Languages at the Crossroads: Training, Accreditation and Context of Use

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PRESENTATION

The present volume, *Languages at the Crossroads: Training, Accreditation and Context of Use*, results from the 35th edition of the *International Conference of the Spanish Association of Applied Linguistics* (*Universidad de Jaén*, 4th to 6th of May, 2017). This book reflects the strong commitment of this association with the teaching of languages, adapted to the new times, and particularly, with the teaching community. As a consequence of such commitment, AESLA has been stimulating and promoting research within the field of Applied Linguistics in all its manifestations. There is no doubt that its significant antecedents endow this book with scientific rigour, since in the light of the results obtained up to this moment, the researchers who have contributed to this volume have reflected and formulated new methodological proposals in different scientific encounters.

Its title, *Languages at the Crossroads*, accurately describes the present situation, which is characerized by new challenges and different

crossing commitments which, without any doubt, come together in an only common interest: the study of language with applied purposes.

The different chapters are circumscribed to different disciplines, which coincide with the sections of the volume, namely, 1) Learning and Acquisition; 2) Language Teaching and Curricular Design; 3) Language for Specific Purposes; 4) Language Psychology, Childhood Language and Psycholinguistics; 5) Sociolinguistics; 6) Discourse Analysis; 7) Corpus Linguistics, Computacional Linguistics and Linguistic Engineering; 8) Lexicology and Lexicography; and 9) Translation and Interpretation.

All in all, this volume contains 21 chapters dealing with languages such as English, Spanish, French, Romanian, or Basque as native and/or foreign languages. The topics covered range from the acquisition of pragmatic or grammatical aspects to medical or literary translation, including affective learning, or political, promotional and computer-mediated discourses, among many other research interests.

Finally, to put it in a nutshell, this book intends to offer a sample of the huge amount of work that is going on in the field of Applied Linguistics, a good example of the commitment with knowledge transfer in general. It implies, likewise, a demonstration that research continues its constant search for innovation, for new applications and orientations in different areas, namely, foreign language teaching and learning, cognitive, corpus and clinical linguistics, as well as applications to sociolinguistics, translation, and lexicography, among others.

January, 2018.
The editors.

PORTFOLIO USE FOR RAISING CONFIDENCE AND COMBATTING LEVEL DIFFERENCES IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES COURSES

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ABSTRACT
English for Specific Purposes instructors are often called upon to teach classes made up of students with vastly levels of English, creating significant knowledge gaps in the classroom as well as motivation problems. In this study, ESP students taking tourism and hospitality classes in Extremadura followed a portfolio evaluation system to narrow these differences and ease language learning anxiety shown at the beginning of the course. This evaluation system allowed students' strengths and weaknesses to be integrated into the global framework of task-based learning. The students were able to successfully complete the tasks both at the individual and group level and reported feeling satisfied with the results.
Keywords: ESP, hospitality, tourism, portfolios.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1. ESP courses

English for Specific Purposes instructors are often called upon to teach classes made up of students with different levels of English, generating knowledge gaps in the classroom as well as problems with

motivation (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2016) and self-confidence in the learning process (Azher *et al.*, 2010). This is partly due to the fact that ESP courses occur at a range of educational levels, including secondary and tertiary levels within vocational or technical programs, as well as in university and non-formal, adult education. For this reason, ESP student populations can be rather heterogeneous, with students having mixed levels of experience both with English as a foreign language and even with academic study in general.

1.2. Portfolios in ESP courses

The practical application of students' English learning to their field is the focus of ESP courses, and as a result evaluation techniques have been scrutinized as a way to push students to be a part of the "complete learning cycle" where their time in the classroom can "create a product that shows what they can do" (Sajedi, 2014) in their field.

Perhaps for this reason portfolios have been considered as an important evaluation tool in ESP classes, as they tend to offer a product-oriented assessment, even if that product is simply the showcased accumulation of student work. Portfolios have been studied as a way to improve writing (Uçar & Yazizi, 2016), an area where results showed statistically significant improvement over traditional methods, as well as a positive attitude towards the methodology by first year vocational students in Turkey.

Evaluating students through portfolios is often recognized as a form of student-centered assessment, which can be characterized as follows: an alternative to traditional testing, comprehensive ways to assess students' knowledge and skills, authenticity of assessment, students' active participation in the evaluation process, and simultaneous development of students' reflective thinking (Kavaliauskienė, Anusienė, & Kaminskienė, 2007). With reference to

the last point, portfolios have been especially useful in ESP classes wishing to promote self-assessment, as Sajedi claimed (2014). Encouraging self-assessment is an interesting way to counter-act student language learning anxiety, since anxiety partly stems from a fear of external, negative evaluation of the foreign language use (Awan & Anwar, 2010) and a sense of an inability to control one's expression in the foreign language. If these students are more efficient at recognizing their own skill development, being able to self-assess more accurately, they may use external evaluations more beneficially, and may also feel more in control of their progress, easing anxiety. This would feasibly help them progress towards English levels that are beneficial for their careers in the tourism industry.

