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*Appeasing the Tug-of-war between Theory and
Practice: a Flexible Task-based Language
Teaching Framework.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the last century very different theoretical frameworks have aimed to understand how languages are learnt. Those Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories have obviously influenced the emergence of new methods that intend to offer the adequate process for teaching a language that are expected to be considered as the basis for actual procedures in the classroom. However, the current situation of the Spanish educational system presents a pretty controversial circumstance as in many cases what really happens in classrooms differs very significantly from the situations encouraged by the prevailing SLA theories. We are somehow stuck in a tug-of-war between the innovative approaches and the out-of-dated reality that still prevails in the classroom today.

On the one hand, the current general framework of teaching is focused on the promotion of competences, at the core of the teaching-learning process today, rather than content, a key element in the past. As stated in the legal provisions of the *Gobierno de Aragón* (Orden de 9 de mayo de 2007) of the prevailing “Ley Orgánica de Educación” (LOE: 2006), henceforth called “Aragonese Curriculum”,

La formulación de la materia como una serie de competencias tiene como objeto resaltar que el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje deberá centrarse en el desarrollo integrado de todas ellas y de cada uno de sus elementos (conceptos, habilidades, destrezas, etc.), y ofrecer la oportunidad de adquirirlas en todas sus interrelaciones, tal como se producen en la realidad, aunque aquí se presenten artificialmente separados en bloques de contenidos (201).

Therefore, teaching should be centred on the promotion of those competences, which require time and adequate situations that should be similar to reality. The teacher is in charge of preparing and controlling a great scope of those situations, which is more challenging and time-consuming than merely teaching isolated contents. Within the particular field of teaching English as a second language, the main goal of the classes has to be the development of the communicative competence. This competence began to be considered the most important element in ELT during the 1950s and 1960s, when a profound shift in SLA theories took place. From that moment on, languages are not longer merely considered a set of rules to be learnt, but a useful tool that is fundamental in our pluralistic and globalised society. In order to have a good command of that

communicative tool, SLA theories recommend providing opportunities for students to interact and communicate.

The most important figures that boosted the appearance and establishment of that new viewpoint were Stephen Krashen, Merrill Swain, Evelyn Hatch and Michael Long, who presented their theories within the scope of the original and revolutionary perspective of Chomsky's *Universal Grammar*. This scope has been summarized by Mitchell and Myles as follows, "Linguistics saw a shift from structural linguistics, which was based on the description of the surface structure of a large corpus of language, to generative linguistics that emphasized the rule-governed and creative nature of human language" (2004: 32).

Krashen's *comprehensible input* theory was the first viewpoint that emphasized the importance of the practical dimension when learning a language. For this author, comprehensible input is the "language that is read or heard that is just a little beyond what the learner already has acquired, a notion Krashen stated in theoretical terms as *i+I*" (McCafferty, Jacobs, & DaSilva, 2006: 18). Thus, this theory underlined the importance of language exposition for an adequate acquisition, implying in this way the correspondent changes in the teaching-learning process.

Swain took a step further with his *comprehensible output* theory, which affirms that "in order for learners to increase their second language proficiency, they need to produce language via speech or writing, and to receive feedback on the comprehensibility of their output", in other words, that "comprehensible input is a necessary but not sufficient condition for SLA" (McCafferty, Jacobs, & DaSilva, 2006: 20).

Those two theories, in which input and output are considered necessary for learning a language, lead to the last fundamental contribution of this period: Hatch and Long's *interaction hypothesis*, which "emphasizes the role of the learner in social interaction, how he or she is able to exert agency over language input" (19). This theoretical approach, in which interaction is considered to be fundamental, fosters the central role of communicative situations in the process of learning a language.

Those theoretical perspectives advanced the emergence of the Humanistic Approaches in the 1970s. Some of those approaches are *Suggestopedia*, *Communicative Language Teaching* and *Total Physical Response*. Communicative Language Teaching

(CLT) was the most important of those Humanistic approaches and its main principle is that “language ability involved much more than grammatical competence” (Richards, 2006: 9); what it is necessary to develop in order to use the language communicatively is the communicative competence, and therefore the development of that competence has to be the main goal of CLT.

Those new approaches, consequently, have to influence the way in which the teaching-learning process is designed and organized. New methodologies should emerge from those new understandings of learning a language, and therefore some routines, roles and processes are likely to change. Classes whose main objective is communication are expected to be dynamic and interactive. They should be learner-centred, that is to say, learners should have an active role and a great scope of autonomy. Pairs and groups are likely to be the usual distribution, since interaction and communication are the main elements of the classes. Cooperative learning is recommended and therefore students are expected to support each other and not to be afraid to participate. Teachers, on the contrary, are encouragers and providers of communicative opportunities; and they have a very important and challenging role in the actual design of the course.

However, the current reality in many Spanish classrooms is still very far away from that ideal situation. My own experience both as student and as teacher-in-training during my placement period made me aware of the fact that communicative competence is still not the main goal for a great number of teachers. The two teachers that I had the opportunity to observe followed a pretty traditional approach in which grammar and vocabulary were the main elements, instead of communication. Students were, most of the time, working quietly on their individual books; and pair or group interaction was scarcely allowed. The great majority of time was devoted to mechanical and repetitive exercises in which students practiced, in a decontextualised manner, the grammar aspects that they were taught. Unfortunately, that was not an isolated experience, since many of my classmates lived similar situations in which they could not appreciate the theories and innovative approaches that we have been learning in the different courses of the master. It seems quite obvious that those procedures and practices cannot be at all described to be communicative, but on the contrary they are pretty similar to traditional approaches in ELT that are next briefly described.

Before the communicative shift in the 1950s and 1960s, the most frequent theoretical framework when learning a language was the *Classical Method* or *Grammar Translation Method*, which was based on the structural conception of language: if a language is merely a system of elements and rules that can be taught separately, therefore learning a language has to mean “mastering a succession of steps, each one building on the one before” (Foster, 1999:1). The methodology was therefore very teacher-centred and subject-centred, the role of the teacher was to transmit his/her extensive knowledge about the language, normally in their L1, and students were expected to be quietly seated while they translated or applied grammatical rules to repetitive decontextualised exercises. The most frequent organization of activities in classes based on this traditional method was the *Presentation, Practice, Production* (PPP) sequence.

The repetitive aspect of the traditional approach was grounded on ‘behaviouristic psychologists’, who “advocated conditioning and habit-formation models of learning” (Brown, 2007: 23). Based on those theoretical approaches, students were asked to focus on isolated grammatical elements in a deductive way by repeating drills and patterns. They were supposed to master the language through repetition and habit formation of grammatical aspects, but interaction was not considered necessary in the normal development of the classes.

As could be observed from the previous description of those two very different approaches to language teaching, the procedures and practices that still can be found in many classrooms are more similar to the old-fashioned traditional approach than to the prevailing and recommended CLT. Therefore, we should reflect upon that incongruence and its possible causes in order to understand the disconnection between theory and practice.

The first element that plays a really important role in the transition from theory to practice is the National Curriculum of each country. In our case, the prevailing educational legislation is the “Ley Orgánica de Educación” (LOE), established in 2006. From that national legislation, a particular legal framework for each Autonomous Community is derived. In our case, this paper refers to that legal framework as the ‘Aragonese Curriculum’ (*Gobierno de Aragón*, Orden de 9 de mayo de 2007), and the following brief analysis is focused on that specific document. The rationale of the

Aragonese curriculum in the section of foreign language is clearly defined in the following paragraph:

Así, la distribución de los contenidos en bloques no implica que deban ser presentados a los alumnos de esa forma, ni en ese orden, teniendo en cuenta que constituyen un medio para el desarrollo de las competencias y no un fin en sí mismos. La finalidad del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje no consiste en la adquisición de cada uno de los elementos por separado, sino en desarrollar la competencia de movilizarlos para actuar (201).

Those lines convey the most important aspects of the curriculum in connection with the teaching of English. First of all, contents are flexible and they are not expected to be taught in the order in which they appear in the curriculum. It is the teacher who has to organize those contents so that they can be useful in the specific context to promote learners' communicative competence. Furthermore, contents are not considered the central element of the course, since it is clearly stated that they are only the means, and not the end, for the development of the competences. The key element is to foster competences to help students improve some specific skills and abilities.

Thus, LOE's Aragonese Curriculum can be described as a flexible legal framework that is not prescriptive at all, but that establishes the adequate principles to implement the appropriate type of teaching based on communication and competences. It also makes reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as well as it explicitly affirms that the main aim is the promotion of the communicative competence in general, and in particular the four subcompetences: morpho-syntactic competence, pragmatic competence, procesual competence, and intercultural competence. Subsequently, the contents presented in the curriculum are not prescriptive, since they are only stated in general terms and in relation with the competences. Specific grammar aspects or vocabulary items are not mentioned. Besides, they are organized in four theme-related sections called 'bloques' that are tightly related to the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) as well as English language from metalinguistic and intercultural perspectives.

Teachers are expected to use that flexible legal framework to create their own syllabus to promote communication adequately to their particular setting. Therefore, it seems logical to think that an appropriate application of the curriculum would indeed help to promote the students' communicative competence. It also seems pretty

reasonable to think that in order to reach successfully the goal of this curriculum; the old-fashioned methodologies based on the structural view of language would not be useful. However, some teachers, consciously or unconsciously, organise their courses around grammar and vocabulary, forgetting about interaction and communication.

Some of the most common reasons that lead teachers to finally apply traditional techniques are time, loss of control and the obligation of using a textbook. First of all, many teachers, including my own tutor during my placement period, do not dare to innovate in their classes because innovative techniques are generally more time-consuming than traditional courses of action. It is commonly thought that if they include communicative activities, they will not have enough time to cover all the units of the course syllabus. This is normally the case because their course syllabuses are organized into isolated units whose main elements are grammar aspects and vocabulary. Since those contents are the main objective, the other activities, for instance those that aim to promote communication, are considered to be extra or avoidable activities. An adequate planning, in which communication would be the main element and objective, should solve that problem. Since those activities are the goal to be achieved and the daily key ingredient of the classes, as opposed to extra activities, lack of time would not be an acceptable explanation anymore. However, planning a communicative syllabus is a challenging and time-consuming task that not every teacher is willing to tackle.

Unfortunately, it is also frequent to find teachers who admit their agreement with communicative principles, but who in fact organise their syllabus in terms of grammar and vocabulary. A possible explanation for that phenomenon is that when some aspects are taken for granted and there is not a real personal reflection, we tend to imitate our predecessors, or the techniques that we used to hate when we were at school, even if we agree with innovative perspectives. A conscious reflection upon the relation between theory and practice is necessary to make the appropriate, however uncomfortable, decisions that would break that vicious circle.

The second frequent reason that explains the reluctance to the real establishment of innovative techniques is the fact that they imply a great loss of control by the teacher. In the traditional approach to teaching English, the teacher is the one who makes all the decisions and the person who speaks most of the time. Students are expected to be working on the exercises that they are commanded to do, normally quietly and individually. The most challenging action on the part of the teacher when managing the

class is to get them to be quiet and concentrated. On the other hand, learner-centred procedures imply a great scope of autonomy on the part of students. For a proper development of communicative classes, students have to be responsible of their own learning by means of their active role in the development of the classes. Timing and behaviours are, therefore, more difficult to control, which makes the teacher feel more uncomfortable. This is also related to the fact that, very frequently, classes are very numerous, and consequently large classes can be unmanageable. A great number of students speaking at the same time may intimidate some teachers, who tend to finally apply comfortable and quiet procedures that provide a fake sense of control and success.

The third, an apparently more difficult to solve, problem appears when teachers are sometimes obliged by the educational centre to use a textbook. Consequently, they tend to feel limited by that imposition because they are expected to cover all the different grammatical aspects and vocabulary items during the course. After all, since books are normally organized into specific-content units, it is as if the teacher is following a content-based syllabus, which can limit the opportunities to communicate. In those cases, the teacher has to cope with that imposition in the most communicative manner possible, since there is always enough space for the teacher to use any type of material in the way that s/he would consider the most appropriate.

In my opinion, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a good option to try to avoid those inconsistencies. A task-syllabus integrates in a natural way the most important requisites of CLT, such as interaction, cooperative learning, and negotiation of meaning. Therefore, it is not possible to meet the requirements presented by a task-syllabus and not fulfilling the curriculum and its subsequent goal of promoting communication.

According to Nunan (1991), “the focus in recent years has been on the development of classroom tasks and activities which are consonant with what we know about second language acquisition, and which are also in keeping with the dynamics of the classroom itself” (cited in Brown, 2002: 11). This type of syllabus integrates the methodology that is going to be followed, including teacher and students roles, routines, grouping, and class management in general, into the design of the syllabus itself, so that we leave no room for contradiction, once applied.

However, this is, no doubt, a challenging responsibility, since the planning of a task-syllabus is pretty difficult and time-consuming and the implementation involves risky

management decisions in which the roles of teacher and students have to be well established for a proper development.

For this reason, my personal suggestion is that a middle stage between the traditional approach and the ideal but difficult pure TBLT may be needed. For that purpose, I support a flexible and moderate task-based approach that has to be understood as a starting point into the wild and challenging venture of innovation, and whose purpose would be helping intimidated teachers, or teachers who are obliged to use a textbook, to introduce communication as the main goal and to establish the adequate roles for the participants of the teaching-learning process.

