

The relation between the implementation of learning objects and listening skills

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La relación entre la implementación de los objetos de aprendizaje y la habilidad de escucha

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Resumen

Los objetos virtuales de aprendizaje (OVAS) son unidades digitales auto-contenibles que pueden ser combinadas para crear una variedad de experiencias de aprendizaje. Sin embargo, pocas instituciones de nivel superior en Colombia están utilizando OVAS para su enseñanza. La Universidad Popular del Cesar es una de estas instituciones de nivel superior donde los OVAS habían sido implementados sin conocer que tan útil o inadecuado era su uso. Consecuentemente, este artículo resalta la relación entre la implementación de los OVAS y el desarrollo de la habilidad de escucha en un grupo de estudiantes en esta universidad. Los resultados de esta investigación revelan que la adecuada mediación del docente fue fundamental para que el grupo de estudiantes se beneficiara del uso de los OVAS.

Palabras claves: Implementación, mediación del profesor.

Abstract

Learning objects (LOs) are material digital instructional units that can be combined to create a variety of learning experiences. However, few Higher education institutions in Colombia are using LOs for teaching purposes. Universidad Popular del Cesar is one of those educational institutions where LOs had been implemented without knowing how meaningful or inadequate its use was. Hence, this article underlines the relation between the implementation of LOs and the development of listening skills in a group of students at this university. The research results reveal that since teacher mediation was accurate to the target lesson, the chosen group of students derived benefit from using LOs.

Keywords: Implementation, teacher mediation.

I INTRODUCTION

Listening is a demanding skill, which develops quicker than speaking and normally affects the development of other language domains such as reading and writing (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992; Oxford, 1993). A reason to justify the previous statement has to do with the fact that people often receive oral instructions or explanations prior to responding in written texts. In order to make sense of the input through listening, people should carefully choose the strategies that match their context namely, generating information in their long term memory with the purpose of making sense of the spoken passages (Murphy, 1985; Mendelsohn, 1994; Young, 1997) or being conversant with learning and teaching strategies by asking learners to use them when intending to understand the text they are listening to.

The English lab, place where learners implement LOs, was founded in 2009. Throughout the years English lab class has been part of the curriculum of the BA in Spanish and English program, there has always been a gap amidst English lab and the English class. In this sense, the coherence, functionality and synchronization among these subjects are intractable. With respect to the way these subjects work, it is relevant to mention that once students finish their academic session at the English lab, neither their English professor nor their English lab one know if students are actually putting into practice what they have learnt at the English lab, especially if LOs are helping students in their learning process. This is a problem because it is unknown if the students of the BA in Spanish and English program can derive much benefit from having English lab classes to improve their proficiency at English language, that is, the relation between the implementation of LOs and the enhancement of listening skills in this group of students has not been defined.

Additionally, in numerous institutional and English professors' meetings it is a common complaint that a significant number of students are having difficulties regarding their listening skills. In this respect, most of the English professors agree on the fact that the listening skill is an essential one but since a large number of students have difficulty in understanding spoken language this makes the class interaction decrease significantly.

It is worth conducting this study due to it might help to establish whether LOs are fostering the improvement of listening skills in these students. Hence, this research aims to state the relation between the implementation of Learning Objects (LO) into the academic English lab sessions and the development of listening skills in these students of BA in Spanish and English at Universidad Popular del Cesar.

The above-mentioned information allows to establish the following question:

What is the relation between the implementation of Learning Objects (LO) into the academic English lab sessions and the development of listening skills in a group of students of BA in Spanish and English at Universidad Popular del Cesar?

Moreover, due to the several breakthroughs in the realm of teaching, especially in fostering the development of listening skills, it is possible to identify the importance of technology regarding resources to be proficient in one language. In fact, researchers have been making efforts to implement technology into the enhancement of listening skills (Govindasamy, 2001). As a result, this has led to the creation of approaches such as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or resources, e.g. Learning Objects (LOs) which can contribute to ease listening troubles in that, if chosen and used well, these means are made of useful contents whose purpose is to meet the students' needs. Precisely, the study that has now been undertaken aims at investigating the relation between the implementation of Learning Objects (LOs) in the academic English lab sessions and the development of listening skills in a group of students of BA in Spanish and English at Universidad Popular del Cesar.

II THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1 Open Educational Resources (OERs)

“..there are a number of innovative initiatives to widen participation in Higher Education study where OER contributes both among distance teaching universities and traditional campus-based institution.”
(Lane, 2012)

Open Educational Resources (OER) is a relatively new resource. Several names were associated to this movement throughout the history. Actually, from the late 1990s until 2002 it has adopted several names such as open content, open educational content, open learning resources, open educational technologies, open academic resources and open courseware. These are terms that were forgotten at a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) meeting in 2002 wherein the name and concept of Open Educational Resources were approved. In this case, there are numbers of definitions of OERs but the original UNESCO concept defines “OER as teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others” (UNESCO, 2011, p.1).

With the use of OERs it is expected that students can have more accessibility and availability to the activities that are offered in the English Lab. Regarding these possibilities Iiyoshi and Kumar (2008) and Burge, Campbell and Gibson (2011), and the Cape Town Open Education Declaration (Shuttleworth Foundation, n.d.) state a renewed interest in how Higher Education may be made more accessible and available to more people around the world by using and implementing new technologies such as OER.

It is said that those educational resources that are offered by “OERs include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge” (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond, 2007, p. 4). Learning Objects is one of those materials that OERs are made of. Precisely, the following section will deal with this issue.

a. *Learning Objects:* Likewise OERs, Learning Objects (LOs) have different definitions in the educational realm. This is, LOs can be defined as a «group of digital, self-contained and reusable resources with an educational purpose and constituted by, at least, three internal components: Contents, learning activities and elements of contextualization» (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006, p.31). Another concept of this resource states that LOs are materials designed to be self-contained digital instructional units that can be combined to create a variety of learning experiences (ASTD & Smartforce 2002; Cramer 2007; McGreal 2004).

Regarding the design of LOs, the creation of them will not be part in this research. In this respect, de Salas and Ellis (2006) mention that teachers can use LOs without designing them to fulfill a variety of learning needs, in this particular case the enhancement of listening. They contend that teachers can also design activities incorporating the LOs for multiple levels of learners, making them very efficient teaching tools.

In the case of the positive results that are likely to be derived from using LOs, the volume entitled

A Case Of Web-Based Inquiry Learning Model Using Learning Objects, whose purpose was to analyze the effectiveness of learning objects in students' learning reveals that professors and learners were confident of learning benefits when using LOs by virtue of the quality and engagement provided by these resources. (Li, et al., 2006; Akpınar&Simsek, 2007; Kay & Knaack, 2007). This fact shows that there are great chances for target learners to foster the improvement of their listening skills.

To continue with the benefits of using LOs to facilitate language learning, there is one study that indicates that LOs positively affects learner outcomes (Caws 2008). To take the three university-level French courses in Canada, the students that were part of this study utilized an LO repository which were useful for their language learning. In these three levels, LOs were freely accessed by students to supplement their classroom studies. According to the results of this study, the students reacted well to learning through LOs since the purposes to use them fitted the objectives of the course.

Any research that is based on using LOs as a resource to teach requires four essential aspects to be covered, that is, availability of opportunities to participate, affordability of those opportunities, accessibility to do so and acceptability of the opportunity (Lane, 2012). The foregoing requirements are fulfilled by the resources that the English lab provides its users. Actually, this place gives the participants of this study the conditions to do a research whose core is LOs. In this sense, target students are likely to use English lab to access those resources so it is possible to identify the advantages or/and disadvantages of using LOs to help students develop listening skills.

2 Listening Processes

Since the findings can be better understood by explaining in detail the different features that these listening processes are made of, it is a must to say that due to the several breakthroughs in the realm of teaching, especially in fostering the development of listening skills, it is possible to identify the importance of technology regarding resources to be proficient in one language. In fact, researchers have been making efforts to implement technology into the enhancement of listening skills (Govindasamy, 2001). As a result, this has led to the creation of approaches such as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or resources, e.g. Learning Objects (LOs) which can contribute to ease listening troubles in that, if chosen and used well, these means are made of useful contents whose purpose is to meet the students' needs.

