

Students' perspectives regarding the institutional English courses at Universidad Surcolombiana *

Perspectivas de los estudiantes respecto a los cursos institucionales de inglés de la Universidad Surcolombiana


* Original Research Article

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Abstract

This narrative research study allows us to learn about the usefulness of the mandatory institutional English courses at the Universidad Surcolombiana, Neiva branch, for students of other undergraduate programs in English and their academic, professional, and personal impact. It uses the open interview anonymously to collect their experiences and to promote free expression by using questions related to the courses and based on their environment and previous contact with English using Spanish to better understand. Likewise, the English for Specific Purposes model was taken into account and presented as an idea to the students as a strategy to implement it in the different programs. The results indicated that the benefits obtained in these courses were very limited for English learning and improving the level of students, evidencing the need for English according to their program for the adequate professional development of each one.

Keywords: Institutional English courses, English learning, benefits, English for Specific Purposes, students

Resumen

Este estudio de investigación narrativa permite conocer la utilidad de los cursos institucionales de inglés obligatorios de la Universidad Surcolombiana sede Neiva en estudiantes de otras carreras de licenciatura en inglés y su impacto en lo académico, profesional, y personal. Utiliza la entrevista abierta de forma anónima para recolectar sus experiencias, y promover una libre expresión usando preguntas relacionadas con los cursos y basadas en su entorno y contacto previo con el inglés utilizando el español para comprender mejor. Asimismo, se tomó en cuenta el modelo de inglés para propósitos específicos y llevarlo como idea ante los estudiantes como estrategia para ponerlo en práctica en los diferentes programas. Los resultados indicaron que los beneficios obtenidos en estos cursos fueron muy limitados para el aprendizaje del inglés y mejorar el nivel en estudiantes, evidenciando la necesidad de un inglés acorde a su programa para el adecuado desarrollo profesional de cada uno.

Palabras clave: Cursos institucionales de inglés, aprendizaje de inglés, beneficios, inglés para propósitos específicos, estudiantes

Introduction

Throughout recent years, the English language has become stronger in many aspects around the world, like labor, social, educational, and personal ones. In Colombia, English courses have taken an important role in all educational institutions, whether they are elementary and secondary schools or universities. Nonetheless, an article presented by Archyde (2020) has shown the findings of a research called the "English Proficiency Index" conducted by Education First (EF) on one hundred countries to assess their English proficiency. In this investigation, it was demonstrated that Colombia ranks seventy-first in the world and third in Latin America in terms of English proficiency. Furthermore, in the 2021 edition of the official website of Education First (n.d.), it was confirmed that since 2011 to 2021, Colombia is still at very low and low levels according to the world's largest ranking according to English proficiency. This being the motive to know if the English courses taught either in schools or universities have contributed to the communicative development of the students and if those English courses have fulfilled the parameters required in those institutions.

In this way, taking as a factor the English courses in schools and universities, it is important to understand and know if those classes led the students to positive learning and evidenced the compliance of the parameters required in the institutions. In this order, we focused on Universidad Surcolombiana as it is a higher education institution, to analyze how students use English in a real context in their specific professional field and how English classes these students took contributed to such a purpose.

The Universidad Surcolombiana has seven faculties. Regarding Agreement 065 of 2009, the Faculty of Education has a degree requirement to complete six English levels to demonstrate a minimum level of B2. The other faculties must take only four levels, pursuing a level of B1 according to the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR). However, it is unknown how students apply the second language skills they learned in their field of study.

The purpose of this study is to describe the repercussions English courses had on the Surcolombiana students' English communication needs.

