

Teaching a whole English language course to first year undergraduate students: a proposal to attain coursebook optimization

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Abstract

Core English language is probably the most important subject in English Studies. Consequently, the design and implementation of the syllabus has to be carefully prepared. However, we have very tight timetabling, many students, and a very heterogeneous level as far as their command of the language is concerned. This paper aims to determine language areas which present difficulties for students in their first year of English Studies according to the results obtained in the final exams of June 2000 and June 2001. After a statistical recount we have determined that the questions related to the use of the English past tense and comparing and contrasting structures are those in which our students registered the highest rates of failure. We propose the consolidation of the aforementioned areas through overexploitation of the reading and the writing activities proposed in the book. As neither the syllabus nor the timing of the lectures can be changed, we have considered that taking full advantage of the textbook could benefit the students.

Resumen

La asignatura de lengua inglesa es quizás una de las más importantes en los estudios de Filología Inglesa. Es por ello que la planificación del programa y su implementación debe realizarse muy cuidadosamente. Sin embargo, se dispone de un calendario académico muy ajustado para el desarrollo de la asignatura y el nivel que poseen los alumnos en cuando al dominio de la lengua suele ser muy heterogéneo. Este trabajo presenta un método alternativo para detectar y categorizar aquellas áreas del lenguaje que son de especial dificultad para los alumnos en el primer año de los estudios de Filología Inglesa, de acuerdo con los resultados obtenidos en los exámenes finales de junio de 2000 y junio de 2001. Tras un análisis estadístico, se ha detectado que las preguntas relacionadas con los tiempos de pasado en inglés y las estructuras de comparación y contraste son las áreas en las que los alumnos mostraron los niveles más altos de error. Asimismo, se propone la consolidación de las áreas mencionadas a través de la sobreexplotación de las actividades de lectura y escritura que aparecen en el libro. Teniendo en cuenta que no puede cambiarse ni el programa ni la temporalización de las clases, se ha considerado que la optimización de las actividades del libro de texto puede beneficiar a los alumnos.

1. Introduction

Course design is sometimes a difficult task to deal with. Teachers have to consider not only what they have to teach and how to do it, but also other components such as evaluation. At Murcia University, core English language is taught in English Studies. It is a fact that, regarding everyday lecture preparation, it is very hard to fit syllabus subjects within the set of hours previously assigned by the Ministry of Education. This situation affects all University degrees and has very important consequences in many subjects, four-skills/whole English Language courses being the ones most influenced by this academic structure.

Core English Language is taught in 4 academic years, with the same time distribution: 3 hours a week, for 30 weeks a year. As far as content and skill organization is concerned, this course is designed to take up to three sessions. The first one is devoted to the study of the use of English and reading, the second session deals with listening and writing activities, and finally, the last one is intended to improve students' oral skills. A native teaching assistant helps with these speaking lessons. One of the defining characteristics of the course is its communicative approach. For this reason, the choice of what we teach is based on the communicative needs of the students in a specific academic context. On the basis of this assumption, it must be inferred that yearly contents selection is a delicate task that has to be carefully done. Moreover, material choice becomes a difficult decision to make, as there is no text-book in the editorial market which matches 100% with the syllabus proposed for a specific subject. However, a commercialised course book should be selected. Students, mainly those from the earlier years, who are accustomed to using this type of reference material in secondary school, feel more comfortable organising their study with these materials. In addition, they are more confident with a direct printed reference of what they are studying, since they will have to learn how to expand information and notes by handling different manuals and reference books in the library.

This is the reason why, at Murcia University, a coursebook has been selected to be used in the English Language class for first year students of English Studies. In our particular case, and after some careful research into the material already published, *New Progress to First Certificate* by Leo Jones was chosen as the textbook for our students. They have to meet an upper-intermediate level of command of the language at the end of the course, which corresponds with First

Certificate level. The starting point in terms of language level is intermediate, which usually coincides with the mean mark of the Oxford Placement test the students take at the beginning of the course. The above mentioned textbook, which is organised in twenty instructional units based on practical topics, focuses on the development of the 4 language skills by means of communicative functions, such as *describing, agreeing, disagreeing, offering, giving permission*, etc, and lexical areas like *free time, personal info, travels*, and others. On the other hand, basic grammar contents, reviewed for consolidation, will fall into sixteen main categories: Present tenses, Questions and question tags, The past, Articles and quantifiers, Modal verbs, If sentences, -ing and to, Relative clauses, Conjunctions, Passive voice, Reported speech, Comparing and contrasting, The future, Adverbs and word order. Special emphasis is placed on the study of vocabulary and phrasal verbs.

