

**REVISION BY EXPERTS
AS A STRATEGY FOR THE IMPROVEMENT
AND VALIDATION OF LAMS UNITS**

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Abstract

After concluding the design of our didactic unit “*My First International Congress*” in LAMS format and putting it into practice with our students, we intended to improve its didactic possibilities through the execution of an analysis by experts on language teaching. The collection of data on the assessment and perception of the experts of our unit, the analysis of these data and the results confirmed that tools such as LAMS can be quite useful in the teaching of Foreign Languages. However, it also showed that LAMS should provide teachers with devices with which students could work synchronic speaking interaction.

Keywords: LAMS development, foreign languages, speaking instruction

1. Introduction

The current context of university studies requires teachers to reflect, review and develop continuous learning, ensuring the students have a valuable and meaningful learning experience.

The constant search for a continuous and effective improvement becomes an unavoidable reality when conceiving teaching as a facilitator of the learning development (Mohanani, 2003), the objective of every educational process. As a consequence, the improvement of the activities used in the process must be in progress of investigation where colleagues and students can shed light on the validity and quality of the didactic procedure.

As Biggs states (1999:25), the foundations of effective teaching professionalism consist of a systematic search for the progress of the teaching practice as well as the

guarantee of providing changes in the correct direction, particularly, ensuring that their students are now learning better than they used to.

In a previous article (Brenes Castaño et al., 2011) we explained how to use LAMS for the teaching of a foreign language inside the framework of learning-oriented e-Assessment. This is the context in which the LAMS unit titled “My First International Congress”¹ was created, a didactic unit providing cohesion and coherence to all the units of a teaching project for level B1 in English language according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*.

After concluding the design of our didactic unit in LAMS format and putting it into practice with the students, we intend to improve its didactic possibilities through the execution of a systematic analysis by experts on language teaching.

To this end, with the help of this research we set out the following main goals:

- To improve the teaching process, in terms of validity and usefulness, included in our LAMS unit;
- To identify the perceptions of experts on foreign languages on the possibilities and difficulties of using LAMS.

1.1. Validation by assessors

The validation by assessors is frequently used in the scientific field with several purposes, such as assessing the veracity of a research’s conclusions, theoretically assessing the instruments of research or assessing the possibilities of the design itself (Rodríguez Gómez, Gil Flores and García Jiménez, 1999; Arnal, Del Rincón and Latorre).

As a rule, the process of validation by expert assessors starts by the selection of the professional characteristics the experts-teachers had to demonstrate. Later on, the contact with the experts and their recruitment takes place, in addition to the choice of the method and design of the validation instrument, the effective collection of observations, the analysis of the data and the conclusions, in our case, the elements to improve in the LAMS unit. The process concludes with the design of a new version of the assessed sequence.

1.2. The LAMS unit object of our validation

¹ Unit available at LAMS Community: http://lamscommunity.org/lamscentral/sequence?seq_id=1266790.

The reason why “My First International Congress” LAMS unit was created was to recreate a long series of everyday situations all the students have experienced or could experience in the future for working reasons. Undoubtedly, we tried to focus on the communicative objectives the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* comprises in level B1.

This was our ultimate goal, on the one hand the communicative objectives of level B1 to be achieved at the end of the course and, on the other, the use of real resources to promote the students’ motivation.

Throughout the whole unit we work on the four basic language skills: writing, reading, speaking and listening. However, it is important to make reference to the value attached to the oral expression and comprehension in the unit. In fact, before the student can access the different phases inside a unit, he or she is asked to develop a speaking activity that must be analysed by the teacher before the student can carry on with the next step. By using virtually the same structure in each section of the unit, that is to say, the combination of activities intended to practice reading, writing, use of English, pronunciation and intonation, listening and speaking, the students can see how the importance of oral communication is throughout the unit, since these speaking activities are designed to give them access to the next level.

“My First International Congress” is divided into three stages:

- Stage 1: Preparing our trip from home.
- Stage 2: On our way to England.
- Stage 3: The congress

The last activity is designed to combine all the previous contents that were carefully developed in the sequence. In so doing, the student is given the necessary tools to successfully accomplish the final task. Since the student has been working on the necessary contents (lexical, grammatical, pronunciation contents...) through multiple learning and assessment activities at the end of each stage the student is ready to successfully carry out the oral expression task.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

The validation process of our LAMS unit was developed during the 2010/2011 course within the module “Teaching innovation and introduction to Educational Research” which is taught in an official Master of the University of Cadiz.

