

Text processing as a resource in the EFL class: A text-analysis model for first-cycle university students

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Resumen

Partiendo de nuestra experiencia en el aula con estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera de primer ciclo de Filología Inglesa (nivel *First Certificate*), este artículo propone una metodología para el tratamiento de textos como herramienta para profesores y alumnos en este contexto. Tras analizar la relevancia de los textos en el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés, y definir los instrumentos necesarios para la puesta en práctica del modelo, se pasa a la descripción detallada del mismo, abordándose diversas variables: inglés oral y escrito, tipos textuales, registro, estructuras gramaticales y léxicas (phrasal verbs, preposiciones, colocaciones, idiomatismos, falsos amigos, conectores), ortografía, puntuación y diferencias dialectales.

Abstract

On the basis of our experience with first- and second-year English Philology students of EFL (First Certificate level), this paper proposes a text-processing approach for teachers and students in this context. After highlighting the role of texts in the process of EFL teaching and learning, as well as defining the tools required for the implementation of the model, this approach is systematically presented. Thus, a number of variables are tackled, including spoken and written English, text types, register, grammatical and lexical structures (phrasals, prepositions, collocations, idioms, false friends, linking words), spelling, punctuation and dialectal features.

1. Introduction: Why are texts so important when studying EFL?

In spite of the wide research on Teaching English as a Foreign Language –including approaches to all four skills, grammar, vocabulary and English in use, among other variables–, with a few remarkable exceptions (Kavanagh and Upton 1994; Carter and Goddard 1997; Carter *et al.* 2001), the role of textual analysis as a linguistic

resource in the process of learning EFL has not been particularly prominent. Major classic introductions to English language teaching (e.g. Nunan 1991; McDonough and Shaw 1993; Scrivener 1994; Stern 1994; Ur 1996; Davies 2000; Larsen-Freeman 2000; Johnson 2001) have tended to neglect text-processing approaches in EFL learning and teaching. However, texts¹ are one of the most important tools for students to acquire and increase their knowledge of English. For example, texts are an endless resource to meet new vocabulary. In addition, those grammatical structures which are normally studied independently are contextually used in texts; in actual fact, coming across new and unknown grammatical structures in a text is the perfect excuse to refer to a grammar reference book to study those thoroughly. Moreover, authentic material will give learners access to the use of such abstract devices as differences of register and style (e.g. formal/informal English; spoken/written English), linking words and other cohesive devices giving unity to texts, varieties of English (e.g. British vs. American English), identifying the basic structure of major text types (e.g. narrative, argumentative, descriptive, letters, plots), etc. As a result, text analysis will be a beneficial tool for increasing knowledge that will be later used in the practice of the productive and receptive skills. Therefore, a systematic procedure of textual processing for students is proposed in this paper. This step-by-step self-study framework contemplates different aspects of the language-learning process –including grammar, vocabulary or style– which are separately treated in textbooks or individually dealt with in various works.

This model has been devised on the basis of our text-processing experience with first-cycle university students of English Philology, i.e. first- and second-year learners, aiming to achieve First Certificate level in the EFL class². Thus, although this approach to textual analysis is primarily designed for English Philology students at an upper-intermediate level, it may also be highly valuable for EFL

¹ Following Brown and Yule's classical definition, "we shall use text as a technical term, to refer to the verbal record of a communicative act" (1983: 6). This definition includes both written texts and spoken texts, as Brown and Yule (*ibid.*: 6-12) explore in their treatment of this notion. Thus, approaches to text analysis will consider both written texts like those in reading comprehension passages and spoken texts such as tapescripts.

² The four-year degree in English Philology of the University of Castilla-La Mancha contemplates the teaching of First Certificate level in first and 2nd year, Advanced and Proficiency levels being taught in 3rd and 4th year respectively.

learners of the same level studying English in other non-university contexts. The model may be used as a self-study guide for students, but also as a text-exploitation resource in the classroom for teachers.

