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# Implementing EFL Communicative Tasks for the Education Context: Primary Education undergraduates' perceptions of a didactic proposal

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## Introduction

Since the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the competence of adaptation to the society and the labor setting in which future teachers will be fully immersed meant a turning point in the elaboration of curricula within the official Bachelor's Degrees at Spanish universities. The underlying assumption was rooted in the necessity of future graduates being able to cope with the constant pressure encountered in their daily labor. In this case, the situational reality of Primary teachers is highly dependent on their ability to react to different contexts which require a personal, social, and professional dimension to solve the emerging issues. As noted by Martínez & González (2019), this is achieved when all dimensions and resources are directed in the same direction, and to gather efforts, traits, and abilities.

In line with the previous statements, the inclusive and comprehensive education stemming from the university should preemptively ensure that technical competencies are combined with social, personal, and emotional ones within the distinct tasks and situations. In this case, Sánchez and Ruiz (2011) argue that three essential aspects should be complied with by university education, namely flexibility, mobility, and transferability. Given the necessity that future teachers may face in their not-so-distant teaching future, specific modules at university should be aimed at precisely ensuring that undergraduates are able to adapt and react conveniently to real-life issues. The contextualization of the future teacher is filled with varied situations that are not only centered on the nature of the classroom itself, but also the surrounding environment. As such, a future teacher should be able to express themselves appropriately in certain situations, i.e. when presenting proposals before an audience of fellow teachers or being able to organize, and more importantly, explain how a lesson is conducted and what is pedagogically included.

Thus, this paper will aim to shed light on: (1) how an EFL task proposal may be developed on solid theoretical grounds to get university students immersed in real-life educational settings, and (2) what the undergraduates' perceptions of this task are to gather arguments for and against their use.

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## The definition of 'task' and main characteristics

Learning languages is characterized by its imitating nature, aiming at simulating real-life situations that learners can adapt to. Long (1985) first described 'tasks' as everyday life actions involving procedural situations. In the same line, Richards, Platt & Weber (1985) regarded it as any activity derived from processing or understanding language. This leads us to frame tasks within the demands of a specific objective, focused on pragmatic aims. This purpose-centered nature of tasks was referred to by Breen (1987) in that they are not only simple exercises, "but complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or *simulations*" (p. 23; emphasis added). Willis (1996) added the idea of communication to the concept of task as the main aim was achieving a communicative outcome, with a goal conceptualized in the representation of the task (Skehan, 1998). Thus, meaning-making and a communicative goal are placed upfront.

Tasks are developed according to a series of criteria (see Candlin & Murphy, 1987; Skehan, 1998) which include *goals*, *input*, *setting*, *activities* as well as *roles* and *feedback*. The specificity of tasks in a university setting made the choice of the topic and content more evident, hence narrowing down what the undergraduate needs. The inclusion of 'input' — either as verbal or non-verbal — condition the way in which learners will respond to the task, and what their predisposition will be. When this input processing responds to the achievement of a goal, learners are hence part of an integrative praxis where it serves as a guideline ranging from general outcomes, i.e. enhancing the communicative competence, to specific objectives, i.e. using appropriate expressions in a teachers' meeting (Clark, 1987; Nunan, 1989). In line with this, the input provided should at least include a source of rich input encountered in the real-life situation that the task intends to imitate (Brosnan, Brown & Hood, 1984), and provide an accurate reflection of the learners' needs and pedagogical interests. Likewise, the importance of the setting is stressed out by several authors (see Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Wright, 1987) in that group work entails a degree of effectiveness on the basis of cooperation, thus creating an adequate learning environment to promote L2 learning. In terms of activity type, numerous are the choices, but according to Crookall & Oxford (1990), resorting to role-plays involves variety as new language and vocabulary are boosted. This way, real learning occurs as the meaning of unknown elements should be either inferred or explained using other words (Grellet, 1981).

All in all, the set of features provided above point to the necessity of developing multifaceted tasks, all of which should provide the learner with a general objective without forgetting the specificity of the task. As anticipated in the previous section, this paper endeavors to respond to these criteria by presenting a series of communicative tasks on the grounds of the previous theoretical underpinnings.

