

SHARING TEACHING EXPERIENCES

**TELLC Workshop:
Teaching English Language,
Literature and Culture, Volume 1**

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**Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística UAB,
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SARA MARTÍN ALEGRE, “Preface: Talk-Starved about Teaching”

The three papers in the hands of the reader were written for the first *TELLC* (*Teaching English Language, Literature and Culture*) workshop, celebrated on 28 November 2014. I was myself the organizer. My impression is that the pedagogical training which universities—like my own, the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona—offer to teachers is often too generic for the specific needs of our students in the BA ‘English Studies.’ Hence, I invited my colleagues from the ‘Department de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística’ at UAB to get together in order to share our experiences of actual teaching, believing that we all feel ‘talk-starved’ about what we do in the classroom with our students. This proved to be correct and we spent a very lively morning discussing actual practice and diverse possibilities for its improvement. I can safely say that everyone who attended was satisfied; all commented on how necessary the workshop was.

Six papers were presented on that day, welcomed as part of what I hope to be a promising beginning for a long series of *TELLC* workshops. The papers not gathered here for a variety of reasons are Felicity Hand, Salvador Faura & Nick Edwards’s “Not So Glorious Revolutions: Teaching History and Culture to First Year Students,” Elisabet Pladevall & Hortènsia Curell’s “Learning to Learn: A Guided Reading of Academic Texts and Students’ Perceptions of their Learning Experience,” and Sònia Oliver’s “Introducing EAP: From Theory to Practice.” Hopefully, the contributions by David Owen, “Accuracy, Relevance and Voice: Evaluating First-Year Students’ Work in Literary Studies;” Susagna Tubau & Malou Van Wijk, “Two Different Kinds of Continuous Assessment and Students’ Success in ‘History of English I’,” and my own “Teaching How to Write Academic Papers: Pushing the Limits in the Second Year” will whet the appetite of other colleagues for future editions of the *TELLC* workshop. Plans

for 2015 include opening it up to the other Catalan universities and continue this very modest first publication with thicker volumes.

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DAVID OWEN, “Accuracy, Relevance and Voice: Evaluating First-Year Students’ Work in L2 English Literary Studies”

ABSTRACT:

Assessment requirements for Literature students are demanding; for first-year L2 English students, they are particularly so.

Such students must demonstrate acquisition and understanding of approaches to texts far exceeding appreciation of plot. Additionally, their work should be formally adequate, pertinent to task and text and, if possible, indicative of personal engagement with the subject (but eluding overt subjectivity). In short, we seek accuracy, relevance and voice.

This raises difficult issues of evaluation: should these qualities be expected and examined equally? For a Literature exam (for example), should language level be as strictly tested as in language tests? What is meant by ‘relevant’ in discussing texts? Is answering the question enough, or should we also expect students to make further connections? Can we reasonably expect students, at this level, to demonstrate ‘voice’ in English whilst balancing this against the need to avoid overly visceral responses to Literature, eschewed in academic discourse?

Keywords: L2, Literature, assessment, first-year study, teacher expectations

Assessment requirements placed on students taking courses in Literature are multiple and demanding at all levels. However, for first-year students making the transition from earlier phases of education and moving into the relatively specialist ambits of undergraduate study, these requirements can appear—and, indeed, are—particularly arduous. This is true, I think, for all students of Literature, but for obvious reasons it is even more so for those reading the Literature of a second language (L2), the subject of this current discussion, for whom the intricacies of literary discourse (whether we are speaking of literary texts themselves or of the critical works written about such works) have a further, and very considerable, layer of complication.

Generalising, in the formal study of Literature, we ask our students to demonstrate the acquisition and understanding of a range of notions and approaches to texts that far exceed the appreciation of basic plot. But, in doing so, we also expect that the discussion of the work studied—in examinations, essays or other tests (that is, usually presented in written format)—should be of a level of language that is formally

adequate, orthographically, grammatically and lexically, for such purposes; additionally, such discussion should be pertinent both to task and to text, and, if possible, it should indicate some degree of calibrated personal engagement with the subject that, at the same time, eludes overt subjectivity. In short, we look for accuracy, relevance and voice.

