

## CONTRASTING APPROACHES IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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**ABSTRACT.** *Technology is a part of our lives and teachers should use all the tools in order to motivate students to learn any topic. Second language acquisition is a hard task as motivation to practice this language simulating a real context is very discouraging for teachers. Students are often influenced by their mother tongue and more when they are practising a second language with a partner from the same nationality. So if we integrate technology in the methodology we use when teaching a second language, the results can be surprising. Chats, scanning texts, games, fill forms, etc. are just some of the activities our students can do in order to improve their command of a second language. In this article we are going to provide some example of activities designed using websites and the effect they produced on students. We are going to explain the methodology used to propose tasks based on websites and evaluate its effect on the motivation of students.*

**KEY WORDS:** *learning English; internet; approach; technology.*

**RESUMEN.** *La tecnología forma parte de nuestra vida y por ello, los profesores han de motivar a sus estudiantes a utilizarla, ya que es beneficiosa para el aprendizaje de cualquier asignatura. La adquisición de una segunda lengua es una tarea muy ardua, ya que los profesores han de intentar simular un contexto real para que el alumno se motive. Por otro lado, otra dificultad es que los alumnos están influidos por la lengua materna, y más aún cuando practican una segunda lengua con un compañero de su misma nacionalidad. Por ello, si integramos la tecnología en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua a través de los chats, leyendo textos para extraer la información más relevante, rellenando formularios, etc., los resultados pueden llegar a ser sorprendentes. En este artículo, se van a dar algunos ejemplos de actividades diseñadas utilizando páginas web, explicando la metodología utilizada para los ejercicios y también vamos a evaluar su efecto en la motivación de los estudiantes al contrastarla con un diseño tradicional de actividades.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *aprendizaje del inglés; internet; metodología; tecnología.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

We are facing an important change in the traditional teaching; we are going from paper pages to digital screens. It implies that we have loads of information available in internet, but we can also guide our students and include our documents in our personal web sites. Now, more and more, traditional content is transformed in digitised content. Teachers have to regain their prestige using technical tools and incorporating to the teaching methodologies all the advances of the information era. The way we distribute the information for students is so important nowadays that students expect to be marked in just few days after the subject finished. They are used to obtain all they want just clicking a mouse or sending an e-mail. We have to integrate the tools the advances of technology have incorporated to our daily life and know all the different ways to record and transmit information. As Soetaert & Bonamie (2006: 5) state 'The computer-as-a-tool agrees with the fact that today a number of educators are seeking ways to teach in a more content-based approaches'.

The use of the new technologies in a second language class implies the incorporation of new methodological aspects that can help the teacher, but their abuse can cause the student the feeling that he is not improving his/her proficiency of this language. The idea of

using internet to develop activities for our students was born by the possibilities detected and the combination of practice and theory through the net. We considered a new era was starting and we wanted to be at the same pace than our students and stimulate them to learn English using an attractive tool for them.

## 2. RATIONALE

There are different factors that influence in the proposal of different strategies to teach a second language: the errors and the different production of the interlanguage in students from the same group, to look for the most adequate didactic and theoretical principles to be applied in each situation, the specific point of view of the professional and academic English, the characteristics that integrate scientific English, and the importance of the new technologies and internet as new ways of learning a second language.

In order to improve the learning of a second language, we should take into account a functional interpretation of the teaching material needed, relating the language structures with the needs, end and means of human communication (Martín Arista, 1999: 28). Halliday (1973: 7) summarises this idea in the following way:

A functional approach to language means, first of all, investigating how language is used: trying to find out what are the purposes that language serves for us, and how we are able to achieve these purposes through speaking and listening, reading and writing. But it also means more than this. It means seeking to explain the nature of language in functional terms: seeing whether language itself has been shaped for use, and if so, in what ways -how the form of language has been determined by the function it has evolved to serve.

