From classroom experience to a workbook

This paper intends to show the design of a classroom workbook, which was the result of 5 years of teaching Business English at Educación Polimodal. For the design of this practical workbook, the following aspects were considered: the limited language exposure students have at school in the new curricula, the possible future situations in which students may need to use the English language, and the certainty that students hardly ever study English at home.

As the title reads, this proposal is a result of classroom experience after 5 years of teaching Business English at Educación Polimodal. I am not going to deal with theoretical aspects but rather the aim is to show the design of a classroom workbook.

It was the year 1997 when the Reform in Education was carried out in the Province of Córdoba. We, teachers found ourselves at a loss as regards the choice of textbooks to be used at the first year of Educación Polimodal. The contents to be taught in the subject English, suggested in the documents sent by the government, varied according to the different “modalidades” each school had adopted.

As these changes were taking place only in Córdoba, the British Editorials had not changed the syllabus of the current textbooks available in market. So, we had to use what we had at hand and make the necessary changes. Not everybody did so, and consequently most teachers went on teaching the same contents as before, including some reading texts related to the orientation the institution had adopted.
Personally, I started devising extra activities to complement the Business English coursebook I was using at that time, which covered 3 running school years because it was too long.

So, to summarise, at the moment of the reform this was the situation teachers of English in Córdoba had to face:

- New contents needed to be developed
- Textbooks were inadequate
- Teaching hours were reduced from 3 to 2 a week
- New subjects in Spanish dealing with specific contents were introduced
- Students were required to stay more hours at school.

In 1998 I decided to follow Alan Maley’s advise to write my own textbook if I felt that the coursebooks available did not satisfy my students’ needs. I had met him in 1992 at a Course for Overseas teachers of English at Bell’s College in Saffron Walden, England, when he was giving a talk on how to choose classroom material and textbooks.

His suggestion was to collect activities until I had enough to end up in a booklet or textbook to be published. I started doing it considering the following aspects of the teaching situation in our country.

**Number of students in the classroom**

The ideal number of 25 students in a classroom is not common in most public schools and even in some private schools in Argentina. That means that it is very unlikely that students will develop the four skills in the use of the language. In the area of Business English most of the information is written. Thus, I thought we had to concentrate on the skills of reading and writing.
Number of hours assigned to English as subject
Unfortunately the people in charge of formulating the Reform in Education did not consider the value of the English language as a Lingua Franca in this globalised world, and reduced the number of teaching hours from three to two hours a week. If we compare this system with the Educational System in other countries, we will easily find out that timetables include more hours to the teaching of foreign languages. Due to the little amount of time assigned to English lessons in our Educational System it is difficult to complete a coursebook in a school year, that is why some of the books available in the market have to be fragmented and used along two or even three running school years. This implies either that students lose the idea of unity, of beginning and end of a cycle, or that they get bored with the textbook. Bearing this in mind, I thought about a short practical workbook, dealing with significant contents of Business English for the first year of Educación Polimodal, which could be used and finished within a school year.

The certainty that students hardly ever study English at home
If we analyse our student’s studying habits, we will end up with the conclusion that most of them only study at home what they think are “content subjects”, that is, History, Geography, Biology, Civic Education, Economics, Physics and Maths, but rarely English. When they do so, it is only before a test.
So, being aware of this situation I thought we had to make the most of the time students are in the classroom, and use it to promote language intake and basic skills.
I believe that, as regards language, students only learn in a significant way what they practise in the classroom, not only from what they get from their teachers, but also from the conscious resolution of tasks, individually or in pairs. We should not forget the underlying principle of co-operative learning present in pair work, which is very important in the sense that more often than
not, a student learns better from an explanation of a peer of his age, sharing experience and skill to solve a task. That is why I thought of a workbook with a variety of activities dealing with the same aspect of language. I had found out that most coursebooks only had one or two activities to practise a new language item and, again, I was convinced that quantity and quality in practice lead to significant learning.

