EXPLORING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE: A CASE STUDY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of transnational training, together with the new labour markets, impose new training offers with a markedly international carácter (Vázquez García, 2015: 23), not only because of the content of the programmes, but also because of the increasing presence of international students. This is the case, for example, with the growing number of postgraduate programmes that give universities a stamp of prestige and academic excellence.

Besides, in a world of increasing globlalisation, English has become the *lingua franca* of international legal practice and, therefore, requires legal professionals to develop high-level skills in English. In this study, we seek to explore students' perceptions of their own Legal English learning through task-based language teaching. Students are registered, during the academic year 2018-2019, in one of the three oficial masters' programmes implemented at the University of Granada Law School, that is, Master's in International Law and International Relations, Master's in Business Law and Master's in Health Law, Bioethics and the Right to Health in the European Union.

The duration of the module in Legal Engish is 3 ECTS credits (18 hours in situ and 57 autonomous, adding up to a total of 75 hours), and the number of enrolled students stood at 29. Of these 29 students, the majority were enrolled on the Master's in International Law and International Relations (18 students); in second place were students enrolled on the Master's in Business Law (10 students) and finally, one student was enrolled on the Master's in Health Law, Bioethics and the Right to Health in the European Union.

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2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Legal English, as a sub-discipline of ESP, is one of the most demanding, and the teaching is complex and intellectually challenging (Bowker and Pearson, 2002, Schneider, 2011, Cook, 2012, Taviano, 2014, Sierocka, 2014; Alastrué, R. P. & C. Pérez-Llantada, 2015, among others).

At first, consideration was given to undertaking activities related to terminology. To this end, we consulted a number of manuals on Legal English (Chartrand, Millar & Wiltshire, 2000; Riley, 2001; Krois-Linder, 2006; Alejo, 2006; Alcaraz, 2007, Brown & Rice, 2007; Frost, 2009, Haigh, 2009; Tessuto, 2009, 2013; Spinzi & Rudvin, 2015; Giampieri, 2015; Alastrué & Pérez Llantada, 2015) and also on Legal Spanish (Ortiz, 2001; Taranilla, 2012; Jiménez & Mantecón, 2012 and Alcaraz, 2014) and we realised that they all had a common denominator. As (Aguado, 2001:2) points out, terminology continues to be one of the characteristic elements of specialist languages.

Nevertheless, when designing these activities it is not just terminology that must be taken into account, but also the speakers (Mayoral, 1999; Mayoral and Díaz-Fouces, 2011). In fact, some authors consider that terminology is the main defining characteristic of the term "Language for Specific Purposes", but it is not the only one Bowker and Pearson (2002: 26-7), (Northcott, 1997, 2001, 2008).

Content Based Language Teaching or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CBLT and CLIL, respectively), which aims to embed L2 learning within a meaningful context, has typically been demonstrated to be an efficient means of encouraging the development of L2 skills ((LaPlante 2000, Short (1994, 1997), Met (1998), (Snow et al. 1989, Swaffar 1993). Alejos (2006), Husinec (2011), Liebenberg (2012), Arnó-Macià, E. & Guzmán Mancho-Barés (2015), Ball (2017) or Vyushkina (2019), Marsh et al. (2019), Luk Van Mensel et al. (2020), Tagins y Ní (2021), Alexandrowicz (2021) and Tashmatova (2022) are other more recent examples of the relevance of this type of approach in Legal English teaching, especially in higher education.

3. OBJECTIVES

The main objectives that we set out to achieve in this study were the following:

1.- conduct a needs analysis of the students of the 3 graduate courses

2.- to design, in the light of the results of that needs analysis, a set of tasks in

order to develop the skills and competences that are most useful to them for their professional future

3.- that students evaluate their own learning through the com-pletion of designed tasks To collect this information, a questionnaire was administered.

All the information gathered through this questionnaire would be very useful, not only for the students, but also for the teachers who teach this module, in order to verify the overall effectiveness and quality of the teaching-learning process.

4. METHODOLOGY

Considering the results obtained from the needs analysis, the main knowledge students needed to achieve for the desired external outcome, was, as expressed by (Deardorff, 2006, Deardorff, 2009), effective and appropriate communication in international/intercultural situations. We based ourselves on the intercultural competence model of (Deardorff, 2006, Deardorff, 2009) oriented in the process more than the product or result, on the one hand, and TBLT (Nunan, 1989, 2004, Willis, 1996, Skehan, 1998, Ellis, 2003, Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Brown, 2007), on the other. Some of the studies that have recently addressed this same issue are in intercultural contexts, (Palmer-Silveira, 2013) and in the university sphere (Snježana, 2011, Liebenberg, 2012; Mancho-Barés & Llurda, 2013; Zaripova, 2015; Vyushkina, 2019).