## English for "Teaching Purposes"

When learning English is targeted at a specific goal, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) gains traction as the leading teaching approach. ESP instruction is goal-oriented and based on the very specific needs of students (Robinson, 2003), all of whom are precisely learning English with the clear aim of communicating at their workplace, or additionally, for pleasure. Among the two branches of ESP instruction (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English of Occupational Purposes or Vocational Training (EOP), the latter is central to the teaching scenario. EOP is centered on "work or pre-work situations" (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 7). As pointed out by Widodo (2015), EOP (or EVP) is commonly targeted at technical modules in both secondary and higher education. Nonetheless, the competencies that teachers are supposed to put into practice stem from a diverse range of situational experiences which lead to considering the use of English not only as pertaining to a very specific environment but also situated within the blurred boundaries of EAP. Such an idea is aligned with other scholars' claims (e.g. Johns & Price-Machado, 2001; Widdowson, 1998) that any English course contains a certain degree of specificity, and thus ESP.

Even if, as noted by Richards (2017), "Competency in English language teaching draws on content or subject matter knowledge, teaching skills, and the ability to teach in English" (p. 2), little has been delved into as regards the educational context in which a teacher is immersed. As a consequence, there has not been such an ESP branch named English for Teaching Purposes (ETP) or English for Teachers. Although traditionally related to the branch of ESP, Primary teachers are not usually forced to be able to write using their academic writing skills in their daily labor. To illustrate this, let us consider an Elementary or Middle School Teacher who, beyond the professional duties assumed within the classroom, has to develop themself in a series of situational contexts such as: talking to parents, presenting a project before the rest of the fellow teachers, contrasting views on teaching aspects with other colleagues, preparing activities and being able to justify their pedagogical usefulness. These are just several tasks that a teacher has to dutifully perform, all of which should be dealt with when teacher trainees are enrolled in their EFL courses at university.

Thus, our didactic proposal will be framed within this newly conceived branch of ESP, that is, ETP. Nonetheless, when we refer to ETP, it does not mean that these teacher trainees are going to major in English, but rather, on the contrary, they are pursuing a mandatory English module in an official BA in Primary Education. This being said, the main purpose of a task centered on the development of teachers' professional skills should be placed on enhancing a series of communicative abilities. Such capacity development is thought to enable teachers to handle situations within the educational context beyond the classroom setting. All in all, this didactic proposal is expected to take into consideration not only the distinctive features of the communicative task (Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985; Nunan, 1991) but also the demanding constraints of the education context.

## The didactic proposal: a communicative task

The task presented here is framed within a communicative-centered approach. Traditionally used as a primary unit of instruction (Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998), the contextualization of the task has been deemed as a core aspect to boost L2 use, and most importantly, acquisition. Communicative tasks are also "vehicles for interaction-driven language learning in classroom settings" (Kim, 2015, p. 163), and classroom tasks are devoid of the main purposes of instructional practice (see Candlin, 1987). Building on this information, the design of a communicative task should include some kind of input, anticipating the contextualization of the goal of the task, and allowing students to draw on some previous explicit knowledge. This information may be written, visual, or aural. Based on all of the above and the theoretical tenets described in section 1.1., our design intent for communicative tasks in which educational contexts are part of the content is devised as follows:

1) Input phase. Teacher trainees are presented with an introductory text or are encouraged to start a short debate (see Figure 1). Building on the premises presented in these sources, learners are expected to retrieve their passive lexical resources, as well as foster the integration of new vocabulary. First, learners are given about two minutes to read the text (or to come up with new ideas in the case of debates), and vocabulary is explained. Afterward, a discussion follows on the topic of the input.

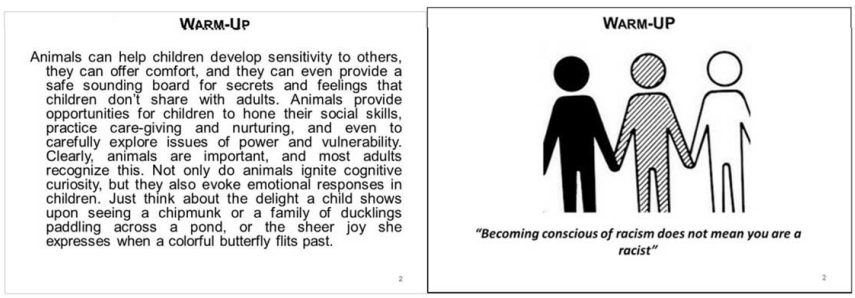


*Figure 1. Input phase of the communicative task: vocabulary-driven debate and photo driven-debate*

