

THREE YEARS TEACHING HISTORY OF COMMUNICATION TO FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to describe the practical experiences of three years of teaching the subject History of Communication, a course for first-year students of the degrees of Journalism, Advertising and Public Relations, and Audiovisual Communication in the School of Communication of the University of Navarra.

The subject fits neatly within a content and language integrated-learning approach at university level: while most of the students speak Spanish as their mother tongue, the lectures, readings, examinations, essays and PowerPoint oral presentations on this course are in English.

The paper focuses on academic year 2011-2012 for several reasons. First, because students of fifteen nationalities were registered on the course, enabling both students and professor enjoy a wider, more universal perspective. Second –and perhaps most importantly reason– because the aims and methodology of the subject, which varied over the course of the three years, were accomplished to a great extent: 1) to carry out an in-depth study of the subject, with three essay-type question exams; and 2) to teach or improve the students' academic essay-writing skills and the quality of oral presentations.

The structure of the present paper is as follows: presentation of the subject; aims; the academic essay; the PowerPoint oral presentation; syllabus; methodology; tutorials and conclusion. The paper comprises a modest contribution to Content Language Integrated Learning literature.

2. PRESENTATION OF THE SUBJECT

As a brief presentation of the subject, the full course title is an apt summary: *The History of Communication from Gutenberg to the Internet*¹. The schedule comprises two 45-minute lectures per week; the course is worth 3 (ECTS) credits; and the subject is compulsory in the degree programs listed above and in the module: Foundations of Communication.

3. AIMS

The aims of the subject were set out in the Student's Guide to the History of Communication, 2011-2012² as follows:

Knowledge: 1. To study the major stages and themes of the History of Communication from the invention of the printing press to the digital age.

Abilities and attitudes: 1. To acquire the habit of reading and studying about the History of Communication; 2. To write and present oral presentations of essays with the following criteria: writing an essay plan, presenting adequate knowledge using relevant and good understanding of the implications of the question.

The same section included: "Learning outcomes: 1. To have a greater understanding of the major themes in the History of Communication; 2. To write and make oral presentations of essays on historical topics".

An important aim was to have the students write essays and make oral presentations. The essays were neither long nor mandatory. However, the three exams students were required to have an essay based structure.

In order to achieve this aim, we received the generous help of the Dean of Studies in the Institute of Modern Languages at the University of Navarra, Cólín Ó hAodha.

¹ The course description was taken from the book by Briggs and Burke (2005), the third edition of which was published in 2009. The book was used as a handbook, for study by students in academic year 2009-2010.

² It contains a presentation of the subject, its aims, methodology, syllabus, grading system, bibliography and references, the class schedule and the tutorial time: available for consultation at <www.unav.es/espacio/communicationhistory/fcom>.

Over the three-year period, he taught several classes on essay writing skills, and on how to make an oral PowerPoint presentation.

Since these two tasks were the core of the language aspect of CLIL³, the main points of these classes, which were practical and interactive, are summarized below.

4. THE ACADEMIC ESSAY

One of the classes dealt with the academic essay⁴. The first point was to clarify what an academic essay was. The second point was to help students distinguish among three basic types of discursive essays: “For and against” essays, “Solution-oriented” essays, and “Opinion” essays (Ó hAodha 2009a: 1-2).

Third, Ó hAodha dedicated a certain amount of time to explain the importance of language in the essay:

The essay should have a clear structure and line of argument. Appropriate linking terms may make the line of argument in the composition coherent: linking different ideas and examples, and making links between paragraphs. (Ó hAodha 2009a: 2)

He ended this point by asking students to add linking words to the categories given in a paper he distributed. The categories were: order, comparison, contrast, addition, consequence and summary and conclusion. Fourth, he asked the students to read a one-page essay on television “underlining the linking terms used” (Ó hAodha 2009a: 2-4).

In fifth place, Ó hAodha addressed a very important issue which is probably not taught in Spanish schools, that is, the importance of writing an outline before writing an essay. I quote again: “Making a plan in advance of writing enables the writer to present a clear structure of paragraphs and sections” (Ó hAodha 2009a: 5).

³ One of the best recent books on CLIL is by Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010). All eight chapters include a list of references and as word index is given at the end of the book.

