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## 89. An approach to redesigning the course *Didáctica del Inglés* for future Pre-primary teachers

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### ABSTRACT

This paper details the views and perspectives of the teachers on the new design of the course *Didáctica del Inglés* for Pre-Primary Education. These teachers were invited to participate on in-depth interviews as it was essential to understand their point of view on the changes made to the course and to explore interesting areas for further changes and/or possible research. An unstructured interview was chosen as it can be particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences and it allows the interviewer to pursue in-depth information around the topic. (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; McNamara, 1999). These interviews were meant to be qualitative research interviews that sought to cover both the facts and meaning behind the words used by the participants (Brinkman, 2018; Atkins & Wallace, 2012). The programme AQUAD was used for data collection and treatment. The interviews showed a divide in general between the two professors of the four morning groups and the three professors of the three afternoon groups on the issues of methodologies, class materials and assignments and assessment. It became clear that in many cases, other underlying issues were at the heart of this divide such as student language proficiency and student characteristics: younger vs. older, and professional profile vs. student profile. The results show a need to continue modifying aspects of the course *Didáctica del Inglés* to facilitate the teaching-learning processes for all students.

**KEY WORDS:** English, Pre-Primary, Unstructured Interviews, Future Teachers

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the second part of a two-year study regarding the course *Didáctica del Inglés* in the Pre-Primary Teacher Education degree at the University of Alicante. The main objective of this study was to take account of the changes made to the course *Didáctica del Inglés* by using unstructured interviews with the professors of the course. In the first year of the study, the teachers on the course and independent Pre-Primary teachers were asked to form part of a focus group as these groups can be useful for several purposes including: interpreting findings, establishing participants' reactions to proposed change, and evaluating new programs and procedures (Dickson, 2000). Each focus group meeting dealt with a specific area to elicit as much information as possible from the participants. The information that was gathered and analyzed led to a change of the course contents to better reflect the transversal nature of the curriculum in Pre-Primary. A special focus was put on the importance of learning a second language at early ages (Cenoz & Jessner, 2000a; Cenoz & Jessner 2000b; Corcoll 2012, 2013, Corpas Arellano, 2013; González Davies & Tarrona, 2012) and the different approaches presented in recent plurilingual programmes (della Chiesa, 2012; Beacco et al. 2016), which reflect the changes recent legislation: Decreto 9/2017 and Ley 4/2018. In addition, it became evident that the focus for students on the *Didáctica del Inglés* course should be developing strong oral skills and a flipped classroom approach was chosen for the classroom where the students would be explaining the syllabus.

Therefore, in the second year of the study (2017-2018) the main objective was to take an account of these changes in the course using a mixed method approach. The evaluation of the course was set up to provide quantitative results using an online test, presentations, and exams. Students were also asked to take a questionnaire using a likert scale on their experience and opinion at the end of the course; (these findings are presented in another study). This paper, however, details the views and perspectives of the teachers on the new course (Krichesky & Murillo, 2018). These teachers were invited to participate on interviews as it was essential to understand their point of view on the changes made to the course and to explore interesting areas for further changes or possible research on the course *Didáctica del Inglés* (Brinkman, 2018; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Interviews were chosen as they can be particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences and it allows the interviewer to pursue in-depth information around the topic. (Brinkman, 2018; McNamara, 1999). These interviews were meant to be qualitative research interviews that sought not only to cover a factual level but also a meaning level although, it can be more difficult to interview on a meaning level (Clandin & Murphy 2009; Kvale, 1996). For this reason, an unstructured interview provided the best option (Brinkman, 2018; Kvale, 1996) and the main task would be to understand the meaning of what the participants wanted to share. Four of the most important claims that have been made regarding open questions are found in Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Important claims regarding open questions (Adapted from Foddy, 1993, p. 128)

<b>Open questions</b>	
a) Allow respondents to express themselves in their own words	c) Avoid format effects
b) Do not suggest answers, indicate respondent's level of information, what is salient in the respondent's mind, indicates strength of respondent's feelings	d) Allow complex motivational influences and frames of reference to be identified

