

INTEGRATED LANGUAGE AND COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING – A PROPOSED PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STEPPING INTO ACADEMIA

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Abstract

This article reports on an innovative practice entailing the use of an EAP literacy portfolio as a pedagogical tool for initiating adult language learners in higher education into a language/competency-oriented learning while building up a supportive environment and setting off a culture for learning. The rationale underpinning this integrated language/competency oriented approach was double-fold: firstly, to stimulate the students' competence in a repertoire of academic literacies and, secondly, to formulate appropriate instructional interventions regarding curricular design, classroom methodology and language assessment system. The article describes the procedures carried out for implementing this integrative approach – namely, designing a coherent instruction and teaching materials, planning classroom work, introducing on-line learner management systems for monitoring progress, assessing student performance and supporting on-going, measurable progress of linguistic, metacognitive and interpersonal competencies. On pedagogical grounds, the article discusses how the ELP becomes a suitable tool to make the course content and pedagogy stay true to the linguistic and generic communicative skills that lie at the heart of academia. In addition, it assesses the advantages of the ELP in helping diagnose each student's conceptual and competency-oriented progress, organise, control and support the learning process and make students move from the reactive into the proactive.

Keywords: language learning, EAP (English for Academic Purposes), ELP (European Language Portfolio), EAP literacy portfolio, academic literacies, TEFL (Teaching of English as a Foreign Language)

Stepping into 'academic literacies'

In *Social Linguistics and Literacies*, James P. Gee (1996: 55) defined the capacities of 'literacy' as those "giving rise to higher-order cognitive abilities". Gee further argued that even if literacy is a personal cognitive skill it should be seen "in terms of its different uses in different social and cultural practices" (ibid.: 72). Broadly speaking, adult language education within the domain of General English has primarily relied on the theoretical tenets of sociolinguistics (e.g. Hymes, 1971) and, more specifically, on the communicative approach to language learning. It places

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special emphasis on the grammatical, pragmatic, sociolinguistic and strategic knowledge of the language (Canale and Swain, 1980; Swan, 1985a, b; Oxford et al., 1989). In a related manner, the integration of communicative skills likewise underpins the philosophy of the CEFRL (Council of Europe, 2001) and its Language Portfolio initiative (Council of Europe, 1997), as clearly reflected in its ‘can-do’ descriptors. On the other hand, language teaching and learning approaches within the domain of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education have traditionally assumed that an academic literacies approach is needed alongside the communicative approach in order to better cater for the students’ specific communication requirements in academic settings. As coined by Casanave and Li (2008), “academic enculturation” thus involves not only awareness of and responsiveness to communicative skills-based learning across different community practices, but also the development of the higher-rank cognitive, instrumental and social abilities that lie at the heart of academia (e.g., information search and transfer, analytical skills, synthesising skills, critical thinking ability, decision taking, problem solving and team working, among others).

Within the Spanish educational context, students entering the Degree of English Studies at the University of Zaragoza (Spain) are expected to improve their language proficiency by attending General English courses throughout the Degree of English Studies, that is to say, courses taking place consecutively from 1st to 4th year. In the 1st year, these students prove to be sufficiently familiarised with the communicative approach to language learning, yet they do not master the specific literacies needed to successfully attend and participate in the English for Academic Purposes courses that are also imparted in the Degree (in the 2nd and 3rd years). Following Johns (1997), Paltridge (2002) and Paltridge et al. (2009), this paper reports on an innovative practice entailing the implementation of an EAP Literacy Portfolio (Durán and Pierce, 2007; Durán et al., 2009) as a pedagogical tool for initiating students in an integrated language and competency-oriented learning and by this means solving the competency-knowledge gap of these students.

The goal of this innovative practice was to raise students’ awareness and elicit extensive practice of a range of academic literacies while they are learning the language and improving their communicative skills. The rationale for implementing an academic ELP in a General English course (imparted in the second semester of the 1st year of the degree) leading to an EAP course (imparted in the first semester of the 2nd year of the degree) was double-fold: firstly, to make the students successfully step into the acquisition of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998; Zamel and Spack, 1998) and, secondly, to formulate appropriate instructional interventions for making students successfully complete the upper-intermediate and advanced EAP courses in the above-mentioned degree. Theoretically, the underlying rationale for the portfolio implementation was Trappes-Lomax’s (2002: 15) recommendation to focus less on “desiderata for content” and more on “desiderata for communication”. This innovative practice also aligns with Crozet et al.’s (1999: 17) contention that language instruction

needs to implement analytical, competency-based, and literacy-based practices that are “critical to appropriate communication”. From a broader perspective, this practice was further targeted at assessing the extent to which combining the communicative approach to language learning with the academic literacies approach was effective in building up a supportive learning environment and initiating students into a ‘culture’ for continued lifelong learning (European University Association, 2008; Hernández-Serrano and Jones, 2010).