During several sessions the students were introduced to the concepts and procedure of research in the educational field. The students, as experts on foreign languages and as future teachers, were asked to actively participate in the development and analysis of information in the teaching-learning process. In so doing, they would be involved in a real research process.

As well as being specially trained in the methodology of research, our students could attend a session in which the authors of “My First International Congress” LAMS identified the objectives and activities of this learning and assessment unit.

The same session was used to familiarise them with the LAMS unit which they could thoroughly analyse through the module Virtual Campus (based on Moodle). Then, the students were invited to fill in an online questionnaire so as to collect their assessment and perception on the unit and eventually extract certain possible conclusions for its modification and improvement.

The following flowchart demonstrates a synthesis of the process that has taken place:

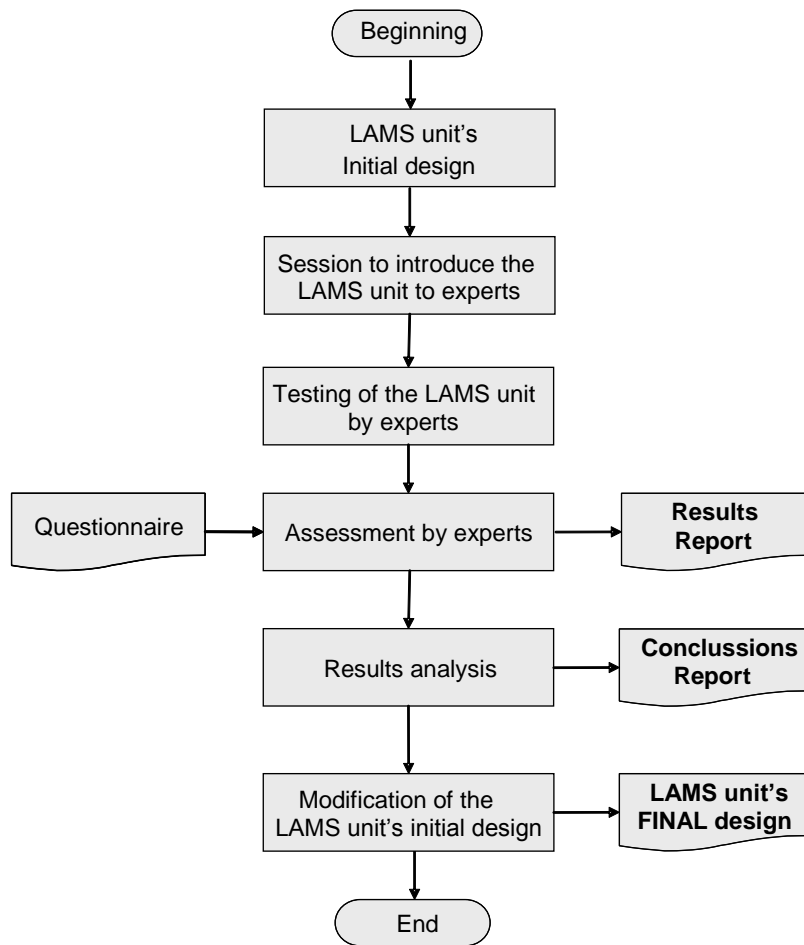


Figure 1: Flowchart of the procedure.

2.2. Participants

The experts who participated in the validation were 26 students (random sampling) undertaking the “Master for Teachers in the Compulsory Secondary Education, Vocational Training and Language Teaching” (“Máster Universitario en Profesorado de Enseñanza Secundaria Obligatoria y Bachillerato, Formación Profesional y Enseñanza de Idiomas”) particularly the speciality of “Foreign Languages”. This official Master qualifies its graduates to start teaching at the level of Secondary Education in educational centres arranged by the regional public administration.

Out of the 26 participants, 12 (46.1%) had a degree in English Philology or Translation and Interpretation and most of them (21 out of 25, 80.7%) had obtained their degrees between 2008 and 2010.

The following table identifies the current degrees held by the students:

Table 1: Participants' degrees

Degree	Frequence	Percentage
English Philology	7	26.9
Tranlation and Interpretation	5	19.2
Hispanic Philology	4	15.4
Arabic Philology	2	7.7
Audiovisual Communication	2	7.7
Linguistics	1	3.8
Tourism	1	3.8
Classic Philology	1	3.8
Publicity and Public Relations	1	3.8
Journalism and Audiovisual Communication	1	3.8
French Philology	1	3.8
Total	26	100.0

The following graph shows the finishing year of the participants' degrees.