2) The task per se. Students are given around 15-20 minutes to complete the task as per the instructions provided. As seen in Figure 3, the task contains information on a series of key features that tasks must possess (Robinson, 2011):

- a. *Roles*. Teacher trainees are assigned a specific role within their groups, namely, one of the members is in charge of annotating the ideas that emerged, but is naturally allowed to take part in the interaction. The rest of the members engage in a fruitful debate to complete the task. All of them are expected to take part in the final part of the task.
- b. *Setting*. Each communicative task provides a different scenario within the education community. As future teachers, they are expected to be able to carry out numerous tasks ranging from the creation of activities to proposals for cultural events, or even presenting projects (see Figure 4).

- c. *Actions*. In order to ensure that learners include all the elements in their task, they are told what information they are expected to generate. There are a number of key aspects and/or organizational contents which future teachers have to comply with. These might include justifying the relevance of an activity proposal, objectives, or the task itself as well as engaging in more critical thinking about a topic per se (see Figure 2).
- d. *Monitoring*. The lecturer will be supervising the groups in order to verify that communication among students is taking place in English and that the task instructions are being conveniently applied.

3) Outcomes. Following Carless (2007), tasks should be considered in their specific context of use. Higher Education allows for much more enriching learning outcomes than other stages of education, especially if one bears in mind the usefulness of debates to foster critical thinking. The role of communicative tasks in this scenario, namely in a BA in Primary Education, is highlighted by the clearly defined outcome apart from the use of the language, as noted by Ellis (2003) in the four criteria for the definition of tasks. Thus, after the time teacher trainees are provided with in order to accomplish the task goals, they have to perform the role they were assigned at the outset.

- a. In general terms, learners are given around 5-7 minutes to present their outcomes to the task. Not only are they required to provide a detailed and structured answer to all the requirements in the task, but also each member of the group is obliged to take part in the discussion. This is meant to make learners lose their fear of speaking English before an audience, and more importantly, fostering their oral skills.
- b. The lecturer may give feedback on their performance while they are presenting their answer to the task, hence assuming a certain degree of interaction to negotiate meaning. Furthermore, feedback may be provided after the intervention of each member, thus ensuring that oral corrective feedback is given, but also comments on the content of the task.

**TASK**

- Children are particularly attached to both their parents and friends. In fact, friendship and family experiences may shape their personality in the future. Nowadays, Internet has changed the way we look at relationships.
- For a project called "*Internet and our students: fostering its use and preventing its traps"*, you have to **discuss** about the **advantages** and **disadvantages** of Internet for **children** and **relate it** to friendships and family. Please, **highlight** the most important risks of Internet use regarding relationships and how it can affect children development.

*Figure 2. Instructions for the communicative task: project.*

## Method

The present study is framed within exploratory research as the main aim is to gather data on an observable situation in a real classroom setting. Hence, a total cohort of 23 primary education undergraduates (males = 5 and females = 18) participated in the study. All of them were taking a yearly compulsory EFL course (*Comunicación Oral y Escrita en Inglés para el Aula de Primaria*), consisting of 9 credits and taught with a frequency of 3 hours a week. Of these teaching hours, one was fully devoted to practical lessons aimed at fostering speaking skills. After an eight-month-long intervention in which they were taught using these communicative tasks, participants were asked about their perceptions on the communicative task with a *Google Form* questionnaire.

This instrument was created *ad hoc* with a total of 17 items involving several characteristics such as the main structural features of the task (organization, efficiency, cooperative value) and the main learning outcomes they perceived out of their participation (see Table xx below). The internal validity of the instrument was checked with Cronbach's α (α = .716, SD = .363, 95% CI [.502, .851]).

