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# EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THEIR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ITS USES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES AT INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGES INSTITUTE AT UPTC DUITAMA BRANCH

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## Abstract

This article reports a small scale study that revealed the perceptions students have in Technology and Industrial Administration major programs. The main objective of this study was to reveal the perceptions of these students about their English learning and its use for specific purposes. This study was carried out with students who are taking English as a foreign language at the Languages Institute at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, Duitama branch. The paper also presents the analysis of insights in the process of

## Resumen

Este artículo presenta un estudio a menor escala el cual permitió ver las percepciones que tienen los estudiantes de los programas de Tecnología y Administración. El objetivo principal de este estudio fue revelar las percepciones de estos estudiantes acerca del aprendizaje del Inglés y el uso de este para propósitos específicos. Este estudio fue llevado a cabo con estudiantes quienes están cursando Inglés como lengua extranjera en el Instituto de idiomas en la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia seccional Duitama. Así mismo, este estudio

students when connecting their knowledge of English with activities and materials in Telematics and Circuits subject class.

**Key words:** perceptions, Language Learning, Specific Purposes.

presenta el análisis de las percepciones en el proceso de los estudiantes cuando relacionan su conocimiento de Inglés con las actividades y los materiales en su clase de Telemática y Circuitos.

**Palabras clave:** Percepciones, Aprendizaje de Inglés, Propósitos específicos,

## Introduction

Nowadays, students have to possess the skills to be able of facing the issues encountered in the twenty first century. Bearing in mind that all teachers have to be involved in the learning process, we intent to describe EFL students' perceptions about their English language learning at the international languages Institute at UPTC Duitama branch. Therefore, it is relevant to see the perceptions in the connection with the prior knowledge in English and how they use it for specific purposes. For this reason, it is necessary to analyze EFL learning in the students from Telematics in the program of Industrial management and Circuits in the program of Technology. The students from these subjects have to develop workshops and perform tests in English as a method proposed by teachers, who do not belong to the Languages Institute.

Since the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia has different programs such as Engineering, Business, Farming, Tourism, Industrial Design among others, students are supposed to take four levels of English as a foreign language; the

International Language Institute offers different sources such as : articles, online activities, software and workshops in order for students to enrich their knowledge in English in and outside the classroom when they have to face real situations as interviews, in business practicums or when they have to compare and reflect about the technology advances in Colombia and other countries around the globe. For this reason, it is essential to take into account the communicative skills that students got in their English classes in order to reveal and describe the perceptions they have through their experience when the students learn a foreign language and the connection with learners' specific purposes.

Finally, this small scale study is also important in terms of students' process and interests bearing in mind their personal development; therefore, it states the benefits it may bring for students and for the field of telematics and circuits subjects at the programs of Industrial Management and Technology at UPTC which is relevant to say that the students' abilities in their subject-matter fields, in turn, improve their ability to learn English or vice versa. English for

Specific Purposes (ESP) approach enhances the significance of what the students are learning and enables them to use the English they know to learn even more English, since their interest in their field will motivate them to interact with speakers and texts while connecting their areas with their prior knowledge or background.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To understand the basis of this study, a clear explanation of each of the constructs, that this work constitutes, should be clarified. The constructs which support this study are: Perceptions about language learning, English at the International Language Institute, and English for specific and academic purposes.

### **Perceptions about language learning**

At Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia Branch Duitama, there are some specific cases where teachers who do not belong to the Languages Institute have been in some way involved through English as a foreign language by means of different experiences and sources; for example, they have presented Lectures in English that have to do with their field of study, they have handled software programs in English, they have also read and analyzed several scientific articles related to their subjects; in addition, those teachers have had the opportunity to go abroad and share their experiences in terms of speech and research.

In the following paragraph we want to describe the connection between Students' knowledge of general English and Circuitos de Corriente alterna Class:

In this class, students have to handle a software which is "Matlab", this program is based on guidelines and tools that are presented in English language; therefore, students with their prior knowledge connect those words with the different functions in the software.



Based on the teacher in circuits, MATLAB is a high-level language and interactive environment for numerical computation, visualization, and programming. By using MATLAB, students can analyze data, develop algorithms, and create models and applications. The language, tools, and built-in math functions enable the learners to explore multiple approaches and reach a solution faster than with spreadsheets or traditional programming languages, such as C/C++ or Java™.