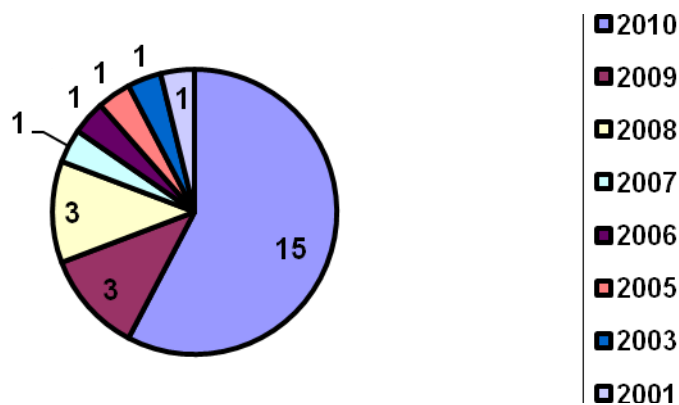


Figure 2: The finishing year of the participants' degrees.

2.3. Instrument

The collection of data on the assessment and perception of the participants on “My First International Congress” LAMS unit and its pedagogical possibilities was done by means of an online questionnaire designed by *GoogleDocs* (Figure 3) and attached on the Virtual Campus.

As mentioned previously, the completion of the questionnaire was part of the module “Teaching innovation and introduction to Educational Research” within the official Master for Teachers the students were in.

The instrument was composed of a total of 18 items, 16 of which were closed and 2 open. The closed items were statements that had to be concluded depending on the degree of agreement with them within the scale: 1. Absolutely disagree // 2. Partially disagree // 3. Partially agree // 4. Quite agree // 5. Very agree // 6. Totally agree. In case of the two open-answer items the experts had to give their opinion on the positive and negative aspects of using LAMS, and offer personal suggestions and comments on the unit (this last case was the only optional one).

In particular, the statements presented were the following:

1. The topics that are treated in the unit are coherent with the ones addressed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for level B1.
2. The topics that are dealt with are or could be useful and practical for the student's daily life.
3. The activities presented are motivating.
4. The communicative activities included in the unit are appropriate and enough.
5. The activities included in the unit are coherent and appropriate for the level of the course (beginning of level B1).
6. In general terms, all the language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are sufficiently developed through the unit.
7. In the unit there are enough extensive as well as intensive readings and they are appropriate for the level.
8. In the unit there are enough reading comprehension activities and they are appropriate for the level.
9. In the unit there are enough listening comprehension activities, both extensive and intensive.
10. The listening comprehension activities are all appropriate for the level.
11. In the unit there are enough speaking and oral interaction activities.
12. The speaking and oral interaction activities in the unit are appropriate for the level.
13. The aspects of pronunciation and intonation are sufficiently developed in the unit.
14. In the unit there are different models of open writing, both formal and informal.
15. In the unit there are activities for the development of both creative and guided writing.
16. The writing activities in the unit are appropriate for the level.

17. As regards LAMS as a tool, give your opinion on how interesting you find it for teaching English, assessing possible positive and negative aspects.

18. Comments or suggestions.

Cuestionario para la valoración docente de la Unidad LAMS "My first International Congress"

A continuación te presentamos una serie de afirmaciones relacionadas con la Unidad LAMS "My first International Congress".

Para contestar, marca el número que se más se ajuste al grado de acuerdo en la escala: 1. Nada de acuerdo // 2. Poco de acuerdo // 3. Algo de acuerdo // 4. Bastante de acuerdo // 5. Muy de acuerdo // 6. Totalmente de acuerdo.

¡Gracias por la colaboración!
*Obligatorio

Nombre y apellidos: *

Titulación: *

Año de finalización de los estudios: *

Las áreas temáticas que se abordan en la unidad son coherentes con la que el Marco de Referencia señala en relación al nivel B1 *

1. Nada de acuerdo ▼

Las áreas temáticas que se abordan son o podrían ser de utilidad práctica para la vida cotidiana de los estudiantes *

1. Nada de acuerdo ▼

Las actividades que se proponen son motivadoras *

1. Nada de acuerdo ▼

Las actividades comunicativas que se incluyen son adecuadas y suficientes *

1. Nada de acuerdo ▼

Las actividades que se incluyen son coherentes y apropiadas para el nivel del curso (inicio del B1) *

1. Nada de acuerdo ▼

Figure 3: Instrument for data collecting (fragment).