*Table 1. Items included in the questionnaire*

| Question | Description |
|---|---|
| *1* | Sex (male or female) |
| *2* | English Level (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 or C2) |
| *3* | How do you think this task helped you communicate in English? (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *4* | It was very useful that the task was related to education. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *5* | The organization of the communicative task was adequate. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *6* | The communicative task helped me understand how to communicate in a real context within an education setting. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *7* | Reading a contextualized text before the task helped me in the subsequent stages. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *8* | What skill did you practice most with this communicative task? (Speaking, Writing, Grammar or Listening). |
| *9* | These communicative tasks favored collaborating with other classmates. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *10* | Working collaboratively made me learn from my peers. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *11* | The communicative tasks helped me enhance my speaking skills in different education contexts (e.g. teaching staff meetings). (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *12* | The communicative tasks favored the acquisition of didactic knowledge in a cross-sectional manner (e.g. when we were asked to create activities). (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *13* | After the communicative tasks, my speaking skills improved. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *14* | During the communicative tasks, my ability to perform presentations in English improved. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *15* | As I had to adapt my oral expression in English to the specific demands of the task, this made me search for or think of different vocabulary words. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *16* | During the task, only one person was allowed to write. This was a positive thing since it made us use our spoken English (Speaking). (1= very little; 5= a lot). |
| *17* | From my point of view, English lessons in degrees such as Primary Education or Early Childhood Education should be much more education-oriented. (1= very little; 5= a lot). |

## Results and Discussion

In the ensuing section, the results obtained from the questionnaire will be further reported. First, as seen in Table 2, questions 1, 2 and 8 are not included. The main reason behind their exclusion is the nature of the question, which were not Likert-scale-based queries. Hence, question 2 asked "What is your English level?", whose findings pointed to B1 level for most of the students (47.8%), while B2 level held the second position (39.1%), and only scarce participants indicated an A1 (8.7%) or A2 level (4.3%). Finally, question 8 asked what skill students had practiced more, with an overwhelming 100% for Speaking.

*Table 2. Descriptive statistics for items 3-17 (excluding 1, 2 and 8 given their nature)*

| Q | Mean | SD | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | 4.12 | .52 | 3.00 | 5.00 |
| 4 | 4.41 | .86 | 1.00 | 5.00 |
| 5 | 3.79 | .86 | 2.00 | 5.00 |
| 6 | 3.75 | .96 | 1.00 | 5.00 |
| 7 | 4.04 | .78 | 3.00 | 5.00 |
| 9 | 4.29 | .61 | 3.00 | 5.00 |
| 10 | 4.12 | .88 | 1.00 | 5.00 |
| 11 | 3.95 | .97 | 1.00 | 5.00 |
| 12 | 4.16 | .68 | 3.00 | 5.00 |
| 13 | 3.16 | .55 | 2.00 | 4.00 |
| 14 | 3.41 | .70 | 2.00 | 5.00 |
| 15 | 4.37 | .63 | 3.00 | 5.00 |
| 16 | 4.00 | .86 | 2.00 | 5.00 |
| 17 | 4.33 | .89 | 1.00 | 5.00 |

As observed in Table 2, most of the students considered communicative tasks as useful (Q3) with a very low distribution among participants (as evidenced in the SD). Nonetheless, the means of the categorical variable (English_Level) indicated that this type of activity was more valuable for A2 level students. Interestingly, students believed that the fact that tasks were education-oriented was certainly positive (M= 4.41). However, such a perception was not equal to B2-level peers, who found it rather neutral (M= 3.44). Question 4 was inherently related to question 7, where participants were asked about the contextualization of the task. In this regard, participants considered that the contextualization was appropriate (M= 4.04), although A2 level students remained mostly neutral (M= 3.0). Participants were also enquired about the usefulness of the task regarding its collaborative nature, which they regarded as certainly positive (M= 4.29), with the lowest values being displayed by A2 level students (M= 3.00). Thus, the outcomes regarding the affordances of cooperative learning yielded a relatively positive perception (Q4, M= 4.12), with B2 level students showing the lowest, albeit relatively high, value (M= 4.00). Question 11 enquired participants about how they perceived the enhancement of speaking skills after the communicative task. Most of them regarded it as highly useful (M= 3.95), and

not surprisingly, A1-level participants believed that they had not improved their oral skills (M= 2.50). Such a perception is subsequently linked to question 13, where participants remained neutral about the improvement of their speaking skills (M= 3.16). This is even more marked for A2-level participants (M= 2.0), who believed that this task did not meet their language learning expectations concerning speaking. Similarly, their perceptions about having enhanced their presentation skills in English was rather neutral (M= 3.41).