⁴ Although there is a lot of information about how to write essays, there is a very good guide for first year students on how to write a history essay on Monash University website. It contains what has to be known and two first-year student essays with the comments of the lecturer and an oral interview with one of the students. It is available at History Essay: <www.monash.edu.au/lis/llonline/writing/arts/history/3.1.4.xml>.

Finally, he underlined this point by asking the students to reread the essay on television, asking them to make an outline in their own words, in the paper given to them. The introduction of the paper was printed with two possible titles: “Television is a wonderful invention” or “Television causes many serious problems” (Ó hAodha 2009a: 5).

The paper also included the structure of the outline: points in favour with explanation and examples, points against with explanations and examples, and conclusion(s) (Ó hAodha 2009a: 5).

In his view, the plan or outline before one starts writing an essay is crucial. It helps to clarify ideas in the mind to organize them, and to think about what one is going to write.

The last point of this session about the academic essay related to the evaluation criteria for the essay. The students were asked to suggest different criteria, and these were then written on the blackboard. Afterwards the students suggested the normal evaluation criteria for an essay (Ó hAodha 2009a: 7). Among other criteria: the use of formal style, the presence of a clear structure and line of argument, with an introduction, conclusion, appropriate linking terms, good grammar and syntax, etc.

5. THE POWERPOINT ORAL PRESENTATION

Having finished dealing with the academic essay, the PowerPoint presentation⁵ was then addressed. Again, this exercise was very practical and interactive.

In the first place, the Dean of Studies in the Institute of Modern Languages dealt with the parts of an oral presentation. He asked the students to fill in, in their own words, the printed document they were given. He asked them to outline the structure, that is, the list of parts of an oral presentation, the parts of an introduction dealing with structure and content, strategies to attract the attention of the audience, and the conclusion (Ó hAodha 2009b: 1).

In second place, he touched briefly on the issue of designing and using visuals in an oral presentation with the following important piece of advice:

⁵ There is another good guide to oral presentations on Monash University website: Speaking. Oral Presentation <www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/speaking/presentations/index.xml>.

‘A picture is worth a thousand words’. Technological development has made the presentation of visual material easy. The question now is how to use such visuals effectively –to support and emphasize what you are saying, rather than distract from it. (Ó hAodha 2009b: 2)

Having seen the PowerPoint presentation in a general way, but still within the context of this exercise, he taught in detail **Language focus: Introductions**, in PowerPoint presentations. He gave from two to ten ways or examples of introducing the following: greeting and thanking; name and position; topic; objective; outline; questions (cf. Ó hAodha 2009b: 1-2).

He also explained **Language focus: Conclusions**. He provided several modes or examples for: Signalling the end; summarizing; concluding; recommending; closing and inviting questions (cf. Ó hAodha 2009b: 2-3).

Afterwards, Ó hAodha concentrated on **Language focus: Linking the parts**. He gave several ways or examples for: ordering; providing reasons; highlighting; digressing and generalizing (cf. Ó hAodha 2009b: 4).

He concluded this section with **Language focus: Dealing with questions**. He provided several ways of doing so: open questions, closed questions, thanking the questioner, clarifying the question and checking that the questioner is satisfied (cf. Ó hAodha 2009b: 5).

The last section on the PowerPoint presentation dealt with the assessment of the presentations. He gave the students an evaluation form with the following criteria: evaluate the structure of the presentations –sections, connections, examples–; describe the use of language in the presentation –effective vocabulary, linkers, correct grammar–; comment on the PowerPoint slides –number, design, relevance, use–; how well the speakers presented –confidence, interest, contact with the audience–; and overall impression –Give a score out of 10– (Ó hAodha 2009b:1-2).

A comment regarding these ideas is that they seem very clear and easy to put into practice. However, for first-year students who have never written an essay or given an oral presentation, they need a lot of time and considerable effort to internalize them. This would not be the case if students were trained in both skills, or at least in essay-writing, from an earlier age.

As a side note, it should be noted that the scores for this year's examinations were as follows: the linguistic dimension of writing a good introduction, a good conclusion, and the use of appropriate linking terms within and between paragraphs counted for fifty per cent; the remaining fifty per cent of the final mark was awarded for content.