Later, Halliday (1985) contemplates language from a social perspective, and focuses on language' users, their reciprocal relationship and their vision of society and how it reflects in the text. Manuel Vez (2000: 138) considers that the outcomes of the functional model in second language learning are the situational or contextual principles (the context facilitates the learning and covers the student's needs) and the notional principle (emphasizes the communication rather than the form). The social perspective of language is essential to interpret and teach a language and so pragmatics emerges as the way to relate the linguistic signs with the interpreters. This evolution of the theoretical perspectives of the language acquisition was essential for the increasing importance of the study of the language for specific purposes.

Also, applied and contrastive linguistics provided a basis for the analysis of the discourse and allowed us to understand and delimit the different strategies that could be used to teach a second language. The needs of the students and of society determine the topics that are of interest for our students. The society of information that surrounds us delimits the way a subject or a unit should be focused and the way we can help our students to understand the reality that surrounds them.

Although information is essential to learn and understand a second language, students commit errors when they interpret or produce texts in English as a second language. The causes that produce these errors are from different nature (James, 1998) as they are the consequence of the interference of the mother tongue, i.e. the cultural conception of the

structures of the sentence. Also, it has to be considered the gravity of the error (Van Lier, 1995: 84), as it will determine if the error has been caused by a misunderstanding, a vulgarism, etc. The teacher has to know all these aspects in order to teach the students how to detect and correct the errors, determining the genre needed by the student and the interlanguage that has to be reached.

The different methodological principles help us to solve the difficulties of the learning process (Ellis, 1995) and to have a general approach to the teaching strategies. Some traditional methods deal with ideas or concepts of language learning that support our communicative approach in the design of the units as we develop the procedure to improve communication and the four skills of the language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 172). The focus on contextual environment and fluency in the L2 provides a wide range of activities that can be prepared to satisfy our students' needs. But we cannot generalise the exercises to be applied in a classroom, as they can change in the same group or from one group to another one. The Functional or the Task-based Syllabus can be better applied to individualise and project specific tasks for our students, while the specific contents of our context is better approached with the Content-based Instruction. The specific vocabulary we have to deal with is considered in the Natural and Lexical Approach and the examples we show to our students are based on the corpora developed from the Data-driven Learning. Recently we have observed how new approaches have been incorporated to the learning and teaching of second languages and so we have incorporated the computer as an important tool in second language acquisition.

The didactic principles are applied to two specific genres, the academic as we consider the present of our students, and the professional, as the future application of the language learnt. Both aspects should be considered as the activities based on internet are designed to teach English to students who are studying industrial engineering. Technical English is the sub-genre that marks the vocabulary and the type of the selected texts, given that the subject to be taught as well as the environment is placed in this context.

### 3. OBJECTIVES

The general objective is to explain the differences of the design of material useful for engineers using internet as a tool and using a traditional methodology. The specific objectives are, on one hand to analyse the way we familiarise students with the comprehension of technical texts and the comment of a topics with the information gathered from different sources. On the other, to study the way students deepen in their language skills through communicative exercises and the tools that can help them to improve their second language acquisition and their English commandment. Finally, to evaluate the results obtained using material based on internet websites and using traditional material based on printed books.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

In order to contrast the different ways of teaching a second language and evaluate the results, a traditional and an online unit were designed. The sections were proposed thinking

in the skills we wanted our students to practice, and as the information they used was static or dynamic, the activities varied.

The level required to the students for the correct learning and profitability of all the concepts explained is intermediate to upper intermediate or, following the Spanish educational system, the level of the Secondary School certificate. It means the student should understand and express correctly in English, in order to start a specialised training.

If any considerable deficiencies are noticed in some students, they are recommended some grammar books or reading and writing exercises. Their improvement is checked in individual tutorials during the term. These strategies allow us to uniform the level of our students as the different levels in the same group could be a burden for the correct development of the units.

The activities we are going to describe were designed to be taught in the subject *English for Industrial Engineering I*, which is worth 6 credits, i.e. 60 hours, which is divided into 3 credits (30 hours) of traditional classes and 3 credits (the remaining 30 hours) of online classes. In addition, the students have to practise and develop their own learning strategies that are strengthened with communicative activities during class time to improve their command of the second language.

Each week is divided into two sessions, each one lasting two hours. The first session is based on a textbook of technical English and is taught in a traditional way. The second session, i.e. the practical class, is taught in a multimedia classroom and is organised around practical activities related to technical English using new technologies.

