E-Sports in the ESL Classroom:
Can they Help Students Overcome Language Transfer Issues?

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Abstract

The Government of the Canary Islands has recently passed a law to by which English is introduced in the curriculum of all the public university degrees in the autonomous region. This has evidenced even more the struggle Spanish students usually go through when expressing themselves in English. It is widely acknowledged that a learner's first language (L1) has a considerable influence on both the acquisition and use of the second language (L2) vocabulary. Yet there is not a very clear and definite relation between language transfer and the learner's age. However, adults seem to be more susceptible to transfer than children; whereas an adult learner will always have his/her first language structures internalized and then try to apply them in the L2, children are seldom conscious of using different languages, In this paper, we will focus on the use of e-Sports to help higher-education students overcome one of the most common struggles for Spanish learners of English: language transfer issues, particularly in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course.

Keywords: *e-Sports, English for Specific Purposes, language transfer, methodology.*

1. Introduction

In 2008, the Government of the Canary Islands passed a law by which English was to be incorporated compulsorily into the public university curricula [1]; different subjects, in all official degrees, were to be taught in English, with instrumental purposes or to teach students technical and scientific vocabulary to face the upcoming changes in the professional world. The universities could adopt a dual approach to cover, at least, 6 ECTS in English: a) including language-specific subjects in their study plans (as in the case of the Degree in Modern Languages at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria [ULPGC]); or) adopting a CLIL approach, in which non-linguistic subjects were taught in English and the students pre-require, at least, a B1-CEFRL-level B1 level of English (as in the Degree in Labour Relations and Human Resources) [2].

Besides, in the case of the ULPGC, all students needed to present a B1-level certificate to graduate, either obtained during the university studies or issued by Cambridge English Qualifications or any Official School of Languages), but from 2018 onwards it is no longer necessary except when English-focused subjects are compulsory part of the curriculum [3]. This decision has somehow affected the students' instrumental motivation and influenced on their learning process and overall results in ESP subjects, especially when they are not able to see its real utility beyond the classroom. Not needing a B1-level certificate in English to graduate implies a gradual isolation from the foreign language, which is not seen relevant in certain degrees and this collides with the intention of giving an integral formation to students and tools for long-life learning and insertion in the job market.

The incorporation of new English-based subjects into the university curricula, as well as the integration of CLIL into the classroom, has brought about a debate about the problems and drawbacks it may convey for teachers and students alike [4,5,6]. In our experience, the incorporation of specific subjects to teach technical and scientific vocabulary in public university degrees in the Canary Islands showed that most students at this formal education level often go through difficulties to acquire, develop and/or put into practice their communicative competence in L2. This is due, mainly, to the fact that they usually have very limited background language knowledge, so there is an urgent need to motivate them to help them overcome any obstacle when expressing themselves in English [7]. Intrinsic motivation, therefore, is a key aspect that must be taken as a priority in this context. As Ryan and Deci put it: "Intrinsic motivation has emerged as an important phenomena for educators […] Because intrinsic motivation results in high-quality learning and creativity, it is especially important to detail the factors and forces that engender versus undermine it" (2000: 55).

In this paper, we will focus on the use of e-Sports in a ESP course for Computer Engineering as a motivating asset to help tertiary-level students overcome one of the most common struggles for Spanish learners of English: language transfer issues.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study group

The study group selected included 32 students taking "Técnicas de comunicación para la Ingeniería II" ("Communication techniques for Engineers", TCI-II) during the academic year 2018/19. This is a compulsory subject in the Degree in Computer Engineering at the ULPGC. In particular, we focused on the students enrolled in TCI-II for the second time so we could compare the results they obtained the first time (year 2017/18) and their results the second time, when e-Sports were introduced in our TCI-II sessions as an innovative twist to achieve extra motivation.

Thus, our study group was further reduced to 10 students including 8 males and 2 females aged 19-25 years old. All were Spanish native speakers and they had a no higher A2-CEFRL-level of English. By the initial assessment at the beginning of the course to check their previous English language knowledge, we detected major problems with vocabulary affecting their productive and receptive skills, also showing demotivation and unwillingness to learn English.

2.2. Methods and instruments

The introduction of e-Sports in the classroom aims at involving students in the use of motivating authentic material that may be helpful to acquire and develop their communicative competence in English, as well as to effectively use a technical computer-engineering related vocabulary for tasks. A series of e-Sports can be used as a content resource from which the students create different types of written and oral texts related to the field of Computer Engineering, providing them with a specialized lexicon and samples of communicative discourse that may enhance their language skills [8].

TCI-II is taught weekly in 2-hour sessions divided into theory and practice. We adopted a communicative approach to introduce e-Sports in some sessions, thus focusing on how to use the language to communicate meaning and the deployment of natural strategies for language acquisition. This allowed us achieving certain flexibility of learning goals and tasks since students could move at their own pace.

To measure the effectiveness of e-Sports to help students overcome the language transfer issues detected initially, we analysed the students' performance and to what extent they achieved the learning objectives stated during the course. For the purpose, we compared the results obtained in the initial reading test with those of the final exam.