Therefore, the two selected essays aim to help in the description of that flexible conception of TBLT and intend to present a realistic and feasible common ground between the overwhelming innovative methodologies, and the comfortable and secure, although repetitive and limited, still common traditional approaches. The first essay presents the theoretical bases that explain this flexible approach, and provides a practical section that may help to understand its usefulness. The second essay presents a more specific implementation of a sequence of tasks, understood within the flexible framework presented above, aiming to develop the students' writing capacity.

For the appropriate support of that moderate perspective this paper is divided into other three sections: *justification*, *critical analysis* and *conclusions and future proposals*. The *justification* section deepens in the reasons that explain the selection of the two essays, their specific characteristics and the relation between them. The following section, *critical analysis*, reflects critically upon the two essays and the flexible teaching framework based on Task-based Language Teaching. The last section aims to provide a reflection about the range of opportunities presented by that framework, some feasible future proposals, as well as the revision of the approach from the perspective that the *Ley Orgánica de Mejora de la Calidad Educativa* (LOMCE) may bring.

JUSTIFICATION

One of the reasons that influenced the selection of the essays was the fact that I aimed to select one essay from each of the semesters of the master, in order to appreciate any variation or confirmation in the way in which I understand now and then what teaching a language means. Another reason that influenced my choice was the fact that in the first semester the great majority of our modules were not focused on our specific field of teaching English, but on the contrary they dealt with general and common issues of the teaching-learning process. I considered, therefore, a good idea to select one essay from the two modules of our field that we took during the first semester.

Consequently, the first selected essay was entitled “What is a task?” and it was designed as a group assignment for the course “Fundamentos de diseño instruccional y metodologías de aprendizaje en la especialidad de Lenguas Extranjeras” in the first semester of this master. It was an assignment in which we had to prove what we had learnt during that module by deepening into a theoretical aspect that had to be also applied into practice.

During the planning of the essay, my group and I were particularly interested in the fact that some of the ideals that the current perspective of ELT were very difficult and challenging to apply in our educational system, in which foreign languages have traditionally been one of the main weaknesses. We already understood in that moment that in order to reach those ideals and almost utopian situations in which both teacher and students cooperate for the objective of fostering communicative competence, a really big and drastic change was necessary from the usually traditional understanding of languages that is pretty normal in our country. We considered that that enormous change was not likely to happen overnight, even if it was completely necessary.

For that reason, we aimed to develop a middle stage in which the most important aspects were included to help teachers establish the new roles of the participants of the teaching-learning process. With the aim of providing that moderate version of TBLT, we considered essential the possibility of adapting activities from textbooks into tasks, as it can be observed in the practical section of that essay, which have to be planned and ordered with the purpose of facilitating communication.

This essay is obviously the main framework that gives shape to the core of this dissertation. It is fundamental an appropriate understanding of the theoretical

approaches behind that moderate approach in order to understand the possibilities that TBLT offers. Those aspects are tackled and analysed in the following section.

The second essay was another group assignment, this time for the course “Evaluación e innovación docente e investigación educativa en inglés” during the second semester. This project was conceived between the two placement periods, and the experiences lived during the first one influenced, to a great extent, what we wanted to suggest for improvement during the second placement period. When we were in our first placement period, we could observe how the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) were not homogeneously developed. Plenty of time was devoted in class for the realization of reading and listening exercises from the textbook, while speaking and writing were scarcely fostered in class. That unbalance may be easily solved with the inclusion of a task-based approach that would focus on communication in the classroom. However, we wanted to focus on writing specifically because we considered it to be the most neglected of the four skills. Many people when they are told about ‘communication’ they merely think of oral interaction. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that writing is also part of communication, and therefore its development is also crucial. During our first placement period we could observe how writing was not frequently taught in class. Students were simply asked to write compositions, from time to time, at home. In other words, writing was normally set aside as homework, and it was only valued in terms of a final product that has to be grammatically accurate. Writing, as any of the other skills, needs time to be developed and therefore time for that arduous process should be devoted in class.

Those were our reasons when we decided to develop an innovative project that would present an approach of writing as a process that needs to be valued not only in terms of its grammar accuracy but also in terms of its capacity to communicate. We also thought that this approach that does not only consider writing as an evaluable skill but also as a teachable skill would seem more agreeable to students, who normally find this skill the most arduous and boring.

Those were the motives that led us to title this project “From Testing to Teaching Writing”, since we considered fundamental to include in the communicative methodologies an adequate sequence of tasks focused on writing as a worthy process. This second project can be understood, therefore, as a specific implementation focused on writing of the general flexible task-based framework presented in the first one.

One of the common characteristics between the two essays is that both of them aim to offer a viable possibility of improvement that is flexible enough to be adapted to any context. Besides, both of them may seem to be simple, however, they are not simplistic at all, since they are grounded on an extensive theoretical revision and both of them have clear objectives. Furthermore, both of them were designed with the honest conviction of being used and applied by their authors in the future.

ANALYSIS

The first essay, entitled “What is a task?” is divided into two very different sections. The first section of the essay provides an overview of the theoretical changes in ELT in the last 50 years, as well as a revision of the most remarkable viewpoints related to TBLT. The second section deals with the analysis of the activities of a unit from a real textbook and the adaptation of the exercises into a logical sequence of tasks.

In the first part, it was fundamental to describe the different conceptions that authors have formulated about what is a task. Although at first sight the term ‘task’ may seem very straightforward, several authors support different requisites for its definition. In order to facilitate their comprehension, the different authors were organized into a continuum depending on their flexible or strict view of what a task is. Authors who present a great number of essential requisites for considering a classwork to be a task were classified at the strict end of the continuum. The other end situated authors who present a smaller number of important requisites, or at least admitted the possibility of existing different types of tasks with different characteristics and purposes.

Following that criterion, Willis and Willis (2007) were described as the authors that present the strictest definition of what a task is. They consider fundamental to obtain a non-linguistic outcome and that the main objective has to be compulsorily communicative. In their view, if a piece of classwork lacks any of those requisites, it cannot be considered a task. Furthermore, they place great emphasis on the fact that if focus on form is necessary in some cases, it always has to be planned after meaning, never before.

By the time we wrote the essay, our evaluation of Willis and Willis (2007) viewpoint as ‘strict’ was mainly based on our own experience and intuition. We

considered them to be extremely complicated to be applied in our educational system, since they would imply a total and radical change. Students, who were accustomed to traditional procedures in which classes were focused on form, were very likely to feel completely overwhelmed and unable to successfully participate when asked to undertake communicative tasks without previous linguistic support.

Nowadays, I am able to corroborate that intuition by means of the knowledge about the teaching-learning process of English acquired during the second semester. First of all, it is worth mentioning Schmidt (1990) concept of 'noticing hypothesis', which claims that students need to 'notice' grammatical structures in order to include them into their repertoire. This hypothesis was the fundamental aspect that influenced the emergence of the second period of CLT, distancing from the first version, also called Classical CLT, which supported that focus on form was not necessary. Nowadays, it is widely known the importance of focus on form, and the fact that the way in which we dealt with it in our classrooms will define, to a great extent, our teaching style.

Secondly, I would like to emphasize the fact that the way in which grammar is approached is more important than simply the moment, or temporal position, that it occupies within the lesson. One of Willis and Willis (2007) main arguments supporting the idea that focus on form has to come obligatorily after focus on meaning was that,

It is rare for learners to be exposed to a new form and, within the space of a single lesson incorporate it into their spontaneous language production. [...] This apparent failure comes about not because learners are careless or teachers are incompetent. It comes about because learning is a developmental process which is not subject to the learner's conscious control (18).

It seems a totally valid fact that "learning is a developmental process" and that learners are very unlikely to incorporate a new form within the space of a single lesson, but I think that this will anyway happen even if form is presented after or before focus on meaning. However, Willis and Willis reduce the option of presenting form before meaning to those teachers who aim to focus merely on grammar accuracy. From their explanation, it is possible to derive that there is no room for teachers who eventually may focus on form before meaning while they seek a communicative main goal in the lesson. In my opinion, those propositions are not interdependent. In general terms, traditional approaches may imply a focus on form at the beginning of the lesson; but starting a lesson with focus on form does not necessarily imply that a traditional

approach is followed. I consider that statement to be too simplistic and prescriptive. It would depend on the way in which grammar is presented, on the type of task that the students have to carry out, as well as on the communicative task that would follow the task focused on form. The appropriate acquisition of the grammatical forms would also depend on the organization of the course. A cyclical order of contents based on recycling knowledge is more likely to be successful than linear syllabuses that only focus once on each of the aspects.

As far as grammar is concerned, I also find fundamental to follow an inductive approach rather than the traditional deductive procedure. Following an inductive approach “students are given examples of sentences containing a grammar rule and asked to work out the rule for themselves” (Richards, 2006:6). This approach implies, somehow, that meaning comes before the grammatical rule, which should be inductively inferred by students from contextualised examples. It does not imply, nevertheless, that the aim of that task would be communicative, so that this type of task would not fit adequately the notion of task supported by Willis and Willis.

Therefore, the knowledge acquired during the second semester has helped me to confirm and justify the need for a more flexible approach that would allow different types of tasks. A first step into innovative procedures, consequently, would not be as inflexible as the ‘strict authors’ regarding focus on form. A first step may, for instance, simply relegate focus on form to a second ground, and place communication as the main objective of the classes, but it would never ignore the importance of focus on form. The expression “second ground” does not imply a temporal position, after or before communication, but it only refers to the fact that the tasks focusing on form are expected to help students in the realization of the main goal: to communicate. The relationship between focus on form and communicative activities has to be similar, therefore, to that one explained between competences and contents: focus-on-form tasks are necessary, but they are not an end in themselves; they are expected to be used as a means for improving and facilitating communication.

On the other end of the continuum, Estaire and Zanón’s definition was considered the most flexible, since they accept that there may be different types of tasks with various objectives. In the middle of this polarization, some authors such as Peter Skehan and David Nunan are mentioned. Estaire and Zanón’s perspective is considered the most adequate since it is more likely to suit different contexts and needs. They make a

distinction between two types of tasks: *enabling* and *communicative* tasks. For these authors, during communicative tasks, “learner’s attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (Estaire and Zanón, 1994:13). On the other hand, and this is the revolutionary distinction, enabling tasks “provide students with the necessary linguistic tools to carry out a communication task”. With this simple distinction they are opening the scope of activities that can be considered tasks, since communicative outcome is an essential element in communicative tasks, but it is not strictly necessary in enabling tasks. It is also remarkable the fact that, as their name indicate, enabling tasks are supposed to enable students to successfully carry out communicative tasks, and therefore, the linguistic aspects dealt during enabling tasks would depend on what students are expected to do in communicative tasks.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that some misinterpretation can be noticed in the way Nunan’s classification of tasks was used in our analysis. Nunan was presented in our essay as one of the moderate authors, who admits that there may be different types of tasks with objectives other than communication. I think that in fact he was adequately classified, however, what was misinterpreted was Nunan’s distinction between “real-world task” and “pedagogical tasks”, as the following paragraph from the essay reveals:

To begin with, David Nunan distinguishes between "real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks: target tasks, as the name implies, refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom; pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom." (Nunan, 2004:1). In this respect, only pedagogical tasks are relevant to us, since we only aim to analyse the phenomena that occur inside the classroom (Appendix 1:3).

In this paragraph real-world tasks are implicitly understood as task developed outside the classroom, while in fact, Nunan refers to tasks that imitate or uses language commonly found in the real world. We stated that only pedagogical tasks were relevant to us since we misinterpreted this type of tasks as those referring to all the tasks performed in the classroom. Nunan clearly makes the distinction between real-world and pedagogical tasks in his book. While “tasks with a real-world rationale” are defined as those requiring “learners to approximate, in class, the sorts of behaviours required of them in the world beyond the classroom” (1989:40), “[t]asks with a pedagogical rationale,” he explains, “require learners to do things which it is extremely unlikely they would be called upon to do outside the classroom” (40).

Now that I fully understand the distinction presented by Nunan I consider that his theory is more flexible than we considered it to be. This flexibility is also reinforced in the way he differentiates between ‘communicative’ and ‘non-communicative’ tasks. As he writes,

It is not always easy to draw a hard and fast distinction between ‘communicative’ and ‘non-communicative’ tasks. There are several reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that meaning and form are closely interrelated. We use different grammatical forms to signal differences of meaning. In fact, good oral grammar exercises can and should be both meaningful and communicative (Nunan, 1989:10).

Due to that misinterpretation, in the practical section only Estaíre and Zanón’s framework was used to analyse a unit from a real textbook. In this section a disambiguation of terms was done: the term ‘activity’ was used to name any type of classwork, whether a task or exercise. On the other hand, the term ‘exercise’ was used to talk about a piece of classwork that cannot be considered a task, neither enabling nor communicative, because it presents a repetitive, mechanical and decontextualised understanding of learning. The analysis revealed that only 1 out of 58 activities in the unit could be considered to be a communicative task. Four activities seemed to be communicative tasks but in fact they were not fully communicative since they fostered oral production rather than interaction and real and meaningful communication. 15 enabling tasks were recognized and 38 activities out of 58 (65,5%) were just exercises.

