El compromiso académico y social a través de la investigación e innovación educativas en la Enseñanza Superior

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Revisión y maquetación: ICE de la Universidad de Alicante

Primera edición: octubre de 2018
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C/ Bailén, 5 – 08010 Barcelona
Tel.: 93 246 40 02 – Fax: 93 231 18 68
www.octaedro.com – octaedro@octaedro.com


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Productive skills in B1 EFL/ESL students: Reassessment of learning needs and proposals for improvement

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ABSTRACT

The variety of resources and strategies of EFL/ESL learning in B1 level, particularly in the Spanish university context, has been traditionally associated with textbook-based syllabuses. However, the nature of language institutions and the diversity of learnership requires a thorough reassessment of materials, resources and strategies. This study is intended to examine the specific needs of B1-level English groups, with special interest in students of “Comunicación eficaz en inglés I” and “Comunicación eficaz en inglés II” (Faculty of Humanities, University of Alicante). A questionnaire has been applied in various language centers and university courses in Alicante. The questionnaire is aimed at finding an account of these students’ preferences and attitude towards the learning experience, the most challenging tasks and activities, the use of resources, and above all, the degree of usefulness and applicability of some of the strategies used in class. The findings show that the majority of students that study English are driven by personal motivations, rather than academic or professional interest. Informants seem to agree on the fact that both writing and oral production activities differ in the levels of difficulty and motivation. Whereas writing activities are connected to self-study practice, oral production remains an in-class request.

KEY WORDS: B1 level, EFL, Productive Skills, Needs

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest challenges in teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) is precisely the adequacy of materials and strategies to learners’ needs. The number of factors involved in the didactic choices made by EFL teachers are proportional to the degree of homogeneity of the studentship. Stated differently, teachers are expected to reassess the quality of the materials and strategies, particularly at the university level, by taking into account several aspects such as the number of students in class (which is higher than standard courses), limited teaching hours, the degree of motivation and interest, and, more importantly, the ‘abuse’ of multi-level classes. Some of these factors are evidently dependent on the temporal and spatial organization of the courses, but some others can be easily connected with the students’ expectations, motivations and needs.

In general, there are numerous resources and materials that have been designed for the development of receptive and productive skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Their distinction contributes to a better understanding of the effectiveness and potential of these passive or active strategies in a foreign context (Golkova & Hubackova 2014: 478), and of the role of students in “whole-class grouping and self-studying” (Harmer, 2007: 114-117). Traditionally, the syllabuses used at University Language Centers or Schools of Languages in Spain are based on similar types of materials and methodologies, which involve a general textbook and a number of learning strategies (Madrid & Pérez, 2001; Viña, 2002; Hughes, 2003; Sercu et al., 2004; Gower et al., 2005; Mercè & Gardner, 2008,
2009). Also, much importance has been given to the correlation between technology and productive activities such as speaking or writing skills, owing to the “cognitive strategies and generic competencies which are instrumental to today’s student-centered, flipped classroom” (Pérez, 2018: 1). All these authors seem to agree on the need to follow a mainstream pattern that also allows for learning adaptations and context-related actions. However, not much has been devoted to the exploration of student-centered perspectives on language learning at the university level, in which language learners of a certain level are inquired about specific practices and strategies.

Therefore, this study is aimed at exploring (i) the needs and expectations of B1 students in an EFL class, and (ii) their motivations towards more traditional, or conventional, activities and didactics in general. The examination of these aspects will shed more light on the preparation of materials and the choice of activities for a B1 English class, allowing us to get a more accurate picture of the degrees of acceptance and applicability, in relation to the specific nature or profile of learners.

2. METHODOLOGY
This section is intended to provide more information on the types of participants, the research tools and the procedure to collect data and perform a conclusive analysis.

2.1. Context and participants
As mentioned earlier, the participants in our research are: B1 students at Schools of Languages (Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas in Alicante, Elche and Elda) and University Language Centers (Centro Superior de Idiomas),* and university students of the subjects “Comunicación eficaz I” and “Comunicación eficaz II”, in the province of Alicante, aged 16 or above. The number of informants is 279, and most of them are Spanish-origin learners.