2.4. Data analysis

The quantitative data derived from the closed items have been analysed through the calculation of basic descriptive statistics such as frequencies, averages and percentages helped by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) in its version 15.0.

The qualitative data derived from the open items of the questionnaire have been analysed according to the general process of analysis for qualitative data (Rodríguez

Gómez, Gil Flores and García Jiménez, 1999) through the reduction and transformation of data with the help of the software NVivo 8 and the later collection and testing of conclusions through the triangulation and the critical judgment with other researchers. The categories of analysis have been established in an emerging way when examining the content of the data since we could not foresee possible answers to the presented questions.

3. Results

The results are described below and are structured into three main areas:

Firstly, the validity and appropriateness of “My First International Congress” LAMS unit based on the 16 statements assessed by the participants in the questionnaire; secondly, the comments and suggestions for improvement on the LAMS unit; finally, the experts’ opinions on the usefulness of LAMS for teaching will be analysed, paying special attention to its positive and negative aspects.

3.1. Validity and appropriateness of the LAMS unit

In order to contrast the validity and appropriateness of the LAMS unit for the teaching and assessment of English as a foreign language, the experts were asked to fill in 16 statements with their degree of agreement on the unit’s characteristics and content. On the whole, the average of the participants’ answers reaches 4.26 in a scale of 1 to 6.

The following table shows the descriptive statistics of the 16 items assessed in the questionnaire.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the statements in the questionnaire.

	N	\bar{X}	σ	Min	Max
1. The topics that are treated in the unit are coherent with the ones addressed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for level B1.	26	4.96	.824	4	6
2. The topics that are dealt with are or could be useful and practical for the student’s daily life.	26	5.31	.928	3	6
3. The activities presented are motivating.	26	4.35	1.093	1	6
4. The communicative activities included in the unit are appropriate and enough.	26	4.04	1.248	2	6
5. The activities included in the unit are coherent and appropriate for the level of the course (beginning of level B1).	26	4.00	1.233	1	6
6. In general terms, all the language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are sufficiently developed through the unit.	26	4.88	.952	3	6
7. In the unit there are enough extensive as well as intensive readings and they are appropriate for the level.	26	3.92	.845	2	5
8. In the unit there are enough reading comprehension activities and they are appropriate for the level.	26	4.27	.827	3	6

9. In the unit there are enough listening comprehension activities both extensive and intensive.	26	4.50	.906	3	6
10. The listening comprehension activities are all appropriate for the level.	26	4.23	1.070	1	6
11. In the unit there are enough speaking and oral interaction activities.	26	3.92	1.262	2	6
12. The speaking and oral interaction activities in the unit are appropriate for the level.	26	4.23	.992	3	6
13. The aspects of pronunciation and intonation are sufficiently developed in the unit.	26	2.85	1.047	1	5
14. In the unit there are different models of open writing, both formal and informal.	26	4.08	.935	2	6
15. In the unit there are activities for the development of both creative and guided writing.	26	4.42	.987	3	6
16. The writing activities in the unit are appropriate for the level.	26	4.23	.863	2	6
Valid n. (according to list)	26				

The most valued statements were the sixth with 4.88, the first with 4.96 and outstandingly the second one with 5.31:

Statement 2: The topics that are dealt with are or could be useful and practical for the student's daily life.

Statement 1: The topics that are treated in the unit are coherent with the ones addressed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for level B1.

Statement 6: In general terms, all the language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are sufficiently developed through the unit.

The least valued items were the seventh and the eleventh with 3.94 and the thirteenth item with a poor 2.85, as well the only three statements whose average assessment were fewer than 4. In particular:

Statement 13: The aspects of pronunciation and intonation are sufficiently developed in the unit.

Statement 11: In the unit there are enough speaking and oral interaction activities.

Statement 7: In the unit there are enough extensive as well as intensive readings and they are appropriate for the level.

3.2. Comments and suggestions for improvement

As previously mentioned, the open question on comments and suggestions for the improvement of the LAMS unit was the only optional one in the questionnaire. A total of 15 participants (57.69%) provided an answer to this question.

First of all, the observations the experts provided us with on “My First International Congress” LAMS unit are shown below.

Table 3: Comments on the LAMS unit.

