7 Innovative resources based on ICTs and authentic materials to improve EFL students' communicative needs

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Abstract

Our global society and our current communication needs have put a strain on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, since common resources such as textbooks may fail to adapt to the needs and interests of our students. The present action research study aims at identifying EFL students' communicative needs and developing their oral skills through the use of authentic materials and Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in the classroom. For that purpose, a set of innovative resources was designed in order to decide whether these activities promote students' oral skills – namely oral production, pronunciation and fluency and listening comprehension – and whether they foster motivation among them.

Keywords: ICTs, authentic materials, innovation, oral skills, motivation.

1. Introduction

We live in a global world where communication demands have dramatically changed in the past decades and where EFL has acquired a central position. The Spanish educational system has tried to adapt to this new reality following the steps of other European countries that pioneered in this field. However, the effort

seems inadequate as it can be inferred from our results in external evaluations, which show less satisfying results than those of other neighbouring countries, even if our students have been studying the language for longer.

Having analysed the situation, we can easily remark that the approach and the materials which are being used have not evolved at the same pace as the reality of our students. Therefore, we would like to propose a set of innovative resources based on ICTs and authentic materials to test whether they foster better results among our EFL students.

2. Literature review

English, the world lingua franca, is nowadays the first foreign language taught in most European countries. It seems that our current communicative needs in this global society and the efforts that are been made to construct a cohesive Europe have reached the education institutions and have been translated into a great concern for foreign languages – especially English.

According to Morales et al. (2000, pp. 214-215), even if all countries have different traditions in the field of language teaching, most of them share some common objectives – such as developing a social and cultural identity by studying a foreign language or using the language for communication purposes – and promote a wider use of authentic and motivating materials, ICTs and a student-centred approach. However, it seems that these objectives and recommendations do not translate the same way in all countries.

This can be inferred from the results of several studies and evaluations carried out all across Europe regarding the students' level and the teachers' performance (Bonnet, 1998; Gil & Alaban, 1997; OFSTED, 1996, quoted in Morales et al., 2000, p. 220), where we can see that many teachers do not enforce such objectives and recommendations in the actual classroom and where we can see how different students' performances are when comparing different countries, i.e. Spain and Sweden.

Taking into account that the key elements that interact in the language classroom are the teacher, the students and the materials used (Allwright, 1981 quoted in Hutchinson & Torres, 1994, p. 318), an analysis of the materials used is one of the easiest and most objective ways to assess the current state of language teaching in a given country.

After reading Spanish school plans and having the chance to observe English lessons in several schools, we came to the conclusion that the textbook was still a central resource in most Spanish EFL classrooms. The use of textbooks is not something negative per se; in fact, textbooks are helpful guides and sources of inspiration for the teacher (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). However, an exclusive or excessive use of textbooks or any other ready-made materials can have negative effects in the EFL classroom, as they may foster a teacher-centred model and they may not always fit the classroom context, i.e. they present unreal language (Gilmore, 2007) and unreal contexts (Hwang, 2005) that will not help students to use the language in real life, and thus, will not motivate them.

On the other hand, we also realised that the development of students' communicative skills was generally disregarded in the language classroom, especially in what respects listening comprehension, oral production and pronunciation and fluency. There may be a clear explanation for that, since oral skills have been neglected in ELT literature/methodology for a long time, they were thought to be developed "through exposure of the language and practice of grammar" (Hedge, 2000, p. 228). However, times have changed and scholars have realised that oral skills are central in communication and that their study and development must be considered as a separate field in its own right.

In order to tackle this situation, some researchers have studied the potential of authentic materials and ICTs to develop more effective and motivating activities and thus EFL students' oral skills.

In what respects motivating alternatives in language learning, we have revised authors who highlighted the close relationship between authentic materials and

ICTs and motivation. Peacock (1997), for example, revised the work of several scholars who connected authentic materials and motivation in different ways, i.e. they bring learners closer to the target culture (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1989 quoted in Peacock, 1997, p. 144) and they offer rewarding challenges for students (Cross, 1984 quoted in Peacock, 1997, p. 144). On the other hand, authors like Warschauer (1996) show that ICTs can influence language learning motivation because they foster communication, they enhance students' personal power, they help students learn better and more independently and they make it easier to perceive achievement.

