

Analysis of EFL/ESP Materials: Basis for Innovative Methodological and Organizational Pedagogy

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Abstract

All the didactic materials used for teaching EFL/ESP have a certain potential for learning. On the one hand, there are those activities focused on the learning of forms, which are likely to foster the explicit learning of language. On the other hand, there are activities focused on the content, more aimed at the comprehension of the communicative message and the implicit learning of language. Selecting the appropriate activities to promote a balanced learning of EFL/ESP is paramount; however, the increasing number of teaching materials today makes it more difficult for EFL/ESP teachers to get to know the learning potential of all the resources available to them. For this particular end, the present study is an attempt to categorize a large compilation of EFL/ESP activities with the help of an activity corpus. Each individual activity was analysed with regard to its language focus and labelled accordingly.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); Second Language Acquisition; explicitness and implicitness; corpus of activities; activity.

1.0. Introduction

Making a proper selection and implementation of activities for the subject of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a fundamental issue (Criado, Sánchez, and Cantos, 2010). Within the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), developing research into the selection of didactic materials to be used in the foreign language classroom even gains further relevance for two major premises:

- (i) firstly, the pedagogical or teaching action in class should never be disengaged from the cognitive dimension of learning. Inasmuch as the brain works following very specific procedures, what the EFL/ESP teacher does by using certain activities in class is to promote the learning of one type of knowledge or another;
- (ii) in the light of this basic fact, the second premise to be borne in mind by EFL/ESP teachers is that all teaching materials, without exception, have certain degree or potential for learning.

On the one hand, there are activities that principally focus on the learning of forms. Attention to forms usually implies the learning of structural aspects of language and, through these activities, the teacher might overtly discuss about grammar and encourage learners to respect upon the formation of linguistic structures. Exercises of this sort often entail the use of grammatical patterns, verbal tenses or decontextualized vocabulary, among others. The type of knowledge gained through these tasks is usually referred to as metalinguistic knowledge, which scholars sometimes equate with explicit or declarative knowledge (Hulstijn, 2005; Ellis, 1994; Paradis, 2009).

On the other hand, teachers can select and implement activities that are, in turn, concerned with the development of the communicative competence; that is, with the development of the four skills, namely, writing, reading, listening and speaking, without necessarily having to pay conscious attention to forms. Whereas forms might not be the major focus of these activities, students' attention is drawn to the communicative message and to the meaning of the content. Nonetheless, forms may be inferred or unintentionally acquired, even when instruction is completely focused on meaning. The type of knowledge achieved by learners in this case is commonly known as implicit knowledge, which is often equated with the terms procedural or communicative competence (Hulstijn, 2005; DeKeyser, 2009; Ellis, 1994; Paradis, 2009).

While it is true that there are activities on these two opposite extremes, and they could be categorized according to whether they foster attention to forms or focus more on the content[†], EFL/ESP teachers can also select tasks that promote attention to both form and meaning to different extents. With the latter, learners might equally improve their explicit and implicit knowledge about EFL/ESP.

Taking for granted that the teaching materials must be managed and administered by the foreign language instructor, it should be noted so far that EFL/ESP teachers have the responsibility to provide learners with activities that promote a balanced learning of EFL/ESP. This argument addresses the fact that, with a biased implementation of focus-on-form

versus focus-on-meaning activities in the class, learners might not develop the necessary communicative competences (that is, the ability to produce or comprehend language in a natural and fluent way) or accuracy in language use (the achievement of grammatical commitment).

2.0. *Explicitness and Implicitness*

The terms explicitness and implicitness (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 1994; DeKeyser, 2007, 2008, 2009; Hulstijn, 2007) can be used in different contexts of analysis. In this paper, I will strictly discuss explicitness and implicitness from the perspective of the learning potential of coursebook activities, and taking activities as the EFL/ESP teacher applies them in the classroom.

The consensus view seems to be that explicitness is closely linked to the promotion of grammar activities and, in general, of any activity that encourages learners to know the rules underlying the language. The formation of verbal tenses, linguistic structures, grammatical points, lexical items (usually in isolation, without a communicative context) or any explanation on language could be examples of explicit learning activities. Additionally, making explicit remarks or using teaching techniques on how to develop a specific skill (i.e. skimming through a text to look for specific information) could also foster explicitness in the class. Thus, it could be argued that the basic notion underlying explicitness might be the focus-on-form component. Regardless of whether the language instructor aims to teach any linguistic aspect regarding its form or meaning, as long as an explanation is delivered, it fosters explicitness. Like the learning of any foreign language, EFL/ESP learning that is explicit occurs in formal or academic settings, where students might in all probability follow a more traditional method of FL learning. There is a great likelihood that learners make repetitive or mechanical practice about the contents reviewed, which implies that the teacher takes control of the classroom most of the time and the opportunities for learners to communicate or be creative might be few or practically non-existent.

