

Six high schools with outstanding results in the PAU: The views of the English teachers and their students¹

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For this research, six public high schools in Catalonia were selected whose students had obtained outstanding results on the English test in the PAU in 2005, 2006 and 2007. Interviews and questionnaires were used to learn about teachers' and students' attributions of success as well about their more general views on English language teaching in their schools and in Catalonia. Data show success is often attributed to both internal and external factors and rarely to methodological factors. Also, both teachers and students are well aware of the limitations of teaching and learning English in their context and are able to articulate valuable ideas for change.

Recent publications on the English proficiency level within the school age population in Catalonia prove that it is not satisfactory enough (see for example CSd'A, 2006 and 2008 or Tragant, 2009), although the *Departament d'Educació* has carried out a series of actions to promote the command of this language at the primary and secondary school levels. As a result, this research project was proposed with the objective of identifying distinguishing features among a group of high schools which obtained outstanding results in English.

The project draws on three fields of research which deal with the topic of good practices in teaching: studies and review articles on effective teaching or achievement in the area of general education (see for example, Cotton, 1995; Harris, 1998; Petty, 2006), research on effective teaching in bilingual programs (see for example Cloud, Genesee and Hamayan, 2000; Lindholm-Leary, 2005; Gold, 2006; Goldberg, 2008) and research on good practices in the field of second or foreign language teaching (see for example Hamp-Lyons et al., 1999; Johnson, 2005; Senior, 2006; Tellez and Waxman, 2006; Tsui, 2003).

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In the Catalan context, we find two articles on exemplary practices in the teaching of foreign languages (Lucea, 2004; Martorell, 2006) that point out a series of features which are conducive to language learning in the school context in Catalonia. Lucea's article draws on the experience of school inspectors, and Martorell's work gathers the perceptions of experienced teachers. Our study has been inspired by these two publications and, by providing empirical data and fieldwork, aims to give continuity to the study of good practices in the context of Catalonia.

Overview of the study

Based on results from the English test in the PAU, six public high schools were selected in Catalonia whose results were among the highest (7%) for three consecutive years (2005, 2006 and 2007). In making this selection, schools were divided in terms of the size of the population where they were located as well as the socio-educational profile of the neighborhood. The objective of the research project was to analyze how English instruction was organized and how classes were taught in these high schools. This project also aimed at identifying common features that could explain their good results.

The sample includes six public high schools from Barcelona (SE)², Cerdanyola del Vallès (PC), Granollers (EMT), Lleida (GG), Manresa (PFQ) and Ripoll (AO). Two schools were excluded (from an initial selection of eight) because the percentage of students taking the PAU was lower than the average in Catalonia. The data, which was collected in 2007-2008, comes from teachers as well as heads of foreign language departments (n=14), who were interviewed and observed in class. *Batxillerat* students filled in a questionnaire (n=391) and took a written test of English (n=329) and a few of them were interviewed.

The results of the full project are divided into three sections. The first one deals with the students' and teachers' profiles as well as the profiles of the language departments. The second section deals with classroom processes in terms of management and methodology. The last section captures teachers' and students' opinions about why their school obtained good results in English and about proposals for improvement. In this article an overview of findings from sections one and two will precede a full account of results from section three. See Tragant et al. (2010) at <http://www.ub.edu/GRAL/Projects/> for a full account of the results as well as the methodology employed.

What makes the selected high schools special

Results of the written test show that most of the students are in level B2 according to the CEFR, which suggests that the general level of competence in English in the selected schools is higher than that of an average student in *2-batxillerat* in Catalonia (see Berga et al., 2008).

The uniqueness of the selected high schools seems to be mainly based on (1) the students' profile (good academic orientation, and positive attitudes towards learning

² Initials stand for the names of the selected high schools.

English), (2) the profile of the English language teachers (good level of proficiency in English, good communication skills in the classroom, and a sense of vocation), (3) the level of demand required by teachers together with an efficient use of class time and (4) the participation in exchange programs. Some of these features coincide with previous studies of good practices, such as good management of class time (Harris, 1998), opportunities to use the foreign language outside of class (Gold, 2006), or the teachers' command of the foreign language (Lindholm-Leary, 2005).