Unstructured interviewing was chosen as the methodology as it provided the opportunity to use an informal conversational style which is useful for exploring interesting topics for research and for ongoing observation fieldwork (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). The interviewer asks a few general questions to draw the participants into an open, informal, and spontaneous discussion. The interviewer can then delve further into the matter with additional questions and explore differences to collect more detailed information about the issue at hand. Additionally, Lazarsfeld (in Foddy, 1993) was one of the first to specifically suggest that open questions are useful for: "(a) clarifying the meaning of respondents' answers; (b) discerning influences on opinions (for example, the dimensions of the topic and personal motivations that have influenced respondents)" (p. 132). As this type of interview resembles a conversation, issues are dealt with as they come up and the participants are more likely to share more information as according to Foddy (1993), "respondents' answers to an open question indicate the strength of their feelings about the topic" (p. 131).

There were many concerns regarding the new course as many factors affect the teaching- learning process at university level (Monroy & Hernández, 2014). The main concern in this study was that there would differing opinions and viewpoints between the teachers and the students on how learning should occur in the new course *Didáctica del Inglés* for Pre-Primary Education. According to Peacock (1998, 2001) the changes in class materials, methodology and assessment could produce reluctance to participate in communicative activities leading to negative learning outcomes. Moreover, in another study

by Canagarajah (1993) it was shown that students that were dissatisfied with the teaching methods in the classroom could show resistance to participating in the activities. This would be problematic as the new course was focused on product/result oriented learning. The new methodology for the course also produced a shift from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach that could produce confusion during the self-directed learning activities (Bloom, 2007). Another study showed that there can be a difference between the perception of the importance of pair work in the classroom between teachers and students (Hawkey, 2006), which could also cause problems in carrying out the activities and doing the assignments on the new course. Lastly, the teaching styles of the teachers coupled with the new methodology could also be discrepant with students' styles and expectations (Peacock, 2001; Jiménez & Márquez, 2014, Monroy & Hernández, 2014) causing negative repercussions. In the words of Gabillon (2012), it could lead to possible "learning failure, frustration and demotivation" (p. 96).

Therefore, there are two main objectives of this study which include: a) the gathering of the viewpoints and experiences of the professors regarding the changes made to the course, and b) to be able to ascertain if there is a need for further changes or further research on the course *Didáctica del Inglés for Pre-Primary Education*.

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Description of the context and the participants**

The participants had to be professors who were giving the course this academic year, so a total of five professors were invited to participate: there were two male teachers and three female teachers. All have worked at the Faculty of Education at the University of Alicante for at least three years and all but one had previous teaching experience in the public education system for an additional ten years at the levels of Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education. In addition, all of the participants, but one, had collaborated on the reworking of the course the previous year and were therefore familiar with the new methodology, class materials, assignments and assessment proposed. The participants were not distributed evenly by groups of students. Two of the professors had two morning groups each (with a total of 199 students), whereas the other three professors had one evening group each (with a total of 131 students). It should be noted that the students choose the group according to their grade point average and there is a strong preference for the morning groups. The new course ran first semester (Sept. – December 2017) and had a total of 60 class hours that were divided into theory and practice. The final course exam was held in January 2018. Once the course was over and the results were noted, the interviews were scheduled on an individual basis for the first week of March, 2018.

### **2.2. Data Collection**

The unstructured interview was scheduled to last an hour was held in a comfortable environment. Two professors, due to timetable constraints, came at the same time, while the other three professors did the interview individually. In each of the cases, the interviewer asked a few broad questions to engage the respondent in an open, informal, and spontaneous discussion. If it became necessary to probe further, the interviewer often used non directive probes, as mentioned by Fowler and Mangione, (1990), which allowed the participants initiate different conversations and give distinct information across the interviews: "How do you mean that?; Tell me more about that; Anything else?" (p. 41).