In what respects the development of oral skills, we have mainly analysed the effects of three of the most popular resources within the area of authentic materials and ICTs: the video format, eTandems and the combined use of blogs and podcasts.

Videos are believed to be one of the best authentic materials available for the EFL teacher when trying to cope with the students' communicative needs because, among other things, a) they "allow learners not only to listen to native speakers, but also to observe the gestures, facial expressions and other aspects of body language that accompany speech" (Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011, p. 181), b) they are great contextualisation tools (Tuffs & Tudor, 1990), and c) they are suitable for all levels as long as materials and tasks are carefully selected (Gilmore, 2007). The study on how to use different aid options – subtitles, transcripts, and so on – should also be taken in consideration, as they help students in the viewing process and show a great learning potential (Grgurovic & Hegelheimer, 2007; Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011).

Regarding eTandems, we have paid close attention to authors who studied conversation exchanges through ICTs. Most literature focuses on the use of chats or emails to give EFL students the chance to communicate with native speakers and thus improve their communicative skills (Lee, 2004; Tudini, 2003). These exchanges proved very positive, as they engaged students in cooperative learning and they had a positive effect on face-to-face oral production – they enhanced negotiation of meaning and corrective feedback. However, we must

be aware of the superiority of audio-conferencing for such purposes. If we revise the studies of authors like Tsukamoto, Nuspliger, and Senzaki (2009), or Skinner and Austin (1999), we can see how audio-conferencing provides not only the same positive outcomes of chats, but also some other specific benefits of face-to-face communication.

Finally, the use of blogs and podcasts shows once again the potential of the web 2.0 for the education of the 21st century. In what respects blogs, they are presented as a simplified model of a website with many educational possibilities: they can host all kinds of resources and they can be easily created and easily accessible for the students and the teacher. Podcasts, on the other hand, can be used by the EFL student in two main ways: a) an authentic source of input, which the teacher/student can easily edit for learning purposes (Fox, 2008; Kavaliauskiene & Anusiene, 2009), and b) a tool for students who want to record themselves and upload it on the Internet (Ducate & Lomicka, 2009). As a result, using both resources combined can provide us with a lot of ideas for designing meaningful projects where students may access different materials and create finished products (Ducate & Lomicka, 2009).

3.   Action research: a proposal

3.1.   Participants

The study is being carried out with three groups of seventeen-year-old students attending 1st year of Bachillerato in three different secondary schools within the region of Madrid (IES Juan de Mairena, San Sebastián de los Reyes; IES Giner de los Ríos, Alcobendas; and IES Atenea, San Sebastián de los Reyes).

These three groups are not similar in number (26, 23 and 15 students respectively), but they all attend the same optional subject: *Ampliación de Lengua Extranjera I*. This subject, which is aims at students who want to improve their oral skills in English, was believed to be the perfect place for our study – not only because students were already working on their oral skills specifically, but also because

students and teachers were expected to be more willing to participate in a study like this one due to the type of subject that we were dealing with.

3.2. Materials and procedures

This action research project is based on a preliminary research study where we were able to observe the current EFL teaching practices in Spain and to identify the students' communicative needs, which were usually not addressed in the EFL classroom (González, 2013). This study, which measured the potential of a set of innovative activities in terms of the motivation gains it enforced on students, provided very positive outcomes. For that reason, we decided to further explore this field in a more comprehensive fashion.

Our current study is structured in three different parts: (1) a pre-study analysis in which the proficiency and the motivation of students was measured, (2) the development of a series of innovative activities based on authentic materials and ICTs (the treatment), and (3) a post-study analysis to measure the proficiency and motivation of students after the treatment.

The pre-study analysis, as we have already mentioned, is divided in two steps. First of all, students will complete a motivation questionnaire based on Dörnyei's (1994) list of strategies to motivate language learners. This questionnaire contains two parts: one where students decide to what degree Dörnyei's (1994) strategies are relevant for them and another one where students state to what degree those strategies have been carried out in this course. Afterwards, students' proficiency level in the areas of listening and speaking will be tested with samples of the Preliminary English Test (PET).