All the theory regarding this skill allows to consider teaching listening as a complex process that involves many aspects such as listening approaches, listening strategies, listening stages as well as the incorporation of new technology. Hence, the following paragraphs will deal with what research has found in the teaching of listening.

In the case of the approaches, Campbell and Gibson (2011) mention that Top Down and Bottom Up are widely known as effective approaches to language learning. Actually, this research has suggested that one of the most accurate forms to improve listening for students learning another language is using Top Down and Bottom Up together since it allows students to benefit from each approach rather than focusing on one isolated process.

a. *Top Down processing*: It can be defined as the way learners comprehend language by connecting it with "prior knowledge and through familiarity with the situational context" (Morley, 2001, p. 74). Actually, it is vital that teachers make use of the learners' prior knowledge which can be considered as a pre-listening phase that serves to prepare the students for the particular listening activity. Numerous researchers, such as Brown (2006) contends that there are different ways to aid students in activating prior knowledge for instance, explaining learners the purpose for listening

giving students a well-structure speaking task informed in order for them to interact properly when giving feedback about what they have listened to.

Based on the information provided before, it is evident how difficult this listening process is. However, with the purpose of easing this complex process, as mentioned above, teachers can use conscious mental processes by activating learners' prior knowledge. Thus, it is vital to say that prior knowledge is organized in schemata and scripts. According to Hoey (2001), Schemata and scripts take place in the listener's mind. As regards to schemata's definition, it is said that they are static representations of knowledge, in other words, schemata show links between facts without mentioning them. This is possible since the mind is able to associate concepts and images which allows to create the expected outcome or representation of knowledge.

On the other hand, scripts are defined as narrative representations of knowledge. This means that scripts show the sequence in which events occur. As a result, schemata and scripts are both activated at the same time and might help understand the listening process since there is an intrinsic process that is held in the listener's mind which benefits greatly the possibility of relating the oral test (input) with the prior knowledge to generate a proper answer (output).

The information stated before allows determining that the use of a top-down approach to listening would probably have students behaving like native. That is, students are likely to be conversant with the topic as well as the culture of the context by accessing the information stored in long-term memory (Vandergrift, 2003). In this sense, by putting into practice a top-down processing approach, students are likely to gain a more authentic interest in developing listening activities which would have target learners acquire what is being heard rather than memorizing and forgetting new knowledge once it has been used.

b. Bottom-up processing: Vandergrift (2003) suggests that bottom-up approach provides language learners with the opportunity of building an understanding from a listening text by establishing meaningful connections that have to do with grammar and lexical items. Precisely, the use of bottom-up processing allows students to establish a connection with the construction of meaning which is better shaped by means of their linguistic repertoire. Morley (2001) is one of the authors that have contributed to this field. She mentions that students are conversant with the meaning of an oral text by means of the bottom-up processing by providing them with chances to build an understanding from this type of text while offering learners the possibility of establishing useful links from the oral text they are listening to.

Morley considers the listener should always listen carefully to spoken text in order to perform well when using bottom-up processing (Morley, 2001). This is strongly justified since oral input involves different details that need to be understood by the listener at the moment of implementing a bottom-up approach. In this sense, Brown (2006) concurs with Morley's opinion. He claims that words, sounds and other factors that have to do with oral output are involved in grammatical configurations which shape the understanding of the output by means of the bottom-up processing.

However, Brown (2006) claims that bottom-up might preclude learners from acquiring automaticity in relation to spoken input. Hence, he suggests that teachers should be careful in employing bottom-up processing frequently. In this sense, top-down and bottom up's features will be used together in order to hamper inadequate outcomes from students.

With the previous analysis of the listening processes, that is Bottom up and top down, it is worth going through a reviewing of literature regarding this issue. listening strategies that learners are likely to use when being exposed to oral text.