Students are aware of the relevance of being sure of the meaning of each concept that this software has in order to do a very good job when carrying out simulations and graphs; otherwise, if students do not know the meaning in English of each command and tool, one of the devices that this Matlab has in this case PLC, this could be broken

and it would be very expensive for the university, that is why students are very conscious on the fact they have to deeply read the handouts that are presented in English language of every single device, program or software before manipulating it.



In the same subject on circuits, the theory plays an important role in students' perceptions, due to the analysis of scientific papers they have to do at the end of the semester; in this case students have to connect the theory, the method, the performances, and the variables that are reported in each article in graphs and simulations in "Matlab"; at the same time, students show their perception in the fact of having prior knowledge, general vocabulary, connectors, prepositions, expressions among others, in order to do a deep analysis and comparison among their prior information in English, scientific papers and their practice in Matlab.

In relation to EFL Students' perceptions in Telematics class, students have to download from data bases (Science Direct), an article based on Telematics subject in order to do a deep analyses and make summaries to

be discussed in class; in this way, students have to possess a background in English to fund their critical points and support their ideas.

Sometimes, students have trouble with the meaning and the coherence of the ideas in paper. However they realize and perceive the importance on the way they can connect that theory with English prior knowledge and the context in telematics processes. At the same time, students become aware of this connection in terms of competitiveness in their future professional performance.

Since the main purpose of this small scale study is to reveal EFL students' perceptions as an impression or point of view based on experiences, attitudes or understanding on what is observed, analyzed, thought and learnt about their English language learning, we have identified that since students from different programs at UPTC Duitama branch ask for growing the amount of time and lessons in English but not only for communicating but also for their specific areas, therefore, this small scale study let us identify other students' needs which we did not know before. That is why, learners' insights are fundamental to this idea where with some assumptions and theory based on this proposal, we can greatly contribute to the languages Institute.

Arslan and Akbarov (2012) rightly point out that in the past the learning process was only focused on teachers but nowadays is more focused on students' needs, interests and purposes, in this way most of EFL contexts only see English as an aspect but in the way people learn a foreign language to communicate, for pleasure, to know

about other cultures taking into account that in the 21st century students and citizens in general are interested in learning a foreign language for facing different situations in diverse contexts.

These definitions allow us as researchers to have a huge background on what perceptions have involved and demanded; therefore, we can connect this assumption with others that some authors make after their experiences trying to identify students' perceptions in the language learning process.

Arslan and Akbarov (2012), were interested in examining their students' attitudes on the way towards General English and also their attitudes in the direction of English for Specific Purposes, they tried to find the answers in two separate parts as general attitude to English and students' attitude towards ESP. The authors asked 15 questions in connection with students' attitudes and perceptions from General English and ESP classes. 100 students were asked which level of English was upper-intermediate based on the Common European Framework of Reference. They also analyzed the findings by using a Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) . At the end of the experience, the researchers also discovered that a great majority of the students did not think that learning English needed coherence and cohesion to communicate, it is not only to set words but also to connect them with their prior knowledge and of course with their specific purposes, which showed that there was not such a barrier between the students and English. Briefly, they could say that general students did not have any biases

towards English and they had a positive attitude towards English when they connected their knowledge from general English with most of the vocabulary and expressions in their field of study.

To sum up, this study was positive in the way the researchers could find many constructive things not only from their students' perceptions but also from their attitudes towards English. They also became aware of finding more strategies and tools to incorporate vocabulary in the syllabus according to their undergraduate programs. Therefore, students perceived that it would be interesting if they only have English for their specific subjects at least as an elective course .

Finally Arslan, and Akbarov (2012) make an effective approach on what we are looking for with this small scale study; consequently, we agree with their experience because we found many interesting ideas and perceptions from students in a similar context we carried out this study.

As teacher researchers, we also have our own definition for "perception" and it is something that we can see in terms as a whole. That is to say, something from an attitude, an action , to the minimal thing or object and depending on the believe or impression can cause that "thing or action" we decide if that is negative or positive or an aspect that could be useful or meaningful for our lives or purposes.