Developing an integrated language and academic literacies approach

Prior to implementing the academic ELP in the General English language classroom, a number of procedures were carried out to integrate the communicative approach and the academic literacies approach within ELP. These involved devising an instructional approach primarily grounded in the tenets of constructivism and pro-active learning (Kagan, 1992; Spiro et al., 1992; Slavin, 1999; Johnson and Holubec, 1999), designing the learning activities (i.e. the different portfolio assignments) and designing ways (instruments, criteria and reference levels) for assessing student performance². It was also deemed necessary to use on-line learner management systems for monitoring progress and supporting the students’ on-going, measurable progress regarding both communicative and literacy skills.

The target group involved a total of 110 students (divided into two groups) in the first year of the Degree in English Studies at the University of Zaragoza (Spain). During the second semester of the academic year 2010-2011, these students attended the compulsory 6-credit General English course. This was the course in which the present initiative was carried out. The course was targeted at reaching a B2.1. level Independent User according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The specific descriptions are detailed below:

B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/ her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
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(Retrieved from <http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/Portfolio/?M=/main_pages/levels.html> [06/11/2011])

² For further details see the course outline available at the official university website, <<http://titulaciones.unizar.es/assignaturas/27809/index10.html>>; English version also available upon request.

Taking a communicative approach to language learning, language-oriented input was offered to students with the textbook *English Result-Upper Intermediate* (Oxford University Press). Supplementing this input, the course instructors also sought to provide students with tasks targeted at developing an apposite repertoire of academic genres and communicative situations (cf. Johns, 2002; Casanave and Li, 2008). As stated above, the rationale for supplementing the language instruction with the academic literacies approach was to initiate students into the conceptual and competency-based aspects of EAP discourse and communication, since these students have to take two EAP courses (Academic English I and Academic English II) in the second and third year (respectively) of the Degree.³

***A conceptual (language) and competency-based
(academic literacies) approach – a new attitude to knowledge***

Drawing inspiration from Paltridge et al.'s proposals on the teaching of academic English (2009), the objective designed for the English Course regarding attitude to knowledge involved going beyond conserving knowledge. It was therefore agreed by the instructors that students should take a different level of study, that of critiquing knowledge. Critiquing knowledge was thought to be an intermediate stage between the 'conserving knowledge' attitude that students were already familiarised with and the 'extending knowledge' attitude that characterises an EAP course (cf., e.g. Swales and Feak, 2011). Accordingly, the learning approach was intended to be not merely reproductive of structural, lexico-grammatical and discursal patterns of the language but also analytical, that is to say, developing logical reasoning and investigative skills. This new attitude to knowledge, that of critiquing knowledge, was expected to be a previous and necessary stage to a speculative approach to learning, namely, one based on conjecture and enquiry and requiring higher-order cognitive skills. At this point, the ELP became an essential pedagogical tool in that it provided extensive 'critiquing knowledge' exposure and practice, as explained below.

Design and implementation of the ELP

Critiquing knowledge using an analytical approach further involved taking a number of initial decisions intrinsically related to the design and implementation of the ELP: i) delimiting the formative scope/ profile of the course, ii) deciding on the role that the language instructors (the teachers) were going to play in the course,

³ For further details on the course outlines, see the official university website, <<http://titulaciones.unizar.es/asignaturas/27818/index10.html>> and <<http://titulaciones.unizar.es/asignaturas/27828/index10.html>>; English version also available upon request. For further details on the module structure of the Degree in English Studies, see the official university website <http://titulaciones.unizar.es/estudios-ingleses/cuadro_asignaturas.html>.

iii) designing appropriate onsite (classroom) and offsite (online) language learning activities to be carried out by the students and iv) establishing the tools, criteria and procedures for assessing the learning process.