**Students’ previous knowledge of the specific aspects of the area in Spanish**

Here I want to point out the fact that when students start the first year of Educación Polimodal they lack specific knowledge about the subjects in the curricula in Spanish. In the case of Business and Management (Economía y Gestión de las Organizaciones) students often do not know concepts such as what an organisation is, hierarchies within an organisation, legal aspects, relationship between customers and suppliers, marketing, sales and profit, just to mention some. Also they often do not know how to deal with an order, a memorandum, a business letter, e-mail or fax, or how to analyse a balance sheet or a profit and loss accounts sheet. So, why ask them to do so in English? I think that those contents should be introduced and graded according to their occurrence in L1. If not we are only placing obstacles in our students’ learning process. Thus, I suggest working co-operatively with teachers of other subjects to organize the English curricula. In my case, for example, I usually introduce writing letters in the second semester while the teacher of Spanish does so in the first one. In this way students find correspondence between fixed expressions in one language and the other, and relate concepts and establish differences.

**Students’ real needs for learning English**

As mentioned before, the socio-economic situation of our country is very different from that of the first world. So, it is very likely that our students will
need to know English in the future for study reasons or for getting a job rather than for travelling abroad. All of us know that, nowadays, anyone applying for a job needs to be qualified in English. In consequence, I believe that our task is to provide our students with the necessary tools and skills to be successful in the use of the language by including useful and significant contents in the curricula.

When devising Business English Practice I tried to take into account all these aspects. Now I am going to refer to some features of the workbook.

A starting unit with guided activities and techniques for looking up words in the dictionary and translating
The requirements of Educación Polimodal, in which translation was given an active role in the classroom, and the fact of living in a globalised world demanded a practical approach to translation as a relevant aspect of learning processes. Since no textbook in market did so systematically, I decided to include a starting unit dealing with abbreviations, short forms, symbols and simple rules for looking up words in the dictionary, as well as useful techniques and recommendations for translating appropriately and comprehensively. In Business English Practice translation practice is guided, ranging from simple sentences to paragraphs and then longer texts. Transparent vocabulary, cognates and Latin-origin words, accompanied by dictionaries, glossaries and the aid of the teacher when necessary, help students to deal with the texts successfully. Also there is a translation activity at the end of each unit based on the topic already dealt with. In most cases I have included authentic materials such as dictionary definitions, magazine articles, documentation from real firms and letters to the editor, to ensure business authenticity and relevance.
Project work

I have always believed that students should be aware that the grammar aspects and vocabulary they have learnt are not restricted to the completion of activities in a textbook but rather they could be used to recreate real situations. This section was included with the aim of fostering students’ creativity in the use of language. Each Project Work activity involves students in describing their own business experience, writing about them, and giving account of events in their own workplaces. When doing this, students hopefully relate the language learnt to their individual needs and experience. Of course, in many cases, teachers may not always be able to supply the specialist terms the students may need. So, at the beginning of the course we should make clear our limitations in the area and the fact that we are teachers of English dealing with language rather than Economists. A good dictionary on Business English or reference book may help and we should use it in the classroom whenever it is necessary without feeling guilty. As a final commentary in this respect I would like to point out that the benefits of encouraging students to discuss their real life experience far outweighs any drawbacks.

Revision and summary

Most students are not used to summarising what they have learnt in a unit of work, not even in Spanish. This may be because they have not been taught the importance of gathering together information as a way of learning something meaningfully. I included this section with the aim of providing students with an instance in which they could revise the new language and grammar points dealt with throughout a unit, and assess how well they had learnt them. Usually they achieve this aim by solving different activities such as working out simple grammar rules for themselves, making word lists or glossaries, grouping expressions under headings, completing sentences and using new vocabulary in contextualized sentences. Students should be
encouraged to work through the activities individually and without looking back through the unit. If they cannot solve the exercise they can look back and revise consciously. Then, they can try to do the exercise again. Answers to the activities can be compared in pairs or with the whole class, and the teacher can jot down those areas of difficulty.

Activities
We are all aware of the fact that not all students like solving the same type of activities. While some may prefer doing a “True or False” exercise, others will enjoy answering questions. So with the aim of satisfying students’ different learning styles and preferences I devised a variety of activities to deal with the same topic in different ways. Also, activities vary according to their level of complexity, ranging from activities for recognition of new vocabulary or expressions, to semi-guided and free production ones. So, within the theory of an integrated activity approach, activities can be grouped in four types:

  Language in context activities, to introduce and practise new vocabulary and expressions in a well-defined context of situation. They involve choosing the right option, correcting ideas, matching questions to answers, completing ideas and writing letters or descriptions using guides.

