
A Blended Learning System in EFL for improving listening and speaking competence

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Abstract: *Listening and Speaking is a common problem in educational institutions in Ecuador. The problem found in Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, was studied through a Case Study and an Action Research. The Literature Review provides information about teachers using technology in English classes and how students are benefit from it. An Action Research methodology was employed to study the problem which is the lack of Listening and Speaking Skills on students of Agricultural Engineering, courses A-B of Livestock Science Faculty. This research contains information encompassing class observations, learners' diagnostic evaluation and activity assessment. A survey was the instrument for data collection, which clarified essential aspects regarding listening and speaking skills. After the analysis, it was concluded that English classes should have some modifications. The proposal was a Blended Learning System in EFL by using on line applications like Voicethread, Padlet, Discovery Education, and Masher.*

Key words: *Listening, Speaking, Technology, Blended Learning, Competences*

Un sistema de aprendizaje mixto para mejorar la competencia en escuchar y hablar en inglés

Resumen: *Escuchar y hablar en inglés es un problema común en instituciones educativas ecuatorianas. Este particular aspecto fue encontrado en la Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, a través de un Estudio de Casos y una acción investigativa. La revisión literaria enmarcó información sobre el uso de la tecnología en las clases de inglés por parte de los docentes que permita mejorar las dos habilidades y el beneficio que obtienen los estudiantes. Con la acción investigativa se estudió el problema de los estudiantes de la Facultad de Ciencias Pecuarias paralelos A y B a través de observaciones de clase y un test. En la recolección de datos se usó un cuestionario el cual clarificó aspectos esenciales con relación al problema estudiado. Después del respectivo análisis se concluyó que las clases de inglés deben tener una modificación, proponiéndose al respecto un sistema de aprendizaje mixto en la enseñanza de idioma extranjero a través del uso de aplicaciones como Voicethread, Padlet, Discovery Education, and Masher.*

Palabras Claves: *Tecnología – Estudiantes – Aprendizaje – Aplicaciones – Clases interactivas.*

1. Introduction

The ability to communicate competently in English nowadays is imperative in fields as diverse as technology, media, commerce, medicine, business, and tourism, for this reason a greater emphasis is being placed on it. As a result, English language teaching in the world over is revolving its focus on effective communication skills to encourage learners to be able to actively use the language in interactional contexts rather than to study English as an academic subject.

Ecuadorian government, through different institutions like high schools and universities, has come to realize that English language education is an important factor in order to meet political, economic, and societal goals. In this regard, important reform have been taking place to improve the English teaching process in Ecuadorian educational institutions that include the use and application of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) regulations, as the latest epistemological framework for the acquisition of the English Language.

At Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, where this research was carried out, teaching English implies a challenge due to some factors. The students follow a six level English program, but listening and speaking are two of the most difficult skills in words of some professors and students, probably due to two hours of weekly lessons, to the limited use of technology, or the scarcity opportunities in the classroom to develop these skills.

The problem was perceived through classroom observations to teachers and three administered tests in students of Pre-technical English program at Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo during the school year 2016-2017. The problem was palpable after the tests taken to students where it was verified that audios and a conversation with the researchers were the most difficult activity for them. Furthermore, it was appreciated demotivation and concern on students because of Ecuadorian regulation that require level B2 for higher students.

In light of this situation, this research is centered on determining how the lack of listening and speaking skills affect the development of communicative competence on students at the major of Agricultural Engineering in Livestock Science Faculty of Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, Ecuador, and how new proposals could help them to improve this problem.

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According to CEFR the competences that students should have on listening are:

To understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonable familiar. To understand most of TV news and current affairs programmes. To understand films in standard dialects.

Undoubtedly, listening is the most common activity in daily life. It is part of our routine. Morley, D.D., & Walker, K. B., (1987) asserts that “we can expect to listening twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write” (p.183).