The conclusions extracted from the analysis were that the number of exercises were very high (65,5%), which explains the reason why using a textbook complicates the development of communicative competence, since most of the class session is devoted to individual, mechanical and decontextualised exercises whose only objective is the improvement of grammatical accuracy.

The rest of the essay is devoted to the adaptation of those 38 exercises into a logical sequence of tasks, both enabling and communicative. Some exercises were adapted and others were simply omitted because they tended to be very repetitive. Thus, the number of activities was considerably reduced after the adaptation, since many repetitive exercises were replaced by more time-consuming tasks.

After the adaptation, grammar is presented inductively, and the first contact with the grammatical point is made by means of input flood, since the grammatical point appears in bold letter in a meaningful text. After some communicative task is done, students are

asked to reflect upon the mechanics of the grammatical point and to complete the rules. After the exercises of the unit were adapted to tasks and integrated in a logical sequence, the number of enabling and communicative tasks was: 25 enabling tasks and 5 fully communicative tasks.

The practical section, therefore, exemplifies the procedure for adapting the exercises in a real textbook into a sequence of enabling and communicative tasks, and proves the feasibility and usefulness of Estaire and Zanon's flexible approach in the situation of our educational system.

It is also important to analyse the suitability of this approach with the prevailing LOE (*Gobierno de Aragón*, Orden 9 de mayo de 2007) curriculum, especially in terms of its main goal: the development of the communicative competence. The LOE's didactic orientations section states,

En consecuencia, [la metodología] deberá seguir un enfoque global, tanto en el tratamiento de los contenidos como del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Ofrecerá así al alumnado la posibilidad de desarrollar de una manera integrada todas las competencias que abarca la materia (morfosintácticas, pragmáticas, procesuales, interculturales), tratando los conocimientos, destrezas, actitudes, etc., que incluye cada competencia no como elementos aislados, en secuencias predeterminadas, sino en toda la complejidad de sus interrelaciones, de la forma más cercana posible a como se dan en la realidad (225).

It is fundamental, therefore, to develop the four subcompetences (morphosyntactic, pragmatic, procesual, and intercultural) in an integrated manner, focusing on students' skills and attitudes applied to real-world situations. The previously explained TBLT approach promotes the four subcompetences in a quite natural manner. The morphosyntactic competence is especially important in the case of the enabling tasks, since they are likely to provide linguistic aspects, lexical, grammatical or phonological. In the case of the communicative tasks, the pragmatic subcompetence is likely to be its central aim, since students are exposed to situations similar to real-world experiences in which the sociolinguistic, discursive and functional aspects of the language are fundamental. Real-world situations imply, among other things, social interaction, which fosters naturally the team work in pairs and groups in the classroom. Similarly, cooperative learning is very likely to be used when groups of students have to work together to solve a task.

The procesual subcompetence is likely to be fostered by the means of TBLT itself, since students have a great range of autonomy in the teaching-learning process. Similarly, interaction among students is an important element in this methodology, especially in communicative tasks. Intercultural competence can be promoted with an adequate selection of materials that reflect upon the diversity of the world, as well as by the promotion of respectful attitudes in class.

Similarly to the relation between enabling and communicative tasks, the *Didactic Orientations* section explains that contents have to be derived from the communicative needs, and not on the other way around.

La selección y secuenciación de los contenidos (morfosintácticos, sociolingüísticos, discursivos, socioculturales, procesuales, etc.) vendrán determinadas por las necesidades de comunicación que surjan en el aula y fuera de ella, la tarea o texto elegidos. Es decir, la necesidad de comunicación conducirá a buscar los medios de expresión y no al contrario (partir de los medios de expresión para buscar en qué situación emplearlos) (226).

This is another common characteristic between the general orientations provided by the LOE Aragonese curriculum and the flexible approach supported by this essay, since enabling tasks are supposed to be derived from the necessities exhibited by communicative tasks.

Finally, the Aragonese curriculum itself recommends a flexible framework of action in terms of methodology, which is obviously aligned to the rationale of this essay.

La metodología deberá proveer un marco de actuación extremadamente **flexible**, que permita satisfacer las necesidades de aprendizaje de los alumnos adaptándose a los distintos contextos que se den, incluso dentro de un mismo grupo (227).

The flexible framework, therefore, aims to facilitate the adaptation of TBLT into any context, no matter how traditional and old-fashioned they happened to be. Finally, as it is stated in that quote, that flexibility does not only allow a proper adaptation of needs to the group as a whole, but also to bear in mind the differentiation among students, which is another fundamental challenge in our current educational system.

The second essay, entitled “From Testing to Teaching Writing” was an innovative project carried out during the second placement period. As has been previously explained in the justification section, we aimed to improve the neglected situation in which writing is normally found in the second language classes. In order to check our

assumptions we developed a questionnaire in the two schools of our placement period. Since the results corroborated our assumptions, the next stage was to identify the causes of that situation.

We inferred that those problems were normal consequences of a traditional approach to writing, since writing was traditionally valued as a product instead of a process. Therefore we aimed to present a proposal in which teachers would not merely be judges of the grammatical accuracy of the text, but “coaches, encouragers, developers, creators of environments in which our students can experience the writing process for themselves”. (Murray, 1972: 13)

We considered that shift fundamental since the traditional approach to writing in which grammar accuracy is the most important evaluable aspect only promotes one of the four subcompetences that compose the communicative competence. Grammar accuracy merely fosters the morphosyntactic subcompetence, but the other three, pragmatic, procesual and intercultural, are not developed at all. This approach is therefore too limiting and it does not fulfil the requisites presented by the LOE curriculum. Process approaches to writing, on the other hand, provide the opportunity to devote time in class to the promotion of writing sub-skills that include, among other things, pragmatic, cultural, sociolinguistic and grammatical issues.

From the questionnaire’s results we also observed the general apathy of students towards writing. It was clarifying the fact that many students considered that the selection of the topic was the decisive aspect for their like or dislike towards writing. When they felt motivated by the topic they were more willing to engage in the activity and therefore significant learning was more likely to happen, but most often they did not feel motivated by the topics proposed in the textbook, which means that they did not fully engage in the process of writing. From those results the necessity of motivating topics was pretty obvious, and it was, therefore, one of our challenges for our innovative project.

For all those reasons we decided to create what we called a “Writing Workshop”, and that could be defined as a sequence of tasks whose main objective was to devote the whole class session to writing in a way that it would enhance the process of writing. Although the word “task” is not explicitly mentioned in the project, the planning of this workshop is clearly based on that notion. The three stages of the workshop coincide with the typical three stages of a task: pre-task, task, post-task. It is worth mentioning

the presence of enabling tasks in the pre-task/pre-writing section, since, as stated in the essay, “our purpose in this project is to give students the necessary tools and strategies to generate ideas that would allow them to feel more comfortable when writing.” (Appendix 2: 9). We sought to make students aware of the process of learning and to decrease the affective filter so that they could feel comfortable during the process of writing. For that purpose, we organized the whole workshop around the following stages:

Pre-writing	1. Individually create a mind-map (generating)
	2. In groups, discuss and compare individual mind maps to create a common mind-map (selection)
	3. Number the ideas of the group according to the order of the writing (order)
Writing	4. Write a draft cooperatively. Each member of the group has to write a sentence using a different colour.
Post-writing/editing	5. Gather the individual, group mind-map and draft together and pass all the papers to another group. With the help of a checklist each group analyses and assesses other group work to this point.
	6. Using the classmates’ assessment, make improvements in the draft and write a final version
	7. Proofread

The project itself was implemented merely on three lessons due to the limited time available during the placement period. However, the Writing Workshop was designed so that it could be perfectly integrated in a real syllabus as the fundamental time devoted in class to improve writing. It was not a prescriptive suggestion, since it only presents

the basic schema for its implementation, so that in its broader sense this project could be applied to any context.

After the three lessons in which the Writing Workshop was implemented, we carried out a questionnaire in order to gather information about the students' opinion and motivation towards the project. Generally speaking, most of them felt motivated and interested. The aspects that they valued most positively were their freedom to choose the content of the text, and the fact that they were working in groups while they normally associate writing with individual assignments.

In the academic dimension the improvement was slight, after all our implementation only lasted three sessions, but a positive tendency could be observed both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

This second essay is related to the first one in the sense that the steps suggested by the writing workshop help to adapt writing exercises provided by textbooks, which are normally presented from a product approach, into a sequence of tasks that fosters writing subskills from a process approach. By means of those simple stages, the creation of a sequence of tasks focused on writing is facilitated. That task sequence is expected to be integrated in the flexible task-syllabus framework presented in the first essay, helping, in this way, overwhelmed teachers to dare to introduce innovative elements into their classrooms. The suggestions presented by both essays are expected to help teachers to gradually change the routines and participant roles, giving autonomy to students at the same time that the teacher still has some structures to rely on.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PROPOSALS

The previous analysis of the two essays provides evidence of the fact that creating a moderate perspective to CLT by means of a flexible classification of tasks is feasible, and it may be beneficial in some cases. It may be particularly helpful to those teachers who are forced to use a textbook or those who consciously choose a textbook because they do not feel confident enough to elaborate and use their own task-syllabus.

The common aspects between the two essays that contribute to that flexible perspective are the following: both essays are modest proposals that aim to help to solve

real problematic situations that exist in our educational system. Despite the difficult scenarios both essays transmit the positive ideal that the teacher is the person who has to make the decisions determining which type of methodology to use and consequently which type of learning to promote. In other words, however complicated the situation may be, there is always enough space for the teacher to make intelligent decisions in order to create as many communicative situations as possible. One of those possibilities is the integration of a moderate and flexible framework to slowly introduce innovative procedures in order to meet the requirements presented in the curriculum. Their flexibility helps them not to be prescriptive and therefore they could be applied to very different contexts, such as those requiring to adapt activities from textbooks into communicative or enabling tasks, or to devote class-time to the development of writing. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that both of them do not intend to be models for a perfect application of CLT procedures, but, on the contrary, they merely seek to help overwhelmed or limited teachers to introduce communicative situations and to set the bases of a syllabus based on tasks that would naturally promote students interaction and meaningful communication.

This moderate approach could therefore be regarded as a middle point between traditional and totally innovative procedures but never as an end in itself. Once the teacher has managed to integrate and establish the new routines, the sequences of tasks, and the roles of all the participants in the teaching-learning process, he or she should aspire to develop fully-communicative techniques. The improvement and the adjustments in the teacher's practices and management have to be based on personal reflection about his/her own procedures. Reflective teaching helps the teacher to detect when more risky methodology may be needed. This means that in the case of teachers who consciously decided to use a textbook but they have been adapting the activities into a logical sequence of tasks, it is recommendable that eventually they will feel prepared enough to develop their own task-syllabus.

In this advanced situation it is likely that teachers may want to introduce other TBLT approaches with a stricter conception in order to give more space to communicative tasks to the detriment of enabling or pedagogical tasks. In that situation, the teachers' challenge will be the design of their own task-syllabus, which presents a variety of demanding decisions. In the future I intend to focus my interest in the field of task-syllabus design. In this field of study I find Willis and Willis's (2007) explanation

very consistent and reasonable. They affirm that the first step in the design of a task-syllabus is to determine learners' needs and to establish topics that suit those needs. Only when that is done "we can begin to specify target tasks." (Willis & Willis, 2007:196)

When we have a series of task sequences and associated texts we need to organize these into a syllabus. We can do this in part by assessing task difficulty, relying on our knowledge of our learners and our knowledge of what they can do. This assessment of tasks and texts will enable us to organize task sequences into a viable teaching sequence. It will provide us with a task syllabus (196).

One of the most challenging decisions when creating a task syllabus is to decide the order of tasks so as to create a coherent process. As Hedge states (2000), "the major issue for teachers in organizing a syllabus based on tasks is how to put together a series of tasks to form a coherent programme; in other words, what criteria to use for selecting and sequencing tasks" (360).

Those criteria should be adapted to the learners' needs and they are especially important in the organization of communicative and enabling/pedagogical tasks. Depending on which criteria to follow, the resulting syllabus will be more communicative and learner-centred or more moderate.

Furthermore, when dealing with future proposals and forthcoming intentions it is important to take into account that we are experiencing a moment of change in the legal framework of our educational system. The rationale of this paper and its key ideas were developed according to the LOE's legislative framework; however, this may be promptly replaced by the "Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa" (LOMCE). Giving the circumstances, I consider fundamental to revisit this paper's rationale and suggestions in order to evaluate whether it will be still significant within the new LOMCE framework.

Generally speaking, it is worth noting the striking similarity between the key aspects of this paper and some of the recommendations provided in the "Methodological Orientations" in the Aragonese curriculum for LOMCE (*Gobierno de Aragón, Orden de 15 de mayo de 2015*).

LOE presents general and abstract recommendations for using a methodology that fosters the communicative competence. The words "tareas" is mentioned but there is no

explicit reference to task-based approach, its operation or specific practices in the teaching-learning process. It also remarks the necessity of a flexible methodological framework in order to be adapted to fit different contexts and needs. This is the framework in which this paper was planned and developed. Some other important recommendations in LOE are the importance of differentiation, the necessary fostering of learners' autonomy and the fundamental focus on the learning of competences instead of simply contents.

