the solution of problems of diverse order or quality. They are, then, on the threshold of all learning tasks as real previous ‘mechanisms’, prefiguring the later processes and which, of course, all individuals select spontaneously before each performance in the form of principles, rules or guidelines” (1990: 121).

exercises, critical reflection, surveys, glossary, etc. And from a methodological point of view, it is based on a communicative approach to second languages, which according to Navarro and Torreblanca validates this educational approach and which is supported by the *Common European Framework of References for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Evaluation*.

Moreover, we can also point out that because of its contents and tools, Moodle is an ideal platform for on-line courses and classes as well as a complement for on-site classes. It is a tool which allows us to work on communication in a global manner, by means of the interaction of the four linguistic skills (oral expression and comprehension, written expression and comprehension), but also on what the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* denominates interaction. And all this, by means of cooperation.

The presentation of the course contents through this platform is becoming more common among the different second language courses at university level. In the majority of them, Moodle is used as a virtual support for on-campus teaching and presents a varied repertoire of contents, both theoretical and practical. Logically, it is around this second point that the different tools which this platform provides for the working of social strategies, mainly forums, wikis and questionnaires, and their implementation in second language learning, are going to be developed. Therefore, we find the implementation of this platform necessary as a support for our teaching.

III. FIELD STUDY: THE USE OF SOCIAL STRATEGIES BY MEANS OF MOODLE

Most universities already provide learning platforms by means of which teachers can develop their work with the students in a comfortable and efficient way. In the case of the UPV/EHU and inside the Virtual Campus (<http://cvb.ehu.es/index.htm>), the teacher's area is made up of five teaching modules: fully virtual subjects, support for teaching subjects, official masters, private diplomas and doctorates.

From the above-mentioned options, the most used is that of support for teaching subjects, and inside this typology, the teacher has two platforms: eKasi (<http://ekasi.ehu.es>) and Moodle (<http://moodle.ehu.es/moodle>). The first one is the institutional web site of the UPV/EHU's support for on-campus teaching. It is a software application which facilitates the management of records and students, simulating the organizational work of a university teacher in a web-based environment and facilitating the student's learning process. The second one is the internationally known e-learning technological platform, which facilities the management of free courses and helps educators to create online learning communities.

By means of Moodle, the University provides teachers with a virtual platform in order for them to take it up and make it habitable. Thus, the structure can be adapted to the teachers' needs and they will fill each of the modules with content. Moreover, we can point out that this method of working with learning technologies and communication has an eminently creative character for the teacher, as this plans the students' learning process, developing educational tools with multimedia characteristics and adding communication resources in order to encourage exchange and participation.

Thus, as can be seen in the following charts, the use of Moodle has increased both in the number of students registered in courses or subjects with Moodle (Fig. 2) and the number of subjects offered (Fig. 3).

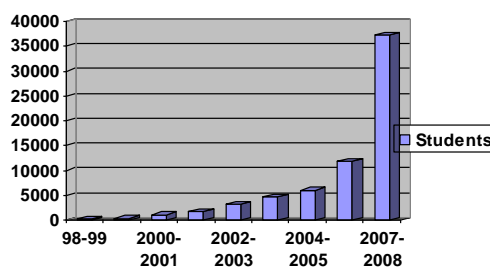


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of students in the Virtual Campus.

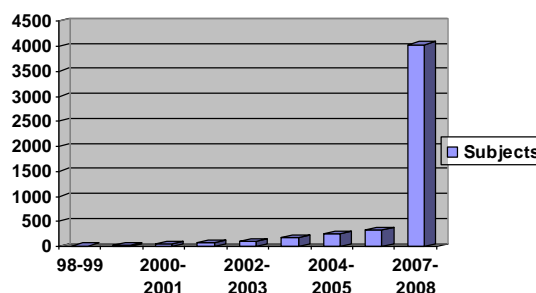


Figure 3. Evolution of the number of subjects in the Virtual Campus.

In this context, we consider that the implementation of this platform as a support for teaching must be something real and daily, but is this true? What really happens with the courses and subjects focused on second language teaching?

A. Methodology and Participants

With the objective of gathering and measuring students' assessments, a survey, anonymously administered, was carried out and it was placed on the Moodle platform in May 2010.² The survey was conducted by several teachers from the Language and Literature Didactics Department at UPV-EHU with a sample of 87 students (39 of them filled out the form) corresponding to the third year of the Degree in Primary Education and the subject "Children's and Young Adults' Literature".