	Comments	n
1	Motivating, useful and realistic activities.	7
2	Coherent unit that makes the student get involved in the story.	2
3	The resources included are very interesting.	2
4	It develops communicative skills.	1
5	It promotes collaborative work.	1
6	It could be used for other levels and languages.	1

As identified in Table 3, the most frequent comment was that the activities were motivating, useful and realistic for the students. This is highlighted by the following comments:

“As I have already said, I’ve enjoyed very much the proposal. All the contents included in it are real and useful”

“As regards the unit itself, I’d like to congratulate its designers since the topic it deals with is really appropriate, bringing about very interesting and useful activities, such as types of accommodation, and all the necessary tools to book flights, rooms...”

“... I think the unit has a wide variety of resources, the working routine is not monotonous, the contents are very connected to situations in our daily life and there are certain activities I consider to be creative and motivating for the student”

In addition, there was a large amount of suggestions for the improvement of the analysed unit, all of which are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Suggestions for the improvement of the LAMS unit.

	Suggestions for improvement	n
1	Creating speaking activities in a synchronic way, interacting with teachers and other students.	4
2	Including more oral comprehension and expression and pronunciation activities.	3
3	Revising the spelling and expression of certain activities.	3
4	Some activities or the unit itself is too long.	3
5	Little flexibility and few possibilities of individualisation.	2
6	Revising the instructions of some activities.	1

7	Promoting the learning of the British accent rather than the American.	1
8	Omitting the written dialogues in listening activities.	1
9	Providing the correct answers and feedback.	1
10	Need for more original and interesting contents.	1
11	Some activities are inappropriate for level B1.	1
12	Incorporation of audio files recorded by the teachers.	1
13	Working with vocabulary activities beforehand.	1

The most repeated suggestion is identified as creating oral interactions with other students of the unit or the teachers themselves:

“I think that the best way to include speaking skills in the unit is by holding conversations with the teachers themselves, or with other workmates as long as the teacher is present and the students are provided with the topic to deal with 10 minutes beforehand”

“Maybe if the interaction between groups instead of individual (teacher-student) were encouraged, the oral production would noticeably be improved”

Remarkably, and similarly to the previous aspect, the experts make reference on different occasions to the necessity of including more activities for practicing oral comprehension and expression and pronunciation. Correcting punctual mistakes in some exercises and shortening some activities or the unit itself are other suggestions included in this section:

“... I would only add some more listening activities, and I would try to integrate more pronunciation activities”

“I’ve noticed that there are certain spelling mistakes in some words, in the case of the first exercise of the letter, in the section on vocabulary one can see the word ‘worlwide’ instead of ‘worldwide’”

“I would shorten the sequence of activities”

3.3. Opinion and positive and negative aspects of using LAMS

Overall, the participants in the validation believe that using LAMS tool and the unit itself is full of interest and usefulness. In particular, in table 5 all the positive aspects the experts are shown.

Table 5: Positive aspects of LAMS identified by the experts.

	Positive aspects	n
1	Motivating, useful and realistic tool and activities.	16
2	Development of the different language skills using the foreign language.	7
3	Importance of the development of competences related with TICs.	6
4	Emphasis on developing oral comprehension and expression.	4
5	It provides multiple options, resources and possibilities.	4
6	It promotes autonomous learning.	2
7	It could be used for other levels and areas.	2
8	The contents are appropriate for level B1.	2
9	It offers improvement in the assessment of students.	2
10	Opportunity to individualise students' learning.	2
11	LAMS allows to monitor students' activity.	2
12	It promotes learning by discovering.	1
13	The writing activities are really useful.	1
14	It allows feedback.	1

As previously mentioned, the main positive aspect identified is that it is a motivating tool with useful and realistic activities:

"... I find it very appropriate recreating real situations of our life, and they're very likely to use it due to its useful and motivating character"

"I consider it a very interesting tool since it's centred on the main aspects of learning: it can easily be seen that it's going to be useful for your day by day, and then it calls the student's attention and motivates him/her to continue studying, what I find basic overall when teaching a language"

Similarly, there are some other relevant opinions stating that the unit explores the different competences and the importance of developing skills with TICs:

"It's very well organised and it deals with contents very appropriate for a level B1, and at the same time, it develops the basic skills for the learning of a language in a clear and simple way"

"I find the tool really interesting, due to the times we are in, with technological developments, it's very pleasant walking around the tool (...), overall it's related with the development of the competences in the student and it tries to contact with the new generation which is based on technology and images"

Finally, as regards the positive statements, the emphasis on oral expression and comprehension the experts have noticed in the unit is also noteworthy, as well as the inclusion of several options and resources throughout the unit.