On the other hand, LOMCE “methodological orientations” are more specific and TBLT is explicitly recommended. Both legal frameworks aim to emphasize the importance of choosing a correct methodology in order to naturally foster communicative competence. LOMCE’s methodological orientations start with a statement that reminds the current necessity for the establishment of new practices: “El aprendizaje por competencias integradas en los elementos curriculares hace necesario una renovación de la práctica docente y del proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje” (3).

Those lines introduce a set of recommendations that are narrower and more specific than those from LOE’s “didactic orientations” and they even offer specific descriptions of the type of tasks and sequences. It is in this sense that this paper is particularly consistent with those orientations. LOMCE’s methodological orientations suggest the use of two different types of tasks, which share their main characteristics with the balance between enabling and communicative tasks that has been supported in this paper. The following lines have been extracted from that “methodological orientations” section of LOMCE:

Las unidades de aprendizaje han de estar organizadas en torno a situaciones de aprendizaje, actividades de lengua, o tareas que podrían ser fundamentalmente de dos tipos. Las tareas principales deberían tener como objetivo la comunicación, es decir, tener un propósito comunicativo claro, identificable y observable, así como ser significativas para el alumno por ser similares o comparables a aquellas tareas que forman parte de la vida diaria en los ámbitos personal, público, educativo y profesional.” [...] Un segundo tipo de tareas serían aquellas de apoyo o tareas pedagógicas, centradas en contenidos curriculares como los aspectos formales de la lengua. [...] Estas tareas se usarían siempre como soporte a las anteriores, dentro de una misma secuencia didáctica. (4)

These recommendations bear a remarkable similarity with those formulated in Estaire and Zanón's approach to TBLT, which has been one of the central theoretical aspects in this paper. I consider this resemblance positive since it implies that the moderate approach previously mentioned will still have its place in the framework of the new legislation.

Another recommendation in the new legal framework that has certain resemblance is the emphasis on the necessity of a flexible framework that allowed teachers to adapt their syllabus into different contexts and learners' needs. It also expresses the need to adapt activities into sequenced tasks when the course is based on a textbook. The following lines show how this recommendation is stated in the new legislation:

Cuando la programación gire en torno a un libro de texto, el docente habrá de adaptar las actividades o secuencias didácticas, si fuera necesario, para convertirlas en tareas, así como complementar los materiales con estos recursos auténticos, de tal forma que sean más significativos y relevantes en el contexto educativo concreto. (5)

The importance of adequate task sequences is also mentioned in the same direction that I introduced in the analysis section. Depending on the way in which tasks are organized, that syllabus and practices would be fostering one or another type of learning. Therefore it is essential to design the adequate ordering and sequencing of tasks so that they could be consistent with the main aim: improvement of the communicative competence. The following lines extracted from LOMCE convey the same idea:

Las secuencias didácticas, en torno a las cuales se organizan las tareas, habrán de ser coherentes con el marco de la competencia comunicativa y variadas, puesto que las secuencias novedosas suponen un reto y pueden aumentar la motivación, y las predecibles proporcionan seguridad al estudiante. (5)

The last shared suggestion is the fact that those sequences of tasks should not be linear, but on the contrary they should provide content and communicative opportunities in a cyclical or spiral mode, since students should not be expected to learn everything that has been taught in the first time that they are exposed:

Al diseñar la programación didáctica se deberán planificar situaciones u oportunidades de aprendizaje y de reciclaje, que faciliten el uso comunicativo de la lengua, así como el desarrollo de destrezas y actitudes. (5)

This brief revisit of the main aspects of this paper and its consistencies with the forthcoming LOMCE could be understood as actual evidence of the real necessity for a

gradual but profound and structural change in the practical dimension of our educational system. A shift from traditional methodologies is really needed in order to avoid inconsistencies and contradictions, and for that purpose a flexible TBLT approach based on an adequate balance between communicative and enabling/pedagogical tasks may be the first but important step to finally establish the teaching of languages from an authentic CLT point of view.

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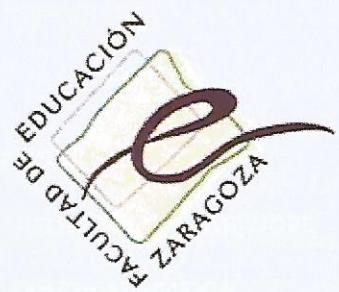
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1:

“What Is a Task?”

**Subject: “Fundamentos de diseño instruccional y
metodologías de aprendizaje en la especialidad de Lenguas
Extranjeras”**



Universidad
Zaragoza

WHAT IS A TASK? APPLICATION OF ESTAIRE AND ZANÓN'S (year)

THEORY TO A REAL EFL TEXTBOOK

*Title must be reformulated,
to make it more critical (year)*

68548 Fundamentos de diseño instruccional y metodologías de aprendizaje en la
especialidad de Lenguas Extranjeras

Group 9

Jara Lacasa

Sandra Nadela

Elvira Esteve

2014 / 2015

an reference to the context (recipient secondary ed. level) could be reinforced here!

INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching is an up-to-date approach to language teaching in which significant active learning plays a certainly important role. The approach has been widely commented and analysed and therefore an enormous range of different conceptions are available. This essay aims to introduce the current theoretical scenario and organise the wide range of different notions and requirements. Afterward, we focus and extend one of them that we consider the most flexible and easy to apply. That approach will be the one that we use in the practical section, in which we aim to analyse a real EFL textbook by classifying its activities by means of the TBLT theoretical approach, as well as to propose certain changes and adaptations to transform some of the activities into a more task-like classwork.

I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Starting with the theoretical presentation, one of the biggest changes in the history of ELT methods and approaches was the change from form-based approaches to communicative-based ones. This evolution was due to a change in the understanding of the ways languages are learnt. "Traditionally, language learning has been regarded as a process of mastering a succession of steps, each one building on the one before." (Foster, 1999, p.1) Two of the most widely known methods used to teach according to this conception were the 3 P's model (presentation, practice, performance), and the Audio-lingual method. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged from a disillusionment with the Audio-lingual method, and it was based on sociolinguistic "concepts oriented to language communication", mainly "Austin's (1962) speech act theory", "Halliday's (1973) functional perspective" and "Hymes' (1972) theory of communicative competence". (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, pp. 60-61). It focused its attention on concepts such as "negotiation, interpretation and expression" and its activities "were supposed to promote grammatical accuracy as well as communicative fluency". (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 61). However, in practice, CLT was not as successful as it appeared to be. In fact, in the classrooms it was impossible to "guarantee meaningful communication", so that it did not present a "revolutionary step" from the previous methods and moreover it was not possible to adapt it to all the different contexts. (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, pp. 62-63).

As a consequence of that failure, a spin-off of CLT appeared: the Task-Based Language Teaching, which is characterized by a more psycholinguistic approach to language teaching. Cognitive theory affirms that communication is not enough, since learners need to 'notice' the grammatical structures to be able to acquire a language. TBLT still has got an important communicative ingredient, especially at

the beginning, but it also gives space to the engagement to grammar. TBLT is also based on the idea "that learners do not acquire the target language in the order it is presented to them, no matter how carefully teacher and textbooks organize it. Language learning is a developmental, organic process that follows its own internal agenda." (Foster, 1999, p.1)

The term TBLT was coined in the 80's by SLA researchers, and it was supported by linguists such as Long, Prabhu and so on. And twenty years later, this approach is still discussed by many other linguists, like Ellis, Nunan, Long, Willis, Skehan and others. Although at first instance the concept of task may seem quite simple and straightforward, in fact there are many different notions of tasks depending on the author. The most complicated aspect to be defined is the blurred limit between tasks and normal activities or exercises.

According to Littlewood (2004) authors can be classified into three categories regarding their definition of 'task'. Some authors understand "the category of tasks as comprising only activities that involve communication" (p.3), e.g. Willis and Ellis. For other authors, such as Stern, the involvement of communication is primary in tasks. Finally, there are authors that do not consider at all communicative purpose as an essential criterion, and present a rather flexible approach, for example Estaire and Zanón, or Kumaravadivelu. Therefore, these "definitions of 'task' range along a continuum according to the extent to which they insist on communicative purpose as an essential criterion." (Littlewood, 2004, p.2). Each author, following the way in which they understand the concept of 'task' use different terms and classifications for activities.

Starting with the most strict and rigorous authors, Jane Willis defined a task as "an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (Willis, 1996, p.23). "Willis (1996) has produced a detailed practical framework for the task-based classroom in which learners are led through cycles of task planning, performance, repetition, and, finally, comparison with native speaker norms." (Foster, 1999, p.1) *↳ we are expected to comment on reference!*

→ Similarly, Ellis classifies three different phases in the development of tasks: pre-task, during-task and post-task; and she proposes six clear-cut criteria for establishing what a task is. According to her, a task is a workplan that "involves a primary focus on meaning" that in many cases includes an information gap, and also "involves real-world processes of language use" by using "any of the four language skills" in addition to "cognitive processes" in order to obtain a communicative and non-linguistic outcome. (Ellis, 2003: 9-10) As it can be inferred from the previous criteria, the focus on meaning rather than form is a really important requisite for considering a classwork a task.

"Ellis is one of several writers who adopt the term 'exercise' for any activity in which the learners have no communicative purpose. Thus Ellis's 'exercises' (in contrast to 'tasks') would correspond to Estaire and Zanón's 'enabling tasks' (in contrast to 'communication tasks')." (Littlewood, 2004, p.3)

However, in our opinion it is rather difficult to imagine an activity or a set of activities whose aim is to provide the students with the necessary grammar tools without turning the focus from meaning to form. *or but why do you say so? (I know, but you don't say it explicitly)*

For both of them the communicative dimension and the focus on meaning are essential requisites for defining a task, and therefore, any other practice that may include a focus on form by means of a non-communicative method would never be considered a task according to Ellis and Willis. Supporting a more moderate attitude towards the conception of task there are many authors that present different classifications of tasks, definitions and delimitations of what a task is and is not.

To begin with, David Nunan distinguishes between "real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks: target tasks, as the name implies, refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom; pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom." (Nunan, 2004, p.1). In this respect, only pedagogical tasks are relevant to us, since we only aim to analyse the phenomenon that occur inside the classroom. "Nevertheless, even those tasks all have a purpose of some sort, like solving a puzzle." (Furuta, 2002, p.15). Therefore, even though Nunan presents a slightly broader sense of tasks, it still embraces the limiting requisite of a pure meaning-based purpose.

Another author that highlights the importance of the relationship of tasks with the real world is Skehan (1996), but for him the relationship of tasks with real world is achieved by performing activities such as exchanging information, problem-solving or making decisions and judgements. Skehan (1998 in Kumaravadivelu, 2006) highlights the necessity of a moderate approach in which "the central feature is a balance between form and meaning, and an alternation of attention between them" (p. 121). *? Kumaravadivelu's article doesn't say anything*

On the other side of the continuum, Estaire and Zanón's suggest a much more flexible classification of tasks that include not only communicative classwork "during which learner's attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (Estaire and Zanón, 1994, p. 13), but they also propose another revolutionary type of task: enabling tasks, which "provide students with the necessary linguistic tools to carry out a communication task" (p.13). This second type of tasks procures a really different understanding of what a task is, and it opens the scope to multiple classwork that would have been considered non-tasks according to Ellis' conception of task.

In a rather similar way, Kumaravadivelu also presents a flexible classification of tasks, divided into

three types: language-centred tasks, which "draw the learner's attention primarily to linguistic forms"; learner-centred tasks, that "direct the learner's attention to formal as well as functional properties"; and learning-centred tasks, which "engage the learner mainly in the negotiation, interpretation and expression of meaning, without any explicit focus on form." (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 65).

According to Estaire and Zanón "some of the types of classroom work that may be classified as enabling tasks are" the following:

- Presentation of necessary new language (...); checking that the new language has been understood; records of new language learnt kept by students.
- Controlled pre-communication practice or awareness-raising tasks usually focused on accuracy:
- (...) immediately following presentation, or as part of recycling of previously learnt language
- (...) facilitating a specific aspect of a communication task which is to be done immediately afterwards
- improving any of the four skills
- (...) Checking and discussion of outcome and difficulties encountered; improving the linguistic quality of outcomes through correction and editing"
- Systematization/globalisation of linguistic content previously dealt with in a fragmented way (1994, pp. 15-16)

All in all, among the immense spectrum of conceptions and definitions of task, most of the authors highlight the communicative dimension of the practices, the focus on meaning rather than form, and the non-linguistic outcome. However, we decided to focus our attention on the liberal approach proposed by Estaire and Zanón. The reasons why we decided to choose this approach are mainly based on the fact that most of the students from initial academic courses and some of the higher courses of ESO have a rather insufficient knowledge of English grammar, and therefore we consider that it may be necessary to create a sequence of tasks that includes not only communicative tasks but also enabling tasks.

Well, perhaps significant knowledge

refined

II. PRACTICAL SECTION

In the practical section of this essay we are going to analyse an EFL book of 3rd year ESO and to classify the activities according to the approach we have decided to follow, that is to say: enabling tasks and communicative tasks. We will also indicate if the activities don't apply to any of the two categories. Before doing that, we are going to establish some general characteristics of the book. The grammatical points and new vocabulary in each lesson are presented in an inductive way through examples or simple activities such as matching definitions to words from a text. The book tries to promote speaking activities and there are some tasks but most of them fail to be fully communicative.