2.2. Instruments
The research tool used in the compilation of data is a questionnaire. This tool consists of 25 questions and 4 major blocks (see Annex 1), i.e. (1) personal questions about the informant, (2) learning difficulties, (3) types of learning processes or means, and (4) types of activities. The design and use of the questionnaire is the most relevant part of this investigation as it attempts to provide as much detailed information as possible on the nature of learners as regards their attitudinal, motivational and methodological traits. The differences might be induced by some grouping criteria such as age, place of study, and educational attainment. Some of the questions are intended to delve into the reasons and motivations for learning English, the personal assessment (or grading) of the activities used in class, the types of materials used or preferred, or what sort of difficulty is especially noticeable. By collecting all this information, we wish to look at the extent to which textbook or more traditional strategies are adequate to a certain type of learners.

2.3. Procedure
The research study consists of two global stages: (a) data collection and (b) data processing. The former involves the design, pre-testing, and submission of the questionnaire to the aforementioned participants. The latter consists in the analysis of the answers and comments made by the informants to construct specific learners’ profiles. This will help us elaborate on the findings and establish con-

* The survey was also sent electronically to the Laboratorio de Idiomas from the Universidad Miguel Hernández. Unfortunately, no participants from this institution have replied to our survey.
nections between profile features and needs/motivations/difficulty. The questionnaire was completed online through Google Forms as the types of questions used did not involve direct supervision, and this procedure also allowed for a higher number of participants in a short time.

3. RESULTS

The data were collected in the last two weeks of April, through an online poll created with Google Forms and distributed to students of both groups of “Comunicación eficaz I” and “Comunicación eficaz II” as well as to students of the Official School of Languages in Alicante, Elche and Elda and of the Centro Superior de Idiomas. 279 students have answered the survey. Most of them are from the Official School of Languages (201). Yet, a significant number of undergrad students from the University of Alicante have also taken part in the study (65) and this will generate comprehensive data about the level under scrutiny (B1) and the institutions in which it is taught. It is important to highlight that most informants are currently studying in B1.2 courses but no specific differentiation has been made between this level and that of B1.1. Also, various age groups have been identified, being that of 36-55 nearly half the total number of collaborators. To show the results in a more fine-grained manner, the discussion of our findings has been divided into five categories: ‘motivations’, ‘challenges’, ‘resources’ and ‘in-class and self-study practice’.

Over 60% of students have chosen ‘personal interest’ as a primary motivation (see Figure 1). This result indicates that the academic or work requisite is not as dominant as initially expected, which corroborates the relevance of psychological needs in the ‘preaction phase’ (Lorenzo, 1997: 61). The fact that students are generally driven by personal motivations might have a remarkable impact on the choice of exercises and/or strategies used in B1 courses. Interestingly, a significant number of informants have acknowledged that their English studies are not new. In fact, primary or secondary levels seem to be the starting point in most cases. It is important to point out that this research study only focuses on students’ motivation to learn English, but other variables are also involved in the classroom motivation, e.g. “how motivated teachers are to teach English” and “the extent to which their students perceive them as using strategies” (Bernaus, 2009: 32).

![Figure 1: Reasons/motivation to study English](image)
As expected, the skills of ‘listening’ and ‘speaking’ have been chosen as the most challenging ones, as opposed to ‘writing’ and ‘reading’, being the latter the least demanding of the four. This is not a new fact, as “Speaking proves to be one of the main goals when learning English” (Golkova & Hubackova, 2014: 478), and ‘listening’ has been traditionally associated with a feeling of discomfort and anxiety. This finding, and also wide-spread knowledge, shows that these skills might need some special reinforcement considering that students are easily disappointed by their academic limitations or class performance. In terms of oral production, or ‘speaking’, the top five most-challenging tasks are (listed by descending order): (i) fluency and avoidance of unnecessary pauses, (ii) use of grammatical structures learned in class, (iii) eradication and correction of mistakes, (iv) speaking for a prolonged time, and (v) correct pronunciation. And nearly 25% of poll-takers have agreed on the task or strategy (i) being the most difficult.