The analysis of the responses was laborious as the responses varied. Moreover, in many cases, additional questions were formulated by the participants themselves which they then answered. In the case where there are great discrepancies in the responses, this was also noted. The responses to

these questions and the additional information that was given was collected, compared, and analyzed. A qualitative method was chosen as the interview contained broad questions on the different areas that could be problematic in the new course and allowed for greater detail and comprehension of the viewpoints of the participants (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Brinkman, 2018). The treatment of the data was done with AQUAD 7 (Huber & Gürtler, 2013) which enables the possibility of identifying categories and facilitates the interpretation of the data collected. The data was codified to maintain participant anonymity and each interview had an alphanumeric code: uaprofinf000 (University of Alicante, professor, Infantil, questionnaire number).

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Due to the limited number of participants and the objectives of the study, only 100% absolutes were considered, therefore four main categories appeared in the data analysis: 1) course organization (materials, topics, assignments), 2) the English language level of the students, 3) course evaluation, and 4) students pairwork / collaboration. It should be noted that the initial results of the interviews showed a sharp divide between the responses of the professors of the morning groups (uaprofinf001 and uaprofinf002) and the afternoon groups (uaprofinf003, uaprofinf004 and uaprofinf005) to many of the issues that appeared in common. The categories are subdivided by different specific issues that were reflected by all the participants and in the following section, the responses will be discussed.

#### **3.1. Category 1: Course Organisation**

The two professors from the morning groups (uaprofinf001 and uaprofinf002) seemed to find the structure easy to follow and explained their satisfaction the general running of the course. They also commented that having two groups also helped in trying out the new class materials as doing things twice made it both clearer and easier. However, the three professors from the evening groups found the need to comment on changes that would need to be made to better adapt the structure to the needs of the students. For example, one professor (uaprofinf003) declared that there was a clear need to “change the order of the topics” to facilitate student comprehension. When probed further, it became apparent that there was a language level issue that was the real issue moving this to another category. Another professor (uaprofinf005) commented on the difficulty to organize the pairs for pair work on the assignments as many evening students also work and have “limited time to work with others outside the classroom and do not see benefits in collaborating with others” which also relates to a different category.

Regarding course topic relevancy, the two professors (uaprofinf001 and uaprofinf002) from the morning groups expressed their agreement that the topics had been relevant, useful and proposed some minor changes to expand the existing topic material. However, one of the afternoon professors commented that a new topic could be included such as the use of ICTs, or that one of the topics – Stories - needed to be completely rewritten. More probing on this question, with uaprofinf004, led to the conclusion that it was related to the use of ICTs, as many literary resources are digital and the need to include this aspect would remedy the issue.

#### **3.2. Category 2: English Language level**

This category proved to be a source for conflicting responses. The morning group professors (uaprofinf001 and uaprofinf002) expressed that in some cases, the material could be challenging for the students, but that many language issues were clarified in class and the main concepts were clear. Once again, after a little probing, it became clear that as these professors had two groups each, questions

or doubts that came up in the first group help foresee possible difficulties for the second group. They also stated that as the course progressed, the students showed more confidence in using and posing questions on the material and that it reflected greater comprehension. In the case of the afternoon professors, the unanimous response was “*the language level was high*” or “*the course materials were difficult for my students*”. In one group, the professor (uaprofinf004) even provided a summary of the modules in an attempt to remedy this issue as the language level of the students, once again, was at the heart of the issue. The respondents explained the idiosyncrasies of their older students (in many cases) who had studied French as second language (L2), or who simply did not have the time between their jobs and university classes to prepare or simply read the class materials. Another professor (uaprofinf003) declared the need to include aids at the end of each topic, such as a glossary for each topic to help the students understand the material. Lastly, uaprofinf005 commented that “*doing a mind-map at the end of each module would help students follow the course and assimilate key concepts better*” and that this should be included in the materials.

The English language level of the students regarding oral presentations of the class syllabus to their classmates in each session was viewed differently. The linguistic effort of the students in the two groups of uaprofinf001 was seen as adequate and generally positive. In contrast, the difficulty observed by uaprofinf002 in both groups in the oral comprehension led to the revision, in many cases, of the material already presented by the students to aid general comprehension. When the afternoon professors (uaprofinf003, uaprofinf004 and uaprofinf005) discussed this issue, the difficulties of organizing pair work (Category 4), and the low linguistic level of some students and the perceived challenging language level of the class materials on which these presentations were based appeared in all the responses. It was clear that few of these presentations had been done satisfactorily. This issue illustrated one of the biggest challenges in the classroom and the greatest divide in the data collected.