Delimiting the formative scope of the course largely relied on Campbell et al.'s (2000) proposal of performance-based assessment system. This particular system nurtures from the 'learning by doing motto' of constructivist theories of learning. To comply with this system, it was agreed to use the ELP as an all-encompassing pedagogical tool, integrating performance of both language and academic competencies (instrumental, systemic and interpersonal). While the language scope of the course was delimited on the basis of the CEFRL's B2 level, as stated above, the competency profile of the course comprised the cognitive abilities postulated by the Tuning Project (2003) (information search, information transfer, synthesising ability and critical skills) as well as elementary computer skills. The competency profile also included personal competencies such as the ability to respond to information sources, including the internet, the capacity to interpret information, the capacity to take decisions and solve problems creatively, and the capacity to develop effective and flexible methods and approaches to work (i.e. autonomous learning). Interpersonal skills such as collaborating in group, exchanging and negotiating ideas and reaching consensus were also part of the academic enculturation target of the competency profile.

In the innovative practice reported herein the teachers' role was not one merely involving instruction, direction and assessment. Rather, it involved coordination of both the learning process and the learning resources. The teacher was a questioner and critical guide of the students in the learning process. Initiating students into this new role of the teacher was expected to familiarise them with the kind of language teaching instruction devised for the Academic English I and Academic English II courses, where teachers engage in more collaborative and advising roles. Ongoing interaction and attention to the needs and interests of individual course participants, as well as of the whole group, both onsite and offsite (using the ICTs) was also a key defining feature of the teacher's role in this pedagogical experience (cf. also van Lier, 1996).

Language learning was targeted at improving the communicative skills requiring the transmission of written and spoken information and skills practice (writing, reading, listening and speaking). Supplementing the language-learning practice, a number of competency-based tasks including problem-solving activities, as well as analytical and critical analyses of case studies were designed. All these tasks were compiled in the students' ELPs. By this means, students were expected to engage in language-oriented practice while at the same time developing not only genre-based awareness (writing short essays, reports, academic blogs, a critique, reading a repertoire of academic texts, preparing academic presentations and participating in small debates) but also academic-oriented competencies (information search and

transfer, analytical skills, synthesising skills, critical thinking, decision taking, problem solving, team working, etc.).

In line with the philosophy of constructivism in learning, the portfolio tasks included not only individual contributions but also collaborative work. The task-based approach underpinning the ELP involved information retrieval and information transfer skills, negotiation skills, decision-taking information skills and task management skills. As an added value of the combined conceptual/competency-based approach, group dynamics was fostered when conducting the portfolio tasks so as to develop students' social skills, as well as sharing information, socialising, seeking consensus, taking decisions and distributing work among peers. Engaging in the portfolio tasks both onsite and off-site also facilitated additional study time, more autonomous attitudes towards learning and eventually contributed to the deepening of learning (Scharle and Szabó, 2000; Sinclair et al., 2000). In all the tasks students were asked to analyse information and ideas within interpretive frameworks while gaining exposure to academic models for developing a critical approach to knowledge. This proved to be a first step towards familiarising and gaining practice in higher-cognitive activities, such as those proposed in the two EAP courses of the Degree.

Both individual and group contributions in the portfolio tasks were assessed on the basis of the quality of language produced and on the quality of the analysis and the reflection, as explained below. Assessment of the tasks involved recall and practical demonstration of communicative skills, with emphasis on replication (i.e. the traditional language skills testing system that we referred to earlier as 'reproductive' learning approach). Inspired by Antón (2009), they also involved assessment of individual and interpersonal competencies, with a special focus on originality and quality of analysis and interpretation. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is also worth noting that the portfolio proved to be a useful pedagogical tool as a reflective instrument for students' self-assessment of tasks, reports, etc. and for keeping a record of thoughts, learning experiences, etc. Put it simply, an instrument indicating and measuring progress in the learning process and also a means of regulating the teacher's support and guidance. This view confirmed that portfolios play an essential role in enquiring into language learning processes and products, as also argued by Belanoff and Dickson (1991) and Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) in other learning contexts.