The survey was devised taking into account the four basic social strategies for second language teaching and learning and their relation to the characteristics, which can also be regarded as advantages, which the use of Moodle tools provides:

Figure 4. Screenshot of the survey in the context of Moodle.

Thus, eight questions were drawn up, which covered the afore-mentioned four basic social strategies. The relations that we propose among questions, strategies and characteristics of the tools offered by Moodle are the following:

TABLE 2.
RELATIONS AMONG STRATEGIES, MOODLE CHARACTERISTICS AND SURVEY

Social Strategy	Moodle tools characteristics	Question	Possible answers
Asking	Interacting	"When I don't know how something is said"	-I consult the forum -I send an email to my teacher -I don't use any of the tools offered by Moodle
Cooperating	Cooperating	"I use the chat for"	- getting to know classmates -I don't use it at all
Empathizing	Taking advantage	"When I need a correction I use"	-forum -email to the teacher - I don't use any of the tools offered by Moodle
Empathizing	Taking advantage	"I fill in my profile"	-A part -I don't do it
Empathizing	Taking advantage	"I read others' profiles"	-sometimes -never
Practising	Protagonising	"I use wikis for"	-creating my linguistic learning portfolio -the cooperative creation of activities -I don't use them at all
Practising	Protagonising	"I use blog profiles for"	-expressing myself in the language I am learning -reading other people's entries -I don't use them
Practising	Protagonising	"For writing in the Moodle platform I use"	-always the language I am learning -sometimes the language I am learning and sometimes other languages -never the language I am learning

² The items used in the survey are shown in Appendix A.

The possible answers, among which the student-participant can choose when answering, are of two types, as we have observed in the last table:

- With the possibility of choosing between three answers. Two of them are actions that can be carried out to solve the difficulty of linguistic learning set out in the question through the use of social strategies which Moodle tools offer. The third one offers the option of stating that none of the proposed answers is possible.
- With the possibility of choosing between two opposite answers.

Finally, we must point out that the surveys were developed and administered by means of the application called *Questionnaire Report*, which the Moodle platform itself offers, since it guaranteed anonymity and the use of a familiar tool for the student-participant.

B. Results

According to the results, we can state that the reality of the language courses which use Moodle for their development, and from the point of view of the student-participants, is as follows:

- Regarding the question related to the social strategy of *asking*, “When I don’t know how something is said”: half of the polled students (52%) state that they do not use any Moodle tool; 28% send e-mails to the teacher and 20% consult the forum.
- In the answers to the questions that refer to the social strategy of *cooperating*, specifically the question “I use the chat for”, we find that 68% answer that they do not use the chat at all and 32% use it for getting to know their classmates.
- The results of the questions linked to the social strategy *empathizing* are as follows:
 - “When I need a correction I use”: 52% state that they do not use Moodle tools; 44% send an email to the teacher and 4% say they use the forum.
 - “I fill in my profile”: 72% say that they fill in a part of it, and 28% do not fill it in at all.
 - “I read other people’s profile”: 68% point out that they read it sometimes, and 35% never read it.
- The answers related to the social strategy of *practising* offer the following results:
 - “I use wikis for”: 88% say they never use them, 8% say they use them for the cooperative creation of activities and 4% for creating their own linguistic learning portfolio.
 - “For writing in the Moodle platform I use”: 72% always use the language they are learning, 16% use sometimes the language they are learning and 12% never use the language they are learning.

If we evaluate these results, we can point out that, despite the fact that, in theory, the use of the Moodle platform with its tools based on the Web 2.0 philosophy for teaching and learning second languages is classified, defined and described as positive, reality seems to be quite different and makes it clear that these tools are not used, or used in a very low percentage, by the students for developing social strategies for linguistic learning.

We consider that the reason for this circumstance could be the lack of habit of using the Internet, in general, and the tools of e-learning platforms, for linguistic learning. Therefore, we think that a possible way to solve this could be by the creation of a methodological standard where teachers and students have clear ideas about which Moodle tools, in this case, foster and facilitate the development of each social strategy.

IV. FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE ALTERNATIVES

One of the most significant characteristics of the world of new technologies is that it is continuously changing and is in a permanent state of improvement with regard to technical sources and applications. Therefore, innovation comes not only from the use of the tool but also from the methodology applied in its use for learning and teaching in second language courses.

From this perspective, Moodle is a help platform between the two poles which a possible scale of learning strategies could have: it goes from autonomy to working in cooperation with a group directed by a teacher, who provides the relevant information and directs its rhythm and flow. It works with and from Moodle, and responds to a type of second language learning which functions by means of the development of strategies, as we have observed in the part of this paper concerned with scientific literature related to social strategies.