By contrast, the way the departments work or the resources they have do not seem to be distinguishing factors. Neither is the methodology employed in the English class of the high schools, which in most cases can be characterized by an emphasis on grammar, input limited to one to four readers and the textbook, a lack of obligation on the part of students to use English to address the teacher, as well as few learning contexts where the student has an active role. In fact some of these features are similar to those reported in *La situació de la llengua anglesa al batxillerat 2000-2004* by CSd'A (2005), a report based on a representative sample of schools in Catalonia.

The teachers' and students' views

This section starts with the teachers' explanations of why their students got good results in the English exam in the PAU. It also collects more general opinions about the current situation of English in Catalonia. The students' views follow, along with information about what they value most about English instruction in their high school as well as their suggestions for change. Data is drawn from teachers' and students' answers to open-ended questions in fourteen teacher interviews and nine student interviews (2-4 students per interview) as well as 391 student questionnaires from the six selected schools.

The teachers' views about their school's achievements in the PAU

Except for one high school (AO), where teachers only mention internal factors to account for the good results in English in the PAU, in the other five schools both internal and external factors are mentioned.

In reference to external factors, teachers frequently mention that the school gets good students (*'Matèria base molt bona en tot l'institut en general'* (SGG), *'Material de trabajo muy positivo'* (PC), *'Els bons resultats atrauen gent que volen bons resultats'* (EMT)), who normally come from families which value their children's education, and want to get good grades. This creates a good working environment in the class which makes it possible to use classtime efficiently: *'El buen clima de trabajo hace que el profesor pueda hacer actividades buenas y que les puedas pedir cualquier cosa'* (PC). In some high schools the fact that the school works efficiently (*'És un insti que rutlla'* (PFQ)) and a popularity for teachers being demanding are also mentioned.

In regard to internal factors, the most frequently mentioned arguments refer to the teachers in the English department: the fact that they work as a group (*'We all work together'* (AO)) and share goals (*'Els alumnes veuen que hi ha una línia comuna a tots'* (FPQ)), as well as that they are highly involved in their jobs (*'Defensem la idea del professor especialista. El fet que t'agradi la matèria que ensenyas també és molt important'* (EMT)), and that they do not waste time in class and set rigorous standards

for students (*'S'està molt al damunt'* (FPQ), *'Exigir força i donar-los molt. És una combinació que funciona'* (EMT)).

Another internal factor which is also mentioned refers to the quality of instruction in English that the students have had since the ESO, be it because they were grouped according to their level or due to other reasons (having been spoken to in English in class from day one, or having been prepared for the PAU from the 3-ESO). Finally, it is worth mentioning that only two teachers credited some aspect related to the methodology used as a factor to explain the good results in the PAU.

The teachers' views about English in Catalonia

The interviewed teachers expressed two basic attitudes about the level of English in Catalonia: a number of views towards teaching (too much importance attached to reading and writing and too little to oral production; too much preparation to pass an exam; excessive emphasis on grammar and vocabulary; the need for a more functional and communicative approach; the need for English to be more present in the school and to be used as a means of teaching other subjects; the need for greater coordination with primary schools) and a critical attitude towards the administration (too many students per class; too many levels within the same group; too few hours of English; some mistaken principles in the LOGSE; wrongly channeled resources; unnecessary innovation; the impossibility of splitting classes in *batxillerat*).

In addition to these two basic attitudes, **the teachers mention external factors, such as the absence of English in the students' environment resulting in few hours of exposure to the language**. In their view, exposure would increase considerably if the practice of dubbing was abandoned, which would make students more aware of the need to learn English and motivate them to do so.

Some teachers, on the other hand, think that it is not true that the level of English in Catalonia is too poor. They argue that comparative studies across different countries should be de-emphasized, among other reasons because students already know another global language Spanish.