Regarding speaking: To interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. To take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views. To present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest and, to explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

According to Zaremba, A. J., (2006) and Rivero *et al.*, 2016“...of all the four macro English skills, speaking seems to be the most important skill required for communication” (p.2). Without a doubt, effective communication by means of speaking usually creates a number of benefits for both speakers and business organizations. For example, Osborn, S., Osborn, M., & Osborn, R., (2008) posit “effective speaking skills result in achievements during ceremonial speaking activities, job training activities, job interviews, and many other business purposes” (p.2).

The low level of sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences is common among UTEQ’ students according English teachers interviewed. Justly, this study proves that university students need a suitable methodology in their EFL classes to help them improve

their skills and consequently obtain the B2 level, according to the requirements of UTEQ and the CEFR.

There are some scholars who have the assumption that the nature of L2 learning involves not merely an integration of linguistic components of language, but also an integration of new technologies for improving language skills. Nowadays, in education, it is crucial for teachers to skillfully be able to manage mobile devices for instance. Curricular benefits are more than just what a student can do with a device, and for this reason there are new and emerging practices related to how to use those devices trying to understand that they are not distractors, but on the contrary they can eliminate distractors and improve motivation, productivity and participation.

Teachers can have a series of reactions about the use of technology. There is not a 'one size fits all' solution to whether an educator should use technology in the classroom. Tutors usually bring their own personal background and bias into the classroom and can be heavily influenced with the pros of using technological devices in their daily practice, whereas another may not be so keen on using it.

On the other hand, it is primordial that children and teenagers combine learning with technology as a crucial part of their daily school experience, one of them is a mobile. Bonnet (2015) recommends educators "Think about your mobile learners as contributors, not just consumers. Your mobile learners often know a lot about their part of the organization, and enabling them to share can satisfy their desire to create and contribute" (p.47).

For many scholars in the ed-tech field and in education claim that new technologies are powerful tools to help schools meet the needs of ever-more-diverse student populations. Herold (2016) posits "the digital devices, software, and learning platforms offer a once-unimaginable array of options for tailoring education to each

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individual student's academic strengths and weaknesses, interests and motivations, personal preferences, and optimal pace of learning" (p.24).

Also, once students become familiar with technology, they quickly develop proficiency in its use. This opens up an exciting new world of learning possibilities for them, and their potential for achievement skyrockets. (Avidov-Ungar, O., & Eshet-Alkalai, Y. 2011).

Learners gain new skills and become familiar with new technologies that will help prepare them for future success in an increasingly technological world, becoming them more productive, specifically in EFL instruction. Notwithstanding, it is recommendable that students learn at their own pace through a program adapted to their specific needs and educational levels, trying to focus the appropriate utilization of technology, and precisely Blended Learning could optimize EFL instruction promoting students' enhancement in the four basic skills.

This study proposes the implementation of Blended Learning (BL) strategies into an EFL curriculum, combining face-to-face classes with online instruction based on some important considerations:

- On the one hand, the proposed project will involve students to a full extent in the application of listening and speaking strategies in their classes; therefore, developing a sense of commitment and priority towards communication and participation. In addition, this study will suggest strategies about learning and practicing English outside the classroom by using technological platforms as part of BL added to the existing curriculum.
- Furthermore, this study would benefit English teachers since it will drive them toward new perspectives in terms of educational

technology given them new ideas for applying listening and speaking activities in their teaching practice.

- Finally, the implementation of this study would offer UTEQ to increase the number of students with B2 level, the degree of credibility of the Agricultural Engineering in Livestock Science Faculty and consequently this will enhance this institution's prestige.