What experiences could be drawn from the two exercises over the three years?

In the first place, as significant number of students found it difficult to internalize the assessment criteria, which included fully understanding the implications of the question, using only relevant knowledge, and using the skills⁶ required in response to the question. In this academic year (2011-2012), the skill of writing an outline or essay plan was particularly stressed.

The requirement of a plan or outline of the essay was based on the realisation that few of the students were at all used to doing so. As a way of helping them to fully understand the importance of the plan, it was mandatory in the first examination to hand in, both the plan and the essay.

Some students had difficulties in the way they were accustomed to writing the introduction and the conclusion. One of the reasons could be the fact that there were students from different countries with very different backgrounds, and therefore fifteen "different" ways of understanding what is an introduction.

Most students were good at linking paragraphs properly. This technique had been taught by the Dean of Studies of the Institute of Modern Languages at the beginning of the semester and it was properly grasped.

Fourth, quite a few students did not place much importance on small things: instead of writing the essay title properly, they often oversimplified it; spelling mistakes; the length of paragraphs –one sentence paragraphs, for instance, particularly at the beginning of the semester–; and poor alignment of text, etc.

In fifth place, very few students knew how to properly quote within the text. The same problem arose in relation to the bibliography and sources cited.

⁶ It is essential to CLIL content the teaching of the cognitive process aspect (with low-order and high-order skills), the knowledge aspect, as well as the adequate vocabulary as stated by Coyle, Hood, Marsh (2010: 29-32). These authors include a table of Bloom's Taxonomy, revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001).

6. SYLLABUS

The syllabus set out in the 2011-2012 Student Guide to the History of Communication was as follows:

1. The birth of the newspaper.
2. The press in the *Ancien Regime* (1500-1770).
3. The birth of ideological journalism during the revolutionary period (1770-1815).
4. The first industrialization of the press during the liberal period (1815-1870).
5. Information during the democratic era (1870-1914).
6. The establishment of media convergence I (1914-1945): the birth of radio and TV broadcasting.
7. The golden age of advertising (1950-1970).
8. The establishment of media convergence II (1945-present).

Although there are perhaps still too much materials to be covered, for a subject worth 3 ECTS and comprising twenty six lectures, the students were told from the very beginning that there would be examinations on all eight topics, regardless of whether they had been taught or not. The schedule of the subjects contained the dates and topics of the three examinations to be taken.

7. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for academic year 2011-2012 was as follows:

7.1. Class work

a) Lectures: 26 class hours to discuss the most significant stages and themes in the History of Communication, including oral and written participations.

b) Two short essay-question examinations on topics 1 to 3 and 2 chapters of a book⁷; and topics 4 to 6 and two chapters from a book. Duration: one hour and a half.

⁷ In fact, the two chapters of a book were substituted by Johnson (1989).

c) Final examinations: essay question about topics 7 to 8 and two chapters of a book⁸. Duration: one hour and a half.

7.2. Outside Class work

a) Personal study: 45 hours of study, applying all the competencies listed in the aims of the course.

b) Tutorial: 1 hour between September and November –Student Guide to the History of Communication 2011-2012.

In relation to the formal lectures⁹, in the second half of the second academic year, and due to suggestions and criticism concerning the PowerPoint presentations, the course notes (the sessions on writing were initially available for printing by students) and the lectures (as perceived lack of variety) a set of changes was decided on.

The main change was that the better students would prepare a 10-minute oral presentation and in each class there would be two or three oral presentations. The presentations dealt with the examination essay questions at the end of each topic. At the end of each presentation, the professor would make some comments if these were deemed to be necessary. The presentations could add a +1 or +2 to the final mark. The students really enjoyed the experience.

Therefore, in light of this experience, a decision was taken to repeat the approach. On the first day of the semester, the students were given a document called “Exam essay questions 2011-2012”. It contained the calendar of classes, the topics, and twenty seven exam questions. The first eight or so essay questions were assigned to the students by the professor while the remaining questions were chosen by other members of the class.