However, the teaching situation is far from ideal. Teaching becomes a complicated activity when the teacher has to cope with overcrowded classrooms of more than 100 students. Despite the fact that all the people involved in this class are supposed to share and follow the same textbook and reference material and the students are free to actively participate in the lectures, the teachers of this subject have the feeling of not being fully satisfied with performance. We assume that some English aspects studied in class are not completely inferred by the students, maybe because there is not enough time to deal with them in detail, (though, as previously stated, everybody has the opportunity to take part in class), or probably because students are overconfident about some areas of language.

2. Procedures

In order to find out which grammatical or lexical areas are more difficult to consolidate, we have analysed the use of English test the students have to take to pass the subject at the end of the year. This test is part of a global evaluation of the year, as the students have to deal with writing, listening and reading tests, as well as an oral interview. The percentage distribution of these language skills in the final exam is as follows: Use of English: 40%, Reading: 15%, Listening: 15%, Writing: 10% and Oral Exam: 20%.

The Use of English test is organised in the following way: the students have to answer 80 multiple choice questions related to the grammar review and vocabulary

areas from the textbook, where only one answer is correct, and three distractors are given. A penalty index is employed to avoid random answers (each wrong answer subtracts 0.25 from the final mark). Use of English has an important role as it represents 40% of the total mark. To corroborate that there are recurrent areas, the tests of two academic years have been revised (June 2000 and June 2001). In both tests, the complete Use of English/ Grammar Review and vocabulary categories are represented in the same proportion as in the textbook.

The reliability coefficient for the June 2000 test receives the score of 0.84, whereas for the June 2001 it is 0.81 (Heaton, 1975). Validity relies on the appropriateness of the test in relation to the contents of the subject. The number of students who took the exams was, respectively, 183 and 189. We have considered the index of difficulty to determine with which structures or in which areas students failed to make progress. Such items could be grammar points on which either the teacher has not spent enough class time (Madsen, 1983:182) or to which students do not pay special attention. The first consideration corroborates the idea that lack of time to a complete syllabus for core English Language can lead to failure on the part of the students.

All the questions of both exams were classified in terms of the grammar area they covered, or their relevance to the vocabulary section. Although the use of prepositions as such was not examined in the grammar section, the textbook offers a wide range of activities dealing with their use. So, prepositions were regarded as an important aspect to take into account when designing the final test. On the other hand, questions and question tags were not included as the students obtained high marks in this language issue when they took the placement test at the beginning of the academic year.

With respect to the lexical field, not only the general vocabulary of each unit was considered, but also some verbs, idioms, phrasal and prepositional verbs were also represented in a section aside in our classification. Thus, the questions in the exam were classified into the following headings: Vocabulary, Phrasal verbs/verbs + preposition, Articles and quantifiers, -Ing and to + infinitive, Present tenses, Future tenses, Modal verbs, If sentences, Prepositions, Past tenses, Reported speech, Passive voice, Relative clauses, Adverbs and word order, Conjunctions and Comparing and contrasting.

The indexes of difficulty were statistically calculated taking into account all the

students who failed or did not answer each question

3. Results

In the following table, the indexes of difficulty for each specific heading are shown:

	June 00	June 01
Vocabulary	51.30	58.37
Phrasal verbs and verbs+ preposition	48.35	55.35
Articles	28.50	60.67
Ing- and to	55.12	40.22
Tenses (present)	13.33	44.67
Tenses (future)	33.50	50.00
Modal verbs	42.00	49.00
If sentences	39.00	42.67
Words + prepositions	43.50	65.00
The past	73.00	56.67
The past: Reported speech	40.67	26.00
The passive	38.67	53.00
Relative clauses	6.00	11.50
Adverbs and word order	49.00	23.00
Conjunctions	----	39.00
Comparing and contrasting	57.00	77.00

Table 1: Indexes of difficulty found in each test (June 2000 and June 2001), for each Use of English/Grammar Review headings evaluated. In blue colour those indexes over 50%.