1. Literature Review

1.1. *What is education?*

The meaning of education has been stated by many authors, though there are few differences. Bhagirathi Sahu (2002) gives us some definitions about education based on classic philosophical authors. One of the oldest concepts was stated by Plato, giving education a connotation of commitment to aim to become the ideal citizen through it. He stated, "Education is the process of development of the mind and the body of man, so that she or he eagerly pursues the ideal perfection of citizenship" (p. 14). On the other hand, Pestalozzi (2002) stated that "education is the natural progressive and harmonious development of man's innate powers" (p. 14), meaning that education must be pleasant, and each learner can develop gradually and naturally their learning. Similarly, Congreso de la República de Colombia (1994), says "education is a continuous, personal, cultural, and social training process grounded in a whole conception of humans and their dignity, rights, and duties" (p.1). Additionally, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, mentioned that education is a human right for all throughout life and that access must be matched by quality. Therefore, as we can appreciate, the concepts are connected with the idea of acquired abilities that help humans to become whole people through the process of training.

Conversely, education has evolved as humans have changed their ways of doing things, something that has brought some new approaches that aim to improve and construct 21st century education. Hallerman, Lewis, & Dresbach (2019) define that "21st century education as one that provides students with the skills and competencies they need to thrive." In Colombia, in order to preserve these new changes and make sure to achieve the best quality of education for their society, the National Ministry of Education (MEN for its acronym in Spanish) was created. In the same way, some time later, this program of government developed the National Plan of Bilingualism (2004–2019).

Through the National Plan of Bilingualism (PNB for its acronym in Spanish), the Ministry of Education (2006) stated its objective to form citizens able to communicate mainly in English who can immerse the country in processes of universal communication, global communication, and cultural openness. All this is also through internationally comparable

standards as established by the Council of Europe in its Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The Council of Europe (2014) defines the CEFR as an outline that describes what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. This Framework is often used by several countries, including Colombia, in educational institutions so that they can compare their curriculum and student assessment with each other. The organization also established six levels of proficiency that indicate how well students are progressing in the language learning process. That means that students at the end of the third grade should attain an A1 level; when finishing seventh grade, they should reach an A2 level; at the end of the eleventh grade, they should have a B1 level. In the final semester, students from undergraduate programs other than English should achieve a B2 level, and final semester students from undergraduate English programs should reach a C1 level. However, it is important to note that the CEFR was not developed to exclusively assess communicative skills in English, but in any foreign language that has been learnt (de Mejía, 2011).

In 2005, the Colombian government, together with the MEN, adopted the CEFR, where it established its levels to be taken as goals for the Colombian educational system. The Ministry of Education adopted the different levels belonging to the CEFR, using them as a guide for teachers to identify the level at which students should be; likewise, it facilitates their work to draw a respective goal where students in eleventh grade demonstrate an intermediate knowledge of English with a command of B1.

On the other hand, according to Angarita Trujillo & Arias Castilla (2014), the main objective of the PNB was to attend to the particular bilingualism needs of the different Colombian populations while considering the multiculturalism of the nation. In this sense, Miranda Montenegro (2012), in his article *Insights on Bilingualism and Bilingual Education: A Sociolinguistic Perspective*, explained that the PNB had three lines of action: Firstly, ethno-education, consisting of providing indigenous communities with bilingual education in their aboriginal language and Spanish; secondly, the inclusion of flexible models of education in order to regulate the teaching of foreign languages in "education to work and human development" (EDTDH for its acronym in Spanish); and thirdly, the improvement of the communicative competence in English in the public and private schools and universities of the country. All of this enables people's development, including the ability to acquire and

change their knowledge and skills, as well as the ability to empower their capacity for innovation and problem-solving, as expected by the National Ministry of Education.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Bilingualism*

The word Bilingualism comes from the etymology of the word "Bi", expressing "two" plus "lingual", meaning literally "two-tongued" and figuratively "speaking a jumble of languages"; finally, "-ism", implying a practice or a doctrine. When we review the world's established dictionary definition, the word "bilingualism" means two languages, and a bilingual person is a person who speaks two languages.

