

# "Optional" English in Context: A survey of EFL/ESP students at the ULPGC\*

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*In this paper we offer a comparative approach to some of the most crucial aspects involved in EFL and ESP teaching, namely, learners' needs, context, motivations and attitudes. We will focus on the data provided by a survey of two groups of students of English Language as an optional subject at the Faculties of Business and Philology of our ULPGC. The main implications are, firstly, the need to broaden the scope of ESP by combining students' both professional and communicative aims; and secondly, the need to take into account the actual use learners make of English in their particular contexts.*

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\* ULPGC stands for Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

## 1. Introduction

An overview of the field of ELT shows the remarkable changes it has experienced in the last decades. The traditional approach to language learning established a general purpose in most language courses: to help students achieve knowledge of both the language and the culture of a particular country. Among the reasons to study that particular language (usually, French or English) were the inherent prestige of that culture, the usefulness of that language when travelling abroad, or simply general education criteria. The development and the increasing internationalization of the various fields of Science and Technology turned communication between people speaking different languages into an essential requirement in a highly competitive society. Likewise, the modern concept of communicative teaching also contributed to the widening of the scope of language studies by emphasizing the language user and the real-world language use, that is, by providing a social and semantic view of language. With this broader interpretation, the theme of the learner's communicative needs became a familiar one to most language teachers, and language learners began to be considered as "social beings who interact in a variety of roles and contexts in particular social and cultural settings" (Berns, 1990:104).

Running parallel with this change, the discipline of Linguistics also widened its scope with the adoption of new perspectives. Traditional studies had previously focused exclusively on the analysis of isolated words and

sentences, and hence the specification of syllabus content derived from formal models of linguistic description. In other words, "the units for teaching were assumed to be the same as the units of grammar" (Widdowson, 1990:130). In turn, modern Linguistics is more concerned with discourse, that is, with the interaction of speakers and listeners, or writers and readers. This new trend claims the relevance of context in the study of language. Accordingly, the development of ESP as a discipline has contributed to a growing interest in new aspects of language and language teaching such as Register Analysis, Discourse Analysis and, above all, Needs Analysis, whose relevance for the teaching-learning process has already been defended by most applied linguists.

To sum up, a shift in focus has occurred, which involves that we teachers should pay special attention to our learners' needs, context, motivation and attitudes.

## 2. Defining learners' needs

In the first term of the present academic year each of us was involved in teaching English to two apparently very different groups of learners: EFL (General English) and ESP (Business) students, respectively. It is generally accepted that the difference between them is "in theory nothing, in practice a great deal" (Hutchinson-Waters, 1987:53). Theoretically, the term ESP involves learning English with a definite aim and with a specific content, though it is not utterly different in essence from the general EFL teaching: it does not teach a different vocabulary or grammar from General English, but focuses on the most common lexical and grammatical items of a variety that are needed by a group of learners.

Although it is assumed that the difference between ESP and General English lies in the fact that the General English learner's needs are not specifiable, we agree with Hutchinson and Waters (1987:53) when they state that "all courses are based on a perceived need of some sort." Tarone and Yule (1989:34) have also pointed out that "it is always possible to specify needs." What distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an *awareness* of the need. Hence, though it may seem that the content of an ESP course is determined by the specific area of

knowledge, the truth is that this is "only a secondary consequence of the primary matter of being able to readily specify why the learners need English" (Tarone-Yule, 1989:34).

Therefore, a sociolinguistic profile is needed to ascertain and describe the role of English in the particular context of our students. Before we can make decisions about our teaching materials or the specific aims we want to achieve, we must find out who the users of English are, what uses they make of this language, "their attitudes towards it, the model of English they want to approximate, (...) and the kind of communicative competence in English they want to develop" (Berns, 1992:3). Apart from helping our students understand the customs and social conventions of the native speakers, as EL teachers we should also be aware of the role English plays "in the non-native context, as the setting for learning and use of the foreign or second language" (Berns, 1992:3).

### **3. The ULPGC context**

Following this line of thought, we decided that a study of our students', context, needs, attitudes and motivations for learning English at the ULPGC should be undertaken, and later on, we thought that a comparison of the results obtained could be of interest.