  Vocabulary activities, which provide vocabulary revision and consolidation by solving anagrams, word squares, putting letters in the right order and writing words under headings.

  Grammar in context exercises, which provide grammar practice and revision of grammatical aspects previously learnt. Choosing the right verb, writing questions, and putting dialogues in order are some examples.

  Translating activities, such as looking up words in the dictionary, identifying transparent and Latin-origin words, transferring information to charts and translating sentences and short texts, aim at establishing comparison and contrast with L1 and help to develop skills in the use of the dictionary.
Assignments are in Spanish
Many teachers may not agree with this approach but I included this feature on the basis of the following criteria. First, it lowers students’ anxiety when reading the task. Since the task is provided in L1, students know what the activity involves from the very beginning. Secondly, students with less knowledge of English do not feel discriminated against and can start solving an activity at the same time as more advanced students. Also, if assignments are in L1 students concentrate only on the task rather than on understanding what they are supposed to do. In this way they feel motivated and it is quite probable that they will fulfil the activity successfully. All of us know that most of the time misunderstanding leads to failure. Besides, as the learning process involves relating what they are learning to what they already know, L1 is the referent students have to learn a foreign language. Furthermore this approach fosters autonomous learning. Given the task and the time allotted for completion, students can work at their own pace. So, I believe that we should not reject the use of students’ mother tongue in the assignments as a tool for learning the new language, provided that we warn them of the disadvantages of overusing it in other stages of the lesson. A workbook with assignments in Spanish is very useful for adults or professionals wanting to revise ESP too. Learning a language is time consuming and adults are, in general, too busy to attend regular lessons. Business English Practice can be used successfully by students with time restraints, wanting to follow a lesson on their own.

Grammar and vocabulary
The reform demands that, as regards language teaching at Educación Polimodal, the focus should be on specific vocabulary rather than on grammar. This is why in this proposal very few grammatical aspects are introduced. Instead, grammar is used as a vehicle for introducing new
vocabulary, and grammar exercises aim at recycling grammar concepts previously learnt. 

**Vocabulary**, on the other hand, is given a central role. Words and expressions related to the area of Business and Management are introduced gradually, considering their occurrence in L1. They are presented in well-defined meaningful and communicative situations, and consolidated through different written activities.

**A Grammar Appendix**

This section can be used as reference material. It contains a glossary of common abbreviations in the field of Business English; a list of verbs of regular occurrence, with their meaning in Spanish; clear explanations and examples of use of some verb tenses, modals and grammatical categories; and a list of words used to relate ideas. It is written in Spanish for the sake of a better understanding and to facilitate autonomous learning. In this way, students can use it as a permanent source of information or revision.

**Teaching Notes**

This separate booklet is divided into three parts. “**Part A**” provides a detailed guidance on how to deal with the activities in the Student’s book, ideas for extra activities and key answers for all the tasks. In “**Part B**” there are extra photocopiable activities, which can be used to present a unit or to provide extra practice at the end of each unit. Finally, “**Part C**” includes sample tests, which can be used at the end of each unit. Each test is devised to be completed in about 80 minutes. Both, the photocopiable activities and tests are complemented with an answer key.

These notes are also in Spanish, so that they can be easily understood in the case of ESP students using the workbook on their own.
As a final general commentary I would like to point out that the workbook was piloted for a year and that the changes made, were the result of students’ suggestions and needs. Also, I think it is important to mention that since the adoption of the workbook in the school I work in, students have improved their proficiency in the use of the English language. In the graph below, I show how the percentages of passing students increased from 1997 to 2000. In 1997, 79% of the students got a passing mark. It was the year of the reform, when we did not have any text adequacy. In 1998, the percentage increased to 86%. This was the year when I introduced a booklet with extra activities related to Business English and assignments and tests in Spanish. In the years 1999 and 2000, the percentages of successful students rose to 90.5% and 97.1% respectively. During these years the textbook “Business English Practice” was the only coursebook in use.

I also think it worth commenting on the fact that Business English Practice has been adopted in 6 schools in the province of Córdoba. So, although my proposal is not a magic recipe I think it may shed some light on everyday teaching to make changes to promote more successful ways of learning Business English.

(2928 words)
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