2. What sorts of texts can be used?

The most immediate texts available for students of English are those contained in their textbook. The word itself is representative of how important it is for both teachers and learners to draw upon different texts as a methodological resource when teaching and learning English. Basically, a textbook is a compilation of samples of real language used in context (Sheldon, 1987), so that different aspects of the text (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, genres, linking devices, etc.) may be expanded thoroughly starting off from either authentic or non-authentic material. Thus, students should be encouraged to make a habit of exploring the different passages in their textbook in detail, in addition to using their book just to do the exercises set by the teacher. For instance, as Krashen (1984) points out in his treatment of the receptive skills, when dealing with a reading comprehension passage, not only should students concentrate on answering the questions asked about the text itself, but also study the vocabulary and grammatical structures carefully at home, and ask their teacher any questions or doubts which they have not been able to solve on their own.

However, students should be encouraged to notice that, apart from reading comprehension passages, any textbook has plenty of other interesting passages to explore so as to make the most of their language: tapescripts; multiple-choice exercises and cloze tests, which are uncompleted texts; models for compositions; and even the headings and instructions for other exercises, which are usually full of useful language. Newspapers, magazines, novels, songs and their lyrics, brochures, leaflets, and any other sort of authentic material are extremely valuable to increase students' knowledge of English.

3. Which tools are needed?

Although bilingual dictionaries are very useful, particularly when students do not know the English for a Spanish word, they should be encouraged to get used to

referring to a monolingual dictionary whenever they come across new English words, as they will get further information³: (i) Various definitions of the word in English, related meanings, and instances of different uses of the word; (ii) Information about synonyms and sometimes antonyms and hyponyms; (iii) Different spellings of the word and information about words with the same spelling but different meaning; (iv) Pronunciation of the word; (v) Pronunciation and spelling of the word in other varieties of English; (vi) Grammatical and usage information about the word in question (category; depending prepositions; irregularities in verbs and syntactic patterns; comparative and superlative of adjectives; irregular plural of nouns and further grammatical information; etc.); (vii) Consonant-doubling phenomena (comparatives, superlatives, before *-ed* or *-ing* forms, etc); (viii) Specialised usage of lexical items; (ix) Information about phrasal verbs; (x) Idioms containing that word, or reference to other entries where the idiom is explained; (xi) Reference to other sections of the dictionary (illustrations, appendices); (xii) Reference to usage notes where words with similar meaning are compared; (xiii) Information about derivatives and compounds; (xiv) Indications about where the word can be divided when writing or typing.

4. What should students look out for when exploring texts?

Students should be reminded that it is up to them to study texts thoroughly, and that it is only them as students who can decide how deeply they need to go into the language of the text depending on their previous knowledge. All in all, a number of variables should be particularly borne in mind, and the following list may be helpful as a self-study guide to make the most of a text⁴:

³ Such monolingual dictionaries as the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Hornby, 2000) or the *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* (HarperCollins, 2001) are particularly recommendable. In addition, in an attempt to make the most of their texts, students should always have a usage dictionary like Swan's (2000) in hand, as well as a good reference grammar book, especially with some practice, for example Murphy's (1994) *English Grammar in Use*.

⁴ Teachers may draw upon the different variables of this text-exploitation approach when working with texts in class, but the model may also be used directly by students as a self-study guide. Therefore, this step-by-step framework has been written using imperatives instead of an impersonal style to make it more student-friendly.