In contrast to Weinerich and Martinet (1953), who conducted several works on linguistics and languages, in their monograph *Languages in Contact*, they contemplated the idea that bilingualism was not only an individual problem but also a social one. Moreover, they began research on various social factors that could affect both the individual and communities, discovering that languages influence each other due to linguistic interference and structural similarity between the two languages. Thus, second language learners thought that the linguistic forms of their first language were the same as the second language, which native speakers refuted. For them, being bilingual means having developed cognitive skills that allow a person to switch between the two languages according to the context that requires it. Therefore, bilingualism is the practice of alternately using two languages.

On the other hand, Siguán Miguel and Francis William (1989) how the bilingual individual and the bilingual society are two terms that, despite being closely related, have different meanings, significantly changing the perception of bilingualism.

The bilingual individual must have independence concerning the two linguistic codes because if there is no such separation, interference will occur; also, the ability to switch from one linguistic system to another depending on its environment; and most importantly, the ability to express the same meaning but in different languages. Therefore, he said that the bilingual individual must be a balanced being who can easily differentiate between the two languages, who has two means of communication and two instruments of intellectual

activity. Nonetheless, a bilingual society is where a community in the same geographical area has different languages as its first language; Francis William (1989) clarifies that if a society speaks two languages, it must be because of a historical past where there will be an imbalance between the two languages, with a weaker language and a stronger one. In the same way, Siguan (2001) concludes that bilingualism is the ability to use two or more languages in different contexts without taking it to perfection, calling it functional bilingualism.

In other words, bilingualism is the ability of an individual to know two languages, alternate them in different contexts and environments, and have a balance between these two languages.

2.2. *English as Academic Purposes*

English as Academic Purposes (EAP henceforth) is considered a branch of English language teaching, which seeks to help people learn English at a higher level depending on their linguistic and cultural practices. This branch is usually adapted to the practices and needs of the students with respect to what they are studying. Likewise, there are several definitions of what EAP is, such as Stevens (1988), who decided to give it a definition based on two specific characteristics. The first is absolute, saying that language teaching is designed for specific needs that have particular content that concentrates on certain activities and that is focused on appropriate language; where the learner's needs are first known, then those needs are related to the topics that have each activity, specialization, or occupation; and that their language is syntactic, semantic, and discourse analysis different from general English. The second characteristic is variable, which means it limits the language skills you choose to learn, which can be taught but with a planned methodology. However, Dudley-Evans and St John (1991) modified the definition above by saying that the absolute characteristics are not designed depending on a topic but on the specific needs of the students, and that the focus should be on language, generating appropriate activities using a methodology that helps to provoke meaningful learning. And in the variable characteristics, he said that EAP should be designed for certain disciplines designed for advanced learners and that although it is mostly used by adults because of the need to use English in a professional work situation, it does not mean that it cannot become a basic language system to be used with beginners.

Otherwise, Robinson's (1991) defined EAP as a developed course based on needs analysis where it clarifies the objectives and the time that must be a course specifying what the students want to learn through English in relation to their career. Although this theory was valid at the time, it was a weak definition of EAP.

2.3. *English for General Purposes*

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) refer to English for General Purposes (EGP henceforth) as a broad base where English language instruction is the structural and grammatical elements for students at a school level to be able to pass a test. In this course, students are introduced to the cultural aspects of the country where their first language is English, to the elements of spoken and written discourse. In addition, EGP bases its activities on basic contexts and environments such as places, characters, and information from magazines and newspapers. Likewise, according to Potocar (2002), this branch only gives the student a basic knowledge of all the skills that must be developed when learning English.

On the other hand, Mohseni (2008) states that even if it is basic, the teaching of English in the EGP environment helps to improve some of the students' competencies so that they can function in an everyday environment and use English in casual conversations without a specific purpose.

It should be noted that this type of course aims to instill excitement in students so that learning English becomes less boring and monotonous; similarly, EGP, by emphasizing general aspects, does not focus on developing specific activities and materials.

2.4. *English for Specific Purposes*

Robinson (1991) defines English for Specific Purposes (ESP henceforth) as a course that encompasses the education, training, and practices of the different specific interests that students have. For him, the need for analysis and a suitable methodology to develop the class is very important; where the teacher, based on what the students learned, gives a conclusion regarding the different topics that were discussed in the course.