As regards writing production’s tasks, the top five are: (a) eradication and correction of mistakes, (b) use of varied ideas and structures to avoid unnecessary repetition, (c) use of grammatical structures learned in class, (d) use of distinctive conventions and formats according to text types, and (e) use of vocabulary learned in class. Interestingly, the ‘correction of mistakes’ represents over 28%, which shows a stark contrast with the previous result (oral production) in which this section has a far lower score (13%).

With respect to ‘resources’, the use of electronic devices is overtly predominant, in particular computers and mobile phones. This is not unexpected: new technologies have taken over the publishing industry at the same time as their presence in our everyday lives increases. The proliferation of wide-ranging apps and websites, whereby self-correction and interactive materials are available, is currently more tangible. Nevertheless, the use of print books, or textbooks, though lower than the electronic resources, is still frequent in EFL/ESL sessions.

Following the initial objectives of the present research, the aspects of usefulness and applicability should also be part of the general examination of students’ perspectives towards B1 classes. In sum, the most useful tasks or activities that should be done preferably in class are: oral activities (dialogues, monologues, presentations, etc.); getting corrections from teachers; writing; in-pair interactions; and grammar exercises (fill-in-blanks, matching, etc.). Funnily enough, getting corrections or feedback from classmates (peer-to-peer assessment) has been scored poorly, which reflects the degree of confidence (or dependence) of students on their teachers as far as feedbacks are concerned. Alternatively, oral production tasks are overwhelmingly regarded as highly profitable and useful. Against all odds, the choice of writing production among the top five ones is of interesting nature as there is a common misconception that ‘writing belongs home’ and students might find it discouraging and time-consuming.

As regards the writing production, the majority of informants (nearly 60%) feel that these tasks could be done both at home and in class (see Figure 2). Besides, when requested what sort of strategy is preferred in class, learners clearly lean towards ‘individual’ (45.5%) rather than ‘in groups/teams’ or ‘in pairs’ (see Figure 3). As to the option ‘creative/exam-type exercise’, nearly 74% of learners have expressed a clear preference over exam-type tasks (essays, letters, etc.). Other categories, of similar importance but lower scores, are: (i) writing types that are based on precise instructions on what type of vocabulary and grammatical structures should be used (56.1%), and (ii) creative writing, e.g. ad, story, etc. (49.1%). Interestingly, 24.5% of the informants have regarded creative writing tasks as predominant, which corroborates our preliminary personal motivations. However, based on the privileged position of English as a leading merit in state-run examinations, exam-type tasks remain a favorite choice (37.2%).
On the other hand, oral production, or speaking, tasks are regarded as traditional in-class activities (55.2%), as opposed to writing production. In fact, only 1.8% of learners feel that speaking should be carried out at home. This confirms a stereotyped learning notion that speaking is to class what writing is to home. Although a vast majority of informants have opted for an amalgam or combination of all different types of activities (45.5%), i.e. individual, in pairs or in groups, an important part of the final score corresponds to in-pair interaction (38%), which is much higher than in-group exercises (12.9%). The synergy ‘in-pair/in-group’, which is not commonly paid attention to, has shown some divergent points from learners’ perspectives, being clearly in favor of working in pairs.

Similarly to writing production, poll-takers have leaned towards a combination of creative and pre-established (or guided) speaking tasks (54.1%), being the latter clearly preferred by the many (34.4%). This is also connected to the need to seek exam-type strategies, in which personal motivations seem to be induced by academic or professional quests. Of all the activities used in the questionnaire, ‘giving opinion’ is clearly prevailing (68.1%), followed by ‘debates’ (50.5%) and ‘role-play’ (40.9%).