Once we have classified the activities our aim is to modify and adapt those activities that do not match the characteristics of task. The main objective is to reshape an EFL textbook into a sequence of tasks closer to Estaire and Zanón's understanding, fostering in this way a more communicative and pragmatic approach to teaching English. It is necessary to bear in mind that the number of explicit classwork will be reduced at the end of the adaptation. This is due to the fact that we are likely to omit a considerable amount of repetitive and mechanical activities and replace them by more elaborate and time-consuming tasks.

We are going to use the term exercise to refer to activities that do not match any kind of task. We are going to use activity as a neutral one, which can mean both types of tasks and also exercises. As we have already explained the definitions of enabling and communicative tasks we are not going to repeat the definition here.

We have analysed a full unit (See Appendix) containing 58 activities and the general classification is:

Enabling Task	Communicative Task	Not fully Communicative	Exercise
15- 25.9 %	1 - 1.7%	4 - 6.9 %	38 - 65.5%

Now we are going to analyse every page in detail explaining the changes we will introduce.

On the first page of Unit 2 (p. 21) we find 3 enabling tasks (activities 1, 2 & 4) that allow students to activate and remember (recycling) some vocabulary about feelings and emotions. Activity 3 as it is presented in the book is just an exercise, the positive aspect about this exercise is that it is presented as

an advertisement, and that is connected to real life. The advert will be used to expand activity 4 and 11 of the next page.

On the following page (p. 22) we find some exercises that help to practice the vocabulary learnt in the previous page by means of listening activities (1, 2 & 3), this recording is too simplistic and artificial so we have decided to omit it. There are other exercises aimed at developing reading skills (they refer to the text in page 23): activity 5 helps to improve reading comprehension providing one key step to start a reading. Activity 7 is an enabling task as it serves to check that students have understood the text. Activities 6, 8 & 9 are non-essential since they do not serve any learning purpose, and therefore we suggest omitting them. Activity 4 is a speaking exercise and it will have a part in activity 11. Finally, activity 10 is an enabling task that promotes the active discovery of new vocabulary by matching new words with definitions.

We propose to develop activity 11 by adding some characteristics of exercise 3 (p. 21) and activity 4 (p. 22). The heading of exercise 11 would be the first part of the task *Over to you: What is your biggest worry? Find out what the students in your class think. Are their worries the same as the teens' worries in the survey?* Students will carry out a survey and when the results are obtained, the learners should select in groups the two most important worries for them. They prepare those worries as if they are going to present them in the 'Feel Good Group' of exercise 3. After they present their problems and how they feel, the rest of the groups should help them.

On page 24 and 25, which go together, the first grammar explanation appears through the use of examples, since the rules are not explicitly given. This is done by means of enabling tasks (activities 1 & 2), which help the students to actively reflect about the use and construction of the past perfect tense. Activities 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11 are just exercises for practising the grammar point explanation, since they simply ask to apply the grammatical rule previously learnt in an automatic way. Therefore we think that those exercises are dispensable.

To follow a coherent sequence these two pages should be restructured. We suggest to present the two examples of past perfect that appear in activity 1, but to postpone the second part of the exercise (completion of the rules). Afterwards, we present the text in activity 4, but without the gaps, that is to say, with the correct verb forms, and ask learners to identify the past perfect and past simple (which should be highlighted by them in different colours) and the structures that precede the past perfect e.g. after, etc. After the text, activity 2 is included as an enabling task to check if they are able to apply what they learnt with the help of the text.

Only after this is done, the second part of exercise 1, in which they have to complete the rule, will be presented. In this way we assure an inductive and significant learning of the grammatical point. We will add another sentence, similar to the previous one, presenting the formation of the verb tense. "We form the Past Perfect Simple with the auxiliary verb had/have and then the past participle/infinitive form of the verb". After this, students will be asked to do activity 9, considered an enabling task because it serves to check that they have understood the rules, in this task we can check if they know the difference in use between past simple and past perfect simple and also if they are able to form correctly the verb form.

Activity 12 can be considered a task; however, we think that it is not fully communicative because there is not a clear non-linguistic outcome. However, we understand the practical dimension of this activity, since interpreting the facial expressions is an essential ability for real life communication and relationships. In order to make it completely communicative, we suggest transforming it into a game. In groups, students have to interpret the facial expressions of the pictures. They have to use the vocabulary they have learnt about feelings and invent the reason why the people in the pictures are feeling in that way. Afterwards, each group has to write a short text narrating each one of the situations they have invented. They are likely to use the main grammatical points of this unit (past simple and past perfect) to describe the reasons and past events. Then, they will present their writings in front of the class and all of the groups and the teacher have to choose one of them as the most original, funny or clear. This dynamic will be repeated for each of the images. When a group is selected as the best description of a picture, it receives one point. At the end, one of the groups will have more points than the rest and this will be the winner.

On page 26, nearly all the activities can be considered enabling tasks if we take into account that they help the student to infer the meaning and vocabulary from the text, which deals with a real-world situation: sibling rivalry. Those activities promote the understanding of the text and the personal reflection about what has been read contributing to the developing of reading skills. At the same time, they have to be able to write simple sentences that sum up some parts of the text in order to answer the questions. The only exception is activity 4, which only requires completing some sentences and is considered to be an exercise that would be erased.

Page number 27 is simply focused on grammar and vocabulary. We consider it to be boring and unnecessary, since it only presents a repetitive and mechanical view of the previously presented grammatical point. We think that all those exercises in which the student is only supposed to fill gaps or

choose the correct answer, can be deleted and replaced by tasks that allow them to employ that grammatical point in a sequence that permits them to develop their creativity and whose connection with the real world may be more clear. The only activity that we would maintain is number 4, because, in spite of the fact that it follows the typical dynamic of "fill in the gaps", at least it is presented in form of a full text and not simply isolated sentences, so that it can be considered an enabling task that helps the learner to check and reinforce the previously learnt knowledge. Moreover, the theme of the text is appropriate in the unit and it may call the students' attention, so that it can be seen as a good opportunity for them to see the grammatical point in context.

On page 28 and 29, activity 1 is an exercise as it is in the book but it deals with a real life activity: a teen chat room. This idea will be used to develop a final communicative task at the end of these two pages and therefore this activity turns itself into an enabling task providing students a model to follow as well as some useful vocabulary that is completed with activity 2. Activities 2 and 3 can be considered enabling tasks to expand vocabulary, since it presents an inductive way of introducing daily expressions, together with activity 7 which is an enabling task to provide students with structures for giving advice. Activities 4, 5 and 6 are just listening exercises, and we think that this recording can be used in the final task. Activities 8, 9 and 10 are exercises to practice vocabulary and will not be included. We think that activity 11, which is designated as "speaking task", although it is an interested attempt to introduce a dynamic and pleasant activity, is not a complete task. We consider that as it is presented in the book, the activity is quite limiting, since it presents examples of problems and it also makes reference to the expressions used in exercise number 7. However, we propose the following idea to transform it into a fully communicative task: Using the idea of activity 1 we would create a chat room or forum (using blackboard or moodle), after that we would use the listening in activity 5 as the first problem and the students all together would provide solutions. Finally in groups they will imagine one typical teenagers' problems and will post it in the class forum and the rest of the groups should give 1 advice each to improve the situation.

On page 30, we find some enabling tasks to explain the structure of a letter and provide the students with the necessary tools and strategies to develop the writing skill (Activities 1, 2 & 3). Activity 4 is a reading comprehension exercise which is not really the purpose of the page (learning how to write a letter), so we plan to delete it. We suggest making a mixture between exercise 4 and the 'Writing Task'. The questions in exercise 4 could be useful to develop the task, which in spite of its denomination we have considered merely 'half-communicative', since apparently there is not a non-linguistic

access to
internet?

outcome. The students may write an anonymous letter that will be uploaded to the classroom forum. They should explain their situation, reasons and feelings. Then each student will be assigned a letter so that everyone has to reply giving advice. In this simple way we provide the letter's assignment with a non-linguistic outcome and therefore the task acquires a communicative dimension.

On pages 31 and 32, activity 1 as it is in the book would be an exercise, since the learners only have to match the magazines with the target people. However we aim to add a second part to the activity so that activity 1 serves as an enabling task: the learners, in groups, should select a magazine from the real world and recommend it to the rest of the class. The rest of the groups have to choose one of them and say why they like it. Activity 2 is a speaking exercise but we are going to adapt it to a communicative task. In groups, students should design a party to be celebrated in class the last day before Christmas holidays and describe it: elements, activities, music... Then, they will describe their party to rest of the groups, who will select the one they want to go and say why. Finally they will give a piece of advice to improve the parties they did not like. The design that is selected more times will be followed to do the party. Finally, after the party has taken place and following the indications in exercise 4, the students should write a thankful email to the organizing group as it is suggested in the book, this will be part of the same task. We would delete exercise 3 since it is merely mechanical and predictable.

After the adaptation of the book now there are 30 activities distributed as explained in the chart:

Enabling Task	Communicative Task
25 - 83%	5 - 17%

The significant reduction in number is due to the amount of time that communicative tasks require.

After the analysis it may seem that many of the common activities that appear in current books are enabling tasks, the main problem is that after that enabling tasks there is not a communicative task that allows students to complete the circle of learning. We have also realised that many of the exercises deal with real life events that are significant to students and are half-way communicative, so we have tried to create communicative tasks by recycling those materials. However, there are also many exercises that require little mental effort on the part of the students and are just copying from a text or filling gaps where the exercise gives the verb form to use, so they end up doing them mechanically, we have discarded them.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, although the widely commented TBLT presents an innovative and psycholinguistic approach to language teaching, it also fosters the appearance of abundant and diverse conceptions and definitions of tasks, so that the boundaries between tasks and exercises are not clearly established. We aimed to introduce the wide range of possibilities and to highlight the most important differences among them. Afterward, we understood that the conditions of real 3rd course of ESO classrooms would require a rather flexible and liberal understanding of tasks, since learners are likely to need support in using their own linguistic resources. For this reason the approach that we considered the most appropriate was the one proposed by Estaire and Zanón, who distinguish two types of tasks: communicative and enabling. Therefore, in the practical section, our aim was to apply Estaire and Zanón's conception of tasks in order to adapt the textbook which is mainly focused on form into a sequence of tasks that fosters communication and active learning. This adaptation has led us to reduce the number of activities, since the new ones need more time to be developed. However, we have just proposed a possible fresh unit design by simply modifying the typical resource used by teachers in EFL classrooms: a textbook.

excellent!

it's an excellent project: it involves theory & practice perfectly; it demonstrates your understanding of key issues - critical & practical; it is well-written & it is context-specific.

congratulations!

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italics
this has a published
version (we need to
refer to web page)
except it is published
online.

APPENDIX 2:

“From Testing Writing to Teaching Writing”

**Subject: “Evaluación e innovación docente e investigación
educativa en inglés”**



Universidad
Zaragoza



Evaluación e innovación docente e investigación educativa en Inglés

From Testing to Teaching Writing



Jara Lacasa

Sandra Nadela

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Appendices

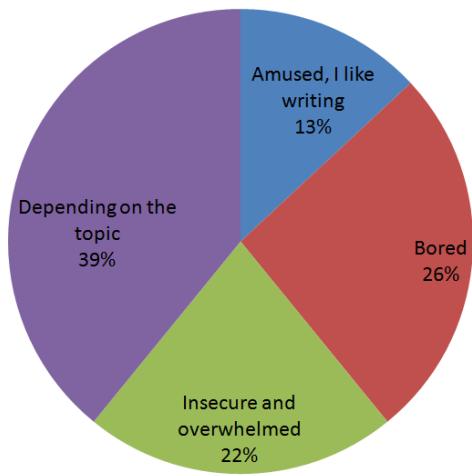
1. Introduction and Justification

We decided to focus our project in the teaching of writing due to some particular previous assumptions. First of all, generally speaking, writing has been traditionally neglected in the EFL classroom, since in many occasions the process of writing is set aside as homework. Therefore, the process itself was evaded and the teacher merely focused on correcting the grammatical and spelling inaccuracies of the final product. Besides, we also presupposed, based on our own experience, both as students and as teachers of private tuitions, that SS in general feel discouraged towards writing and in many cases they have difficulties when writing. Some of the typical justifications given by students are statements such as “I don’t know what to write”, “I’ve never been there, how am I supposed to write about that”, or “I never have any good idea, I have no imagination”.

With the intention of verifying those assumptions in our assigned schools, we designed two questionnaires, one for students and another for teachers (see appendix 1, pp. 1-2). The students’ questionnaire was comprised of five questions, which could be classified into two groups according to their purposes. Questions 1 and 3 aim to gather information about the SS’ attitude towards writing in general and school’s compositions in particular. On the other hand, questions 2, 4 and 5 were designed to determine the SS’ active knowledge about writing strategies. The teachers’ questionnaire was designed to obtain information about the teachers’ approaches towards writing and their procedures in the classroom.