#### 4.1. *The traditional learning of a second language*

The methodology included in the planning of a traditional unit designed to teach English for engineers is divided taken into account the linguistic components, i.e. phonetics, grammar and lexis. *Phonetics* is considered one of the most difficult aspects for students that learn English as a second language and in the case of Spanish learners is hard to pronounce or understand sounds as the schwa. The interference of the mother tongue is very strong and it is quite difficult to emulate the second language in some words that are not familiar to students. Technical vocabulary is not difficult to understand as it is similar to the one used in Spanish, but on the contrary, its pronunciation varies. We emphasize pronunciation in our students as it is a vital aspect to be understood and understand any aspect of communication. It is also proposed an oral presentation to be exposed in front of the rest of the class. The students have to expose the topic chosen using the software Power Point, so they practise their oral skill, which is assessed in previous sessions by the teacher.

Traditionally second language acquisition was focused on the learning and practising of the *grammatical* aspects of language, but the communicative approach rejects this perspective and proposes other ways of learning how to recognize and produce the different parts of the text. The different parts of the sentence cannot be learnt just memorising or repeating some structures, but they have to be understood and the student should be able to identify the different parts and the way to reproduce them. Another aspect that has to be considered is the existence of different representations of the same language and a different use and interpretation of the same structures. The different ways of expressing a reality have to be accepted as the different interlanguages prove that. The role of the intuition in the student is vital to reproduce a language, as it is known that the same structures learnt in the same way produce different texts when they are applied by the students. It was believed

that students could learn the different structures of a language in an implicit way, observing reality, but we can state that the grammatical errors are not avoided, but fossilized in this way. So, our students are taught grammar in an explicit way, providing them the rules and practicing them with examples done by the students. First, they learn how to understand and reproduce the different structures in a correct way and in a second stage; they use these structures in a natural way, as a native speaker does. Nevertheless, our aim is not to focus on grammar and forget other important aspects for an engineer, as we are conscious that we have to join the different parts implicit in a language and help the student to combine them and express adequately in a L2.

The last part we consider is *lexis* or *vocabulary*, which takes a really important role in technical English teaching, as it is the core of this speciality of language. We have considered vocabulary the main aspect to be taken into consideration in the unit, as all the parts spin around the topic of the unit. The vocabulary is learnt in its natural context, the text, and it is integrated in the previous linguistic components we have commented before. We stress the new words and once translated and understood the meaning in the L1, the students define them in English, sometimes as a written task and other as an oral one, depending on the students' level. Context is really important in vocabulary learning, so we focus on one aspect in the whole unit to learn the vocabulary associated to this concept, which is introduced gradually from general vocabulary to more specific technical words. Sometimes, the students learn technical vocabulary because it is very similar to the one used in the mother tongue or they know the contrary. In this way, students learn to associate the terms to a determinate field and this helps them to categorise and memorise them.

Another important aspect in the methodology is the didactic of communication, integrating the communication of the four language skills. The linguistic components are integrated in the four language skills as they have a communicative purpose, so in this part we will describe the written and spoken communicative skills. Concerning the *written skills*, we start the proposed unit with a reading exercise, in order the students familiarise with technical vocabulary and structures. The reading activities are related to the writing ones, as the students have to write summaries, answer questions about a text (from a book or internet) and finally, they have to write an oral presentation that is performed from different texts.

The level of our students and the objectives planned at the beginning of the unit allows them to read a lot of texts as this is the skill they will need more in their professional future. They understand technical texts quite well and so, in the activities planned we emphasize certain details or the key words that permit them to remember the vocabulary and to reproduce the structures in the writing skill. Our students are offered topics that are interesting for them, as they are specialised and real. Most are withdrawn from a specific journal, adapting its vocabulary and structures to the knowledge of the students. They can apply their own knowledge of the subject and implement the answers proposed with their perception of the topic, so at the end of the unit we propose an interactive activity. We develop the intensive reading in a first stage and extensive reading in a second stage in the theory classes, while we emphasize global and focused reading in the practical sessions.