At the **Faculty of Business Studies** the teaching of foreign languages offers a double-subject option. Students can choose between English and German, the former being the most demanded. Admittedly, most learners are conscious of the important role English plays at present both as an international language and as essential tool in their professions. However, English as a subject does not seem to be their main concern, since most of their time and efforts are clearly devoted to the other compulsory subjects within their curricula. English has to be studied for two consecutive years, which are the second and third courses in their degree. This means that when attending their first English course at the University, most of them have not used English for one year at least. Students' last contact with English is limited to the one they had in a general school course before entering the University. This course is likely to have concentrated on written English, though with a

more "literary" kind of comprehension and composition, and to have dealt little, if at all, with the language of Business. Yet we find that our students are not able to use General English effectively. This makes it necessary for them to review the basic grammar structures, vocabulary, and communicative strategies at the very beginning.

Up to now, the official syllabus for English Language establishes that in the first year students should mainly deal with Reading Comprehension passages related to the fields of Business and Economics; in the second year they also have to cope with specialized texts and commercial correspondence. Underlying these requirements, some assumptions can be found: it is often argued that language courses aimed at ESP students should focus exclusively on the sublanguage of the specialism, since their motivation to learn the language is determined by their professional needs, and thus excluding any concern with the culture and with their sociocultural competence of the target language. However, we don't agree with this view, and we wonder how we can definitely separate language from the socio-cultural factors. In Wilkins' words, (1974:49) "language cannot be properly learned without familiarity with features of the culture, since language and culture are inextricably connected." Furthermore, communicative competence includes four major components, namely, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (Omaggio, 1986:7). Besides, both we teachers and students feel that a more general approach to English is also needed, since they will have to use this language in the future in order to establish relationships with clients, to sign contracts, etc., but also to cope with social events, and everyday life situations, that is, they must be able to communicate at a more personal level. Moreover, our classroom experience shows that focusing merely on specialized texts proves to be demotivating for learners, because they are too often uncreative, and the scope of the language activities they attempt to engage the learners in is limited. Thus, additional material has to be prepared in order to cover a wider range of language skills and contexts which suits students' general interests.

The fact that language learning is an active developmental process and a sort of emotional experience contributes to enhance students' motivation

whenever they are involved in using the language naturally to make decisions (Hutchinson-Waters, 1987:128-9); that is, those exercises/tasks which "simulate the kind of communication that goes on in the real world" have been proved to be more challenging for learners (Berns, 1990:95). Therefore, our main concern should be to develop an ESP syllabus which creates opportunities for students to use language to do interesting things with the subject matter, that is, Business. By helping our students become more competent in reading non-specific texts and in using the language in general contexts, we can contribute to motivate them. We firmly believe that it will be worth taking these ideas into consideration when designing a new syllabus for a Business English course within the forthcoming *Plan de Estudios*.

As regards the context at the **Faculty of Philology**, we could start by saying that right now we are facing a new situation. In previous years the old *Plan de Estudios* forced our students at this Faculty to attend the same English courses during the first three years of their degree, regardless of the specialty they were interested in (English or Spanish). English was compulsory for those students pursuing a degree in English; for those specializing in Spanish Studies a choice could be made among English, French, Arabic, Ancient Greek or Latin. However, most students chose English because of the fact that they already had some background knowledge of this language, after having studied it at Primary and Secondary School for at least seven years. In practice, however, we found two different groups of students with two clearly different levels in their command of English, depending on whether they were specializing in English or in Spanish Philology. This policy was not beneficial to any of them since their real needs of the language were not the same.

Fortunately, this academic year 1994-95 things have begun to change, though we still feel that some adjustments have to be done. With the beginning of the new *Plan de Estudios* a large number of those students specializing in Spanish Studies have registered to take a new English course titled *Lengua y Literatura I, (English)*. This course was especially designed to review and improve students' basic English language skills (grammar, listening, speaking and writing) as well as introducing them to important English literary texts in order to help them develop reading and comprehension techniques. The

course had to be designed in advanced, and we expected the level of the majority of our students to be pre- or low intermediate. It has turned out that the students' real command of the language was not good enough for them to cope with the study of literary texts. Hence, a change in the orientation of this course is felt to be needed: we should focus more on the language, rather than divide the content of this subject equally into language and literature. A greater emphasis on literature can be placed in the following year, when students take the subject *Lengua y Literatura II (English)*. Besides, as the survey shows (see Appendix), a large number of Philology students have overtly stated that they want to learn English with a practical goal, such as to get a better job, for their future professional promotion, to study abroad, etc., which should be taken into consideration.