Meanwhile, according to Mohseni (2008), ESP is the teaching of English but with a specific purpose. That means that this course is concerned with the needs of the students depending on the professional field they are in. Likewise, the material to be prepared for the course must be specifically designed for the needs of the students related to their occupations or activities; it should also focus on syntax, lexis, semantics, and others to increase their skills in their field of work (Peter Stevens, 1988). Finally, Widdowson (1983) establishes distinctive features of ESP as the focus on training using English in vocational contexts, the selection of appropriate content, and the creation of a restricted English competence.

3. Method

The narrative method was the most accurate for this research, using the experiences obtained by the students who took the institutional English courses as data and not as a medium to analyze a case (Barkhuizen et al., 2014).

The participants of this study were fourteen students of the Universidad Surcolombiana, specifically two students per faculty of the most known programs (table 1). Additionally, we considered other variables to select our participants. As they must have completed all the levels of the Institutional English courses, they did not have to belong to the foreign language program.

Table 1. Participants of the research.

FACULTY	PROGRAM	STUDENTS PER PROGRAM	STUDENTS PER FACULTY
FACULTY OF EDUCATION	Bachelor's degree in Natural Science Environmental Education	2	2
FACULTY OF EXACT AND NATURAL SCIENCES	Physics	2	2

FACULTY OF LAW AND POLITICAL SCIENCES	Political Science	2	2
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES	Psychologist	2	2
FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT	Public Accounting Economy	1 1	2
FACULTY OF ENGINEERING	Software Engineer Civil Engineer	1 1	2
FACULTY OF HEALTH	Nursing	2	2
TOTAL OF PARTICIPANTS	14		

Note. Own elaboration based on the participants from the different programs of the Universidad Surcolombiana selected for the investigation.

We used semi-structured interviews to collect participants' perspectives and stories (Richards, 2003). This approach helped us to collect the answers of the students in an oral way, allowing the students to express themselves freely about the experiences they had in the English courses. The questions were created in advance with a specific order for each of the students who were interviewed. In the same way, any extra information that the interviewee gave at the time of the interview was noted as an aid to the investigation. (See Appendix 1).

4. Findings

For this analysis, we used thematic analysis. Creswell (2009) described this systematic process for coding data in which specific statements are analyzed and categorized into

themes that represent the phenomenon of interest. Similarly, we were able to follow some steps in which we analyzed the information using a linear, six-phased method (Braun and Clarke, 2006). At the same time, we implemented pseudonyms to ensure the privacy of the participants and analyzed how the institutional English courses taken by the students of the Universidad Surcolombiana were useful for them and their future professional lives.

4.1. Background Knowledge

First of all, we identified that the background knowledge of the students was an important factor for them in these courses. All those significant experiences with English during their growing up – English courses in institutions, families, music, movies – influenced the development of their Interlingua courses. There were some students who felt that the classes for them were easier and, at some point, monotonous because they already knew many topics. We can see, for example, the case of Pedro from Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences :

On the other hand, the English courses were a little traumatic because in the first levels there were topics that I already knew. Let's say that these courses were sometimes a little repetitive, right? To the point, they made me a little fed up because there were themes that I already saw (and knew).

However, there were students without enough extracurricular support for the courses. Some of them had the support of family or friends and, in some cases, the contact of English through music, video games, TV series, movies, and more content of this type that helped them. As in the case of Paola a Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences student, No, honestly no, but I have tried on my own to improve my English skills. I have listened to music, watched series in English, read in English, and not only with the reading of scientific articles in my career, which also helps me a lot to remember some words that I have forgotten, and practice some forms of grammar and some phrasal verbs.

As a consequence of this, we realized that background knowledge is an important factor to take into consideration due to the fact that this helps the student have a better performance in the English courses. In the same way, leisure activities could help them to have a better understanding of the language.