With the aim of justifying our innovation project in our particular contexts, the results obtained with the help of the previously mentioned questionnaires are presented below. The following graphics show the results from the SS’ questionnaire obtained in the school María Inmaculada-Claretianas:

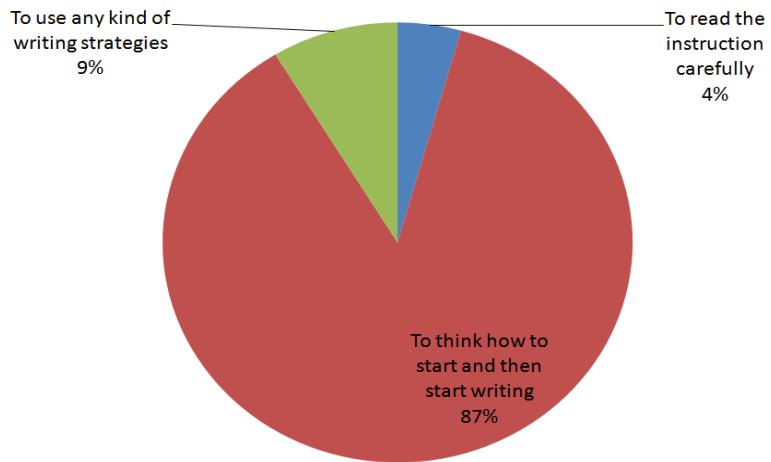
1. How do you feel when you have to do a writing exercise?



This graphic shows that only 13% of students in this class feel amused when they have to do a writing exercise. On the other hand, 48% of students have a negative attitude towards that type of exercises, from which 26% feel bored and 22% overwhelmed.

It is remarkable the fact that 39% of students stated that their attitude depends on the topic.

2. What is the first thing you do when you start a writing exercise?

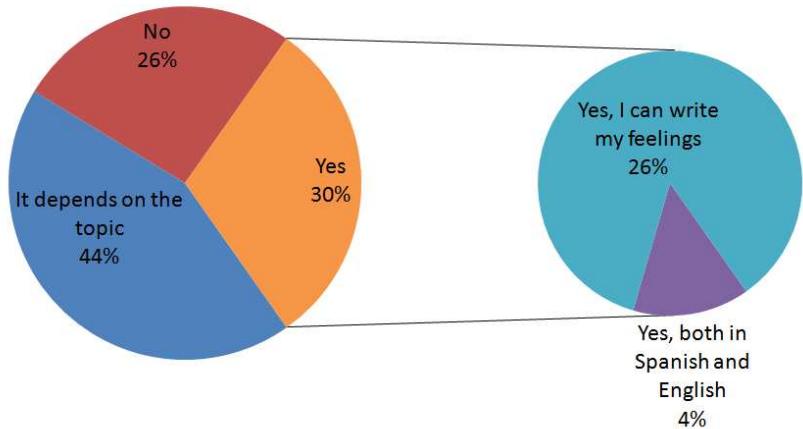


This question intends to gather information about the SS' knowledge about the pre-writing stage.

Only 9% of students mentioned in their answers any type of writing strategies, such as brainstorming or making a draft before the final version.

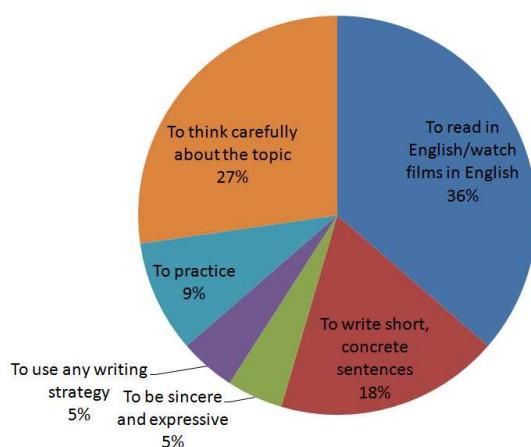
Most of them, 87%, simply think about the topic and start writing, without taking notes or making mind-maps.

3. Do you like writing?



The answers to this question are similar to first question's results. However, it is remarkable the fact that the percentage of students that answered positively is higher in this question (30%) than in the first question (13%). This difference is a consequence of the fact that this question asks about writing in general, while the first question is narrower and it only refers to school writings. In other words, some students that enjoy writing do not enjoy doing writing exercises at school. The most common argument for the students that like writing is that they can write their feelings.

4. What would you suggest your classmates to improve their writing?

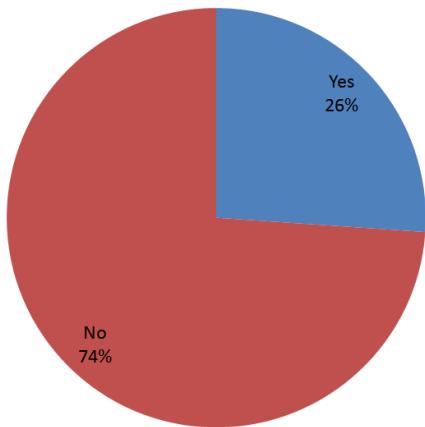


This question also aims to know the SS' knowledge about writing strategies.

Only 5% of them suggested any type of exercise related to writing strategies, such as drafting or proofreading.

Most of them suggested to think carefully about the topic, 27%, or to read and watch more books and films in English, 36%.

5. Have you ever worked on writing skills before?

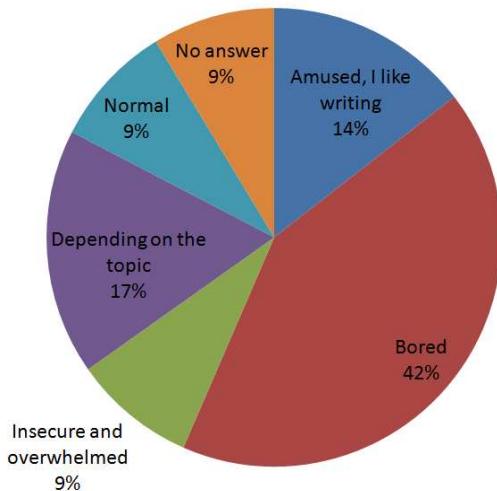


This question was pretty straightforward and simply wanted to know if they had worked previously on writing skills or not.

74% of them stated that they have never worked on writing skills, while 26% said that they did but in English academies or private tuitions.

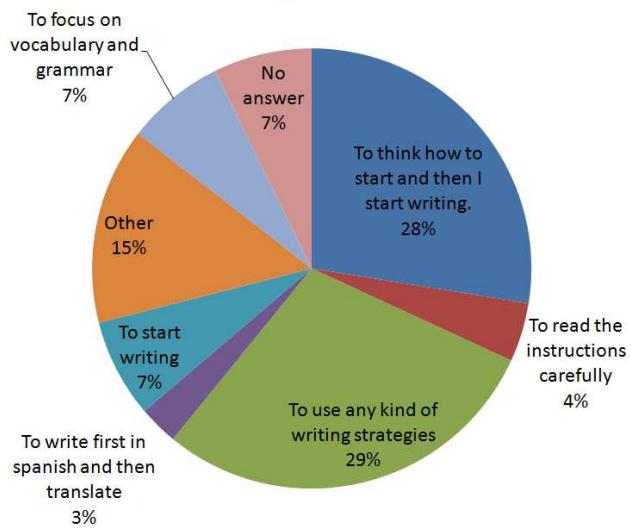
The following graphics show the results obtained from the SS' questionnaires in *Madre María Rosa Molas school*:

1. How do you feel when you have to do a writing exercise?



Regarding the first question the most relevant results are that only 14% of students have a positive attitude towards writing and more than 50% have negative feelings, most of them feeling bored. Besides, 17% of students draw attention towards the topic as a factor that influences their motivation.

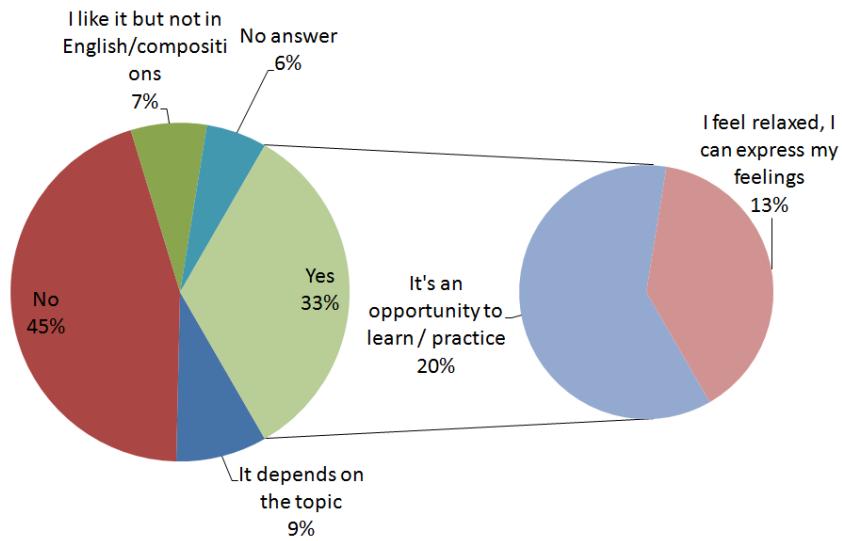
2.What is the first thing you do when you start a writing exercise?



The answers to the second question are more varied. The most important findings are that only 29% of students use any kind of writing strategies such as brainstorming, making lists of ideas or drafting and that 35% of students think and write or start writing straight away.

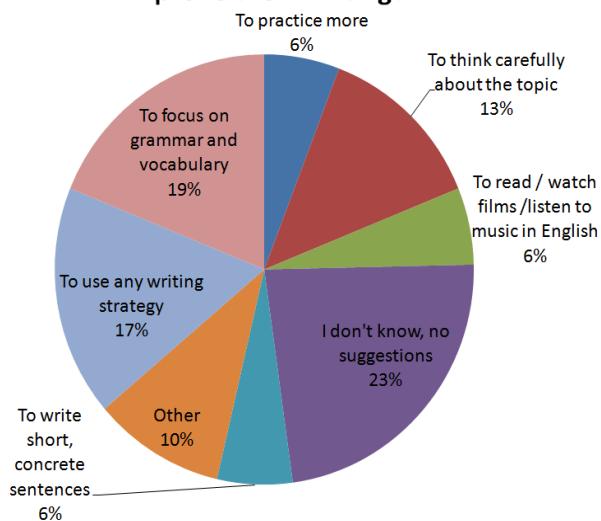
A very positive finding is that only 3% of students write first in Spanish and then translate.

3. Do you like writing?



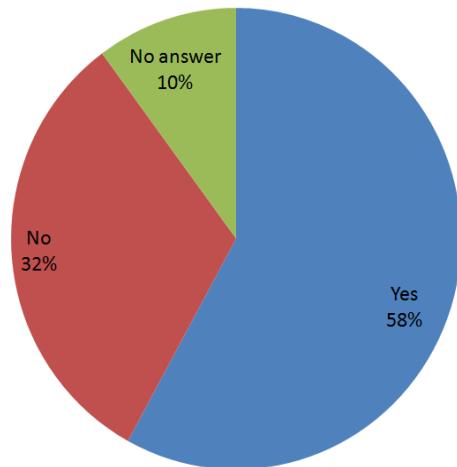
Regarding question number 3, 45 % of students answered that they 'don't like writing' and 9 % mentioned the topic and an influential factor. Only 33% of students like writing and the 20% out of that 33% regards writing as an opportunity to learn.

4. What would you suggest your classmates to improve their writing?



Regarding question 4, only 17% suggested to use any kind of writing strategies such as brainstorming, making lists of ideas or drafting. 19% of students suggested to focus on grammar and vocabulary, this result may be derived from the writing approach followed in the school.

5. Have you ever worked on writing skills before?



In relation to question 5, 58% of students answered that they have worked on writing skills. On the contrary 32% of students answered they have not, which is striking because all of them have the same teacher.

Regarding the Teacher's Questionnaire, the answers from both teachers were rather similar, and for this reason the following analysis presents a brief summary of both results at the same time, however the complete answers can be found in appendix 2 (pp. 3 - 5). Regarding questions 1 and 4 (1. Do you consider working on writing skills necessary? Why or why not?; 4. How do you think students face writing skills?) both of our mentors agreed and believe that writing is important and should be developed and improved and that

students face writing tasks unwillingly. In relation with question 2 (*Have you worked on writing skills with this group before? What did you do? Did it work? Why or why not?*), answers differed. Claretianas' mentor accepted that she had never worked on writing skills with this group before because there was no time. However, she had planned to work on them during the term we were in our placement period. On the contrary, Madre Maria Rosa Molas' mentor works on writing skills but with a very limited approach focusing mainly on text structure. She is currently focusing on news format and making students practice it several times. However, some of the students (32%) as it was shown in the questionnaire results were not aware of having worked on writing skills.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the previous description of the data. First, skills are not worked sufficiently in the normal development of lessons since writing is an activity commanded as homework and has not space in the classes. Second, normally students do not feel motivated with the topics proposed by teachers. The main student's opinion towards writing seems to be that the selection of the topic is very important. If they consider the topic to be interesting, apparently they enjoy writing, but on the contrary they feel obliged and bored when they do not like the topic. Their interest obviously influences their learning, since they are more likely to improve if they engage with the activity.