#### 4. The survey

A needs assessment for any EL course can be carried out by surveying the students for what they feel they need to learn, but also for their attitudes towards English, since learners' attitudes towards whatever they learn are essential for the learning/teaching process. Needs Analysis is useful because it can also enable teachers to discover the potential knowledge and abilities that the learners bring to the classroom.

With all these ideas in mind, we carried out a survey of ESP students at the Faculty of Business and Economics and of EFL students specializing in Spanish Studies at the Faculty of Philology. In our survey we sought information regarding learners' attitudes "towards English and towards the learning and use of [this] foreign language" (Robinson, 1991:9). We asked our students the following open questions:

1. *How long have you been studying English and what's the average number of hours a week?*
2. *Have you studied / Are you studying any other language?*
3. *Why are you studying English now?*
4. *In your opinion, what's the main reason why most people study English nowadays?*
5. *What chances do you have to use this language?*

6. *What's your personal attitude towards this language and its native speakers?*
7. *Have you found people with different attitudes?*
8. *Do you agree with the idea that English is an international language, a language that belongs not only to its native speakers but rather to anyone who uses this language for communication with other people?*
9. *Do you consider English as a "powerful" language, a language that has an influence on the other languages in the planet?*

## **5. The informants**

The sample of the present study comprises a total number of 35 students at the Faculty of Business, whereas at the Faculty of Philology, we collected the answers of 43 students. We will briefly comment now on the results which are graphically represented in our Appendix. In both Faculties, we found that a majority of students have been studying English for seven years, and a considerable number of them have been involved in the study of this language for even 10 years, mostly at an average of three hours a week. Only a few of them have shown an interest in learning another language, especially French and German.

It should be underlined that the main reason that both Business and Philology students gave to explain why they were presently studying English is that they consider it as a useful tool for both their professional and academic purposes. A secondary motivational factor is related to the importance of English within the modern world as a lingua franca. These are also considered to be the two main reasons why people are encouraged to study English. However, when asked about other people's motivation, Philology students state that the view of English as an international language tends to play a major role, while Business students assume that other people share their own practical idea of English as a necessary instrument for their professions.

Interestingly enough, the real chances students have to speak this language, apart from the class setting, are minimal. A minority can use the language with non-native foreigners or when travelling abroad. It should also be noted that there is no correlation between the time they have spent studying English and

their actual competence of the language. This might be explained by poor exposure to real language and by the little emphasis that has been placed on oral skills throughout all those years of study. Needless to say that a further analysis of the potential factors underlying this situation would go beyond the scope of this article.

As regards attitudes, we must point out that both groups of students regard the language and the speakers differently. Towards the former, their position is mostly positive, with Business students confirming this idea almost unanimously, while both groups remain neutral in their attitudes towards the native speakers of the language.

Philology students declare that they have found negative attitudes towards English and its speakers in a larger proportion among the people they know. Nevertheless, Business students have come across a slightly higher percentage of positive attitudes.

An overwhelming majority of both sets of informants agree with the idea that English belongs to anyone who uses this language for communication. Yet, the percentage of students who spontaneously express their dislike of Anglicisms being used in Spanish is higher in Business than in Philology students.

## 6. Conclusion

Our survey revealed that the main purpose of our students when choosing English as an optional subject within their curriculum responds to their view of this language as a useful means both for their academic research needs and for their future professional promotion. Although our students at the Faculty of Philology are supposed to deal with a more General English, it is a fact that in designing our teaching materials for them we must also bear in mind their practical needs, since they overtly state their view of this language as an essential tool for their careers. With this perspective, it seems that they are also involved in another sort of ESP, that is, they need to learn English for academic and professional purposes: their EFL learning becomes clearly specific, and turns into EAP (thus also ESP), since they have to cope with specific philological concepts and bibliography.