4.1. Written or spoken English

Make a difference between written texts and spoken texts (i.e. transcriptions of dialogues, interviews, speeches, etc., for example in tapescripts). When working with tapescripts, it is important to pay attention to conversational strategies as follows:

- Omission of personal pronouns and auxiliary verbs: e.g. A. *Want some tea, Helen?* B. *No thanks, already had a drink.*
- Expressions employed to create thinking time (e.g. *I mean; You know; Let me see...*), or when we do not know the exact words for describing something (e.g. *sort of, kind of, etc.*).
- Formulae to indicate interest in the speaker (*Uh-huh; Hmm*); conversational hesitation (*well...; ...er...; and...erm...*); understanding (*I see; (All) right*); etc.
- Expressions to give opinions (*In my opinion; From my point of view; As I see it*).
- Signalling that you are ready to start (*OK...; Well...; Right...*).
- Expressing sympathy/disappointment (*Oh dear! Poor you! Never mind!*).
- Contradicting (*Actually...; In fact...*)⁵.

4.2. Text types

If you are working with written passages, identify the basic textual pattern⁶:

- *Narratives*: When telling stories or narrating past events, pay attention to the use of past tenses to set the scene, to describe simple facts and states in a chronological order, or to refer to actions happening before the main events. Do not forget to make a note of the time expressions employed to put events in order (*at first, in the end, eventually, after that...*).

⁵ The examples and variables of conversational analysis are based on Naunton's (1989) *Think First Certificate*.

⁶ We follow the distribution of major text types in TEFL as proposed by Coe *et al.* (1987) and Byrne (1988) in accordance with the one used by the University of Cambridge Examinations Syndicate. Paltridge (2001) provides a recent update of the teaching of different textual genres in the EFL classroom, and Campbell (1998) highlights the use of texts as a crucial starting point when teaching writing.

- *Descriptions*: When describing people, places, objects, procedures, etc., look at the different stages of the descriptions (e.g. introducing the person, physical appearance, psychological features, importance in your life). You can also study the use of different adjectives and their position.

- *Discussions*: When expressing opinions about pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages or considering different points of view of an issue, you should pay attention to the way ideas are organized in different paragraphs (e.g. introduction, arguments for, arguments against, conclusion). You should also consider the use of linking words when:

- Organising an argument: *First of all; Firstly; Secondly; Next; Lastly; Finally.*
- Adding new information: *As a matter of fact...; In fact...*
- Summarizing and concluding: *To sum up; To summarise; In conclusion; On balance; All in all; In a nutshell; In short.*
- Re-formulating: *In other words; That's to say; That is.*
- Providing additional information: *Moreover; Furthermore; What's more.*
- Generalising: *In general; By and large; On the whole.*
- Referring: *Regarding...; As regards...; Concerning...; As far as X is concerned.*
- Contrasting: *However; Nevertheless; In contrast;*
- Expressing result: *Therefore; Thus; As a result (of this); That's why.*
- Giving examples: *For example; For instance; Let's take X as an example⁷.*

- *Letters*: Consider differences in organisation between formal and informal letter (address; formulae for beginnings and endings; etc.).

- Whenever you read other text types like *plots, book and film reviews, reports, articles* in newspapers or magazines, etc., pay attention to the basic structural pattern, tenses and linking words used in their organization. And remember that you should take advantage of the organization and language of these texts when you

⁷ We follow Naunton's (1989) approach to linking words and their classification at a First Certificate level. Sinclair (1990) also provides a thorough treatment of linking words and conjunctions for EFL learners.

have to write similar compositions of your own. That is why you must bear those features in mind.

4.3. Register

Be aware of markers of register in the texts with which you are working⁸. By way of example, in contrast to formal English, informal English is characterized by the use of contractions (*you're*); phrasal verbs (*I'll set off very early*); lack of passive constructions (*They dismissed me from my job*); direct questions (*Can you do me a favour?*); exclamation marks and intensifiers (*What a surprise!*); non-standard punctuation like dashes (*I love you – so let's get married*); abbreviations (*Look at this ad*); and colloquial vocabulary (*Three chaps were watching telly in the pub when the cops arrived*).