The interviewees provide more diverse opinions on the negative aspects of the sequence, as demonstrated in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Negative aspects of LAMS.

	Negative aspects	n
1	Dependence on resources, such as computer and internet connection.	2
2	Possibility of excessive dependence on TICs.	2
3	Need for specific training in LAMS.	2
4	Few and improvable oral comprehension and expression activities.	2
5	The linguistic immersion is inevitable and irreplaceable.	2
6	There's no real interaction between students and/or teachers.	2
7	It doesn't offer information, corrections or feedback.	2
8	Technical problems and/or errors in internet connection.	
9	Too complicated activities for B1.	
10	Need for some very specific answers.	
11	Disproportionate number of exercises.	
12	All competences are not developed similarly.	
13	To some students it can be confusing.	
14	Classical perspective of the course book.	
15	Excessive control on the student's learning development.	

Firstly, there are certain negative aspects related to the technical dimensions of LAMS as a computer tool. The experts appear to be concerned about the excessive dependence on TICs or the necessity to be specifically trained in LAMS.

Secondly, the need for the improvement of certain aspects of oral communication is again highlighted. The absence of real oral interaction between students and teachers, the scarce number of activities developing oral expression and comprehension as well as the suggestions on linguistic immersion are other areas of improvement emerging from the experts' comments.

4. Conclusions

In the current socioeducational context it is essential to continuously review and improve teaching and learning methodologies, ensuring that the competencies are applicable to a real context.

LAMS can become a valuable tool to develop meaningful learning strategies. Since the need for distance learning courses has certainly increased, the virtual learning environment helps train a larger number of students who cannot frequently attend the classes for mainly working, personal, economic reasons. Tools such as LAMS offer an advance in educational projects that can be considered a great help for students and, as has been shown in the validation by experts, can even be enhanced.

When working with LAMS in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language we believed in a fundamental principle that nowadays one cannot consider the language teaching-learning process without developing oral comprehension and expression. Although LAMS was definitely a tool that could help when working with activities of use of English, reading comprehension, for us, as Spanish citizens, basing the learning process only on structural aspects and reading elements was to revert to a teaching methodology for learning languages that was completely obsolete and that nowadays is inconceivable and unbearable.

After using the LAMS sequence, we decided to start research on the observations of experts in foreign languages with the purpose of discovering how to improve the educational quality of our unit. In this sense, it can be observed that in general terms the validations by experts on the several items of the questionnaire we employed, reached an average of 4.26 out of 6, which is a highly promising figure. This assessment identifies a very positive and useful unit for daily life, developing all the language skills and being coherent with level B1. The areas for improvement are identified in pronunciation, oral expression and interaction elements.

The experts' observations acknowledge the activities included are motivating, useful and realistic. Their suggestion of introducing more activities related to the oral expression for the enhancement of the unit, which reveals the previously mentioned limitations for the development of these speaking elements in the learning of a language.

In addition, we have confirmed the perceptions of these experts on foreign languages on the possibilities and difficulties of the use of LAMS itself. Overall, the experts have considered it is a motivating and useful tool that can develop several communicative competences and that represents a good opportunity for the development of computer competences in a society which is increasingly under the power of the media. As regards the difficulties in the use of LAMS, the experts have made reference to their preoccupation for the excessive dependence on TICs, the need for specific training in LAMS and, over all, that there is a section of the learning of a foreign language that is indispensable: oral interaction.

This research raises the following questions: What happens with oral interaction and intercultural mediation? Are aspects such as the advance in pronunciation and intonation sufficiently developed? The data analysis was without doubt stating the need to create activities promoting this kind of situations.

We can conclude that LAMS offers a wide range of opportunities, although some areas need improvement to encourage oral interaction activities with the student. In this sense, it could be interesting to analyse if we have been able to extract the maximum performance of the tool, therefore, it could be useful as well as fascinating to carry out the same procedure in a future study to examine the most technical and designing aspects of the LAMS unit itself.

In conclusion, a twofold process of improvement has been proposed: the first one focused on the assessed LAMS unit aiming to suggest feasible solutions with the purpose of exploring the possibilities for the improvement of the oral aspects of learning English as a foreign language. Secondly, we concentrated on LAMS as a tool that could promote synchronic communication and interaction between those who use it.

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