On the basis of the results of the two tests delivered in the last two years (June 2000 and June 2001), it can be observed that 3 grammar sections show the highest indexes of difficulty (> 50%) and consequently need more strengthening on the part of the student: *General vocabulary*, *the past* and *comparing and contrasting* (Other areas such as the passive or prepositions showed high indexes of difficulty, but not in the two exams under analysis. The study of these last areas is of course of interest, but we are going to concentrate on those which have recurred from one

year to another). To our surprise, neither the formation and the contextual uses of the English past tense nor the comparing and contrasting structures had been shown to be difficult areas for our students through the course. They were able, when asked, to enunciate the use of both language items and to do the exercises related to these points.

4. Discussion and Proposals

Results do yield conclusive evidence that we must continue making inquiries as to how to improve second language learning in these areas, with the handicaps of few class hours, too many students and a dense textbook with which to teach English. No more complementary activities can be added since there is not enough time to deal with them, not even incidentally. No activities can be substituted in the textbook, as this will be to the detriment of other grammatical areas. No more lecturing hours can be added, as the students' timetable is very tight. Bearing in mind this series of drawbacks, our proposal is to optimise maximum performance from the activities that already appear in the textbook (fulfilling up the goal that they are intended to). In addition, as has previously been mentioned, we have to deal with large heteroneous classes (Coleman, 1989a and b; Sarangi, 1989; Sarwar, 2001). It is universally agreed that language is learnt by practice. However, as teachers are less able to attend to every individual, they have to make an extra effort to produce active participation among students, falling back heavily on group work (Brumfit, 1980). That is why large heterogenous classes seem very much to be challenging and interesting sometimes to teach, as they provide us with greater opportunities for innovation and more creative professional development (Ur, 1991).

The textbook should be a "shop-window" for language (Grant, 1987), so we must consider making the most of it. The overexploitation of reading activities, where global comprehension and the acquisition of new vocabulary are the main aims (Grellet, 1981; Bloor, 1985), and of the writing activities (Carson and Leki, 1993), where the teacher can control and suggest the thematic and grammatical areas involved in the task, could serve our purpose.

"Using grammar is just as important as knowing about grammar" (Baker and Westrup, 2000: 47). Grammar can be present to students both directly and

indirectly. Grammar should be put into context, so that meaning is clear and students know when to use the structure. And most important, grammar should be practiced. There are several ways of presenting new grammar to students: direct teaching is when the teacher presents the grammatical rules and information and indirect teaching is when the teacher does not explain the grammar to the students, but helps them to understand it in different ways. Grammar can be presented indirectly through a situation, through pictures and real objects, using the student's knowledge to present grammar. A direct presentation can be done by presenting rules and explanations and by presenting grammar through a text, underlying all the examples of particular grammatical points in text (Baker and Westrup, 2000).

It is not necessarily true that every aspect of language use need be taught in an itemized way. In this light, when referring to grammatical structures, it is important to provide students with the necessary "contextualized examples" and, consequently, to make optimum use of the resources and aids available (i.e. the coursebook readings) as this can contribute to better grammatical understanding. For this reason, resorting to an inductive method, that is eliciting rules on the basis of examples, is more effective in this situation, rather than providing students with rules to invite them later to produce examples (deductive) (Harmer, 1989).

Reading exercises are mainly concerned with the acquisition of vocabulary and gaining a higher competence in global comprehension of written information (Munby, 1978; Johns and Davies, 1983; Sawyer, 1989; Nuttall, 1996; Carrell and Carson, 1997). "Chunks of language" associated with particular communicative contexts, provide the learner with a rich and reliable vocabulary (Widdowson, 1989). However, the passages to be read can be exploited not only from a lexical approach, but also from a grammatical/use of English approach (Sim and Laufer-Dvorkin, 1982; Glendinning and Holmström, 1992). According to Jordan (1997) in the process of reading, students will be concerned with the subject-content of what they read and the language in which it is expressed. Both aspects involve comprehension, though of different kinds, and depending on the reading purpose, different reading strategies and skills will be involved. On the other hand, we must highlight the fact that home/classroom writing composition activities can also be regarded as an effective communicative instructional tool of understanding grammar in context, that is to say, to go beyond exploiting students' writing skills proper, such as *story-telling* or *making notes*. With this aim in mind, we will use the resources of the prescriptive course-book in order to provide students with some

additional activities. In this sense, students could be asked to:

- (a) find out all the expressions in which a past tense is used in the text and justify why these specific tenses are used according to the grammar review proposed in the book;
- (b) consolidate past and past participle forms of irregular verbs;
- (c) recognise all the expressions of comparison and contrast that are used in the text and reformulate them so that they have a similar meaning, but using other words;
- (d) review the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs.