4.2. Benefits obtained from the learning English process

For some students, the institutional English courses were helpful as a means of reinforcement in their process of learning English. Regarding allowing them to have a better understanding of the basic topics taught in the courses, nonetheless, they admitted that reviewing some of them helped students remember some words and rules, or even strengthen their skills. For example, the following student said:

Well, let's say that the institutional English courses have helped me review some topics. For example, the tenses, some phrases with verbs and certain prepositions, have a different meaning than what you would think of when the verb is alone, so let's say it is important because it helps you remember certain things and topics related to the English language. In the same way, it helps us with the formation of grammar and how to use the language correctly, as well as the use of certain formal or informal vocabulary according to certain situations. [Pedro, Student from Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences]

Besides, many students seem to understand and do the exercises and tasks without much struggle. Although they had their shortcomings in English, we could notice that, in general terms, the courses were not complex but rather, at some point, useful for them to practice what they already know with respect to the English language. We could evidence it when a student said:

The courses seemed to me a little too simple in terms of what is used in the study book. As for the experience, it gave me the ability to manage both writing and reading, but my deficiency is my speech. [Sergio, students from Faculty of Engineering]

As for the new English learning process, students acquired knowledge related to different expressions and ways of communicating in English useful in their future professional life:

Well, I can say that the four levels of English helped me a lot because I learned new words, terms, and expressions that I did not know. Because of that, I was able to

interpret some physics books since all the books and articles that were used in my career were either in English or Portuguese. [Paola, physics' student, Faculty of Exact and Natural Science]

According to the students, the courses were mostly useful for improving their English skills. However, they did not help them advance in their careers. For instance, one economics student responded to the question "Have you had any difficulty understanding an article in English in your professional field with the basics learned in the English courses?" as follows:

Well, I have read very few articles regarding my career, but the complexity of an accounting text is already much higher than what is seen in a level 3 or 4, so I felt that I lacked (vocabulary) I can't say it helped me a lot. However, it helped me a little to understand the texts. [Lucia, student of Public Accounting]

We could identify that during the courses, students could not only understand the different types of activities the professor gave them, but to some extent, improve their level of English and their ability to communicate in that language. Through different expressions and ways of communication, they could have a conversation useful not only in their daily environment but also in their future professional life. Besides, these English courses allowed students not only to understand how a language works or can be used, but also to read about texts related to their career.

4.3. Drawbacks found during the English learning

Despite the large number of participants who commented that the courses were useful for remembering and strengthening what they had previously learned in English, either in other English-speaking institutions or independent activities, or even for their program, many felt these English courses had activities that were hard to understand and complete. Two students claimed that the difficulties they encountered at some levels were the result of external factors such as a lack of a solid English foundation at school and the professor's behavior and teaching style. The first student admitted:

Well, for me, the first two levels of English were complicated because the teachers who taught me English before at school did not give me a very good basis and they did not explain in a clear or explicit way some topics. I always had to look for classmates who had more experience in English. In the last two levels of English, it was a little easier because the teachers explained the topics better and I was able to have a better understanding. [Pedro, student from Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences]

On the other hand, the second student was not sure if the reason for their struggle was the demanding character of the teacher, the traditional method of evaluation, or because they had to deal with many subjects in university. He stated:

At the fourth level, the situation was different. I am not sure if it was the professor or the fact that I had a lot of subjects enrolled at the university, or the schedule, but I suddenly felt tired, so it was not very good. For me, the fourth level was more complex because of the traditional tests. [Paola, Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences]

We could identify that some classes were limited to doing the same types of exercises and the use of textbooks without implementing any innovative activities, making these courses useless for them and for their program. As Paola, one student of the Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences said, Some professors only limited themselves to the traditional type of class that we were used to in school. They gave all the subject matter, but the exercises were to practice the same ones for two semesters, for two levels, and I think that was not right.

Unfortunately, we discovered that some of the difficulties students had in learning English during these courses were mainly based on the lack of a good basis in English at school and the lack of a clear explanation of the different topics. In the same vein, consequently, many students expressed their dissatisfaction with the professors' classes because they were based solely on the book and there was no innovation on their part in the process of teaching a new language. Finally, the exercises students were to practice were the same ones used for two semesters in the courses and were based on traditional tests, making

students have problems using the language not only for personal but also academic or professional purposes.