Finally, portfolios may be an interesting way to focus course content in a more integrated way. As noted earlier, ESP courses are goal-oriented, which puts the emphasis on field-relevant vocabulary and grammatical structures. Traditionally, this focus has led to a more top-down methodological approach, where students must assimilate lists of key words and expressions. However, using portfolio assessment for this component, where student participation is key and the end-product can be emphasized, may make this more integral. In a study carried out with Indonesian vocational learners, Widodo (2016) found that Indonesian ESP students reacted positively to vocabulary portfolios that enhanced their lexical understanding and made them participants in the learning process.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPLICATION: ESHAEX

2.1. Population

Adult students taking English courses at the Escuela Superior de Hosteleria y Agroturismo de Extremadura (ESHAEX) most often take English as part of professional certificate programs. Most of the 51 students had an A1/A2 level, but several had a B1 level, and two

students held degrees in translation and philology. They shared a particularly low level of confidence in English, as the group overwhelmingly indicated that they felt "bad" about English, and "out of control" of their English in a self-report survey conducted at the beginning of the course. Interestingly, students also felt that they could improve their English, which is positive. In the table below 1 is the lowest rating and 7 is the highest.

Value 1	Value 7	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Bad	Good	2.5	2.0	1.3	1.0	5.0
Out of control	In control	3.3	4.0	1.4	1.0	7.0
Improvable	Not Improvable	6.3	7.0	1.1	3.0	7.0

Figure 1. How students feel about their present level of English

2.2. Course portfolios

In this study, ESP students taking English for hospitality and tourism classes at ESHAEX followed a portfolio system. The following questions were asked:

1. Would groups of students of varying levels be able to complete their individual portfolios as well as the final project tasks with all members participating in some way?

2. Would students feel positively about their participation, despite the level gaps among them?

Theoretical research was undertaken to discover which portfolio system might be most appropriate. A semi-directed, continuous evaluation system with a 4-tiered approach was chosen, where

individual students completed weekly tasks that focused on both accuracy and fluency. These tasks were encompassed in the following portfolio components 1. Grammar exercises (traditional, fill-in-the blank, etc), 2. Self-made vocabulary lists (English-Spanish), 3. Quizzes (20 items or less) and 4. Mini-Projects. These were checked weekly when students handed in their individual portfolios.

The first two components, vocabulary lists and grammar exercises, were intended to focus on accuracy and held students accountable for basic vocabulary and grammar practice, while the third, quizzes, operated as short, weekly evaluative checkpoints intended to consolidate those same points on accuracy. The final component to the individual portfolio were mini-projects. These were independent, small-scale projects which put into practice both the grammar and vocabulary points reviewed that week in a creative, productive way that turned the focus to fluency and pragmatic language use. One example of a mini-project was to create a Sunday brunch menu with annotative descriptions of the dishes, a brochure, or a short service video of students waiting on a table in English.

Each portfolio was accompanied by a progress checklist, where student progress was noted in a handout with spaces for both instructor and student comments. In this sense, the checklist was a way for students to communicate with their teacher and it purposefully included language that encouraged them to express how they felt about the class and their progress. This checklist was included because the lack of positivity students expressed about their English levels, juxtaposed with the indication that they thought they could improve, seemed to indicate that they would benefit from personal interaction with the instructor. This interaction could occur in either Spanish or English, with the student deciding which to use. Figure 2 shows an example of a course progress checklist entry from one student.