To illustrate our proposal, two different reading and two writing exercises are going to be described and commented according to the over-exploitation suggested.

Example N° 1: Unit 5: *The world around us*. This unit proposes a topic related to the environment, nature, animals and wild life, and the weather, so all the vocabulary in this unit deals with these lexical areas. In section 5.2, which is entitled *the weather*, a set of reading activities is proposed. The text is the following:

Fortunately we suffer relatively few lightning casualties in the UK, but the story in America is **a lot more serious**. **More than 200 people** a year are killed there on average by lightning, and surveys of the casualty figures upset **a few cherished beliefs**. One revelation is that houses are by no means safe. **Most indoor lightning casualties** occur while talking on the telephone, particularly in rural areas, because outdoor cables can catch a lightning strike and send the electrical current surging down into the telephone itself. **The next most dangerous indoor situation** is in a kitchen, because of the metal pipes, taps and sink units which can pass current. Watching television carries the hazard that lightning strikes the aerial on the roof. And, of course, open windows and doors are an open invitation to a direct lightning strike. There are even cases of deaths and injuries of people inside moving cars, and, in one case, the rear window was smashed by lightning and the driver injured. Another case was **more indirect**: lightning knocked over a tree which knocked over a high voltage power line, electrocuting the driver. A number of people have been temporarily blinded by a lightning flash, causing accidents and injuries. But direct strikes are **much more frequent** in open locations and **three times as many males as females** are killed in total because **more men** do outdoor work or recreation. One surprise is **that twice as many anglers are killed than golfers** by lightning, although golfers are **more likely to suffer** non-fatal injuries. The advice to avoid lightning is clear. Stay away from metal fixtures in the home or outdoors. Avoid exposed shelters, open fields, open boats, lone trees and large trees in woods. Get off golf carts, bikes, horses and take over. Do not swim.

The activities found are:

1. A pre-reading activity, where the students have to give their opinion about the best and worst places to be in a thunderstorm.
2. The reading itself; after reading the text, the students have to decide which of the headlines suggested would be best for it (there are 3 from which the student has to decide).
3. A list of activities is given, and the student has to choose which ones are dangerous in a thunderstorm, according to the text, ticking them.
4. An oral activity about the previous one, where students compare their answers and make comments on them.

Apart from these activities, students can also be asked to do the following:

1. Highlight all the expressions of comparing and contrasting in the text.
2. Rewrite them using comparative and superlative forms of adjectives.
3. Classify them according to their collocation (e.g. countable and uncountable nouns, ...)

Example N° 2: Unit 19: *Other people*. This unit proposes a topic related to describing people, personalities and behaviour, so all the vocabulary in this unit deals with these lexical areas. In section 19.4, which is entitled *first impressions*, a set of reading activities is proposed. The text is the following:

My first impression **was** that the stranger's eyes **were** of an unusually light blue. They **met** mine for several blank seconds, vacant, unmistakably scared. Startled and innocently naughty, they half **reminded** me of an incident I **couldn't** quite **place**; something which **had happened** a long time ago, to do with the upper fourth form classroom. They **were** the eyes of a schoolboy surprised in the act of breaking one of the rules. Not that I **had caught** him, apparently, at anything except his own thoughts; perhaps he **imagined** I **could read** them. At any rate, he **seemed** not to have heard or seen me cross the compartment from my corner to his own, for he **started** violently at the sound of my voice; so violently, indeed, that his nervous recoil **hit** me like repercussion. Instinctively I **took** a place backwards. It **was** exactly as though we **had collided** with each other bodily in the street. We **were** both **confused**, both ready to be apologetic. Smiling, anxious to reassure him, I **repeated** my question:

'I wonder, sir, if you could let me have a match?'

[...]