4.4. English for specific purposes as a proposed action for the different programs

Although it is well known that the English language is necessary for almost every professional field, not all educational institutions teach the needed English for the different professions. This is exemplified by the Universidad Surcolombiana. Most of the interviewees agree that using English for specific purposes is necessary for them and for the proper development of their careers. One example that supports this statement was given by Miguel from the Faculty of Health:

Some For me, it is essential to begin to give a more specific focus on the English that we learn because, as I said, a university that is training professionals cannot be dedicated to a school's English; let's say an administrative program has to know administrative terms; in a health program like mine, we have to speak with health descriptors in English, then we have to see what is needed for each program, because the English focus of my program is very different and should be special for each field: engineering, education, and health, at least for that.

Another important point that it is necessary to highlight is from Laura of the Faculty of Law and Political Science, who stated:

It would be great if everyone could learn a little English from their own approach, precisely because that would allow one to, let's say, open up other worlds. If I had a better command of English in my field, I might be able to read documents by English authors without having to scour the Internet for the translated document.

All this demonstrated how these students from Universidad Surcolombiana of different faculties and programs found the use of English for specific purposes essential not only for their profession but for their personal development. Finally, we could see how the implementation of specific English could provide students with a broader perspective of the world and even knowledge or information regarding their own careers.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Regarding the results of this research, it can be said that the students' background was a significant factor that influenced their experiences with the Institutional English Courses. For instance, students with previous contact with the English language noticed that the courses were unchallenging and monotonous, while others with no reasonable basis in English had some difficulties during the classes. These differences in perspectives are due to previous influences or experiences students had with native people that assisted them in learning the language easily, so they were at a higher level and the courses were merely reinforcement. As Rizky (2021) highlights, for those students who have been in contact with native speakers or have been exposed to the English language in many ways, it is much easier to learn it.

Another factor was the dissatisfaction of the students with some aspects of the courses, either because of the teacher's attitude and method or since teachers were limited to using textbooks, stereos, or worksheets, which also affected the way students learn. As Vighnarajah et al. (2008) pointed out, "In a traditional teaching and learning environment, little learning is taking place in the classroom even though there appears to be an active shift of information." (p. 33).

Students, on the other hand, indicated that some other teachers used didactic resources such as games, videos, or web pages to help students learn more effectively. Changing the idea of what is considered useful and beneficial in the process of learning a new language in the same way, showing how didactic resources, especially games, contribute to the process of teaching-learning in a way that is familiar and meaningful to students. Furthermore, how those resources activated their motivation to learn through activities contextualized in real life, such as news reports, sketches, and debates. All this is due to the use of didactic resources that promote a motivation that catches the attention of students and provokes in them a positive stimulus that helps them to have better educational quality.

Another factor of this dissatisfaction was the insufficient content of the courses due to the lack of time and meaningful teaching. Despite this, students commented that those courses were helpful in reinforcing some basic vocabulary and making them understand some general paragraphs. Nonetheless, they did not see considerable benefits in terms of their

field of study development since the courses only taught basic English, generating difficulties in understanding articles about topics of their discipline.

During the research, we wanted to know how students would contemplate the implementation of ESP, which, according to Javid Mehdi and Mohseni Ahmad (2020), focused on the teaching of English, taking into account the needs of the students in their field of study. It was surprising to find that most of the students indicated that they would agree to take specific English courses for each university program. However, students stated that it was difficult to execute in the real context since it is necessary that teachers are trained in a specific branch, and students have an appropriate level of English so that the tasks are not too difficult to accomplish.

Finally, this research will help as a guide to improve those institutional English courses according to the needs of the students, generating a useful English learning development that enriches their future professional field. All this, taking into account different aspects that may obstruct the correct process of those courses and careers.

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