In this way, if social strategies refer to those social acts that the student carries out to be able to understand and study better a second language, Moodle becomes the vehicle that can transform those social acts into a more realistic and plausible method, given that it opens simple channels from a technical point of view for the development of such strategies, which are based, above all, on promoting feedback or interaction; that is, they are actions that the apprentice carries out with the help of others and that help him to understand, learn and gather information (*asking*, *empathizing*, *cooperating* and *practising*).

Thus, the Moodle platform provides a wide variety of tools for working on the social strategies for second language learning, but the real use made of these tools is scarce, as we have observed in the results obtained in the research reported on in this article. Therefore, it is essential to open help channels for teachers and students, which explain and show clearly what each tool can be used for, and what aspect of learning strategies can be developed with each instrument.

In this way, we consider it to be important, bearing in mind the characteristics of each instrument, to create a classification which serves as a guide to teacher and e-learners when the time comes to find the most efficient way to accomplish the aims within the development of second language teaching and learning based on strategies, in this case social strategies.

Therefore, given that our initial aim in this paper is to present the characteristics, advantages and classifications of social strategies while focusing on our students' impressions, we present a conceptual map for easy comprehension which matches the more general aim that is second language learning based on communication and cooperation. That is, a learning process based on social strategies which in turn will be developed by use of the instruments that the Moodle platform provides, such as forums, questionnaires, wikis and chats, among others.

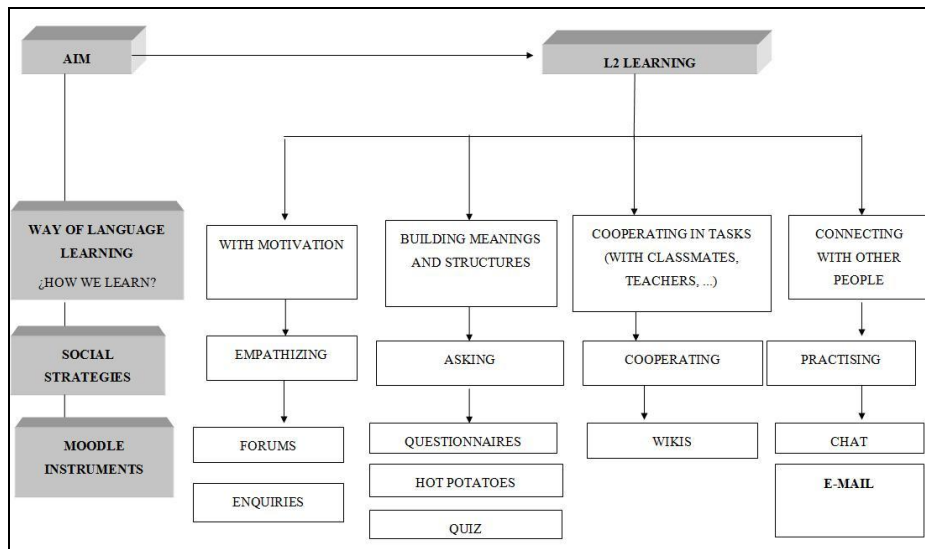


Figure 5. Social strategies for L2 learning by means of Moodle.

Finally, as a challenge for the future, we have found it highly interesting to follow and complete this study, based above all on the reflection and quantitative description of data, together with other research, both quantitative and qualitative, and with concrete educational interventions. It would be interesting, for instance, to conduct empirical research which implements a complete second language course in Moodle, as well as to analyze the efficiency of each instrument related to each characteristic which constitutes a social strategy in this field of university teaching.

APPENDIX A SURVEY

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY CHOOSING ONE OPTION:

(ASKING)

When I don't know how to say something:

I consult a forum

I send an email to a teacher

I don't use any tool that Moodle offers

When I need to correct, I use:

A forum

An email to a teacher

I don't use any tool that Moodle offers

(COOPERATING)

I use wikis to:

Create a portfolio of language learning

Create cooperative activities

I don't use them

(PRACTISING)

I use chat to:

Practice the language that I am learning

Get to know my classmates

I don't use it

(EMPATHIZING)

I fill in my profile:

Completely

Partly

I don't fill it in

I read other people's profiles:

Always

Sometimes

Never

I use profile blogs to:

Express myself in the language that I am learning

Read other people's entries

I don't use them

To write on the Moodle platform, I use:

Always the language I am learning

Sometimes the language I am learning and at other times other languages

Never the language I am learning

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