The tiny flame of the lighter **flickered** between us, and as perishable as the atmosphere which our exaggerated politeness **had created**. The merest breath would have extinguished the one, the least ludicrous gesture or word would have destroyed the other. The cigarettes **were** both **lighted** now. We **sat** back in our respective places. The stranger **was** still doubtful of me. He **was wondering**

whether he **hadn't gone** too far, **delivered** himself to a bore or a crook. His timid soul **was** eager to retire. I, on my side, **had** nothing to read. I **foresaw** a journey of utter silence, lasting seven or eight hours. I **was determined** to talk.

'do you know what time we arrive at the frontier?'

Looking back on the conversation, this question does not seem to me to have been particularly unusual. It is true that I **had** no interest in the answer; I **wanted** merely to ask something which might start us chatting, and which **wasn't**, at the same time either inquisitive or impertinent. Its effect on the man **was** remarkable. I **had** certainly **succeeded** in arousing his interest.

The activities found are:

1. The students are supposed to have read the text previously, and have to find out in the text, words which are synonyms for words which are proposed in a list.
2. 10 multiple-choice questions on the text.
3. A proposal to describe one of the characters in the text, and a set of questions about the text to discuss with a classmate.
4. An oral activity, where the students have to describe a group of people.

Apart from these activities, students can also be asked to do the following:

1. Highlight all the past tenses.
2. Explain and justify the uses of the past tenses in the context of the sentence they appear.
3. Check past and past participle forms of the irregular verbs found.

Example N° 3: Unit 12: *What shall we do this evening?* This unit proposes a topic related to entertainment, films videos and television, so all the vocabulary in this unit deals with these lexical areas. In section 12.7, which is entitled *Short sentences? Or long ones?*, a set of writing activities is proposed. They are:

1. The students read 3 paragraphs, which are part of a story, and have to decide which they prefer and say why.
2. The students are given a list of ideas and they have to write 2 short paragraphs (100 words) incorporating these ideas.
3. Students compare their paragraphs, paying attention to sentence length, and improving them.
4. Students are given 3 topics and have to write 3 paragraphs.
5. Students compare their paragraphs and suggest improvements.
6. Students are asked to write a review of a film or TV programme they have seen recently (about 150 words)

Apart from these activities, students can also be asked to do the following in the proposed writing:

1. Pay attention to the past tenses they have employed in the writing, highlighting them.
2. Bear in mind a natural chronological sequence of events, and show this by means of the past tenses.

Example N° 4: Unit 7: *There's no place like home*. This unit proposes a topic related to homes and housing, living conditions and living in a city, so all the vocabulary in this unit deals with these lexical areas. In section 7.7, which is entitled *Starting and ending well*, a set of writing activities is proposed. They are:

1. Students are asked to choose the best opening sentence from a list of 6, to use it at the beginning of a paragraph.
2. Students are asked to choose the best closing sentence from a list of 6, to use it at the end of a paragraph.
3. Students are asked to review the reading passages in the previous units and choose their 2 favourite opening sentences and their 2 favourite closing sentences.
4. Students are asked to have a look at the compositions they have read up to this unit and improve the opening and closing sentences.
5. Students have to write a description (120-180 words) of the town in which they live, making it sound attractive and interesting.

Apart from these activities, students can also be asked to do the following in the proposed writing:

1. Write the description comparing their city with another, showing differences and using *comparing and contrasting* expressions.
2. Include adjectives and adverbs comparisons (equal, superior, superlative) and give variety to the text combining them with other expressions (3 times as many, much longer, etc).

5. Conclusions

To conclude, although teachers have to struggle against timetabling and concentration of concepts when teaching core English Language at University, exploiting language activities in a different and complementary way can help students to reinforce those grammar areas which are shown to be problematic in the

final examinations. The analysis of the examination results have shown that certain areas, such as past tenses, and the comparative and contrastive expressions, are a major source of difficulty for our students. As grammar is a necessary component of second language instruction used as a tool for development of communicative competence, a complementary exploitation of some activities, such as reading and writing is proposed in this descriptive study. Although these materials are primarily designed for the development of reading and writing skills, we can also make the most of them for grammar practice and reinforcement. No extra material is provided and the tasks can be combined with the ones proposed by the text-book. Therefore students will be provided with opportunities to actively improve those grammatical areas which are considered as problematic in their performance.

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