2.3. Data collection

At the beginning of the course, we performed initial assessment through a reading test on graphic cards hierarchy that helped to check our students' understanding of technical vocabulary. The results indicated that 6 out of 10 in the study group had failed to find the corresponding term in English due to language interference with L1 (Spanish). The main issue observed was negative lexical interference, that is, the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired by the learner [9,10].

As a way to remedy this lack of technical vocabulary, we designed a task including the use of e-Sports as source material. The objective was to help students overcome the language transfer issues detected by working on exercises that facilitated the acquisition of specific technical vocabulary. In the final exam, we checked whether the study group had improved or not in their overall language skills and technical vocabulary.

3. Results

3.1. Task performance

The task designed consisted, firstly, on asking students to get information about the latest graphic cards in current use, and then gather descriptions of colors, shapes and brightness of characters and scenarios in the game *Battlefield*, which belongs to the e-Sports universe nowadays. That information was only accessible if the students actually played in a given scenario and choosing a specific character, so they had to get actively involved in the game. For the presentation of their findings, the students were allowed to deploy any means that could be used in the classroom.

As a case in point, Figure 1 shows one of the graphs created by one of the students' from our study group:

Figure 1. Frames per second in Battlefield
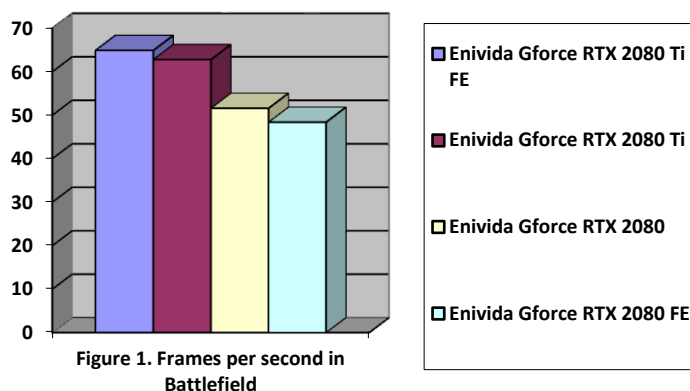
To perform in front of his classmates, this student had to find out the specific vocabulary needed to describe graphic cards beforehand. During data presentation, he showed domain of technical words and expressions like *expansion ports, frames, multiple monitor connectivity, on-board, built-in,* etc. Compared to his initial reading test results, there was no L1 interference because he had looked for and understood the concepts to surf on the Internet and locate relevant information form specialized webpages and publications on the latest graphic cards. This skill is illustrated by the word *frame*, for instance. In the initial reading test, this student had mistaken *frame* for *marco*, which is one of its translations into Spanish (in the sense of "frame of a painting"), seemingly not being familiar with its specialized meaning in Computer Science ("data transmission unit"). This phenomenon is known as a "substitution error", in which the learner uses a direct translation of a word or expression in L1 in a context which is not appropriate in English [11].

3.2. Outcomes

The evaluation criteria in this subject stipulate that the final exam carries a 60% of the total grade; the other 40% comes from oral presentations and class attendance. The final 2018/19 exam included three skill-based sections: a) Grammar/Use of English; b) Reading; and c) Writing. The Reading included a reading comprehension exercise about a research paper dealing with a topic that has been worked on during the course: "Voice Search for Development". The students were instructed to read the text carefully and perform two exercises: first, to identify the different parts of a scientific paper (by labelling the sections) and, second, to find synonyms and antonyms for some words of the text. The latter was included to specifically observe whether language transfer issues had been overcome or not by the end of the course.

Generally speaking, these 10 students showed greater understanding of the specialized text and could point out its different sections since they had read several articles while researching about graphic cards. It is interesting to note that 7 out of 10 students passed the second exercise without any problem, the other three just failing in one or two words. Besides, the actions of searching, reading and presenting orally information thematically related to the topics covered in our sessions also improved students' performance in the Grammar/Use of English and Writing sections. Yet we may say that they showed difficulties in adjusting style and register to write a successful application letter for a company asking for a programmer position.

4. Conclusion

The inclusion of e-Sports in an ESP course for Computer Engineering can turn out a tool to enhance students' motivation and involve them in a challenging teaching-learning process in higher-education contexts. In this sense, e-Sports can be exploited for controlled language acquisition, that is, having in mind which kind of information is going to be extracted from the gaming universe. However, given that our findings are based on a limited number of subjects, the results should be treated cautiously. We may state that tasks and exercises that draw on e-Sports may be motivating to our study group yet variables like age, interests or level of English are indeed relevant at this point and must be taken into account when saying that they may help to fix language transfer issues.

All in all, and as a consequence of using e-Sports as source material for their oral presentations, the students in our study group commonly self-corrected language transfer mistakes when speaking technically, probably in imitation of patterns and words they had come across in their search for information. Register and style mistakes in their written productions could be partly due to the influence of e-Sports whose forums, live chats, live-streaming sessions... are all informal, getting students used to expressing themselves in informal register and style also by imitation. However, it seems that by exposing Computer Engineering students to authentic English via e-Sports we may ultimately correct language transfer issues like negative errors, especially if greater exposure and contact is promoted.

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