Those two conclusions are normal consequences of a traditional approach towards writing. That approach is focused on the final product, evading the process of writing. When evaluating the essays and compositions, only grammar accuracy and vocabulary and spelling were taken into account. In the same way, the practice was focused on the improvement of grammar and the individual practice. Writing was not adequately valued; many teachers considered it to be too time-consuming and results cannot be observed at short term, so in many occasions writing was set aside to the personal work at home.

Since little attention is paid to the improvement of writing, the limited moments centred on writing tend to be focused on the fostering of grammatical accuracy. When the most important aspect when assessing writings is the language accuracy, we are only taking into account the *morphosyntactic competence*. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember the fact that the communicative competence is composed by three other competences: *pragmatic, processual and intercultural competences*. Special mention should be done to the *pragmatic competence*, which plays a really important role in the

process of writing, since it includes sociolinguistic, discursive and functional language's aspects. (*Orden 9 mayo 2007*)

Therefore, the approach of writing as a process is definitely more recommended, since it does not only take into account the linguistic appropriateness and grammatical accuracy of the final product, but it also focuses on the activities that foster the development of the necessary skills to create a written text.

The teacher is not longer a mere source of knowledge and the person who assesses and marks the students' writings, in the writing as a process approach, teachers are "coaches, encouragers, developers, creators of environments in which our students can experience the writing process for themselves". (Murray, 1972: 13) Therefore, "not every piece of writing needs to be corrected or graded", (Sokolik, 2003:93), but on the contrary the emphasis should be done in the practice in which they could feel comfortable and relaxed to honestly engage with the process of writing. For this purpose, writing cannot be a neglected activity set aside to personal work, but it has to be integrated in the syllabus, so that students could "become more comfortable with the act of writing." (Sokolik, 2003:93)

The practice of this skill in the classroom should be based on the fact that writing is a process that can be "divided into three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting" (Murray, 1972: 12), and the three of them have to be fostered and practiced. In order to do that, activities such as "brainstorming, drafting, writing, feedback, revising, and editing" have to be taught and practice in the classroom, since "these types of activities encourage the idea that learning to write is more than creating a final product; it is the learning of a series of skills leading to that product." (Sokolik, 2003: 96)

Hence, our purpose in this project is to give students the necessary tools and strategies to generate ideas that would allow them to feel more comfortable when writing. We also aim to improve motivation, as motivation influences students' engagement in activities leading to an improvement of the writing quality. Needless to say that the topics selected should be meaningful and interesting for the students.

2. Research Proposal

Taking into account the previously presented problem and having reached the conclusion that the approach of teaching writing as a process would improve that situation, we proposed the following hypothesis: if we teach writing skills based on the process, and therefore we provide strategies and scaffolding during the whole writing process, students will improve their writing outcomes and will feel more confident and motivated when facing a writing task.

Therefore, in order to both devote enough time in class for working on the process of writing and to provide encouraging and motivating topics and situations, our innovative project was the creation and development of a writing workshop.

During this writing workshop, our first purpose was to make students reflect about the process of writing and help them practice the necessary sub-skills separately, so that they could focus on them little by little. The first part of our innovation project was therefore focused on the implementation of activities for generating ideas, selecting and focusing on the most important pieces of information, and structuring the sentences and paragraphs coherently and following the appropriate patterns for the specific type of writing. We also wanted to make emphasis on the importance of the purpose and the addressee when facing a writing task.

Secondly, we also aimed to procure meaningful writing tasks in order to foster interest and motivation. We do not want them to consider writing as the “toughest skill”, but we aspired to integrate writing in their daily activities. For this purpose we wanted to decrease the affective filter and make them feel confident enough to express their ideas.

Our final aim was to promote creativity, however this objective could only be applied to those students that already presented a good development of the previously mentioned main aims, since we were conscious of our limitations both in terms of abilities and time. If possible, we wanted to help them to create connections between the real world and experiences on one side and invented things and imagination on the other. Since we wanted to do this bearing in mind student’s potential, for some of them it was enough to improve their writing skills and to foster their motivation.

3. Description of innovation or action plan

Action Context

This project was developed in two state funded schools in Zaragoza: María Inmaculada - Claretianas (Sandra Nadela) and Madre María Rosa Molas (Jara Lacasa). In Claretianas the action took place in 4th year ESO and in Madre María Rosa Molas in 3rd ESO. Although the great part of the project is shared, there are some differences in the implementation that will be dealt with individually. Therefore in this point the common classroom action plan will be explained. In the Report stage differences between the two schools will be detailed.

Classroom action plan

To teach writing skills based on the process we decided to carry out a writing workshop. This workshop dealt with an Advice column that appears in British magazines and newspapers: Agony Aunt. In this advice column teenagers or adults write telling Agony Aunt their problems and then Agony Aunt answers them giving advice and possible solutions to those problems. The first part of the activity consisted in students inventing the problem and writing to Agony Aunt, they were given total freedom to invent any kind of problem and encouraged to be creative. In the second part (follow-up) students had to act as Agony Aunt and provide solutions and give advice to other group's problem. The steps to follow in both parts of the activity were the following:

1. Individually create a mind map.
2. In groups, discuss and compare individual mind maps to create a common group mind map.
3. Number the ideas in the group mind in the same order you will include them in the letter addressed to Agony aunt. If there any idea you are not using leave it without number.
4. Write a draft (first version) including all the ideas and following the order. Each member of the group has to write a sentence using a different colour.
5. Put all the paper sheets you have used (individual mind map, group mind map and draft) into the folder and pass it to another group. Using the checklist you have to assess your mates' work.

6. Using the checklist your mates have completed you have to improve your draft and write a final version.

The last step after the workshop had finished was to carry out a Final Students' Questionnaire (Appendix 3 - p. 6) to observe if this activity had produced any change of mind in the students.

Expected results

Thanks to the implementation of the writing workshop we expect to observe two types of improvements: first, we presume to observe any type of enhancement in the academic results of the writings. Second, by means of group activities and the interesting topic we expect to perceive an increase in the SS's motivation towards writing.

4. Individual Report

María Inmaculada - Claretianas (Sandra Nadea)

In María Inmaculada school the innovation project was carried out in one class of the 4th course of ESO. The class was comprised of 23 students and the workshop could be developed during 3 whole lessons. During those 3 lessons there was enough time to carry out two group composition and one final individual composition. The two group compositions were thematically related, since the first of them was to describe a problem as if they were sending it to an advice column. In the second composition SS were supposed to answer to other group's problem by giving advice as if they were the Agony Aunt of a magazine.

Finally, since they were willing to express their feelings in written form, I had the opportunity to suggest a final individual composition in which they had to give their opinion about the writing workshop and to suggest improvements. They were free to write whatever they wanted, the only requirement was that they had to apply their recently acquired knowledge about writing, and therefore I wanted to receive not only the final version but also the brainstorms or mind-maps, drafts and corrections.

This opportunity allowed me to measure their progression in a quantitative mode, since the teacher gave me SS' previous compositions and I could compare them by following the same criteria.

Madre María Rosa Molas (Jara Lacasa)

In Madre María Rosa Molas school the innovation project was carried out in all the three groups 3rd year ESO, adding up 68 students. The writing lesson, which was developed in 2 sessions, was integrated within the 5 sessions to implement during the student-teaching period. That allowed to connect writing with reading. The reading lesson had two main aims: to serve as a reading comprehension activity and to provide an example for the writing that students had to work on in the next sessions. It was of assistance to introduce both the topic and the structure. After that, classroom action plan was followed as devised.

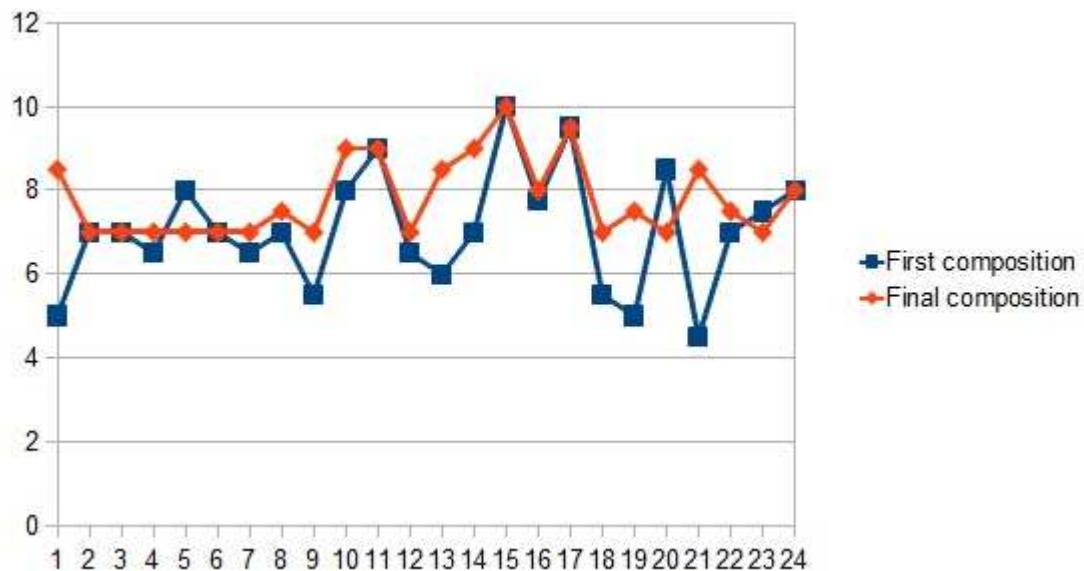
The second part of the activity, at first designed to be done in group, was modified and send it for homework as an individual exercise. Therefore all the steps established could not be followed; students were asked to do the individual mind map and the draft and to hand it in together with the composition. Therefore, students were able to produce one group composition and one individual composition.

In this case results were measured in a qualitative manner by means of the feedback about the activity provided by the teacher. To elaborate that feedback the teacher took into account previous students marks and the individual composition after the writing workshop, as well as students' development throughout the course.

5. Findings

Findings can be divided into two sections: academic results, that correspond to the assessment of writing exercises after the writing workshop and motivation evidence, that is extracted from Final Students' Questionnaire (see appendix 3 - p.6) . Academic results will be treated separately in each school as they are of different nature (quantitative vs. qualitative) and commented below.

The results of the quantitative measure about academic results carried out in the school María Inmaculada - Claretianas are depicted in the following graph:

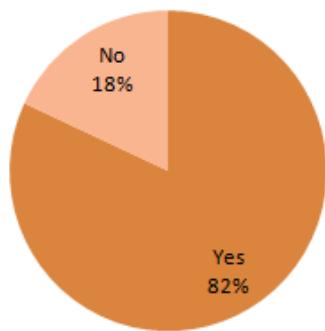


The blue line represents the SS' marks of the first composition, while the red line portrays the marks of the composition written at the end of the writing workshop. In general terms, a slight improvement can be observed, since only three students had higher marks in the first than in the final composition. It is also remarkable the fact that the average of the class is higher in the final composition and its results are more homogeneous.

Madre María Rosa Molas' results (qualitative) derived from the teacher's feedback about the activity could be summarised in three main ideas: first, the topic motivated students to express themselves and give advice in a very realistic manner; second, the main objective, to communicate, was achieved; and third, students that usually hand in compositions got a better mark because their arguments were well thought, explained and structured thanks to the generating process.

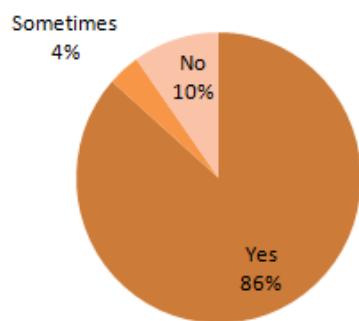
Below, the results from the final SS questionnaire are shown. Since the data gathered from both schools are quite similar, these graphics show the average of the results so that they could be analysed simultaneously. Yet, individual results can be found in appendix 4 (pp. 7-10).

1. Did you like working on writing skills?



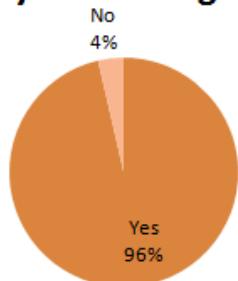
More than 80% of students liked working on writing skills.

2. Are brainstorming and mind-maps useful?



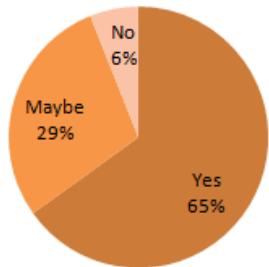
About 85% of students think that brainstorming and mind-maps are useful.

3. Do you think that it is important to proofread once you have finished your writing?



In general students think that proofreading is important.

4. Will you use these strategies in the future?



More than half of the students would use writing strategies in the future.

Others will use them sometimes.

Following findings division, the answers to our hypothesis can be divided in the same manner. Regarding academic results, in both cases there has been a slight improvement in compositions quality, although it is more evident in the case of the quantitative measure. Yet, it is important to remark that this experience was very short, and therefore it is not possible to make generalisations.

In terms of motivation, the selection of the topic has encouraged students' participation. Moreover, in general, they have enjoyed working on the writing process in class and in group, and they consider the writing strategies developed useful and something to be used in the future.