III METHODOLOGY

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned definition, this research project is based on the qualitative approach. That is to say, as a qualitative researcher it is a must to analyze phenomena in their natural settings in order to interpret as well as to make sense of them. Hence, this investigative approach is likely to seek the reasons why these phenomena occur by means of the study of the collected information (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2007). As a matter of fact, this investigation is carried out by means of the target approach because “a problem or issue needs to be explored” (Creswell, 2007, p.39). That is why; the understanding of this problem that is under exploration is likely to be answered through the use of qualitative research.

1 Case Study Methodology

There are several approaches to qualitative inquiry namely, narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnographic and case studies. The latter is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Feagin, Orum, & Sjberg, 1991). In this sense, the context of this research and the procedures for conducting this qualitative study will have as a core the case study approach. The reason of this choice is justified in trying to “understand a problem using the case as a specific illustration” (Creswell, 2007, p.73). In fact, this approach demands the examining of a particular situation analyzed by means of the features of the case employing a certain system.

At the intrinsic case study, the case is directly predicated on the unit of analysis since the latter has a crucial role in this type of methodology. In this sense, Tellis (1997) has contended that intrinsic case study is hardly seen as an individual or group of individuals because it is basically a system of action. He also claims that case studies are likely to be selective, focusing on one or two issues that are fundamental to understanding the system being examined.

In this research I intend to use intrinsic case study due to this investigation is focused on the case itself (Stake, 1995), that is, analyze the relation between the implementation of Learning Objects (LO) into the academic English lab sessions and the linguistic development (listening) in a group of students of BA in Spanish and English at Universidad Popular del Cesar.

Hence, I will intend to follow the four stages that Yin (1994) and Freeman (1998) recommend:

1. Design the case study,
2. Conduct the case study,
3. Analyze the case study evidence, and
4. Develop the conclusions, recommendations and implications.

Yin (1994) also invites researchers to put into practice five skills so that the investigation can be conducted well. The first procedure is to have the ability to ask good questions and to interpret the responses. The second ability is being a good listener. Then, he recommends to be adaptive and flexible in order to comprehend and tolerate the different situations that might arise from the research. The fourth skill suggested by this author is to have a firm grasp of issues being studied. Finally, researchers should be unbiased by preconceived notions. These series of recommendations can be summarized in the following statement: The investigator must be able to function as a “senior” researcher (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991).

In short, case study will be the used in this research since it allows to be concentrated on the case itself with the purpose of understanding the system or case being examined. To do so, it is nourished by different instruments that are described as follows.

2 Instruments

a. *Data Collection Procedures:* This section has the aim of explaining the made choices, undertaken procedures, along with the purposes of the instruments that were implemented when conducting this research.

In the case of the choices that were made, given we needed to research the students' behavior when interacting with the learning objects, as well as analyze their conducts through a systematic process, we carry out scientific observation. The way this data collection instrument was used covered a whole unit of the program of the two target subjects (English Theory and English Lab), that is, observations were held during the 5 sections of each matter. In those sessions, the professors were opened to let us observe the classes, which is something that should not be underestimated.

Being conscious about the purpose of the observation is another crucial factor in this process. Actually, in this particular context observations were used to describe the LOs that are implemented into the English lab sessions as well as to describe the students' performance when being exposed to activities that involve the implementation of LOs.

According to Leon & Montero, 2003, p. 75, these are the questions that a systematic observation must include:

- ☐ What to observe?
- ☐ How the subject (event) was done?
- ☐ When were the events observed?
- ☐ Where were the events observed?

Each one of the qualitative observations aimed to look for features of the class, specifically the way LOs and the activities that involve their use are developed which helped understand processes and identify problems to generate knowledge (Hernández Sampieri, Fernandez Collado, & Baptista Lucio, 2010).