### **Language Learning at the International Languages Institute**

The International Languages Institute, at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica

Duitama Branch is a sub center of the Languages Institute from Tunja. This institution is based on the same parameters which are established in a handout in 2013. The institute has as part of its mission “academic excellence, the Foreign Language Learning according to the students’ needs and their interests, not only for the local population, but also for the national and the international one. This promotion is developed through quality standards and the openness to pedagogical and technological innovations.” (p.1). In addition, its vision is linked in the following way: “The **International Language Institute** will promote educational offerings, which help solve the current Colombian academic needs and will offer a variety of language courses for both the university students and the external community.” (p.1). Based on this Handout designed by the Instituto Internacional de Idiomas 2013 Tunja, we teachers at the language Institute have to accomplish and achieve these parameters as a fundamental part and role in the language learning process by taking into account the transversely with other subjects and purposes at the UPTC.

Consequently, “The main objective of the General English Area, at the **INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE INSTITUTE**, is to develop the students’ communicative competence, through the potentiation of the four basic linguistic skills: reading comprehension, writing, listening and speaking; furthermore, two components, grammar and vocabulary. The Institute fixes its programs inside of the Common European Framework requirements to the foreign language teaching and learning processes which contribute to the students’ integral

formation.” (p.1). Based on the parameters mentioned above, the language Institute is working hard in connecting students’ necessities and interests with their English learning processes and their requirements in other subjects and purposes regarding to students become competent in their professional field.

### **English for Specific Purposes**

Chen (2001), cited in his article based on Task based ESP, Howatt (1984). Where he stated that “Since the 1960s, English for specific purposes (ESP) has become a vital and innovative activity within the teaching of English as a foreign or second language movement.” (p.2). On the other hand, Hutchinson & Waters, (1987) mentioned by DR. Pi (1987) express that “ESP is regarded as an “approach” not as a “product” It is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning.” (p. 2). This point of view let EFL teachers know how important and relevant Students’ perceptions are in terms of learning a foreign language in order they can connect their knowledge with their interests and own purposes.

Markee (1988) proposes that “ESP is communication not only because it is learner-centered but also because teaching language as communication is an innovative activity”. Based on this point of view, some ESP instructors use problem-solving methods and techniques to promote the appropriate communicative development of individuals in particular contexts of implementation. Therefore, this point of view has a strong connection with the activities

developed by the students in telematics and circuits when analyzing the scientific articles and using the software, because they evidenced that prior knowledge was used to communicate and to give a solution in regards to their specific own problems.

According to Ypsilandis G (2007) English for Specific Purposes (ESP) was established as a separate branch in ELT mainly due to research studies such as those on register analysis (Barber 1962 reprinted in Swales 1988), discourse analysis, needs analysis (Munby 1978), and market needs. As a result, two separate trends became apparent in ESP: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational/ Vocational/ Professional Purposes (EOP/ EVP/EPP). The former refers mainly to the academic needs of students and of future professionals who would seek a career in the academic environment, while the latter caters for the actual needs of (future) professionals at work". (p.69). After analyzing this information, we finally found

that since the intention in this study is to know about Students' perceptions in their language learning and its uses for academic purposes we focused only in EAP which refers to academic needs of the students from telematics and circuits subjects.

### The setting and the participants

In this study, we had the support of 14 boys and girls; 9 out of 14 are students of Administración Industrial and the rest of the participants are studying Licenciatura en Tecnología at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, branch Duitama. Students, who are taking Circuits and telematics subjects, have to understand and analyze some sources such as : "Matlab" and scientific Articles taken form Data Bases (Science Direct) and put into practice students' prior English knowledge and the one gotten from it. The participants are students from different English levels from 1 to 4 and they are taking 4 hours of English instruction per week .

Table 1. English Class Schedule per week.

Schedule of Circuits and Telematics Subjects	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
12 - 2 pm			<i>Circuitos de Corriente alterna</i>		
6 - 9pm	<i>Circuitos de corriente alterna</i>				
6 - 10 pm				Telematicas Room 310	

## Findings

In order to obtain the results of this study, teachers researchers present students' responses in the following categories; students' perceptions, awareness about the need of learning English and English for general purposes as a support for specific purposes.

## Students' Perceptions

Taking into account students insights, it was possible to find that English is a requirement as future professionals become competitive in their own field. Likewise, the learners highlighted that English is a mean of understanding specific materials such as handouts, software, and foreign and scientific articles among others related to their own purposes. Therefore, they become aware of learning and improving their level of English in order to display and apply around the world everything they learned in their majors taking into account their experiences as future professionals and their English language learning.