It is perhaps the use of self-study strategies or activities that best describes learners’ motivations and preferences. As far as resources are concerned, the two leading choices are online dictionaries and...
online platforms used by teachers to upload reference materials. Also used, and listed by descending order, are grammar and vocabulary books (with practical exercises), videos and audio tracks found online (YouTube, Hulu, etc.), and mobile/tablet apps. Clearly, the implementation of these activities is in synchrony with a preference over the media and electronic devices, as commented above. An interesting fact reveals that less than 10% of informants do not use forums or chats that are especially designed for English learning practices.

One of the queries in the survey is intended to compile suggestions and comments from B1 learners. They are divided into two major blocks: speaking and writing productions. As to writing tasks, some common commentaries or proposals have been gathered: the submission of more writing tasks throughout the academic course, the implementation of in-class exercises to work on situational feedback, the use of present-day topics and authentic texts in the writing sessions, and the adaptation of writing materials to online platforms and digital tools.

As regards oral production, learners have remarked that teachers should provide more corrections and feedback on their contributions. Also, some other equally important proposals emphasize both the need to devote more time to oral practice in class, particularly to the activities that involve creativity and improvisations; and a more limited ratio of students in class.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

An examination of the aforementioned results has revealed that personal motivations are relevant to a vast majority of B1 learners, unlike a presupposed notion that academic or professional motives are more prevailing. This can certainly have an impact on the content or topics used in the preparation of class activities.

Of the productive skills, ‘speaking’ is by far the most challenging task, in particular the types of activities that involve fluency and correlation of ideas. This is perhaps connected with the aspects of creativity and self-guidance, which are fundamental in the development of oral production. But still, learners seem to greatly acknowledge the importance of exam-type activities to accomplish their final learning goals; nevertheless, the survey has confirmed that the need for creative materials should play a fundamental role in the types of strategies and materials selected.

The insight of error-correction is linked to writing production rather than speaking. This could reflect a lack of awareness of the convenience of having in-class feedbacks, and the requirements for more specific ones on the domain of writing. The questionnaire has also helped us confirm presumptions on how and where these productive skills should be developed: learners believe that speaking pertains to class whereas writings tasks are essentially connected to homework.

An unexpected conclusive observation lies in the number of participants in the learning strategies: in-pair activities are preferred over in-group ones. Learners might be induced by the length and quality of contributions, which are more frequent in the former. Psychologically, this could also be owing to the perception of ridiculousness and lack of intimacy in groups. The improvement of these socio-cognitive constraints could actually facilitate fluency and naturalness in oral interactions and speech in general. An instance of this insight is precisely reflected in the choice of more egocentric activities such as ‘giving opinions’ rather than reciprocal contributions such as ‘dialogues’.

The use of online dictionaries or platforms such as Moodle prevails, as opposed to more interactive tools (e.g. forums, chats). In general, the implementation of digital or technological tools is somehow connected with receptive skills (reading or listening) whilst speaking or writing is less commonly found.
5. REFERENCES

6. ANNEXES
This is the questionnaire that has been used. Question headings have been translated into English, but authors have kept the possible answers in Spanish to encourage future use of the questionnaire by researchers.

**BLOCK 1: STUDENTS’ PROFILE**

1. Centro en el que estudia (Center for language studies): *
   - ___ Estudiante de grado (Universidad de Alicante)
   - ___ Programa IRIS (Universidad Miguel Hernández)
   - ___ Centro Superior de Idiomas (Universidad de Alicante)
   - ___ Laboratorio de Idiomas (Universidad Miguel Hernández)
   - ___ Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas
   - ___ Otro: __________________

Si estudiá en una Escuela Oficial de Idiomas, por favor, indique cuál: __________

2. Curso que está realizando/ha realizado en el año 2017-2018 (Level that is underway in the academic course 2017-2018): *
   - ___ B1.1 (EOI/CSI/UMH) / Comunicación eficaz I / 3rd course (Lab. UMH)
   - ___ B1.2 (EOI/CSI/UMH) / Comunicación eficaz II / 4th course (Lab. UMH)
3. Edad (Age): *  
16-20  21-25  26-35  36-45  46-55  56+

4. Motivos por los que estudia inglés (Reasons to learn English): *  
Marque tantas como desee.  
a. Laboral/profesional  
b. Interés personal  
c. Necesidad de obtener un certificado  
d. Requisito académico  
e. Otros: ________________

5. ¿Cuándo hizo su primer curso o asignatura de inglés? (When did you take your first course/subject of English?) *  
Indique el año aproximado.