Earlier in this paper we noted that it was deemed necessary to use on-line learner management systems for monitoring the students' progress and supporting and measuring their on-going progress regarding both communicative and literacy skills. In this respect, a key constituent of the course was the support of the learning processes with the help of information technologies. In line with van Lier's (1996) proposals, in this pedagogical experience the online tools provided by

an e-learning platform (Moodle) played a number of interesting roles, which are summarised in Figure 1:

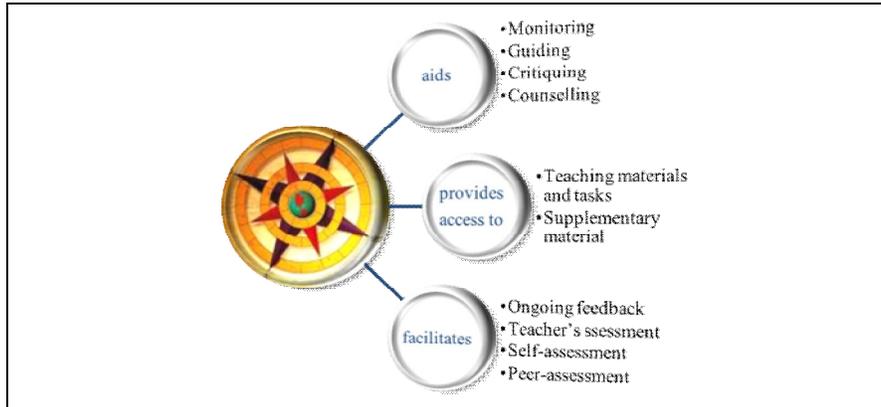


Figure 1 Online support to the integrated language and academic literacies approach

Supplementing the core curricular design of the General English course, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and, more specifically, the e-learning platform Moodle became part of a methodology for learner support. Firstly, students were provided access to teaching materials (texts, videos, audio files, etc.), handouts with the learning tasks as well as supplementary material (both written and audio/ video materials) that the teachers considered to be appropriate for conducting and resolving the learning tasks. Online availability of these materials facilitated onsite instruction (i.e. classroom work) and at the same time fostered individual and autonomous learning processes outside the class (i.e. offsite learning). Secondly, since the teachers acted as facilitators and collaborators in the students' learning processes, the use of online support made it feasible for them to give students the necessary linguistic and competency-based scaffolding. By this means, the students were later able to apply this cognitive scaffolding when carrying out the portfolio tasks. In sum, online assistance aided the teachers in monitoring, guiding, critiquing and counselling students throughout the learning process (both individual and group work). From a pedagogical standpoint, it should be noted that providing feedback to students became an important asset of the course, as it allowed a fair amount of flexibility and responsiveness towards students' individual and group needs. In addition, it also facilitated the development of teaching/ learning resources such as regular debriefs, self-assessment and peer-assessment tools such as rubrics. From a theoretical standpoint (see, e.g. Lantolf and Poehner, 2008), shared assessment systems were considered to strengthen teacher/ student dialogue and interactionism in search for ongoing, joint reflection on the learning process.

A ‘swim’ (and not a ‘sink’) approach

The goal of this paper was to report on a pedagogical experience based on an integrated language-literacy approach and its complementary role to language education. In view of what has been reported above, the General English course was improved by aiming not only at transferring knowledge and skills of the English language but also at training the students in independent analytical skills and critical styles of thinking, skills which are indeed necessary in academia.

Pedagogically, the experience reported above proved to be a ‘swim’ and not a ‘sink’ approach in so much as it helped diagnose and assess both conceptual and competency-based aspects of the learning process (see Fig. 2 below). It also allowed ongoing supervision in a number of ways, for instance, organising the course planning and monitoring, controlling and supporting the learning process. As stated above, alongside the teacher’s role in guiding the students in the appropriate direction, and once the students developed confidence and practice in group dynamics, the task-based, portfolio approach proved effective in increasing motivation, encouraging the participation of the students and autonomous learning strategies. Further, the ELP helped the teachers diagnose each student’s conceptual and competency-oriented aspects not yet mastered, organise, monitor and support the learning process accordingly. Unlike the traditional assessment tests, the portfolio as an assessment tool proved to be a consistent and reliable instrument for supporting on-going, measurable progress of linguistic and generic (metacognitive and interpersonal) competencies through ongoing assessment of students’ individual and group performance. In addition, using ITCs in the experience yielded a more efficient planning and organisation of lessons, sufficiently transparent to course participants so that they were able to understand what they were doing and how it helped them learn the expected language and competency-based skills.