### **3.3. Category 3: Course evaluation**

The category on course evaluation included viewpoints on the class assignments. In general all the respondents, in reference to all the groups, shared many examples of good practice (on behalf of the students) regarding the development and presentation of the assignments. However, in addition, several comments regarding the organization of the assignments were collected from the professors of the afternoon groups. A need to do even longer and more detailed assignments was expressed by uaprofinf003, however, uaprofinf005 believed that there was no need to change the assignments, but rather than let the students choose one out of three possibilities, all of them should be obligatory which would lead to better oral skills. This was an interesting response, as the same participant had expressed the difficulties in organizing pairs (Category 4) to do the assignments.

There was a consensus regarding how the assignments help students achieve the learning outcomes, albeit at different levels. The two morning group professors (uaprofinf001 and uaprofinf002) were confident that the assignments had clearly helped students achieve the learning outcomes set and referred to the rubrics for assessment and the class results at the end of the course. For the three professors from the afternoon groups, it was generally agreed that the assignments were designed for this purpose but it depended on the student and the circumstances. More probing led to the explanation that some students had ended up doing some assignments individually and others had had great difficulty due to pair work and interpersonal relations that complicated matters.

The usefulness of an online test for Topic 5 in the class materials showed a consensus across all the respondents. It was seen as adequate and not difficult. It is interesting to note that for this question,

the most curious response was that of uaprofinf003 who even stated that “*the online test was too easy and that there should be more questions or less time to make it more challenging*”.

### **3.4. Category 4: Pairwork / collaboration**

This issue showed another clear divide between the professors from the morning and the afternoon groups. In the four morning groups, pair work itself was not an issue, but the organization of the pairs was, thus different strategies were used depending on the purpose of the pair work. If it was for an oral presentation of the class materials, one professor (uaprofinf001) used this combination: linguistically weak + strong student. In the case of assignments, the other professor (uaprofinf002) let the students choose their own pair. For the afternoon professors, pair work seemed to be more problematic and after some probing it became apparent that there were two issues at hand: it was more complicated to organize as work schedules of those students who already had a job and were studying of complicated pair work, as did their perception of the usefulness of pair work.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The two main objectives of this study were to gather the viewpoints and experiences of the professors regarding the changes made to the course to be able to ascertain if there is a need for further changes or further research on the course *Didáctica del Inglés for Pre-Primary Education*. The identification of four main categories and the specific issues in each one helped identify the changes that need to be made to the course. In general, it became apparent that in general the morning group professors were more satisfied and that the three professors from the evening groups had perceived more difficulties in the running of the course and had more challenges in the classroom. This is illustrated by the responses which show a divide (in general) between the two professors of the four morning groups and the three professors of the afternoon groups. It is clear that in many cases, underlying issues were at the heart of this divide. The most notable issue was student language proficiency or the lack thereof which was a major challenge.

Another issue, class materials, assignments and evaluation also proved to be an important point where changes need to be made so that all groups can successfully use the materials. It is necessary to say that the changes in class materials, methodology and assessment did affect student participation to some degree in some groups. This is essential to note as the new course was focused on product/result oriented learning. The new methodology that shifts from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach was challenging. The importance of pair work in the classroom was not valued the same in some instances between teachers and students (Hawkey, 2006) and caused problems in carrying out the activities and doing the assignments on the new course.

There are limitations to the study, mainly the number of participants and the uneven distribution of groups among the participating professors. Nevertheless, the results from the interviews have led to a need to consider the different characteristics of the students across all groups to: a) reconsider the approach to the student presentations of the course syllabus in each session, b) to include the tools (glossaries, mind-maps) necessary in the class materials, and c) to reconsider the timing for pair work activities. It is also necessary to bear in mind student characteristics: younger vs. older, or professional profile vs. student profile (Jiménez & Márquez, 2014). Older students who balance a job with studies may not have previous English language skills or time for pair work on class assignments. These results make it possible to explore interesting areas for further changes and further research on the course *Didáctica del Inglés for Pre-Primary Education*.

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