What is more, technology promotes that many English teachers be more intellectually prepared and turn to digital media to strengthen students' basic skills. For example, the use of video and audio technology brings class material to life in a way that stimulates learners' minds and greases the wheels of learning. Furthermore, by incorporating pictures, sound, animation and multimedia significantly enhances students' ability to recall basic facts, as well as improving their understanding of complex systems. (Herold, 2016)

In words of Trapp, Blended Learning (BL) can be defined as "the combination of multiple approaches to pedagogy or teaching, e.g. self-paced, collaborative, tutor-supported learning or traditional classroom teaching. Blended learning often refers specifically to the provision or use of resources which combine e-learning with other educational resources". (p.1)

That is to say that BL refers to the integration (the "blending") of e-learning tools and techniques with traditional methods. For this reason, Trapp adds "Computer based learning is no longer regarded as an alternative to traditional forms of learning/teaching" (p.1). On the contrary, it is integrated into a learning arrangement which combines those methods that have been selected for a specific learning purpose or environment.

In words of Woodall (2010) the goal of Blended Learning is "to empower the individual to achieve an understanding of a given topic, become self-sufficient, improve his or her job performance

and ultimately drive results that support business objective” (p.3). That is to say, BL can support a variety of informal learning processes and this function is a crucial aspect of higher education or a part of the job for many corporate training departments.

Under these premises, BL is linked to Mobile Learning due to the necessity of students use mobile resources or technological tools during their instruction in an appropriate and effective way. For this reason, teachers must know that BL is an avant-garde approach with a pedagogical foundation to be correctly focused and achieve learning outcomes.

Materials and Method

The research methods used in this study were quantitative and qualitative through a mixed-method: case study and action research in order to collecting, classifying, ordering, synthetizing, evaluating and interpreting all information gathered trough instruments. Also, validity and reliability will be applied to these two types of research, though how validity and reliability are addressed in these two approaches varies.

The instrument was the questionnaire, it tends to be more reliable; because it is anonymous, it encourages greater honesty (though, of course, dishonesty and falsification might not be able to be discovered in a questionnaire); it is more economical than the interview in terms of time and money; and there is the possibility that it can be mailed.

In addition to external validity, participant observation also has to be rigorous in its internal validity checks as well as test where the degree of formality, the amount of guessing of answers by the students, the way that the test is administered, the way that the test is marked, the degree of closure or openness of test items were considered. (Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2013).

The research design for this study will be observational where case study and surveys are part of this design. One fundamental aspect is that students and teachers were observed through classes' observation. Observational data were commented on the physical environment, and were followed up with interview material to discover participants' responses to, perceptions of, messages contained in and attitudes to the physical environment.

The research work is going to take a view on the students at the career of Agricultural Engineering in Livestock Science Faculty at Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, Ecuador, during the second term of 2017. They were registered in the morning. Their ages were ranging from 19 to 23 years old, 24 females students and 34 males. This research took place at the II semester of academic program 2017-2018.

Additionally, three English teachers were observed while they proceed with their lessons with the purpose of describing the listening and speaking activities in normal classes; as well as, identifying their strategies and appreciating how students reply to the strategies. The general research question was: How can the lack of Listening and Speaking skills affect the development of communicative competence on students at the career of Agricultural Engineering in Livestock Science Faculty of Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo, Ecuador?

The research instruments used in this work were:

Two tests selected from EOI ESTEPA Escuela Oficial de Idiomas de Estepa (Sevilla), (2018) for assessing students' listening skills; and a speaking test from Britishcouncil.org, (2018) site. The tests were taken from two important institutions well-known by their official English test, so both tests had been used to establish validity and reliability.

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- Three class observation to three teachers will be proposed with the aim of seeing how they implement listening and speaking activities, and verify students' responses. Retrieved from (Medway site)

The chosen sample for this work was intentional. 58 individuals conformed these two groups been the only ones in the Pre Technical English level, which is close to achieve the minimum level required by National Educational Authorities. Being this a case study research, these groups were suitable for particular observation.