Finally, the integrated language and competency-based approach served to make students move from the reactive to the productive. It engaged them as co-producers of learning and collaborators in the learning process. As stated also above, collaborative learning and a distributed learning environment with the help of the online support and the new technologies played a major role facilitating students’ new roles in the ‘learning-by-doing’ process.

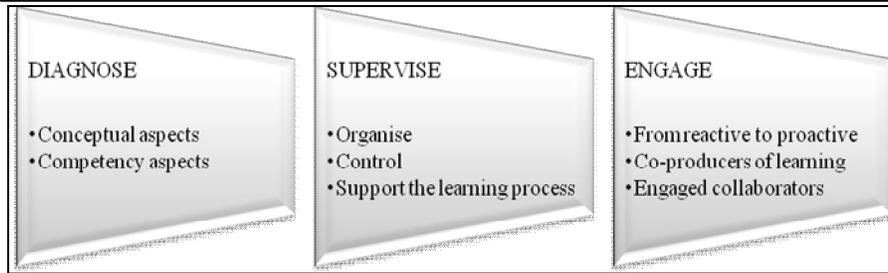


Figure 2 Rationale for a 'swim' approach

A number of limitations and difficulties should be acknowledged in this pedagogical experience. At the beginning of the course, there was a deeply-felt difficulty on the part of the students (all of them 1st year undergraduates) in overcoming traditional teaching and learning approaches and embarking on proactive rather than reactive roles in the learning process. Although this aspect was partially solved as the course progressed, greater support to students' active participation and autonomous learning practices is still needed. Also, some of the tasks included in the portfolio might have imposed additional time burdens on the students and therefore need revision and improvement in forthcoming years. Assessment of the portfolio with a large class of students represented an extra burden for the teacher. As for online support, there is still a need for improving ways of sustaining peer to peer communication (esp. in the use of the forums and chats, for instance, especially regarding collaborative work and autonomous learning). Also, shared assessment systems which, as argued earlier, were considered to strengthen teacher/ student dialogue can be seen as an area for improvement; possible biases might be attributed to students' lack of maturity or lack of familiarity with self-assessment and peer-to-peer assessment systems. A final note on quality assessment in language teaching/ learning should also be made here. It would be desirable in the future to assess the quality of this pedagogical experience in terms of customer-satisfaction, process-orientation, results-orientation, personal-development focus, values-driven dimension, as succinctly described in the *QualiTraining Guide* (Mureşan et al., 2007).

Pedagogical benefits, however, outnumbered the limitations of this pilot experience. The supplemental academic literacies approach provided opportunity for the development of intellectual and professional competencies: development of individual and interpersonal skills, and awareness of genres, communication procedures and community practices in academia. Engagement in the use of ICTs fostered learner autonomy and a self-regulating capacity of the learning process, and there was a parallel growth in confidence and in metacognitive abilities.

Curricular design, based on the CEFRL and the ELP guidelines, proved to be flexible enough to assess both language competency and generic/ instrumental competencies. It fostered the construction of a learning environment that brought benefits for both students and instructors. Students were not only initiated into critical learning activities by conducting task involving facilitating discussion, comprehension, understanding, analysis, critiquing but also felt valued, forming part of a community of learning. From a broader pedagogical perspective, autonomous learning, acquired as part of the competency-based profile of the course, brought to the fore the advantages of training students in positive attitudes towards the lifelong learning philosophy advocated by the CEFRL while equipping them with tools for holistic training across the language-academic literacy continuum, as shown below (cf. for further discussion Pérez-Llantada, 2012).



Figure 3 Learning results of an integrated language and academic literacies approach

In the light of this experience, a holistic approach to language and competency-based instruction proves to be a useful pedagogy in so much as it facilitates work on academic literacies in ways that go beyond language communication and in search for social communication in academic contexts. Even if what has been reported in this article is just part of a pilot pedagogical experience, it renders credence of the way the students get familiarised with this new learning environment, of their ability to take on more cognitively complex tasks and therefore develop an analytical, ‘critiquing knowledge’ attitude – and not just a conserving attitude – towards language learning in higher education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Vice-Rectorate of Pedagogical Innovation at the University of Zaragoza (Spain) for the financial and institutional support to carry out this pedagogical innovation project (project code PIIDUZ 10_2_440).

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