Implicitness, in contrast, puts forward the opposite approach to EFL/ESP learning. To start with, activities are communication-oriented. There is a communicative purpose in language use, thus, activities may promote the acquisition (also referred to as unintended, incidental or implicit learning) of linguistic expressions, vocabulary or grammar in a more natural way, often within mock communicative settings. The learner's attention is drawn to the communicative message, that is, to the content of the activity rather than the form in which it is expressed. Even though the context of implicit learning is inevitably artificial and academic in most cases, implicit learning activities try to create or imitate an atmosphere where students practice language within near-natural contexts of acquisition.

For the language practice to be primarily communicative, the learner's role has to be more active and participative. Conversely, though equally fundamental, the role of the EFL/ESP teacher is rather secondary, him or her being a mere guide who does not obstruct but permits communication, even if some unimportant mistakes are made.

3.0. *Objective*

By using a corpus of activities, the objective of this study was to establish a typology of teaching activities (Sánchez, 2004), according to whether the activity was focused on the form or on the content. The definition of a corpus lies at the heart of the discussion on textbook creation and analysis, but it is necessary here to clarify what is meant by both a corpus and a corpus of activities. In the literature, the term corpus is generally understood as a collection of authentic texts that the linguist can examine in order to study language as it is really used by speakers (Tomlinson, 1998). Nevertheless, the focus of this study was not to compile a corpus of specialized language or any type of language that speakers use. Instead, EFL/ESP textbook activities were gathered with a view to elaborating a corpus. Coursebook activities were at the basis of this research and analysis, but only the instructions at the heading of each individual activity were taken; the content of the activity itself was not included.

There is not much specialized literature on the subject to this date; however, scholars contributing to the development of EFL/ESP teaching materials with the help of corpus tools have devised a unique way of designing, creating and analyzing coursebook activities. What seems true is that the role of corpus linguistics within the research on the development of didactic materials for FL teaching and learning is paramount. Still, there is not a perfect method for learning EFL/ESP and many linguists (see for example Tarone and Yule, 1989; Cook, 1996) point out the need to further explore the possibilities of corpus techniques to advance in this research arena. Studying language with the techniques of corpus analysis might be advantageous and so may be the study of classroom activities. The first asset of corpus analysis is the representative value of the materials analyzed. In order to make a more objective selection and implementation of activities, it is necessary to sort out the limited analytical potential of the human brain. With the help of computers and corpora software (WordSmith Tools, Monoconc, Casualconc, Antconc, Sketchconc, among others), the choice of activities could be much greater. With this computer software, teachers could compile a complete set of activities from different textbooks and gather them in a corpus of activities, instead of dealing only with the physical format of textbooks. And with a more objective selection of activities, the EFL/ESP teacher might not be missing good activities for the classroom. The greater the scope of analysis, the more relevant the results from the activity search in the corpus. The

second advantage is that, with such a vast library of didactic materials in a computer, the EFL/ESP teacher could look for all the specific activities that would target the needs of learners instantly, without having to look for them manually in the textbooks.

Even though there is an increasing tendency to upload and publish EFL/ESP activities to online websites (most of which might be accessed and used freely), my aim is to analyze only those from school textbooks, due to their widespread popularity in the FL classroom. In Littlejohn's (1998, 2011) *The analysis of language teaching materials: inside the Trojan Horse*, the author acknowledges the importance of published coursebooks over any other type of didactic materials, since textbooks might be the main vehicle of knowledge transmission within academic contexts of learning.

4.0. Literature review

On the role of corpus analysis as applied to the study of EFL/ESP textbooks, Criado and Sánchez (2009, 2010, 2012) have carried out extensive research on various issues such as lexical frequency, EFL/ESP teaching methods or even cognitive aspects of learning (i.e. explicitness and implicitness). In this respect, I am going to discuss three of the papers that most influenced the current study.

Criado and Sánchez (2009) attempted to analyse the extent to which textbooks used in EFL/ESP teaching within the Spanish educational system followed the official regulations of the European Framework of References for the teaching of EFL/ESP. In this case, seven textbooks for different levels of proficiency in secondary education were analysed, together with other textbooks for young and adult learners. By a random selection of individual units from each textbook, they analysed the communicative nature of the strategies implemented and the communicative learning potential of the activities, which was measured using a scale ranging from 0 to 10. The authors found that the presence of activities with greater communicative potential was higher, but also there was an important number of activities focused on form (grammar and vocabulary). Similarly, Criado and Sánchez (2012) examined two textbooks used within the context of EFL/ESP teaching to examine whether students had sufficient opportunities to practice and learn the vocabulary. In an initial stage, Paul Nation's software (RANGE) was applied to identify the distribution of the lexicon in the textbooks and, afterwards, the activities were identified and quantified accordingly.