On the other hand, as the survey shows, much of the motivation of Business students to learn English has to do with its role as an international language. This leads us to insist on our suggestion that ESP learners should also be able to cope with contexts other than the Business discourse. Thus, we should concentrate on improving their communicative competence in a wider context, rather than on deepening into a profession-bound ESP course. It follows, then, that we agree with Dubin and Olshtain (1986:70) when they hold that

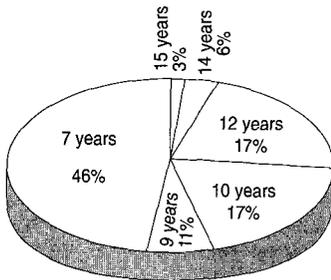
communicative competence entails knowing not only the language code or the form of language, but also what to say to whom and how to say it appropriately in any given situation. It deals with the social and cultural knowledge that speakers are presumed to have which enables them to use and interpret linguistic forms. It also includes knowledge of who may speak or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, how to talk to persons of different statuses and roles. A well-known description of communicative competence has been that it includes knowledge of what to say, when, how, where, and to whom. In effect, it takes in all of the verbal and non-verbal mechanisms which native speakers use unconsciously to communicate with each other.

In conclusion, we think that both groups of students need a combined approach to English. They are involved in learning this language with a specific purpose - Business and Academic English, respectively. Alternatively, a general approach is also required, since they are supposed to be able to cope with English in other contexts. Hence, students' performance in oral communication should be maximized if we are to effectively improve their communicative competence.