Positively, participants believed the task enticed them to search for new vocabulary expressions related to the task (M= 4.37). This perception may be related to question 16, which delved into the students' opinions about the task procedure, i.e. one person writing (and participating in the debate) and the rest speaking. Surprisingly, a relatively positive view was accommodated in this respect (M= 4.00), notwithstanding the neutral opinion of A2 level participants (M= 3.00). Finally, question 17 enquired about the need for more education-oriented tasks (or contents) in EFL courses in higher education. Participants agreed overwhelmingly with the idea that EFL courses should be more focused on specific aspects of the education context (M= 4.33) with the sole exception of the lower proficient participants (M= 2.00), who did not see it as appropriate.

As described above, the communicative task has offered diverging views among the participants. Nonetheless, low-proficient students were not as convinced as higher-level peers that the collaborative nature of the communicative task might enhance their language learning. Several voices (see Kormos, 2006; Pawlak, 2011) have posited that L2 learners, given their limited attentional capacities, might encounter difficulties engaging in real-time interaction, hence imposing cognitive demands hindering the retrieval of vocabulary and content knowledge. Bearing in mind the nature of the communicative tasks proposed in the present paper, these included cross-sectional aspects beyond the mere linguistic contents. As these tasks required focusing on a specific goal, low-proficient L2 learners may find it difficult to attain this goal individually. This leads us to consider the role of peer interaction as facilitative of language acquisition (Long, 1996; Swain, 1997) since it allows for the joint construction of L2 acquisition, mediated by problem-solving and knowledge-building activities (Chen, 2017). Participants in this study were allowed to group themselves according to their criteria (i.e. they were free to form a group with their friends or closer classmates). This characteristic is well-aligned with Storch's (2001) patterns of interaction, more specifically, *mutuality*, defined as the degree of engagement in each other's interactions. Thus, being surrounded by familiar classmates might have contributed to increasing the possibilities of attaining task completion, by sharing the responsibility (see Norton, 2005). Also, it might have led to augmenting the affordances of processing and applying (peers') feedback. Likewise, a high degree of mutuality ensures that grammatical aspects are focused upon. Chen (2017) points to the relevance of mutual attentive listening to each other's propositions but also to co-investing the contributions to the final goal of the communicative task, which coincides with the pattern proposed in this communicative task, where one writes (and talks) and the rest speak. In this regard, the cooperative nature of the communicative task furthers potential linguistic enhancement through a series of learning opportunities in the case of lower-level participants (Yule &

McDonald, 1990), thus allowing them to engage in hypothesis-forming strategies which may be confirmed or rejected by peers' feedback (Swain, 1999; Tarone & Liu, 1995). Not less importantly, the role of more proficient participants is linked to an increase in the ability to listen to low-proficient peers and learn from these interactions.

## Conclusion

The present paper has endeavored to provide a substantial theoretical basis for an education-oriented communicative task within the framework of Education degrees along with some perceptual views about its implementation. The value of this proposal leans on Ellis's (2003) view that L2 tasks provide authentic communicative language practice affordances that would not be available in a traditional classroom context. The communicative tasks appear to be suitable for B1-level undergraduate students, albeit valuable for other more or less proficient students. In a similar vein, perceptions on the usefulness of the task for enhancing speaking abilities such as presentation skills were particularly divisive, especially for upper-elementary students (A2). This indicates that, prior to the commencement of the communicative tasks, more emphasis should be placed on providing sound explanations for exploiting the task to its maximum.

As was expected, the collaborative nature of the task favored elementary to pre-intermediate students, building on the concept of peer interaction and scaffolding. Overall, these data suggest that the interactive nature of the communicative task gains traction in enhancing low-proficient knowledge. Finally, the inclusion of this didactic proposal in the Degree of Primary Education undergraduates has paved the way for a more globalized view of EFL courses as pertaining to an educational context. In this regard, future research endeavors should focus on enlarging the pool of activities and contents, and possibly, assess the extent to which these communicative tasks are empirically valid in terms of language learning. Similarly, a great deal could be done regarding the curriculum of EFL courses in Spanish higher education, by revisiting the main objectives and competences and adapting those to the real-life context in which teachers will be immersed.

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