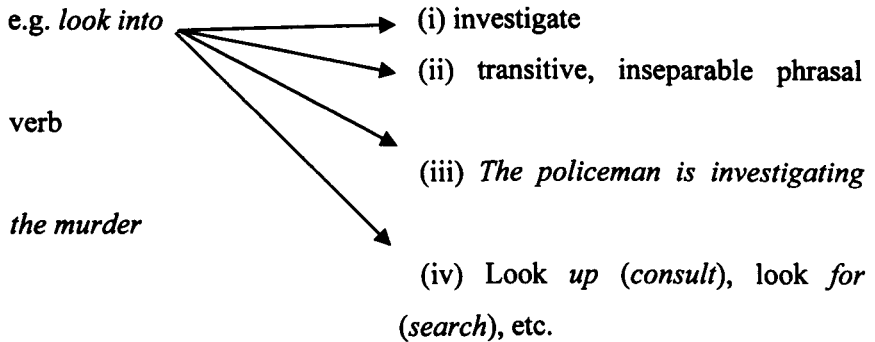
4.4. Grammatical structures

You should make sure that you understand how the grammatical structures that you study independently are reflected in the text. If you are uncertain about how grammar works in the text, use a reference grammar book. Although all grammar points are important, some are more problematic than others: tenses, modals, conditionals, reported speech, the infinitive and the gerund, the passive or relatives are just some remarkable examples to note. Articles are particularly important, especially when they are used in contexts where Spanish would avoid them (e.g. *When I first saw her* < *La primera vez que la vi*) or when they are omitted in cases where they would be necessary in Spanish (e.g. *President Clinton is no longer in power* < *El presidente Clinton...*; *I love English* < *Me encanta el inglés*).

⁸ Quirk *et al.* (1973) offer a wide range of stylistic features in English from a grammatical point of view. Differences between formal and informal English are also dealt with in most

4.5. Phrasal verbs

When coming across new phrasal verbs, do not forget to study (i) a paraphrase, (ii) the grammar of the phrasal, (iii) an example to remember, and (iv) some other particles used with the verb in question.



4.6. Prepositions

You have to be particularly careful with the use of prepositions, not only when they are used to express time, place or other circumstances (e.g. *stay at home; arrive in London; go to church on Sunday*), but also when they depend on a given noun, adjective or verb, for example: adjectives + prepositions (*angry about something/with someone; aware of; bored with*); verbs + preposition combinations (*apologise to someone for/about something; deal with; insist on; listen to*); Verbs + object + preposition (*blame somebody for; congratulate somebody on; remind somebody of something/to do something*); prepositional phrases (*by accident; from time to time; in danger of; on behalf of; out of work; to a great extent*).

4.7. Collocations

You should explore common phrases and regular combinations of words in the texts that you are dealing with⁹, for instance, *break a promise; make a promise/a mess/a choice/a mistake/the most of something/sure; do a favour/your homework/the washing-up; lose your temper; set an example/fire; tell the difference between/a lie/the truth*.

EFL textbooks at First Certificate, Advanced and Proficiency levels.

⁹ According to Halliday and Hasan, *collocations* consist of "the association of lexical items that regularly co-occur" (1976: 284).

4.8. Idioms

Idiomatic expressions with no literal translation into Spanish occur every now and again in texts. The context will indicate you how formal or informal they are, e.g. *When in Rome do as the Romans do; I haven't a clue; Make ends meet; That's the last straw!*; etc.

4.9. Spelling

- Watch out for the spelling of English words somehow similar to Spanish, e.g. *comfortable* / *accommodation* / *immigrant* / *immune* / etc.
- Observe differences in spelling between nouns and verbs, e.g. *practice* [N] / *practise* [V]; *advice* [N] / *advise* [V].
- Identify differences in pronunciation between words written in the same way but belonging to different grammatical categories, e.g. *import*: /'Impɔ:t/ [N]; /Im'pɔ:t/ [V].
- Pay attention to irregularities in the formation of 3rd. person singular Simple Present, the Gerund/Present Participle (-ing form), Simple Past and Past Participle, comparatives and superlatives, plural nouns and adverbs in -ly.
- Be careful with changes in spelling when using prefixes and suffixes, e.g. *probable* > *improbable*; *logical* > *illogical*; *regular* > *irregular*; *similar* > *dissimilar*. In this respect, texts will give you a unique opportunity to increase your knowledge of word formation through derivatives, e.g.: -ee (*employee*); -ify (*modify*); -ish (*foolish*); etc.