One learning experience in this regard is that the better students must be clearly identified because not all of them are able to write an essay and make a proper oral presentation. The students chosen for class oral presentations have to have talent, experience in writing essay questions according to the Anglo-American academic essay

⁸ The two chapters were: “Perspectives on Mass Communication History” and “The Study of History: Interpretation or Truth?” in Sloan (1991).

⁹ At the time of preparing lectures it may be very useful to read *Teaching History Through English – A CLIL Approach* (cf. University of Cambridge 2011). Particularly “Considerations when planning a CLIL History lesson” and “Applying CLIL to a history lesson”. Although it is addressed to school teachers many ideas can be useful for university CLIL history classes.

technique, as well as in making oral presentations or PowerPoint oral presentations. Besides, one had to make sure that these students were fluent in English. Those students who did not fulfil these requirements could make the oral presentations in a seminar room or the professor's office with the same assessment criteria as the presentations carried out in class. With the latter, the professor ensured that the oral presentation was not spoiled by nerves, which tend not to affect a presentation made in front of the professor as much as they do in front of fellow students.

This procedure demanded some work from the professor. The essay and outline or plan was read and comments were sent by e-mail to the author. The author then re-sent the corrected essay. Once the oral presentation had been done in class, the author had to send a final version, taking into account comments made in class, again by e-mail. In some cases, up to three versions of the essay were (re)done before the text reached a +1 standard.

The main problem for the Spanish or non-Spanish students has been the difficulty in internalizing the criteria for writing essays, making oral presentations and the comments made by the professor.

Midway through term, it became clear that class on the delivery of PowerPoint oral presentations would be needed. Although the students had the written instructions given to them in a document, these had not been internalized. The Dean of Studies of the Institute of Modern Languages kindly agreed to give a class on PowerPoint oral presentations. From that moment onwards, the students showed a marked improvement in performance, which was accompanied by a better selection of candidates.

8. TUTORIALS

Experience shows that with first-year students in the first semester it is not easy to have an individual conversation or two with all of them. In the case of this subject, the tutorials were not formal classes with individual students or with small groups of students. The tutorials were informal conversations about the subject in general, and essay writing in particular, going through the students' answers in the three exams they had done, the criteria of assessment, etc.

In academic year 2011-2012, there were few tutorials at the beginning. However, around mid-term the number of tutorials increased significantly. The reasons may be that the students felt a need for such tutorials; they wanted to check the three marked examinations with the professor.

Moreover, the fact that the students who did not make oral presentations in class, were able to do so in a seminar room or in the professor's office –individually or in pairs– likewise facilitated a tutorial conversation about their work. In this way, quite a few students were helped to understand the subject better and to write exam essay questions, particularly as regards formal technique.

9. CONCLUSION

A number of conclusions may be drawn from the three years of experience teaching History of Communication to mostly Spanish students: (I) ensure that students study and read through at least three examination essay questions; (II) have the lecture notes typed and edited from the beginning of the course; (III) encourage students to always make a plan before writing an academic essay assignment or an examination essay question; (IV) inform students that they will be examined on the whole syllabus, giving the dates and subject topics from the very first day; (V) formal lectures can be replaced with oral presentations made by students, taking into account the professor's comments; (VI) brief introductions and summaries of the topics given by the professor may also be useful; (VII) the marking system would seem to be sufficiently demanding and, therefore, does not appear to require any change; (VIII) the bibliography to be read could be chapters from books or papers, with the requirement that students may also be examined on their content; (IX) when examinations are to be held and the materials to be studied should be clear from the class schedule; and finally, (X) tutorials may be especially valuable when students come to see their marked scripts or when they make an oral presentation before the professor.

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to convey and summarize the experiences of three years of teaching the History of Communication. The subject fits neatly within as content and language integrated learning approach at university level while most of the students speak Spanish as their mother tongue, the lectures, readings essays and

Power Point oral presentations are in English. It seems important that students at secondary schools be taught how to write essays and make oral presentations. Besides, critical thinking skills should also be fostered. CLIL would appear to be less developed at university level in Spain than in the school sector. Yet the number of degree subjects taught in English at Spanish universities is growing. The knowledge and experience of university students would be greatly enriched by increased exposure to the CLIL approach, through essays, oral presentations, as well as critical thinking and creative skills.

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