The authors concluded that both textbooks were characterized by a similar distribution with regard to the number and distribution of words in frequency ranges. Last but not least, and probably the paper that most motivated me into the analysis of the activities' learning potential with the use of corpus techniques, was Criado, Sánchez, and Cantos (2010). In this study, the authors attempted to validate a scale with which to analyse the explicit and implicit learning potential of EFL/ESP activities. They concluded that the activities analysed fostered the learning of both explicit and implicit knowledge, but the ones that promoted the implicit acquisition of explicit and/or implicit knowledge were predominant across textbooks.

5.0. Method

5.1. Materials

Activities analyzed in the corpus belong to 16 different textbooks, all of which were carefully selected in an initial stage, according to three major criteria:

- (i) a time-based criterion, according to which the textbook date of publication should range from the 80s to the present; this principle was followed to tease out whether the influence of the communicative method on the learning potential of the activities analyzed could also be found in the books that I selected;
- (ii) the textbooks should be (or have been) used in the official school system or, at least, in official language schools; and
- (iii) the level of proficiency of the textbooks should range from upper-beginner (A2) to low-intermediate (B1), to have access to a wide variety of activity types. After the textbook selection came the second stage, in which I scanned one complete unit from each individual coursebook. In this case, the criterion followed for the selection of the unit was based on the content; in other words, each unit should deal with a different grammatical point to avoid any overlapping of the contents. The third stage consisted of the digitization of the materials scanned.

For the very purpose of the creation and analysis of an activity corpus, scanned images (files with a .jpeg format) were transformed into format-free, editable text files, so that each activity could be easily copied from the textbook and pasted in the corpus with the help of OCR software (i.e. Adobe's Acrobat XI Pro).

5.2. Corpus of activities: creation and analysis

So far I have dealt with the required preparatory phases for the creation and analysis of the activity corpus. With all the activity headings put into a formatless .txt file, I proceeded to analyze and label each individual activity. It should be noted that the type of analysis involved in the categorization of the activities in the corpus was fully qualitative, since computers still might not be capable of discerning the features and nuances which make an activity more focused on form, or more focused on meaning. Different variables are involved in the analysis, the sequencing of the activities throughout the unit being, perhaps, the most complex determinant of the activity's explicit and/or implicit learning potential. However accurate computers can be for a quantitative analysis, their ability to distinguish slight qualitative nuances within the discourse of the activity heading is limited.

After the corpus of activities was compiled, all the activities were tagged with two different labels. The first label, also called 'A', contained referential data about the source of the activity. Activities categorized under the value '0' were characterized by a full focus on form, whereas attention to meaning was secondary. These tasks often dealt with pure metalinguistic explanations and simply required the student to complete a grammatical structure (i.e. the structure underlying the present perfect tense). Activities with the label B<0> were sometimes decontextualized, or the context they had was not communicative; and even when there was a communicative context, it was bound to be limited to some extent. In fact, the student may successfully complete the activity without necessarily having to pay attention to the contextual information in this type of exercises.

On the opposite extreme, activities categorized under the value '100' were characterized by a full focus on the meaning, whereas form was secondary. Exercises of this particular sort obviously required the use of forms, but in the activity's heading there were no explicit instructions as to which structures learners should use or how they should use them. With a clear communicative purpose, the task could even contain a covert structure (i.e. work in groups and say how you used to spend your summer holiday in the past); nonetheless, as long as the major focus of activity was communicating and delivering a meaningful message, the activity's learning potential was fully implicit.

Activities categorized under the value '50' were partially focused on form and meaning. To different extents, this type of tasks promoted the explicit learning of structures, but also the implicit acquisition of communicative competence through communicative practice (i.e. in pairs, put in as many non-defining clauses as possible to make the story longer and more interesting). The activities below show the three different types of focus.

6.0. Results

6.1. Quantitative analysis of the activity corpus

Results from the quantitative analysis of the activity corpus revealed a greater presence of activities fully focused on the content. Whereas 51% of the activities (340 out of 667) were completely focused on meaning, a significant number of them were fully focused on form (32%). To a lesser extent, 17% of the activities in the corpus were partially focused on meaning and form. Even though the data were not standardized, and each unit from each textbook contained a different number of activities, it can be seen that the communicative method clearly influenced the focus of the activities throughout the time frame of my analysis.

In order to examine the possible relationships between the data gathered from the 16 textbooks, I carried out a cluster analysis. The results from the cluster analysis showed that there were two extreme cases at each side of the tree (case 2 and case 8, corresponding to the textbooks Face2Face and Openline respectively). If we carefully study these two textbooks, we first notice that Openline (1990) represents an atypical case due to the fact that, even though the communicative method started to influence EFL/ESP teaching materials by the 80s, the textbook promotes the study of forms to a greater extent; in contrast, activities that are partially or fully focused on content are almost missing. Comparatively, Face2Face (2005) and Get it Right (2008) are atypical cases inasmuch as the presence of activities fully focused on meaning and those focused on form is nearly equal.