4.10. False friends

Do not be misled by false friends that you will come across when reading different passages, e.g. *sensible* [sensato] vs. *sensitive* [sensible]; *constipated* [estreñido] vs. *have a cold* [constipado]; *support* [apoyar] vs. *stand, put up with* [soportar]; *physician* [medico] vs. *physicist* [fisico].

4.11. Linking words

Pay attention to the use of linking words to mark logical relations (adding new information, expressing contrast, drawing conclusions, giving examples, expressing result, etc.), as indicated in section 4.2 above.

4.12. British and American English

It is important to identify whether you are working with British or American English. Although it is British English that is normally taught in Spain, you will find lots of texts written in American English (and also tapescripts for listening passages). Therefore, it is a good idea to identify features of American English in grammar, vocabulary and spelling, so that you do not mix them up. Including features of American English in a composition written by and large in British English makes a bad impression and sometimes can lose you marks, for example when taking international examinations¹⁰.

4.13. Punctuation

Punctuation rules in English vary from the Spanish ones sometimes, for example: *Dear Sir*, (British English) / *Dear Sir*: (American English) > *Estimado Sr.*: [letters]; *12,500* (English.) > *12.500* (Spanish.) vs. *12.5* (English.) > *12,5 / 12'5* (Spanish.) [numbers]; *My mother asked, 'how are you today?'* > *Mi madre me preguntó: "¿cómo estás hoy?"* [reported speech]; *The 19th century* > *El siglo XIX* [dates].

4.14. Any hints?

1. Remember to use your monolingual dictionary at all times.
2. Keep a personal notebook and write down words, expressions or structures that you regard useful; not only from your textbook, but also when reading other books or magazines, listening to music or to the news, speaking to natives or to your teacher.
3. Sometimes it is important to make your own lists of vocabulary items that you can complete over the years: false friends; differences between British and American English; phrasal verbs organized either by particles or by verbs themselves.
4. Get used to marking useful vocabulary and expressions in the passages and tapescripts with a yellow highlighter. You can develop your own technique to make the most of texts; for instance, underlining new words, circling prepositions, making notes on the margins; using post-it notes to add information from your dictionary, etc. And do not forget to revise your notes frequently.

¹⁰ For a good treatment of differences between British and American English and the most essential features to bear in mind by learners of English as a foreign language, see Swan (2000).

5. Finally, make an effort to use what you have learnt when you write or speak in English. The more practice you get, the more your English will improve.

5. Conclusion

Given the scarce attention to procedures of textual analysis by EFL students, a textual processing model has been proposed so that learners of English can make the most of both their textbooks and further textual material. Drawing on the treatment of a number of variables used by teachers at different stages of the teaching/learning process (i.e. grammar, vocabulary, register, spellings, punctuation, etc.), a systematic self-study approach to textual analysis for EFL students has been presented. Thus, students should always take all those variables into account whenever they encounter new texts in their textbooks or when working with authentic material of their own, such as magazines, brochures or leaflets. Attention to the variables in the framework will guarantee students' making an effort to make the most of their texts instead of simply using them for answering comprehension questions or looking up unknown words. This analytical framework integrates a number of variables dealing with differences between written and spoken English, text types, register, grammar and vocabulary –including phrasals, prepositions, collocations, false friends and idioms–, linking words, spelling, punctuation and dissimilarities between British and American English. Taking advantage of such factors through textual analysis will result in expanding the students' knowledge of English, which will be shown in the practice of different linguistic skills.

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