The students' views about their school's achievements in the PAU

According to the students, the two most common arguments are the high standards set by their school and the qualities of the teachers. Regarding standards, students mention the level of English in *batxillerat* (*'Si un alumne va a un nivell baix a l'ESO, quan arribi a batxillerat ho notarà molt'* (AO); *'El nivell (d'anglès) que tenim ara és més alt que el que demanen a Selectivitat'* (SE)), the large quantity of homework (*'Fiquen molta feina'* (PFQ)) and the strictness of their teachers (*'A primer de batxillerat són molt rectes'* (AO)), among other factors.

With regard to the qualities of teachers, students make general statements such as *'In general the teaching staff is usually good'* (PFQ), as well as more specific comments such as teachers always using English (*'A base de tener que acostumbrate por narices a tener que entenderlo para hacer algo en clase, creo que eso te hace coger soltura y muchos más recursos en inglés'* (PC)), preparing enjoyable lessons, promoting a good class atmosphere, etc.

Other factors which are also mentioned refer to the student body; the fact that the schools tend to attract good students, that the students are hard-working and motivated to learn English, and also that many of them attend language schools.

What students value most about English in high school

A recurrent topic in all of the interviews is related to oral English being positively viewed. However, some students mention that in *batxillerat* they do less speaking, or even none (*'En realitat, el que fem [a batxillerat] ens ajuda a entendre l'anglès però no a parlar-lo'* (AO)), and at the same time they are aware of the difficulty of doing oral practice in large groups. There are students who mention that they like the fact that the teacher uses English in class. Others make reference to the advantages of activities in which they must speak English, as can be observed in the following statements: *'Parlem molt amb la profe.... Ens fa preguntes i parlem en anglès amb ella. Encara que ens costi una mica de vegades, vas agafant confiança parlant amb ella'* (SE), *'T'ajuda bastant haver-te de preparar exposicions orals'* (PFQ), *'M'agrada que em facin parlar, que és el que més em costa. Perquè llegir, escriure o escoltar, això ho puc fer jo sol amb un llibre o disc'* (SE), *'L'anglès el tens més arraconat a les hores de classe. Fent un treball has de treballar en anglès, amb els textos, has de donar informació tot sovint en anglès, te l'has de preparar en anglès'* (PFQ). Also, some students refer to less formal contexts of oral practice, such as the school exchanges (*'Et veus tot sol davant del perill. Has de saber comunicar-te amb la persona que tens allà'* (PFQ)) or the presence of language teaching assistants in the school.

By contrast, some of the references to grammar in these interviews, especially in high schools where this area is emphasized, have a negative connotation: *'monotony of the teaching approach'* (SE), *'the most difficult part'* (SGG), *'something you drag year after year'* (PFQ). However, these statements are frequently accompanied by comments which suggest that, at the same time, the students see the usefulness of studying grammar, or at least, they do not question its role, as the following statements show: *'La gramàtica suposo que com a tot arreu s'ha de fer i es fa i es practica'* (PFQ), *'Són classes sosses però que serveixen molt'* (AO).

The students' suggestions for change

The students' suggestions for change can be clustered into three groups. The first group of suggestions is about promoting the use of the foreign language in class (both on the part of the teacher and the students), with speaking activities, pronunciation practice, and feedback. The second group of suggestions refers to classes becoming more 'dynamic', 'intense', 'varied' and 'practical'. **Some students would like to do fewer written or simple exercises, less homework correction and theory, and more 'alternative' activities**, such as group work, games or plays. Some students also mention ESL theater plays and exchanges with schools abroad. The third group of suggestions has to do with more frequent use of audiovisual materials (songs, films, documentaries, etc.) and of new technologies (interactive activities, e-pals, Internet searches, and/or PowerPoint presentations).

Conclusions

Teachers and students in the six selected schools attribute the success of their high schools in English to a combination of internal factors (such as English teachers setting high standards or being rigorous) and external factors (such as the fact that their high schools tend to attract good students). Also both teachers and students see some room for improvement (especially in the promotion of opportunities for oral practice in the students' view), although they are well aware of the limitations of the context where teaching takes place, which condition the methodology employed.

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