6. Final reflection and conclusions

At the beginning of the project we were quite ambitious in our proposals. SS' level of English, both written and spoken, was not as high as we imagined. For this reason, during the implementation we could barely focus on creativity, since all of them really needed time and effort to focus on fostering writing skills. However, they were free to choose the problem they described, and they were also encouraged to be original and creative when inventing both the problems and the solutions.

We also had time limitations since we only carried out two or three days of writing workshop. However, slight improvement both academic and motivational was found. Yet, generalizations should not be made since this is a very limited project.

This project has helped us to become effective teacher because we have learned to adapt to SS' real needs regardless of which our aspirations as researchers were. We have also realised that classroom time is often devoted to skills that could be developed by SS on their own at home, such as listening, instead of investing that time in writing, which requires much more effort on the part of students. Besides, the first questionnaire made clear that merely testing writing discourages creativity, since they are not given the necessary strategies to develop their writing skills. For this reason, this project has helped us to understand the importance of teaching students the necessary tools for developing each of the stages of the process of writing, so that they could write freely and improve their own creativity.

As a result of this research, in our future work as teachers, we aim to devote class time to develop writing skills at the same time that we make our students aware of the writing process, following a writing approach based on the process. Furthermore, we intend to look for meaningful topics by means of asking students. For this reason, we contemplate the possibility of developing a future research focused on SS' preferences in relation to writing compositions.

7. References

Murray, D. (1972). Teaching Writing as Process, Not Product. *The Leaflet*. pp. 11-14

Sokolik, M. (2003) Writing. In David Nunan (ed.). *Practical English Language Teaching*. New York: McGraw Hill, pp. 87-108.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1



Facultad de Educación
Universidad Zaragoza

MASTER EN PROFESORADO DE E.S.O, BACHILLERATO, F.P.
Y ENSEÑANZAS DE IDIOMAS, ARTÍSTICAS Y DEPORTIVAS
ESPECIALIDAD LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS,
INGLÉS

First Student's questionnaire

1. How do you feel when you have to do a writing exercise?

2. What is the first thing you do when you start a writing exercise?

3. Do you like writing? Give reasons.

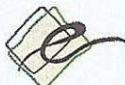
4. What would you suggest your classmates to improve their writing?

5. Have you ever worked on writing skills before?



Teacher's Questionnaire

1. Do you consider working on writing skills necessary? Why or why not?
2. Have you worked on writing skills with this group before? What did you do? Did it work? Why or why not?
3. If you haven't worked on writing skills with this group, have you ever worked on writing skills with other groups? What did you do? Did it work? Why or why not?
4. How do you think students face writing tasks?



Teacher's questionnaire

Do you consider working on writing skills necessary?

Yes. Sí, creo que es muy necesario. Deben por medida a veces que son capaces de llevar a cabo el proceso por ellos mismos y como han aprendido en la asignatura de lengua, pero es necesario enseñarles el proceso cuando escribes en una lengua que no es la tuya.

Have you worked writing skills with this group before? What did you do? Did it work? Why?

Sí, pero no todo lo que me hubiere gustado. Recientemente solo hemos trabajado algún punto que aparece al final de cada tema del libro, pero de manera puntual y reconozco que desordenada. No creo que ellos AR hayan trabajado de manera consciente.

If not, have you worked on writing skills with other groups? What did you do? Did it work? Why?

How do you think students face writing tasks?

Con mucha pereza y en general con poca motivación.

④ Este es el segundo año que trabajamos por niveles y tiempo al grupo "cavando" de 4º, lo que permite trabajar más el Writing (Hablar y como tiene progresado este evaluación).



Teacher's Questionnaire

1. Do you consider working on writing skills necessary? Why or why not?

Yes, I think it's really "English in use". It's not just writing. Students need to learn to write different types of texts. In fact that students are more motivated when it's a challenge. I mean writing a news is more motivating if they know their news will be published in the school web page.

Linking reading skills and writing skills also makes sense. Before writing a news, students should have been working in text that is a news. Teachers should monitor how to do it and explain to them its format before asking writing it on their own.

2. Have you worked on writing skills with this group before? What did you do? Did it work? Why or why not?

Yes, since last year. They are used to "write sentences". If you ask them to write a description of themselves, they are only few that are able to write following a structure. When they do the "prueba inicial", their compositions look like "brainstormings".

At first, I asked them to do writing exercises (compositions) at home. Compositions are usually weekend homework.

It's not till the end of first term in 2º ESO when they write a composition in an exam. I monitor them through the different types of text. I only work types of text that are "suitable" for their age. Writing to a letter of complaint to a travel agency is not interested for teenagers at all.

When I explain to them a type of text, I do a "cultural" introduction or a conclusion. If we write a postcard or a card, I tell them about shops where you can find cards for each celebration and how much English people appreciate receiving cards. If possible, I try they can "test" themselves with native speakers.

I think it works. It's true that you need students to practice the same type of text again and again. First time they wrote news, they weren't perfect but they were motivated. They took part in a Christmas writing contest that the APA organized at school. They are always asked to write school news, local news or news related to culture topics I explained in class (or we watched in videos or texts we read).

3. If you haven't worked on writing skills with this group, have you ever worked on writing skills with other groups? What did you do? Did it work? Why or why not?

I work writing skills with all groups. It's 20% of our students' final mark. (More detailed information in Criterios y procedimiento de evaluación in our Programación Didáctica)

4. How do you think students face writing tasks?

Their first thought is "Oh, no!" but if they see it as a challenge, if they will take part in a competition, if they know other people will read their compositions...they do their best.

Appendix 3



Facultad de Educación
Universidad Zaragoza

MASTER EN PROFESORADO DE E.S.O, BACHILLERATO, F.P. Y ENSEÑANZAS DE IDIOMAS, ARTÍSTICAS Y DEPORTIVAS

ESPECIALIDAD LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS, INGLÉS

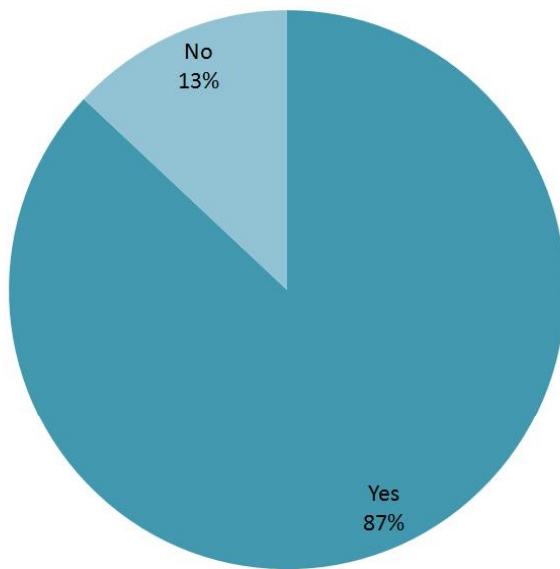
Final Student's questionnaire

1. Did you like working on writing skills? (Creating mind maps, drafts, etc...)
2. Are brainstorms and mind-maps useful?
3. Do you think that it is important to proofread once you have finished your writing?
4. Will you use these strategies in the future?

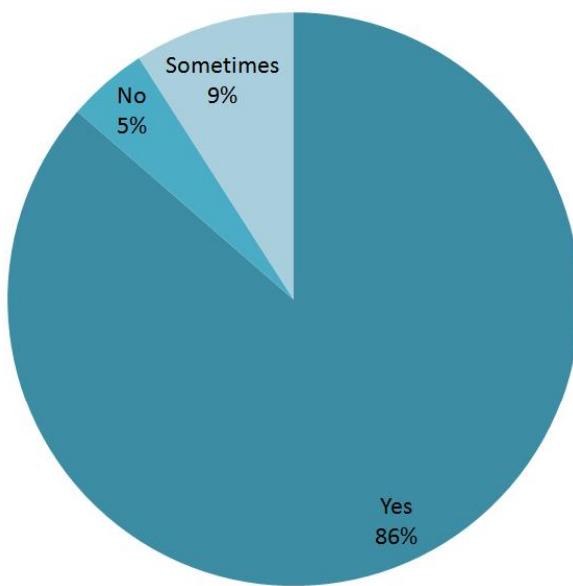
Appendix 4

Final Questionnaire Results - María Inmaculada - Claretianas

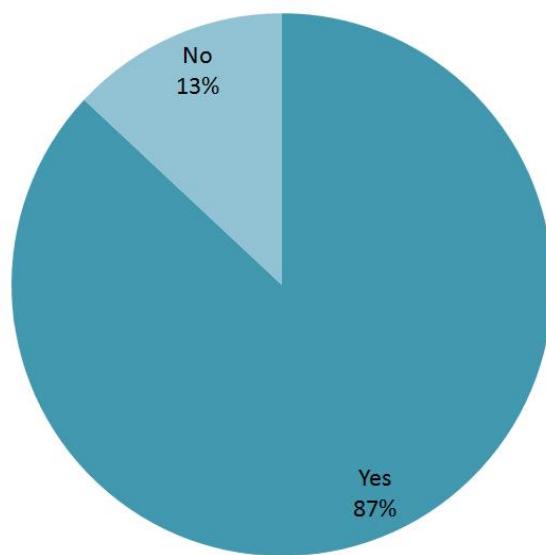
1. Did you like working on writing skills?



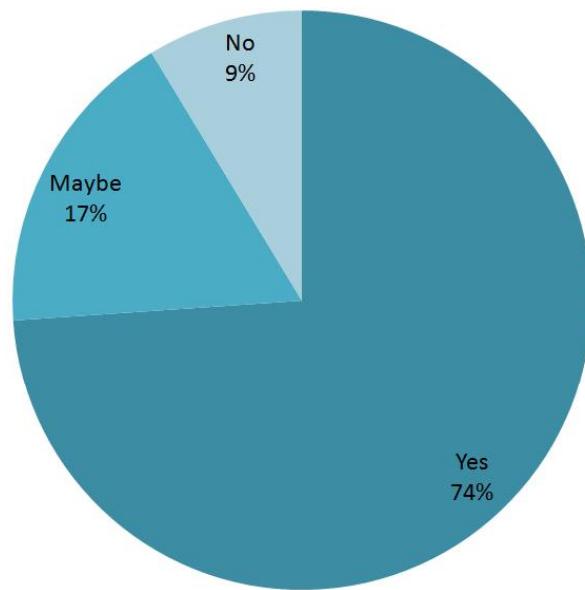
2. Are brainstorming and mind-maps useful?



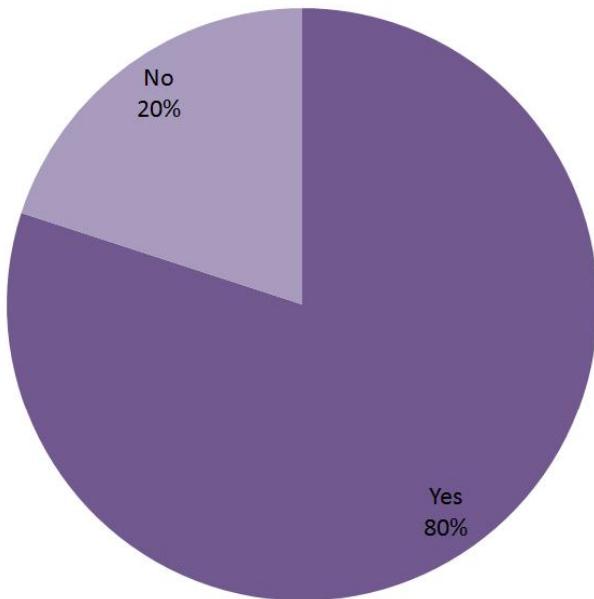
3. Do you think that it is important to proofread once you have finished your writing?



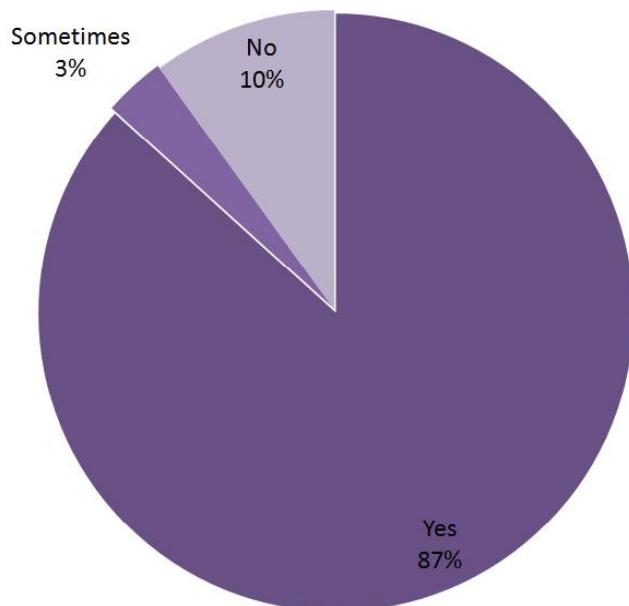
4. Will you use these strategies in the future?



1. Did you like working on writing skills?



2. Are brainstorming and mind-maps useful?



3. Do you think that it is important to proofread once you have finished your writing?



4. Will you use these strategies in the future?

