BLOGS AND PODCASTS AS RESOURCES TO COPE WITH EFL STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE NEEDS

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RESUMEN

El mundo global en el que vivimos genera nuevas realidades comunicativas que imponen la necesidad de introducir cambios en las metodologías y en los materiales que se usan en el aula de lengua extranjera (sobre todo en países como España, donde dichas metodologías y materiales parecen no funcionar). Por ello, decidimos trabajar en el diseño de actividades que introdujeran un uso compensado de las TICs y de materiales auténticos para promover el desarrollo de las competencias orales entre los alumnos que estudian inglés como lengua extranjera (véase, comprensión y producción oral).Este estudio de caso se centra en el uso de blogs y podcast, pues, según los expertos, estos materiales se pueden combinar fácilmente para crear proyectos significativos y, además, ofrecen a nuestros alumnos la posibilidad de poner en práctica sus competencias comunicativas.

Palabras clave: TICs; materiales auténticos; competencias orales; blogs; podcasts.

ABSTRACT

The new communicative realities in our global world impose a need of change in EFL methodologies and materials, especially in countries like Spain in which the ones currently used are proving to be insufficient. In order to tackle this situation, we decided to work on the design of several activities that carefully balanced the use of ICTs and authentic materials to promote the development of EFL students' oral skills –namely listening and speaking. In this case study, we focused on blogs and podcasts, which according to the experts can be easily combined to create meaningful projects for our students whereas they can also provide them with the opportunity to put to practice their communicative skills.

Keywords: ICTs; authentic materials; oral skills; blogs; podcasts.

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a global world where communication demands have dramatically changed over the past decades and where EFL has acquired a central position. English has thus become a lingua franca that everyone needs to learn in order to communicate globally and this has been reflected in many educational systems around the world, where English has acquired the position of first foreign language.

This is case in Spain, where English is offered as first foreign language in most primary and secondary schools. Students who complete all stages of non-compulsory and compulsory education may have studied the language for around fifteen years prior to their access to tertiary education. However, several evaluations carried out externally have shown that even if our students have been studying the language for longer, the outcomes are not as positive as expected (see Eurobarometer 2014 or results on Morales et al., 2000). What is the Spanish system doing wrong? How can we fix these problems?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Back in 1987, Strevens already stated that there are several elements that influence language learning and language teaching, namely the community, the language teaching profession, the teacher itself and the learner. Those elements have a crucial role in the variability of achievement, determining the factors associated with greater or less success in language learning.

The community, for example, can be responsible of setting unattainable aims and objectives, an unsuitable syllabus –or no syllabus at all–, physical, organizational and psychological shortcomings, insufficient or excessive time/intensity of tuition, or inadequate teacher training.

Learners may also hinder the development of their language skills themselves, maybe due to a lack of motivation or to their low expectations of success. However, that is something that a teacher should be able to prevent. In fact, even if the community places a lot of constraints on teachers, it is ultimately them who make the final decision of what happens in the classroom.

In fact, if we have a look at the principles which guide the design of curricula in Spanish schools, we come across with ideas such as « using authentic and motivating materials », « enforcing a student-centered approach » or « using ICT as a communication tool and a resource by itself » (Morales et al, 2000) which are not put into practice in many language classrooms around the country, as we were able to prove after observing and surveying several of them.

Regarding the dichotomy teacher-centered vs. student-centered approaches, Aun (1994) believes that, even if student-centered approaches seem to dominate the field of education, teacher-centered teaching is still « alive and well » : teachers still do most of the talking in the classroom, lecturing students with all the knowledge they will need to acquire ; desks and chairs are usually arranged into neat rows facing the blackboard and students cannot roam around the classroom as they please ; and textbooks tend to guide what is being taught in class (p.13).

According to Hall (2011) and Hutchinson and Torres (1994), textbooks are the primary source of teaching ideas and materials for many teachers around the world and they entail many benefits for the teacher– I.e. They can provide interesting materials organized in a logical manner, they reduce the time teachers spend preparing classes, they combine different areas of expertise and can guide teachers towards effective teaching, especially when they are not very experienced. However, relying too much on textbooks has visible counter-effects: they may lead to a dependency culture among teachers (Swan, 1992) – making teachers eventually become “de-skilled” (Richards, 1985 – cited in Hall, 2011) – and they may not be able to cope with students’ individual needs (Meddings and Thornbury, 2009 – cited in Hall, 2011), hindering the development of communicative skills in the classroom (Gilmore, 2007; Hwang, 2005).

A possible response to this problem is the use of authentic materials and ICTs, since they are not only more attractive and motivating materials for learners (I.e. Peacock, 1997; Genc Ilter, 2009; Gilmore, 2007), but they can also better prepare learners for real life situations where they will use the language in the future and better cope with their individual needs and interests (Gilmore, 2007; Guariento and Morley, 2001; Warschauer and Meskill, 2000).