Following Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) we use authentic texts, but select them with an objective, to interest our students. The activities are organised in groups and we connect them with practical cases that can be useful for the professional future of the students. We divide the reading activities in four stages: pre-reading, first reading, second reading and text analysis and so our students are familiar with the text and then, they are

introduced to more complex texts and activities. As we mentioned before, reading is integrated with the writing activities as all the unit spins around the same topic. We take into account the process and the product of writing, as our students do not know how to organise both aspects. We explain them how to organise their writing procedure and how to check their production, avoiding the most common errors. The writing activities are planned considering their future needs as engineers, i.e. define words or concepts, write forms and reports, answer or write commercial letters or e-mails, etc. We are conscious that to command the writing skill implies to have practiced grammar and vocabulary first and that is why we also propose activities based on grammatical and lexical concepts. We control the writing production and the errors of the students, and progressively we increase their autonomy. We exchange the productions of the students and they correct each other and expose in the class the different errors found and the possible causes. In this way, they realise of the errors and of the way of avoiding them. We teach them how to organise their writing, to explain concepts in a simple way, to take into account the cohesion parts of the text and to express themselves, but avoiding the L1 interference. We combine technical and business writings in our proposal, as our students have to deal with these two genres.

#### 4.2. *Using internet as a tool to learn a second language*

In this section, we are going to explain the different aspects taken into account to design the material based on the practice of a second language through internet web sites. These aspects determine the main characteristics taken into account to organise its parts and the concepts we want to emphasize. The unit *Energy in our World* is the stage that will allow our students to learn the specific English language associated to engineering in a virtual environment.

The students want to apply all the concepts learnt as in a very short time they will be working. Their learning capacity and the way they adapt to the use of new technologies is sometimes surprising, but, on the contrary, students do not have a clear idea of their professional needs and can be discouraged very easily.

The online units are prepared in order to practice different skills using the resources of internet. Each unit turns around a similar topic to the one practised in the theory class or first stage and it is used to reinforce the student's knowledge of this specific matter.

Each unit is composed of different sections: an *Introduction*, *Objectives*, *On line exercises*, *Follow up*, and a *Glossary*. These parts conjugate the new technologies and the most recent didactic principles in order to adapt second language acquisition to the benefits of internet. We combine reading comprehension, listening, writing and speaking in the practical proposed, but they are done in dynamic way as the students have to look for the answers in different documents of the web site.

Each session is planned in a way that students change the tasks and practise different aspects or skills of the second language. Some activities take longer as the complexity of the language or the own concepts have to be repeated and explained using different examples. The different activities are organised to practise the four skills and complement the traditional unit. They are mainly exercises based on on-line activities, oral presentations, listening comprehension, developing writing strategies, team work, cultural awareness, etc. We divide the activities taking into consideration the fact that in the previous unit, the classroom is a traditional one and in this one, we dispose of computers for all the students, so the sessions can be planned in a more dynamic and varied way.

Grammar is just one aspect integrated in the reading skill, explained with real examples and proposed as just one of the parts of the unit. We are conscious of the different rhythm followed by the students, and so we provide further practice with internet websites specialised in grammatical aspects. The different possibilities are explained in the class and students have to look for examples in the texts of the unit, so realising of the importance of comparison in technical texts.

Vocabulary is another essential aspect to practice using all the texts that can be found in internet. So, students have to provide examples of the words in a definite context, mainly technical, and in class they check their definitions with the ones provided by dictionaries on line, practising the pronunciation. A very useful tool to memorise vocabulary is internet, as searching web sites associated to a field of words provide the students with a lot of pictures that illustrate the vocabulary learnt. We advise students to keep a personal dictionary of the technical words they learn with the most outstanding collocations and their pronunciation. One of the most frequent errors is the misspelling of words, so we emphasize this aspect when teaching vocabulary. Also, the confusion of similar terms or the use of false friends is remarked in the class and all these concepts are combined with practical exercises based on internet.