The rest of the textbooks relate differently to one another, but the common denominator is that they similarly promote attention to form and content. Indeed, cases 6 to 9 in the dendogram tree tend to have a greater number of activity fully focused on content, a smaller number of exercises fully focused on content and, in most instances, a fewer number of activities partially focused on form and content (The Cambridge English, Hotline, Reward, The English Experience, Milestones, Landmark, Inside Out, New English File and English in Mind). There are some exceptions to this tendency, in which the number of the activities partially focused on form and content exceeds the number of those fully focused on form (Streamline, Steps to Success, Valid Choice and Bridges).

6.2. Typology of activities in the corpus

After each individual activity in the corpus was properly analyzed and labeled regarding its focus, I proceeded to create three different sub-corpus.

The first sub-corpus contained the activities fully focused on form, that is, those activities tagged with the label B<0>. A wide range of activity types was found in this corpus and they mainly consisted of: (i) form checking or peer review; (ii) multiple-choice questions; (iii) completion of gaps and tables; (iv) error correction; (v) pronunciation; (vi) search for target forms; (vii) metalinguistic rEFL/ESPection; (viii) listening to target forms and repetition; (ix) close attention to forms; (x) elaboration of lists of verbs, adjectives or vocabulary; (xi) matching of forms; (xii) rephrasing and rewriting; and (xiii) readings about metalinguistic explanations.

The second sub-corpus dealt with the activities that were partially focused on form and content, which were tagged with the label B<50> and mainly consisted of: (i) multiple-choice questions; (ii) choice of correct word forms; (iii) filling gaps or blanks; (iv) search for target forms and expressions; (v) close-ended questions and controlled production questions; (vi) sentence formation; and (vii) short, and often, controlled readings.

Thirdly, within the corpus of activities tagged with the label B<100>, which were all totally focused on content, tasks mainly dealt with: (i) close-ended and open-ended questions; (ii) choice of the correct forms; (iii) photographic description (background images or people profiles among others); (iv) role plays; (v) free and argument-driven conversations and discussions; (vi) surveys and quizzes; (vii) interaction in groups and team work; (viii) written and oral comprehension; (ix) written and oral production (often different text or conversation formats were involved); (x) search for specific information; (xi) judgment of true and false statements; (xii) note making; (xiii) dialogue imitation; and (xiv) oral presentations in front of an audience.

7.0. Conclusions

The issue of EFL/ESP activity selection and implementation has a special relevance within the area of Second Language Acquisition. It should be paramount that EFL/ESP teachers knew the learning potential of the materials they handle, since they promote the learning of different types of knowledge depending on which task they are using inside and outside the classroom. However, the increasing number of didactic materials and resources for the teaching of EFL/ESP makes it more difficult for the language instructor to explore all the materials available and their potential for learning. For this particular end, the objective of this present study was to categorize EFL/ESP activities according to their focus (either on form or content) with the help of an activity corpus.

The findings from the present study reveal a stronger presence of communicative activities in most textbooks, in all likelihood, due to the influence of the communicative method in the design and creation of EFL/ESP teaching materials. Nonetheless, there is still an important emphasis on the learning of forms, as it has traditionally been done with the implementation of purely grammatical activities. Methods like the grammar-translation basically fostered the learning of foreign languages through mechanical practice and repetition. However outdated may these formal approaches be, the presence of activities totally focused on the learning of forms might follow the view that rote learning is essential for the successful attainment of accuracy and proficiency in a second as well. Likewise, Criado and Sánchez (2009, 2012) acknowledge the importance of frequency and repetition in learning, since there are solid underpinnings to support the fact that both factors play an important role in cognition; empirical testing on the cognitive effects of frequency and repetition also supports this idea.

It should also be noted that corpus linguistics and the existing corpus engines today are extremely valuable tools both for the creation of didactic materials and for their analysis. Corpus analysis tools could have a great impact on the production of materials for EFL/ESP teaching and learning, insofar as a corpus can work as an activity library and an immediate search engine with which the EFL/ESP teacher could save a lot of time during lesson planning.

The limitations underlying this study are closely related to the criteria for the categorization of activities into three different types. While there were activities that clearly fostered the learning of forms or meaning, there were other activities whose real learning potential was difficult to examine. For future research, I may include intermediate categories to analyse more in depth the potential of activities which could have been categorized between the values B<0> and B<50> (full attention to form and partial attention to form and meaning), and the values B<50> and B<100> (partial attention to form and meaning, and full attention to meaning).

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