Blogs and podcasts have been very positively valued in what respects the development of the students' communicative skills. Podcasts can be used in the EFL classroom to improve students' listening skills –students listen to podcast already available online– or to improve students' oral production and pronunciation skills – students create their own podcast based on examples online (Sze, 2006; Ducate and Lomicka, 2009; Jobbings, 2005; Lee, McLoughlin and Chan, 2008; Rossell-Aguilar, 2007). Giving a further step, Guzzo de Almeida (s.d.), Hung (2011) and Hsu, Wang and Comac (2008), for example, suggested linking blogs and podcasts to design meaningful projects for the students.

3. DESIGN

3.1 Participants

The study was carried out in a public secondary school of Alcobendas (Madrid). We worked with a group of 19 students of 1st of *Bachillerato*[1] enrolled in the subject *Ampliación de Lengua Extranjera I* –a subject that revolves around the development of oral skills according to its syllabus (BOCM [Official Gazette of the Region of Madrid] on the 29th July 2008). It should be noted that this school offers a bilingual program in German and that most students enrolled in this subject were part of this bilingual program – their first foreign language was German and not English. Nevertheless, these students had also been studying English during all this time as their second foreign language.

3.2 Materials & Procedures

The study was designed as a case study in order to see the effect of certain activities based on the use of authentic materials and ICTs – namely blogs and podcasts– in the development of students' oral skills.

[1] *Bachillerato* corresponds to the last two years of secondary education, right before students go to university.

The study was divided in three parts: (1) a pre-study analysis in which the proficiency (listening and speaking skills) of students was measured, (2) the development of a series of innovative activities based on blogs and podcasts (the treatment), (3) a post-study analysis to measure the proficiency after the treatment. Moreover, some relevant information about the students was collected after the treatment to correlate it with the study results –i.e. Marks, contact with the language outside the classroom, cultural level of the parents and other sociolinguistic information.

The treatment consisted in the creation of a radio station located on a blog specifically designed for this purpose (https://radiostationginer.wordpress.com/). The students were asked to record four different types of radio programs (a news broadcast, a debate, a short story and a commercial) in each of the four sessions in which the treatment took place. Before creating the radio program, the students were provided with a series of authentic podcasts of the same genre they had to replicate and they were asked to listen to some of them in order to become familiar with the genre. Afterwards, they were asked to act them out –I.e. the news broadcast and the commercials– or to design some new ones –I.e. the storytelling broadcast and the debate–, recording them as a new podcast. These podcasts were later uploaded to the blog, where all students could have access to them and see what their classmates had done.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As we previously discussed, the main aim of this study was to see if there was an improvement in students' oral skills after implementing a series of activities based on the use of authentic materials and ICTs. In order to do so, we decided to carry out a T-test to compare the listening and speaking results before and after the treatment. However, outcomes showed that there was no significant difference between results before and after the treatment –Listening marks only improved 1% while speaking marks only improved 1.2%.

Nevertheless, when having a close look at the results, we realized that some students had actually improved quite a lot and that the fact

that some students had underperformed in the post-test made this improvement blur when analyzed in the general picture. For that reason, we decided to go further and analyze each case separately.

By having a closer look at results, we hypothesized that students who were improving more were generally those that had obtained worse results on the pre-test. Could this mean that students with a lower proficiency level benefited more from these activities than those with a higher proficiency level? In order to test this hypothesis, we decided to correlate these results with students' marks in English and with their global marks.