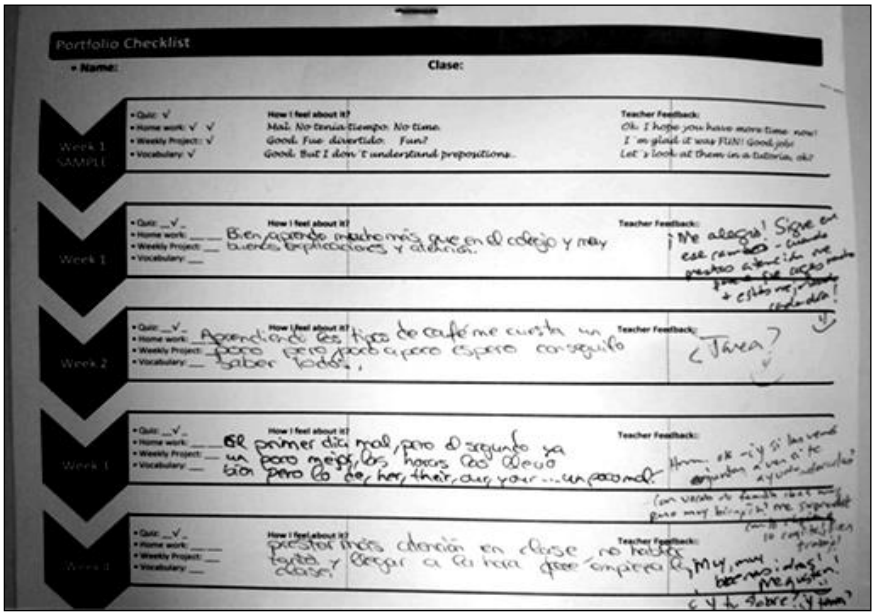

Figure 2. Portfolio checklist example.

Finally, a more extensive group project rounded off the course experience and was instrumental in incorporating the variety of learning experiences students brought to the course. This larger group project served as a final exam and built on the smaller, individual projects done weekly by individuals. Groups of 4-5 students were given an extensive task that took 12 hours of class time, and a standard set of materials to complete it. Students could not take the project home, and so were monitored to ensure everyone was participating and to create an on-site evaluation experience. Students could use their dictionaries at specific times, but they could not use their textbooks for this final exercise. The content of the final project was varied, and included both lexical and grammatical points that students had to contextualize in tasks. All of the separate tasks had to be included in a presentation about a fictitious restaurant to be delivered at a simulated hospitality fair later. Students had to prepare (1) the visual layout of a restaurant and its kitchen with specific areas (cloakroom, toilets, etc); (2) a work-flow chart for their

restaurant that included specific posts (beverage manager, pastry cook, dining room assistant, etc) with 1-2 sentence descriptions on each person's job; (3) a visual collage of tableware (including again specific vocabulary such as soup bowl, ashtray, napkin, etc) with a one-sentence description that indicated the location of the tableware with place prepositions; (4) a dialogue between one of their waiters and a customer following a few clues provided in Spanish (e.g. *Saluda a los clientes, entrega las cartas, toma nota*, etc); and (5) some close-up scenes of what some customers were doing in the restaurant that indicated actions in the present continuous. Finally, each group had to present and "sell" their restaurant at a hospitality fair and act out the waiter's dialogue.

The final project had several aims. It intended to consolidate students' accuracy in terms of grammatical structures and vocabulary items, while allowing students to place these items in context by asking them to design a restaurant and include the representation of all these tasks within it. The project required the effort of all the members and drove them to apply their knowledge with little support from materials and within a limited time. Finally, the project allowed reconciling level differences, since everyone took an active part in it. In Figures 3 and 4 part of a group's final project is shown.

Figure 3. Final group project “Restaurant ESHAEX”.

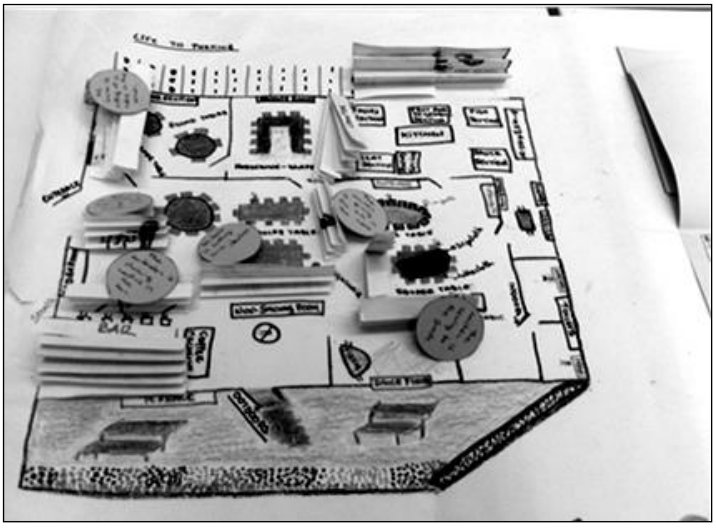

Figure 4. Final group project “Restaurant ESHAEX”.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Students' anonymous assessment revealed that they were very positive about the use of portfolios in the course. Many pointed out that it was something new, that they had felt much more comfortable using English, and that they had appreciated doing something "different". These comments were also often reflected in the weekly checklists as well. It thus seems that the use of portfolios in an ESP class is positive. Portfolios that combine both individual and group efforts are an alternative assessment method that should be considered as an option for ESP classes with different proficiency levels and backgrounds, or who show anxiety about foreign language learning.

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