With this qualitative data, and taking into account the intercultural competence model of (Deardorff, 2006, Deardorff, 2009) and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), we designed a set of activities aimed at acquiring these competencies that, on the whole, were related to being able to communicate effectively in international environments. With this in mind, we decided to design the tasks focusing on the main skills required, such as cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge and sociolinguistic awareness by listening, observing, evaluating, analysing, interpreting and relating. In order to fully evaluate the efficiency of the Legal English module, a questionnaire was adminstered. There were all together 27 respondents out of 29 posgraduate students (the two remaining students were absent that day). They all have been studying at the University of Granada for a semester (the first one of the Master Programme) and most of them (16 out of 27 with a background in law).

4.1 Design of tasks

The tasks were designed according to the preferences expressed by the students in the needs analysis phase. The main linguistic skills Common European Fra-

mework of References for Languages (CEFR) were also considered, as well as communicative and professional spheres, such as client counselling, negotiation and mediation. These spheres rely heavily on listening, paraphrasing, reframing, summarising and skills of question formation regardless of what legal system a student belongs to or has been trained in (Sierocka, 2014). Terminology also played an important role in the tasks designed. We based our tasks in Willis and Willis (2007).

Task types (Willis & Willis, 2007)	**Examples of specific tasks**
Listing	Brainstorming Fact-finding Games based on listing: quizzes, memory and guessing
Ordering and sorting	Sequencing Ranking ordering Classifying
Comparing and contrasting	Games finding similarities and differences Graphic organizers
Problem-solving tasks	Logic problem prediction
Project and creative tasks	Newspaper Posters Survey fantasy
Sharing personal experiences	Story telling Anecdotes Reminiscences
Matching	Words and phrases to pictures

Table 1. Tasks' design (adapted from Willis & Willis, 2007).

4.2 Questionnaire description

With the objective of assessing the activities that have been of greatest use to the students, a questionnaire was provided at the end of the in situ sessions. The questionnaire consisted of 5 parts. The questions were mainly multiple-choice and scaled questions with one open-ended question included. The responses to questions in the first section intended to reveal how heterogeneus the group is concerning their training backgrounds, their studies completed at the university, and their

self-assessed level of Legal English. Section two focused on their perceptions regarding the content and the different resources and material used in the module. Section three focused on the methodology and teaching approach followed by the teacher. In section four, in scaled questions respondents were asked to directly assess the usefulness of the types of tasks assigned to them in terms of their professional futures. Finally, section five included an open-ended question, in which they were to highlight those aspects of the course that could be improved upon, namely those elements related to the content of the topics taught in class and in the tasks that could have been studied in greater depth and, finally, the system of assessment. Due to reasons of space and study object of this study, reference will only be made to the results obtained for the item relating to the activities.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS

This section explores the data obtained from the quantitative analysis based on a 10-item questionnaire on a Likert scale administered to the 27 students participating in the post-graduate course in Legal English. For this study, only the results referring to the assessment of the tasks the post-graduate students made in terms of usefulness for their development of employability skills will be mentioned. To this end, each response level ranged from 1 (not at all useful) to 4 (very useful).

The tasks were grouped into five main different types: a) simulated workplace tasks, b) terminology-based tasks, c) reformulation and phraseological tasks, d) intercultural-oriented tasks and e) basic legal concept-based tasks. As can be seen below in Tables 2 to 6, the number of students who decided that simulated workplace tasks had been useful reached almost 80%. Especially significant was the result obtained for intercultural-oriented tasks, since both useful (50%) and very useful (45%) values obtained a nearly equal percentage, reaching a total of 95% taken altogether. Something similar occured with the tasks related to basic legal concepts (see Table 6 below).

These three tasks types reached the highest score of all, whereas the score for those tasks focusing on terminology, phraseology or reformulation of words, (Tables 3 and 4) even though far from negligible (63% and 59.3%, respectively), was less significant for the purpose of this study.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	useful	17	63.0	63.0	63.0
	very useful	10	37.0	37.0	100.0
	Total	27	100.0	100.0	
Standard Deviation		,492			

Table 2. Simulated workplace tasks.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Somewhat useful	2	7.4	7.4	7.4
	useful	21	77.8	77.8	85.2
	very useful	4	14.8	14.8	100.0
	Total	27	100.0	100.0	
Standard Deviation		,474			

Table 3. Terminology-based tasks.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent

Valid	some-what useful	4	14.8	14.8	14.8
	useful	16	59.3	59.3	74.1
	very useful	7	25.9	25.9	100.0
	Total	27	100.0	100.0	
Standard Deviation		,641			