Results and discusi3n

The tests were taken by 46 students, and were divided in one test for listening and three tests for speaking. Unfortunately, twelve students failed to arrive to the tests because of their academic activities. A day after they were asked to take the tests, however they indicated that they did not feel prepared for them. The tests are:

Test 1 – Part 1- Listening Comprehension. Comprehension- Part 1 - students were asked to listen an audio called “Rita talks with her friend about a party”. The answers given by students, were 89.6% incorrect and 10.4% correct.

Test 1 –Part 2- Listening Comprehension: Part 2 - filling the gaps. Students were asked listen a touristic guide talk with some people about a field trip. The audition related to a morning and afternoon' programme was; and, what to bring to the programme. It was demonstrated that the majority of students did not understand the audios and could not fill in the gaps of the statements. For just 2, 4% from course A could answer correctly and 97.6% were incorrect; and course B showed 96% incorrect and 4% correct of the total.

Test 2 – Speaking - Oral Production: In this test student responded eight questions regarding use of technology, the options were: correct, incorrect and partially correct. Students did not have a good performance when answering short questions, 27, 5% of the

questions were answered incorrectly. While most of the responses (58, 9%) were partially incorrect answered in spite of the fact of some questions were explained in Spanish due to students' difficulty with English questions. Notably, very few questions were answered correctly (13, 61%).

Speaking – 2: Part. 1 – Oral Interaction (pair) Students were asked to keep a dialogue with a partner for commenting about a weekend break at a hotel in Las Vegas. The options for the dialogue were: a) There is no water in the minibar. B) There is no toilet paper in the bathroom. C) It is extremely cold in the room.

Most of the students had problems with details also it was observed confusion with tenses. Their expressions were vague, and they did not connect ideas coherently. Students completed the required time however it was evident that they cannot organize their speaking properly. Very questions were replied correctly (27.53%) in front of 72,46% of incorrect.

Speaking – Part 2 - Oral Production (individual) Students were required to speak for just one minute selecting one of the following topics: Talk about yourself, Describe a photo, picture or a person, information gap activity. Tell a story or personal anecdote, and oral presentation. Students had difficulty on elaborate coherent sentences probably due to lack of vocabulary, and problems with grammar and syntax. Time frame was complete because students tried to reach it with regular breaks. The right answers given by students of course A were 46, 67% incorrect and 53, 33% correct; regarding course B the answers were 34, 92% corrects, and incorrect were 65, 8%.

Teachers' questionnaires describe what teachers' point of view on the development of competences on EFL students at UTEQ are, and the way they organize and structure lessons as well as the solutions to different activities proposed. The instrument had three parts:

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1. The use of audiovisual and the target language in their classroom. Two of them admitted speaking only in English because their students can understand this language; however, in the second statement teachers agree students did not appreciate that classes be completely in English. Two of them admitted using videos for enhancing the students' communicative skills.

2. The attitude of the teacher regarding using of audiovisuals in course. Teachers consulted said that audiovisuals are highly beneficial for students, help to improve daily because increases students' motivation and their participation in classes, also audiovisual are effective for planning lesson, and using them in classes do not require lot of time.

3. The material available and the training that teachers have. Teachers are disagreeing about having materials available in the classroom, and although they replied that extra visual aids are part of teachers' job only one of them admitted is trained to create their own audiovisual material.

In researchers' opinion class observation is a good instrument because it helps to educators to be more conscious of how they perform in the classroom as well as students' needs; promote dialogue and discussion in a school district including everything we can learn from other.

Under these considerations, it is proposed Blended Learning, because constitute a relevant methodological strategy within a flexible-learning framework that would offer a unique opportunity to fully integrate pedagogy and technology with teaching and learning. Besides, BL can be introduced to teachers and learners as part of a transformative redesign process using important digital tools that reinforce the competence of students about listening and speaking. Some of them are:

Vocethread: a web based tool that allows learners to work collaboratively using multimedia slide shows with voice (conversations) while storing images, documents, videos and audio files. (Mc. Dougald, J. S. 2013). Voice Thread has many

prospective uses for face to face and online classes additionally students can create their own content for assignments like:

Narrate a PowerPoint presentation with audio or video.