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**BLOCK 2: LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**

6. ¿Qué le resulta más difícil a la hora de aprender inglés? (What is the most challenging aspect while learning English?) (ordene del 1 al 4, siendo 4 la mayor dificultad)  
___ Hablar ___ Escribir ___ Leer ___ Escuchar

7. A la hora de hablar inglés, los cinco aspectos más difíciles para mí son… While speaking English, the most difficult aspects are… (marque 5)  
a. Centrarme en el tema propuesto.  
b. Hablar durante un periodo de tiempo prolongado.  
c. Ordenar las ideas.  
d. Conectar las ideas.  
e. Poner en práctica el nuevo vocabulario aprendido en clase.  
f. Poner en práctica las estructuras gramaticales aprendidas en clase.  
g. No cometer errores.  
h. Hablar con fluidez, evitar realizar pausas prolongadas.  
i. Pronunciar correctamente.  
j. Interactuar y entender a la otra persona.

8. De los 5 aspectos elegidos, ¿cuál diría que es el más difícil para usted? (Of the 5 items chosen in section 7, which one is the most challenging for you?) (marque 1 solamente) ______

9. A la hora de escribir en inglés, los cinco aspectos más difíciles para mí son… (While writing in English, the most difficult aspects are…) (marque 5)  
a. Centrarme en desarrollar la tarea propuesta.  
b. Utilizar ideas y estructuras variadas, evitar repetirme.  
c. Aprender y seguir las convenciones (expresiones típicas) de cada tipo de texto.
d. Adaptarme al registro (formal/informal) y al tipo de texto propuesto (ensayo, carta…).
e. Ordenar y conectar las ideas.
f. Poner en práctica el nuevo vocabulario aprendido en clase.
g. Poner en práctica las estructuras gramaticales aprendidas en clase.
h. No cometer errores.
i. Deletrear las palabras correctamente.
j. Puntuar y separar párrafos correctamente.

10. De los 5 aspectos elegidos, ¿cuál diría que es el más difícil para usted? (Of the 5 items chosen in section 9, which one is the most challenging for you…)

(marque 1 solamente) ______

BLOQUE 3: LEARNING TYPOLOGY

11. ¿Qué dispositivos/medios utiliza para mejorar su inglés? (What types of devices/means do you use to improve your English?)

(marque todos los que utilice)
a. 
b. Teléfono móvil
c. Tableta
d. Ordenador
e. Libros en papel
f. Otros: _________________

12. En el aula, los 5 aspectos más útiles a la hora de trabajar son…(In the classroom, the top 5 aspects that are found most useful are…)

El trabajo individual.
a. El trabajo en parejas.
b. El trabajo en grupo.
c. Hacer ejercicios de gramática (rellenar huecos, relacionar conceptos…).
d. Preparar listas de vocabulario.
e. Recibir correcciones del profesorado.
f. Recibir correcciones de compañeros/as.
g. Hacer redacciones.
h. Hacer actividades orales tipo examen (monólogos, diálogos, presentaciones…).
i. Usar las nuevas tecnologías.

13. ¿Qué recursos utiliza a la hora de estudiar por su cuenta? What resources do you use when you do self-studying?