In regards to the interviews, since this is a case study research, this data collection was chosen due to we decide to have an instrument that could be both, flexible and structured when establishing the questions and procedures at the moment of conducting an interview. Actually, Burns and Hood (1995) describe interviews as unplanned, planned or structure interactions performed by researchers in face to face oral sessions. It is worth mentioning that by means of the interviews, it was possible to analyze the different types of activities (listening) that were performed with the implementation of the LOs into the English lab sessions, given this technique is "in deep" used mainly due to its descriptive and discovering nature (Leon & Montero, 2003). In this sense, different kinds of questions were designed according to the interviewed person or people. With respect to this, Hernandez Sampieri, Fernandez Collado, & Baptista Lucio (2010) classify questions into four kinds (see table 4).

Table 4. Interview questions (Hernandez Sampieri, Fernandez Collado, & Baptista Lucio, 2010, p.455)

<i>Type of questions</i>	<i>Features</i>
General questions	Usually state global ideas
Example questions	Ask for an example
Questions of structure	ask for a list of items
Contrast questions	Inquire about similarities and differences with a convergent point

The following table depicts the specific objectives with the techniques and instruments that will be used to generate data. The participants that will have an active role when implementing the

instruments are determined as well.

Table 5. Specific Objectives with its techniques and instruments.

<i>Specific Objectives</i>	<i>Techniques</i>	<i>Instruments</i>
Describe the different types of listening activities in the English class.	Interview (English professor). Focus group (students). Observations (English class).	Transcriptions of the interviews and observations.
Describe the LOs that are implemented into the English lab sessions.	Focus group (students). Observations (English lab observation).	Transcriptions of the interview and observations.
Describe how the students interact with the LOs in the English lab sessions.	Focus interview (students). Observations (English lab class)	Transcription of the interviews and observations.
Relate students' use of LOs and the development of listening skills once they have been exposed to learning objects.	Interview (English professor) Focus interview (students) Observation (English lab class)	Transcription of the interviews and observations.

As it was depicted in table number 5, each of the instruments aimed at a specific subject. In the case of the observations, 4 of them will be carried out inside the English class in order to collect data regarding the unit four that students are working on. The development of this unit, whose name was "News from around the Globe" is planned to last one week and a half.

The other 4 observations will have place in the English lab sessions. The purpose of those observations is to describe the way the professor leads a listening class, the learning objects learners implement at the English lab as well as the form students interact with those learning instruments.

In relation to the interviews, the first of them will have as an interlocutor the English professor of the target group. There will be also a focus group interview where seven students have already volunteered to be part of it as well.

3 Data analysis

Once the instruments have been applied, the first action that is involved in this analysis is transcribe the data from observations then, to code the transcriptions from the English classes in order to organize them in terms of turns, professor speech, students' speech, type of activity, learning strategy and the category of the target strategy. It is also born in mind the professor's and students' behavior during the English classes observed. With respect to the measures that will be taken to interpret the information gathered, since triangulation is likely to build confidence and solidity in the way researchers analyze their data and thus in what they discover (Freeman, 1998), the interpretation of the data collected will be carried out by means of the data triangulation in every category classified. In this sense, the evidence of every aspect from different instruments can be found and contrasted as the reader goes through the paper. It is worth mentioning that the format that will be used for presenting the findings from the research in the next section is theoretical, since it is only based on the theories exposed in the rational. (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010).

III Findings

Bearing in mind that this is an ongoing investigation, these are the main findings that have been identified so far:

1 Stages of a listening task

Regarding the English class and its listening activities, the evidence obtained from its observations was totally consistent with both the professor's answers at his interview as well as the focus group interview for students. Actually, one of the English classes that involved the use of listening activities was led by the professor without fulfilling the different stages and activities that belong to each one of those phases. That is, one of the observation's findings was the fact that students begin their listening class without being aware of the objective of such English lesson. Coherently, the professor's responses given at his interview clearly showed that he starts his listening lesson by going right to the activity leaving the purpose of the listening exercise unknown by the students.

From a theoretical view, Field (2002) mentions that English practitioners should focus on the process of listening rather than being interested in the product. Unfortunately, the data obtained from the observations manifests there were some unsuitable procedures regarding the way listening stages were held in the first English class observed. This entails students failed to follow a sequence or process that allows them to understand the target task.