Table 4. Reformulation and phraseological tasks.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Some-what useful	2	7.4	7.4	7.4
	useful	13	48.1	48.1	55.6
	very useful	12	44.4	44.4	100.0
	Total	27	100.0	100.0	
Standard Deviation		,629			

Table 5. Intercultural-oriented tasks.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Some-what useful	1	3.7	3.7	3.7
	useful	12	44.4	44.4	48.1
	very useful	14	51.9	51.9	100.0

Total	27	100.0	100.0	
Standard Deviation	,580			

Table 6. Basic legal concepts-related tasks.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings described in section 5 reveal not only the students' main preferred (and less preferred) tasks for a Legal English course, but also what they found more effective for their future job placements in the labour market and the extent to which they could apply, to their professional contexts, what they learnt. On this point, the results obtained in this study confirm what other experts have recently underlined when dealing with an ESP course. In this sense, authors such as (Palmer Silveira, 2013: 11; Louhiala Salminen & Charles, 2008: 48; Arnó Macià et al. 2013: 249) states the importance of intercultural competence.

This competence, however, has not been taken into account accordingly. Thus, (Lario de Oñate & Vázquez Amador, 2013:171) conducted a study of 67 Business English textbooks and the results showed that only two of them include specific units devoted to intercultural communication. The fact that terminology and phraseology tasks were not selected as one of the most preferred tasks among the students is a very revealing piece of data, since this displaces the idea that ESP teaching refers especially to terminology and lexical units. Teachers, far from thinking about which Legal English they should teach, are encouraged to be "more sensitive to local exigencies and to theorize from their own pratice" (Kumaravadively, 2006: 75). There have been recent studies exploring terminology in connection, for instance, with e-learning platforms and web-based collaborative tasks at university (Breeze, 2014: 111). Other authors, such as (Fuertes Olivera, 2014: 91) has followed a study on the strengths and weaknesses of the use of specialised internet dictionaries for teaching and learning Business English in Spanish universities.

Task-based Learning is not a panacea as it offers both advantages and disadvantages. One of the main criticism of this approach is the "apparent lack of focus on grammar" (Rodríguez Bonces & Rodríguez Bonces, 2010:174) and that practitioners need to be prepared to use language as a means and not as an end. One of the main advantages is in a student-centred approach, the role of teacher is merely that of a facilitator. Students become autonomous and the feedback for teachers and students is guaranteed by the post-task stage and where the evaluation of the task process takes place (Müller Hartmann & Schocker-v. Dirtfurth, 2011: 100)

7. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions can be drawn:

a) This study has shed light on the kind of tasks which have more impact on their learning process when acquiring skills for communicating effectively in intercultural and international legal contexts. A total of 92.5% of the students found interculturally-oriented tasks both useful and very useful, and 77.8% of them found simulated workplace tasks useful too. Besides, 51.9% of students found basic legal concepts-related tasks very useful (objectives 2 and 3).

b) The best way to assess intercultural competence in Legal English is through a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures. Similar findings were obtained by (Deardorff, 2006:250) when seeking to determine an appropriate method of assessing intercultural competence.

c) Definitions of key concepts, such as *tasks* and *intercultural competence* are changing concepts, that is why it is so difficult to define these constructs and, therefore, to assess Intercultural Legal English competence.

d) As the constructs of tasks and intercultural competence, the concept of *assessment methods* should also be reviewed on a ongoing basis. Multiple assessment methods (tasks, oral presentations and simulated workplace papers) in measuring intercultural/international Legal English competence, both inside and outside the classroom, has proven to be a successful tool for this module.

e) Due to the fact that students participating in this module come from diverse cultural, linguistic and academic backgrounds, it seems to be more appropriate to refine the term "Legal English" or "English for Legal Purposes (ELP)", not considering them as a mere sub-discipline of ESP, but rather using a broader term, such as "Legal English in Intercultural settings" or "Intercultural Legal English" instead. The term "Content and Language Integrated Learning programmes in universities (CLIL), coined by some authors, especially in those with a tradition of ESP courses (Arnó-Macià and Mancho-Barés, 2015:63) has proven to be the appropriate approach to legal language instruction.

f) In spite of the short duration of this module, the findings obtained in this study are statistically significant. Applying a tailor-made and context/local-sensitive model for teaching Intercultural Legal English, seems to be more appropriate and realistic (objective 1).

h) ESP courses are often tailor-made and unique, so that it is not feasible to prepare and design the course in order to satisfy all the ESP students' needs, as they are likely to change with each ESP course (Sierocka, 2014:15).

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