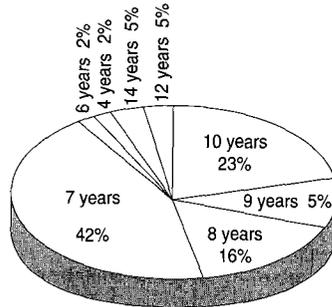
## APPENDIX

### Question 1 A: How long have you been studying English?

**Business students**

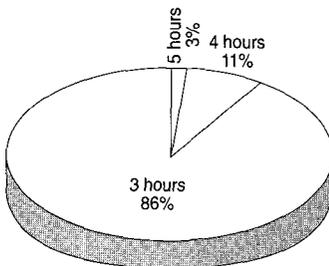


**Phylogy students**

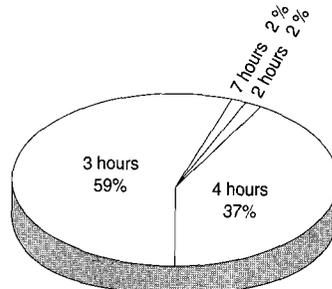


### Question 1 B: what's the average number of hours a week?

**Business students**

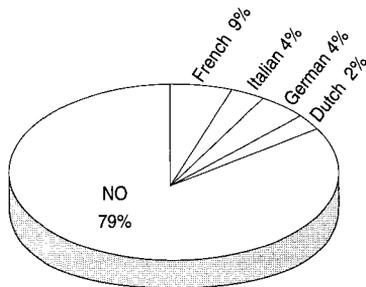


**Phylogy students**

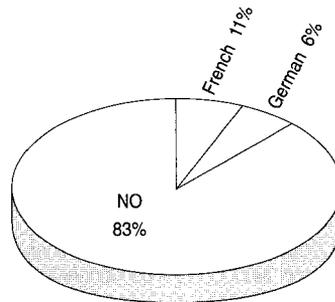


### Question 2: Have you studied / are you studying any other language?

**Philology students**

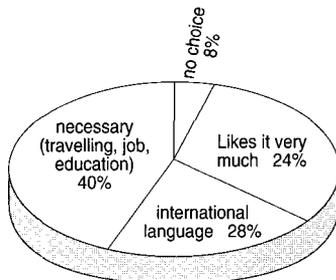


**Business students**

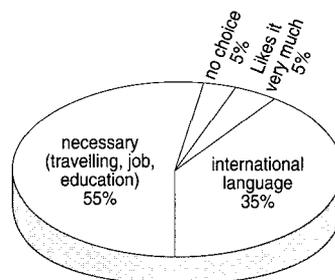


### Question 3: Why are you studying English now?

**Philology students**

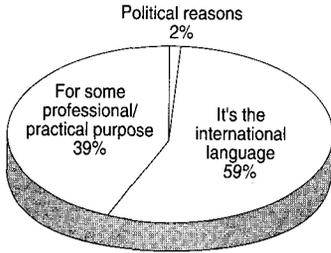


**Business students**

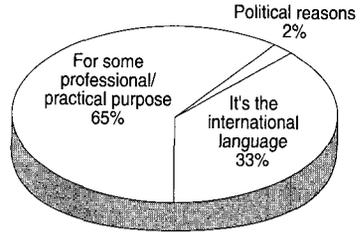


**Question 4: What's the main reason why most people study English nowadays?**

**Philology students**

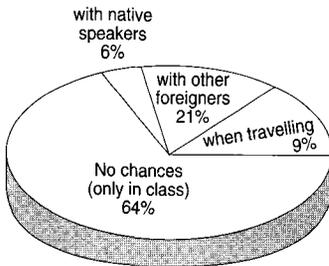


**Business students**

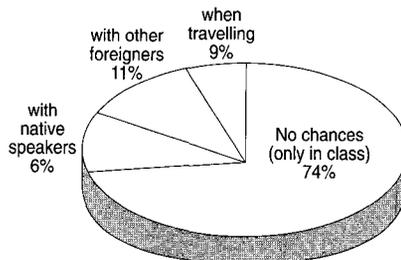


**Question 5: What chances do you have to use this language?**

**Philology students**

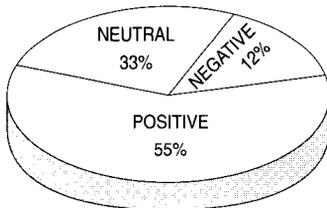


**Business students**

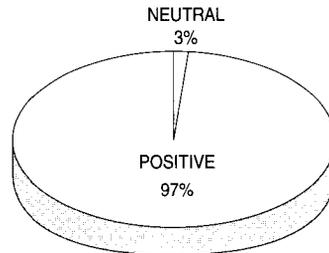


**Question 6 A: What's your personal attitude towards the English Language?**

**Language (Philology students)**

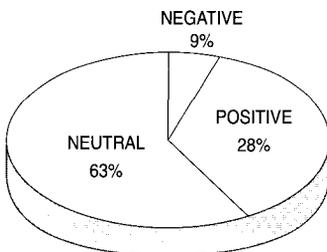


**Language (Business students)**

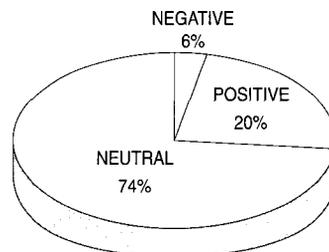


**Question 6 B: What's your personal attitude towards the English Speakers?**

**Speakers (Philology students)**

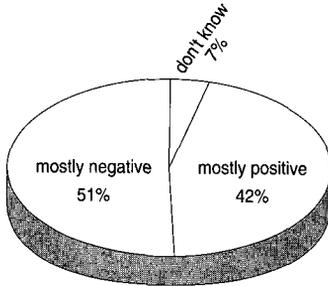


**Speakers (Business students)**

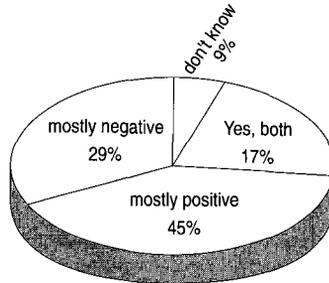


**Question 7: Have you found people with different attitudes?**

**Philology students**

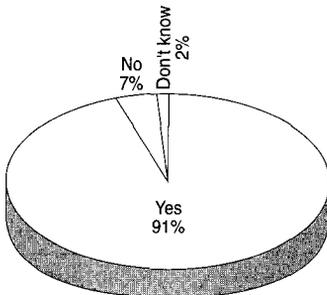


**Business students**

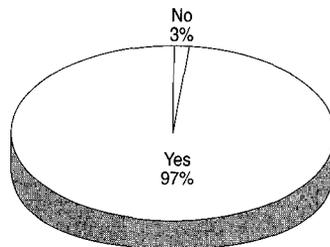


**Question 8: Do you agree with the idea that English is an international language...?**

**Philology students**

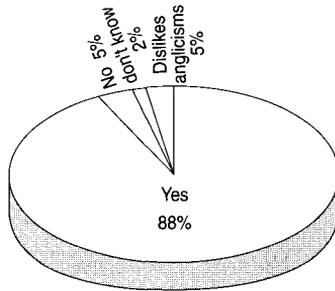


**Business students**

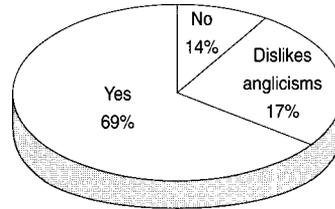


### Question 9: Do you consider English as a "powerful" language...?

**Philology students**



**Business students**



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