According to students' voices, it is possible to analyze some of their insights

Question 5 : ¿El Inglés tiene alguna influencia en su Carrera profesional?

Student 1.( C) mentioned: *“si, Porque aparte que es importante sirve para traducir textos y tener buena pronunciación y conseguir un trabajo fuera del pais”*

Sutdent 2. (C)” *Siendo pedagogos es muy importante esta lengua no solo por los textos y programas sino para la enseñanza de otros.”*

Student 3. (T)”*por que como administradores estamos directamente involucrados con los negocios y este es el idioma considerado de “los negocios” “.*

Question 2 : *¿En que situaciones le ha sido útil el uso del Inglés?.*

Student 1 (C) *“En los programas informáticos ya que en ellos se encuentra en este idioma”*

Student 2. (C) *“Para hacer uso de las bases de datos de la universidad, o hasta para entender noticias o simplemente para leer un manual de instrucciones”*

Student 3. (T) *“En entrevista de trabajo, trabajos universitarios, visitas de extranjeros”*

Student 4. (T) *“Para comunicarme con personas de EEUU, en un viaje al extranjero”*

Student 5. (T) *“Para tomar información actual en muchos temas como en revistas científicas y tendencias de la actualidad.”*

## Awareness about the need of learning English

When students were surveyed about the importance of learning English, their responses were addressed on reflecting on the need of learning English as a meaningful tool when facing and challenge situations in terms of communication in the different fields by taking advantage of the different resources proposed or designed by Telematics and circuits teacher.

Consequently, they also referred about becoming conscious of the relevance of learning a foreign language in terms of globalization since students have to analyze deeply the up dated information related to the subjects; this is evidenced in the



following responses,

*Question 1: ¿Por qué considera usted importante aprender Inglés?*

*Student 1 : (C) Expressed: “Por la globalización. Colombia ya hace parte de varios tratados con extranjeros”*

*Student 2 : (T) Answered: “Dadas las circunstancias actuales de apertura de mercados y de internacionalización de las empresas”*

*Student 3 : ( T) stated: “Dada la globalización y el intercambio comercial la importancia de comunicación es fundamental más aun en el idioma Ingles que es el idioma internacional. “*

As it was stated before, in ESP is essential the process that students follow during their learning, and how this process help them to connect their interests , knowledge and purposes, in order not to use the language only as communication but also as a way to solve problems according to their own needs.

### ***English for general purposes as a support for Specific Purposes***

Regarding to the strong relationship that exists between English as a foreign language and students’ interests and purposes , the learners highlighted the deep understanding about the connection among EFL with other subjects such as Telematics, and circuits in regards to put into practice their prior English knowledge in the different activities, articles and materials provided by their teachers.

*Question 7 “Utiliza usted el Inglés en su clase de Circuitos de corriente alterna?”*

*Student 1 : (C) answered: “sí, manejando*

*simulaciones”.*

*Students 2: (C) argued: “si, en el programa de computador MatLab “.*

*Question 7 “Utiliza usted el Inglés en su clase de Telematicas?”*

*Student 1. (T) : pointed out “si, en los conceptos, Programas, lenguaje de programación “*

*Students 2. (T): referred “si, en el desarrollo de talleres y tutoriales”*

### **Conclusions**

This study allowed us to know how important the students’ perceptions are about their English learning process at the International Languages Institute at the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, making connections between students’ prior knowledge, the theory and practices in the Telematics and Circuits subjects.

Taking into account students’ perceptions and points of view they revealed that English was not only an isolated program but also the other subjects were involved in students’ needs and interests.

The use of different resources in EFL classes is a support when students have to develop other activities related to their majors doing deep analyses of scientific articles, making simulations in “Matlab”, presenting the papers through discussions and of course understanding handouts.

Students are aware of the need in learning or improving their level of English in order to face many situations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century .

Finally, It is important for teachers not only from the language Institute but also from not

language teachers to transform the outcome of the Institute in terms of not only teaching English for communicative purposes but also brings benefits if we contemplate students' needs and purposes in their majors in order they can face and challenge any situation in this competitive world.

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