The activities included in the treatment are based on the resources we mentioned above (the video format, eTandems and blogs and podcasts). These resources, mainly selected due to their tested potential, inspired three teaching units where activities were carefully designed and selected to match the students' interests and needs. The teaching unit with videos contains the following activities: (1) special days and celebration (listening comprehension questions), (2) opinion about

cultural issues (opinion about topics that appear on a video), (3) cross-cultural references (follow-up to a sequence), and (4) audiovisual translation workshop (subtitling some videos). As for the teaching unit with eTandems, a four-session tandem with a British school via Skype is planned so that EFL Spanish students and Spanish as a foreign language British students work cooperatively in several tasks: an introductory speech, a presentation, a discussion and a joint project. Finally, the teaching unit with blogs and podcasts revolves around the creation of an online radio station where students have to create a series of radio broadcasts – namely a news broadcast, a debate, a storytelling broadcast and a commercial.

The post-study analysis is structured in a very similar way to the pre-study analysis. Students' proficiency level will be measured again using the PET Cambridge Test (Listening and Speaking Tests) and then students will have to complete a motivation post-questionnaire. This questionnaire is based on Dörnyei's (1994) strategies as well, but this time it will measure to what degree the activities proposed in the treatment fit these strategies. Moreover, this questionnaire contains two additional parts where students will be asked to assess activities proposed.

3.3.   Hypothesis, planning, and expected results

The common axes of our action research project are the following hypotheses:

> **H1 –** If we foster a more real and exhaustive use of the foreign language among our students, they will achieve better results in what respects their oral skills.

> **H2 –** If we use ICTs and authentic materials, students will make improvements in their oral skills and will be more motivated in the learning process.

This quasi-experimental research is thus similar to our previous study. However, our previous research relied on subjective results and this time we want to make sure that results are more objective. For that reason, we will measure motivation

and improvement on the language in quantitative terms to carry out a statistical analysis.

As we have previously explained, the motivation questionnaires are all based on Dörnyei's (1994) strategies and have a very similar structure in order to carry out a t-test regarding (1) what students are interested in and what students actually do in their classes, (2) what students are interested in and what students will actually achieve after this treatment, and (3) what students actually do in their classes and what students will achieve after this treatment. Statistical analysis is expected to show that there is a significant difference between what students actually do in their classes and what students are interested in and what students will achieve with this treatment. On the other hand, results should show that after the treatment, there is no significant difference between what students are interested in and what students will achieve with this treatment.

Regarding the improvement on the foreign language, results between the pre- and post-tests will be easily compared, since both tests are samples of the PET test, and thus have been extensively tested to entail the same level of difficulty. In this case, we will use a t-test again to see whether results in the pre-test and in the post-test are significantly different – a result that would show that the treatment is effective regarding the improvement of the students' oral skills.

Apart from this quantitative data, we plan on collecting some other kinds of qualitative data. The motivation post-questionnaire, for instance, includes an open question in which students will have to give their opinion on the activities proposed. Furthermore, all sessions of this action research project will be filmed in order to extract as much information as possible, i.e. involvement of students in the activities, oral performance of students, and so on.

In order to foster the use of these kinds of activities and manage to share their benefits with other professionals of the area, a final proposal will entail the creation of an online tool where members of the teaching community are able to share their ideas and materials, something that would enrich this field while turning the experience of creating innovative resources into an easier task.

4.   Conclusions

The key to improvement in EFL teaching is nowadays more accessible than ever. If we consider Allwright's (1981) framework again, we may realise that making changes in what respects the role of the teacher and the role of the student in the classroom is rather complicated. However, changing the role of the materials used and implementing innovation through them is, as it has been shown in this study, something easily attainable and achievable.

Research in this field has previously showed that innovative materials based on authentic materials and ICTs provide great outcomes in teaching English to speakers of other languages, so the aim of this study is to contribute to this area of research with more optimistic results and reinforce this idea. Perhaps we can eventually prove that the materials and resources used in the language classroom can actually become a driving force in the renovation of the EFL teaching system in Spanish schools.

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