Figure 1. Difference in scores vs. Marks in Ampliación de Lengua Extranjera

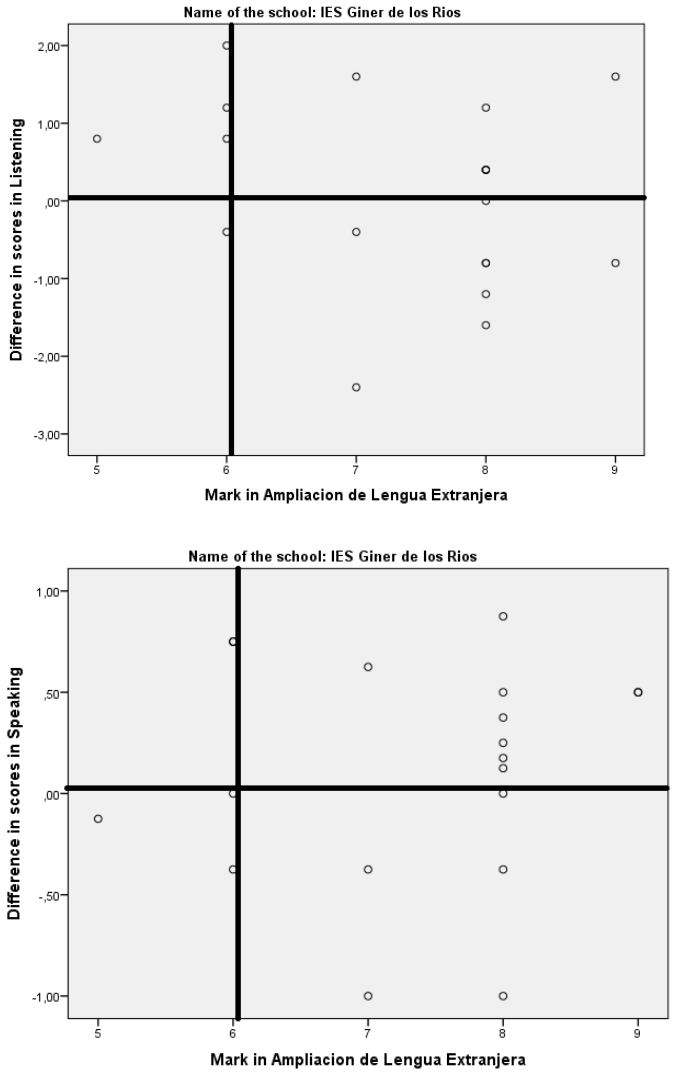


Figure 2. Correlations difference in score vs. marks

Correlaciones[a]

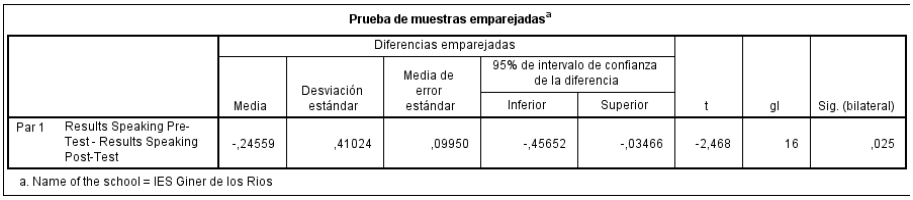
		Difference in scores in Listening	Difference in scores in Speaking	Mark in Ampliacion de Lengua Extranjera	Global mark of the course
Difference in scores in Listening	Correlación de Pearson	1	,294	-,265	,030
	Sig. (bilateral)		,221	,273	,902
	N	19	19	19	19
Difference in scores in Speaking	Correlación de Pearson	,294	1	,113	,105
	Sig. (bilateral)	,221		,646	,668
	N	19	19	19	19
Mark in Ampliacion de Lengua Extranjera	Correlación de Pearson	-,265	,113	1	,696**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,273	,646		,001
	N	19	19	19	19
Global mark of the course	Correlación de Pearson	,030	,105	,696**	1
	Sig. (bilateral)	,902	,668	,001	
	N	19	19	19	19

**. La correlación es significativa en el nivel 0,01 (2 colas).

a. Name of the school = IES Giner de los Rios

Having a look at these results, it seems that this could be the tendency regarding listening but not speaking, where most people who improve has a high level of proficiency – in fact most people improved in speaking, but results were blurred by those who had underperformed in a quite visible way in the post-test. Having a close look at those particular cases, we realized that these students had either worked in different teams throughout the study – so maybe they were not as involved as other people in more cohesive teams–, or either carry out the post-test with a different partner –which may have influenced results, as in the post-test they had been assessed compared to a different person, who was much more proficient than them (something which made them look less proficient and which made them a little bit more "under pressure"). In fact, if these two students are removed from the study, improvements are actually significant.

Figure 3. T-Test after eliminating extreme cases



Prueba de muestras emparejadas[a]

		Diferencias emparejadas					t	gl	Sig. (bilateral)
		Media	Desviación estándar	Media de error estándar	95% de intervalo de confianza de la diferencia				
					Inferior	Superior			
Par 1	Results Speaking Pre-Test - Results Speaking Post-Test	-,24559	,41024	,09950	-,45652	-,03466	-2,468	16	,025

a. Name of the school = IES Giner de los Rios

5. CONCLUSION

Even though results did not show a significant improvement, the treatment proposed seems to show slight positive outcomes for most students concerning the development of their speaking skills. Regarding the development of listening skills, results are not that clear and improvements cannot be observed right away. This could be explained by the fact that the input provided was not challenging enough for students (see Krashen's input hypothesis [1977)], who were maybe used to accessing authentic materials online. The fact that the treatment was carried out in such a short period of time may have also constrained results, as it may take more time to see relevant results of improvement among those who have a higher proficiency level (see Zipf's Law [1935,1949]).

Nevertheless, this is only a preliminary study that we will further extend in the future –maybe conducting a longer study or increasing the number of subjects–, since literature has shown us that the use of authentic materials and ICTs in the classroom as a supplementary material has the potential to cope with students' communicative needs, especially regarding oral skills. Moreover, it has been proved that the use of such tools can eventually lead to autonomous learning, encouraging the student to continue their language development even beyond the classroom (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Ryan, 1997; Little, 1997; Pinkman, 2005; Darasawang and Reinders, 2010).

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