Pose a question or topic and use it as a visual discussion board.

Encourage student to student interactions.

Create digital stories by narrating over images, videos and slides. Or, create collaborative stories with VoiceThread's collaboration features.

Upload video to VoiceThread and gather reflections.

Practice a foreign language.

Evaluate, review or critique an idea or a student presentation (University)

Padlet: an online virtual “bulletin” board, where students and teachers can collaborate, reflect, share links and pictures, in a secure location. Padlet allows users to create a hidden wall with a custom URL. Padlet creators can also moderate posts, remove posts, and manage their board. 24/7. McDougald, J. S. (2013) Also, it is possible to use padlet for storytelling, class brain storming (online or offline), and for sharing ideas. As teachers we should encourage our students to create pictures, words, and ideas for teams that deserve recognition!

Masher (online video creation and sharing application that allows students to create videos using uploaded photos, video clips and music in addition to the library of resources available to each user. McDougald, J. S. (2013). As teacher we know that incorporating video projects in the classroom is one way to provide a rich blended learning experience for students. In words of Image Learning Technology blog, “Masher is a fun, free, tool for creating video mash-ups. Masher offers large collection of video clips, music, and effects from their gallery. You can also add your own images, video clips, and music clips through the Masher uploader. Masher allows you to insert text throughout your video. Using Masher is simple: just drag elements from the media gallery into the timeline editor. From there, you can arrange the sequence of

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elements, and when you are ready, you can publish and share your production". (Learning)

Discovery Education, Discovery Education's Puzzle maker provides teachers, students, and parents, the tools necessary to create crossword, puzzles, word search puzzles, mazes and more online. Nowadays educational institutions are implementing new kind of learning in an effort to improve the quality and reputation of their own establishments, and one of these interesting methods of learning is discovery learning.

Discovery learning is a kind of teaching that is based on the student finding things out for themselves, looking into problems, and asking questions. Discovery learning is used in the classroom for solving exercises and educational programs. Students will undergo discovery learning when they are looking at their own experiences and knowledge in their studies, and enquiring about further information to improve their understanding. Discovery learning will also be used in terms of answering controversial and tricky questions, asking other people what they think, and generally discussing things.

It is popular in special-needs facilities for students with disabilities or learning problems. It has been proven time after time that discovery learning is an incredibly effective method of teaching special needs students, and is perfect for allowing students to have a productive learning environment that promotes questioning things, discussing ideas, and getting involved.

In a regular classroom, a teacher who is trying to enforce new innovative methods of teaching might give students different problems, and try and get them to work together to come up with a solution to this problem. This can be implemented in nearly any kind of class and consistently proves to be an effective way of teaching. (Resource).

Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn based on the results of the data analysis.

- Most of UTEQ students have not developed their listening comprehension in EFL classes and were unable to fill the gaps of statements in their test after listening to a basic conversation. Most of them had problems answering questions in English even though teachers used Spanish to be understood. Main detected problems were with grammar, syntax, vocabulary, tense and time frame while speaking.

- As a possible barrier for students can be mentioned the lack or shortage of time (only two face-to-face hours of English classes weekly), few activities using TICs -only two of three English teachers used projector in EFL classes-, it was not observed the use of any application available on the internet or important websites, and lack of opportunities outside of classes for developing speaking or listening skills.

- All professors consulted on this study are conscious on the necessity of applying technological resources in EFL classes, but in the practice most of them do not utilize TICs in a sufficient and effective way.

- The criteria established by the CEF regarding listening and speaking could not be appreciated due to students of Livestock Science Faculty performance. It was difficult to hold a conversation grammatically correct,

- The strategies that will help students to improve their listening and speaking skills are included in blended learning activities oriented to enhance their competences through the use of applications like Padlet, Education Discovery, Masher and VoiceThread etc. that will reinforce their competences in English classes.

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