(marque todos los que utilices)
a. Diccionarios en línea
b. Diccionarios en papel
c. Apps para móviles/tablets
d. CD interactivo incluido en el libro de texto
e. Foros y chats para aprender inglés
f. Materiales subidos por el profesorado a las distintas plataformas
g. Libros de gramática o vocabulario con listas y ejercicios
h. Páginas web de gramática o vocabulario con listas y ejercicios
i. Vídeos y audios en plataformas digitales (YouTube, Hulu…)
j. Textos reales (blogs, revistas, periódicos digitales)
k. Páginas de redes sociales (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram…)
l. Otros: __________________________________________________

**BLOCK 4: ACTIVITY TYPOLOGY**

14. A la hora de practicar las destrezas escritas prefiere (During the writing practice, you’d rather):

15. A la hora de practicar las destrezas escritas en el aula prefiere en el aula
   (During the in-class writing practice, you’d rather):
   a. Trabajar de manera individual
   b. Trabajar en parejas.
   c. Trabajar en grupos.
   d. Una combinación de las tres

16. A la hora de practicar las destrezas escritas (en clase o en el aula) prefiere (During the in-class writing practice, you’d rather):
   a. Trabajar con ayuda de libros y diccionarios.
   b. Trabajar sin ayuda de libros y diccionarios.
   c. Una combinación de ambas.

17. ¿Qué tipo de actividades prefiere? (indique hasta 3) (What type of activities do you prefer?)
   a. Realizar un ejercicio de redacción de tipo creativo (creación de un anuncio, historia…).
   b. Realizar un ejercicio de redacción de tipo examen (escribir un ensayo, una carta…).
   c. Realizar un ejercicio de redacción en el que se den indicaciones sobre el tipo de vocabulario, gramática y conectores que se deben usar.
   d. Realizar un ejercicio de redacción en el que se aporten todas las ideas y solo tenga que organizarlas y conectarlas.
   e. Realizar un ejercicio de mejora de un párrafo o texto (corrigiendo errores de gramática, vocabulario u ortografía, mejorando la puntuación, resolviendo problemas de coherencia y cohesión…).
   f. Otro tipo de actividad (indique cuál): ______________________________________

18. De las actividades elegidas, ¿cuál prefiere? (Of the activities chosen in section 17, which one is your favorite?)
   (escriba la letra de la respuesta) ________
19. A la hora de practicar las destrezas orales prefiere (During the speaking practice, you’d rather):

20. A la hora de practicar las destrezas orales en el aula prefiere (During the in-class speaking practice, you’d rather):
   a. Trabajar de manera individual 
   b. Trabajar en parejas. 
   c. Trabajar en grupos. 
   d. Una combinación de las tres.

21. A la hora de practicar las destrezas orales (en clase o en el aula) prefiere:
   (During the in-class speaking practice, you’d rather):
   a. Realizar ejercicios orales donde puedas producir libremente (sin imposición de estructuras gramaticales concretas, sin ayuda del profesorado…).
   b. Realizar ejercicios orales donde debas producir siguiendo unas pautas concretas (imposición de estructuras gramaticales, vocabulario, apoyo del profesor…).
   c. Una combinación de ambas.

22. ¿Qué tipo de actividad prefiere? (indique hasta 3) (What type of activities do you prefer?)
   (indique hasta 3)
   a. Realizar un ejercicio de comunicación oral donde tengas que dar tu opinión sobre algún tema específico.
   b. Realizar un ejercicio de comunicación oral donde tengas que meterte en el papel de un personaje y realizar un diálogo con un tiempo determinado.
   c. Realizar un debate sobre un tema específico.
   d. Realizar un ejercicio de comunicación donde tengas que hablar sobre un tema y grabar tu intervención para su posterior corrección.
   e. Realizar una descripción oral de una foto o un diagrama.
   f. Otro tipo de actividad (indique cuál): ____________________________

23. ¿Le gustaría añadir alguna sugerencia para mejorar la enseñanza de las DESTREZAS ESCRITAS? (Would you like to add any suggestions to improve the teaching of WRITING SKILLS?)

24. ¿Le gustaría añadir alguna sugerencia para mejorar la enseñanza de las DESTREZAS ORALES? (Would you like to add any suggestions to improve the teaching of SPEAKING SKILLS?)

25. ¿Tiene alguna otra sugerencia para mejorar las clases de inglés? (Do you have any suggestions to improve English classes in general?)