Apart from these sessions, students have to prepare the oral presentations and some additional activities that are corrected individually or as a group activity. Students need to do self-learning activities in order to improve their English level. Also, they have to practise and develop their own learning strategies that are strengthened with communicative activities in the class time to improve their commandment of a second language. This aspect has to be emphasized to students as some of them believe a second language is just learnt by intuition and, in some cases, they think the more they study, the worse. Also, Multimedia software helps them to pronounce and understand better in English and it is recommended the visit to a language laboratory to practice these skills. Students are forced to speak in class with their partners and debate the different aspects in English.

Students have to detect the key words, explain the topic treated in a listening or identify the different parts of a speech, and the material used is real or is extracted from a real environment, so the student can check his/her understanding of reality. It is important that they understand that each speaker has got his/her own way to express in English, so they have to express with confidence and security, as it is the only way to learn a language. If a problem is identified in a student or a group of students, they have to attend to oral tutorials. They practice the English language with the teacher in small groups, and at the end, they are given an evaluation and possible activities to do to improve their spoken and listening skills.

## 5. EVALUATION

The evaluation of the knowledge learnt by students using different material is one part of the continuous revision process followed in the whole conception of the subject, but we consider independently the different linguistic components practised and the communicative skills of each unit. We evaluate the theory and the practical class as a single unit as the exercises are complementary. We follow different types of evaluation as Cortés Moreno (2000) proposes: in a first stage, we start with an initial evaluation to determine the level of knowledge of the students of the topic proposed, in a second stage, we follow a

criteria evaluation while they are learning the unit, centred in the individual progress of each student when using the different types of material, in a third stage, we use the normative evaluation to compare the progress of each student with the rest of the group and finally, we use the final evaluation of the unit, i.e. we determine the concepts acquired by the students using the different material. All these steps are followed in the progress of the session, evaluating each student and the group at the same time to obtain an objective evaluation of the unit taught. The students are marked considering different aspects:

- ❖ *Oral communication*: We mark the speaking and listening skills of the students and we also consider their grammatical, lexical and phonological competence when they use these skills.
- ❖ *Written communication*: We evaluate the reading and writing skills of the students with their grammatical and lexical competence.

We evaluate the *reading skill* considering if our students understand a technical text and can explain the main concepts and determine the key words. They have to read the text with fluency while they understand the meaning of the text and the implications that it supposes.

The *writing skill* is evaluated considering different factors, as the use of correct grammar, proper vocabulary use, correct structures used, and the adequate style. Of course, the evaluation of writing and reading cannot be separated and in general, we evaluate these skills at the same time.

The *listening skill* is evaluated considering if the student was able to understand the general meaning of the speech or conversation and determine the key words and so explain the speaker's attitude or his/ her intention. The *speaking skill* is evaluated considering different aspects: fluency, grammatical correction, pronunciation, intonation, and the global performance of the student. They are evaluated taking into consideration an oral presentation, a job interview and group conversations to observe the different communicative skills of our students.

We use the tasks of the traditional classes to mark the written communication skills of each student. The on line exercises are used to evaluate them as a group and the improvement of their oral skills. Each mark of the different units is contrasted and we observe the difficulties of the students to assimilate the different topics suggested. This allows us a revision of the material offered to the students and a perception of the weaknesses and strengths that our students acquired in previous learning processes. In the evaluation we take into account the objectives, the profile of the students and their attitude in the class and the assistance to the theory sessions, as the practical ones are compulsory to pass the subject.

If the evaluation at the end of the unit has not got satisfactory results, the teacher will start the marking system again changing the tasks and the previous parameters, to detect the deficiencies of the students and try to solve them, with individual or group tutorials.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Students prefer the on line activities to the traditional ones, as the dynamic characteristics of the tasks are more stimulating. After trying all the material with our students for four years, we have detected activities in the traditional material that are not positive for the learning of a second language, meanwhile the on line activities have



influenced in the improvement of the understanding and the expression of the students. Self-esteem is reinforced and other skills beneficial for the learning of a second language, (as for example, look for information, provide quick answers, curiosity, etc.) have been developed. Students feel more confident to use a second language after the on line activities as the activities force them to work quite concentrated and to evaluate the information they need.

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