2 Exposure to listening texts in English classes

Other discovery that was derived from triangulating the data collected was the lack of frequency students were exposed to listening lessons. In fact, several students asserted that they hardly ever carried out listening activities. Students specified they practiced listening exercises once per term. Moreover, when the professor was asked why his English classes gave little room for listening lessons he answered that there were few tape recorders available to be used. In addition, the English professor also stated that due to the significant number of students per group, it made more difficult to expose learners to an accurate audio environment where students could have the adequate conditions to develop a listening task. Evidently, professor and learners were aware of the fact that they seldom carried out listening lessons in their English classes which made it hard for the researcher to collect the evidence required to describe the type of listening activities scholars carried out in their English class. However, regarding students' listening skills the little evidence collected showed that when the English professor gave them an oral instruction most of them understood what they were asked to do and those learners who failed to make sense of the oral instruction used to ask their classmates in their mother tongue to explain to them what the English professor had requested.

Regarding the type of activities students faced in their English class, since listening exercises were almost never part of them, English class observations allowed to identify that role play was the activity learners are exposed to the most. Actually, at the moment learners and professor were questioned about the activities they develop in their English class all of them converged on the fact that during their English sessions role-plays activities were held most of time which let listening tasks out of the majority of English classes. This showed one of the reasons learners were experiencing difficulties while trying to understand oral texts.

3 Exposure to listening texts in English lab classes

The information stated in the previous section differs from what occurs in the English lab sessions. That is, since students had trouble to make sense of oral texts, their English lab sessions aimed

to foster the development of listening activities in order to aid learners overcome their difficulties. Students disclosed in their focus group interview that most of the activities they carried out in the English lab involved the activation of listening skills. This fact was consistent with the information observed at the English lab sessions where students and the activities had a common factor: listening activities. In other words, during their English lab sessions students were asked to implement learning objects with the purpose of understanding oral texts in order to perform well at the listening task.

4 Learning objects features

In the case of the learning objects students were exposed to at their English lab sessions, the description portrayed at the Review of Related Literature section allows to establish that out of the three technological resources for learning only one fulfilled the most all the requirements a learning object should meet. Actually, the results obtained from the learning objects description were aligned with the students outcomes derived from the English lab observations. One of those findings was that students expressed valuable comments on the implementation of the previous learning object. Moreover, their encouraging remarks about it were consistent with the way they performed while being exposed to this object. The activities this learning resource included were developed by the students as it was expected. Hence, learners interacted well with this open educational resource.

5 Teacher Mediation

In addition, whatever the target activity learners were asked to carry out it always was set by covering the three stages any listening lesson should address –pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. The last stated point is revealed throughout the English lab observations whose sessions allowed to notice the type of activities as well as the phase to which these exercises belonged to. In this sense, students were both motivated to be active participants of the English lab session and conversant with the reason of listening to the oral text they were exposed to, which should be held at the pre-listening stage. Moreover, the professor succeeded in fulfilling the while and post listening phases. This case might have helped students to be interested and encouraged to answer the questions that were part of the listening activities they were working on.

6 Engagement with LO's

One of the findings that was derived from both the observations of the English lab sessions and the students' focus group interview was directly related to the way students have greatly benefited from the use of learning objects once they were exposed to them. During the focus group interview learners attested that the use of learning objects was certainly useful to increase the time they devoted to practice English wherever they were, which possibly allowed them to enhance the skill they were working on. This statement was supported by the different students' outcomes observed during their English lab sessions. Indeed, at the moment of going through the while-listening stage, wherein the professor checked students' answers, students performed well at it. They portrayed by means of their responses an outstanding accuracy to solve the questions.

With respect to students' performance at the English class, especially once they were exposed to learning objects, it was difficult to know if there was any improvement regarding scholars' listening skills during their English classes since students were hardly ever asked to develop listening tasks. This fact was supported by students' responses at their focus group interview, professor's answers at his interview as well as the English class observations. These results clearly illustrated that albeit professor and students were aware of this predicament, there were no measures taken to cope with the

issue of having few listening lessons throughout the semester.

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