But this raises several difficult issues of evaluation. Should these three qualities be expected and examined equally from the outset of a student's study of Literature? In the context of, say, a Literature exam, should considerations of language be as strictly observed as for an instrumental language test? What exactly do we mean by 'relevant' in discussing texts? Is answering the question enough? Or should we also expect an ability to make pertinent connections at a broader level than the specifics of a given question? And how can we reasonably assess the highly subjective quality of 'voice' (always assuming that it attempts to go beyond a basic expression of like or dislike), whilst balancing this against the need to avoid excessively visceral responses to Literature, generally eschewed in academic discourse?

The assumptions underlying the expectations and requirements outlined above are not infrequently accompanied by teachers' frustration at what is perceived as a general inability by many (most?!) first-year students to fulfil such expectations, an inability that is sometimes attributed to students' failure to read set primary texts, or to read critical texts, or to participate in class, or to accept their own responsibility within a teaching-learning model that—in opposition to what students may have experienced in secondary education—emphasises individual critical thought over rote learning and over the repetition of 'expected' answers.

This essay will review these assumptions and will then forward a somewhat alternative approach to the assessment of first-year Literature students' written work. But I would like to make clear, from the beginning of this discussion, that this is much more of a working paper than a definitive argument; my observations and comments on teachers' views (such as those expressed in the preceding paragraph) have not been formally obtained and are therefore essentially anecdotal in character. Nor do I make my arguments within the conventional academic framework of review, assessment and theory; I provide no critical citation and very little bibliography, all of it

rather dated. And, apart from the most basic suggestions, I make no attempt to point to any formal means of taking this argument forward to a further developmental phase. I am simply using this opportunity as a sort of 'think-tank' platform to debate certain issues that, to date, have perhaps not been given much centrality in the teaching of Literature within my own department. My intention is therefore primarily to generate discussion, entirely accepting that the suggestions made here are very far from being fully thought-through proposals; but, despite the obvious limitations to any under-developed idea, through this discussion I would nevertheless like to point to possible means by which students might be enabled to gradually meet the demands placed on them in a more effective and successful manner than would currently seem to be the case.

Let me begin by reviewing the current broad "linguistic" approach that—I believe—is more or less characteristic of most classes in L2 English Literature in our own context. Of course, I do not suggest that this approach is applied uniformly by all teachers in all classes, but, rather, that it essentially reflects general classroom practice.

For the most part, classes are given entirely in English; all reading material (primary and secondary texts, that is, literary and critical works, respectively) are in English; all teacher-student interaction (at least that which concerns class content) is carried out in English. And, crucially for this discussion, all written work—tests, essays, exams—is submitted in English.¹

This is, undoubtedly, an entirely reasonable means of proceeding. After all, our students are taking a BA in 'English Studies;' it makes very good sense to ensure that all academic work within its component subjects represents opportunities for language acquisition and practice. It is also perfectly sensible to insist on English-only materials, such as critical writings, as excellent models not only of the ways in which literary analysis works but also of the rhetoric expected within this field.

¹ Whilst many universities in Catalonia and Spain teach English Literature—within English Studies—through the medium of English, this is not universally the case, or is not so for all courses within the degree. Some universities (for instance, Valencia) opt to give at least an initial introduction to English Literature through students' own language, and this is an approach that is also found in other countries (for instance, Italy).

It is also true that, by requiring students to ‘normalise’ an extensive use of English, from the very beginning of their studies, we help them to move forward in the difficult transition from secondary education to university study. Postponing this use of the language to a later stage, it could well be argued, would be detrimental to students' own language development and would hinder their fuller ability to engage with the both the curriculum and the bibliography of their studies. Clearly, then, the basic justification for this approach—if such a justification were ever needed—is perfectly solid.

And yet, how frequent it is when discussing our students, or their ability to adapt to first-year study in Literature, and the specific difficulties that they appear to have, that we find ourselves concerned (not to say frustrated) at their apparent incapacity—in spite of the input and textual models indicated above—to produce work of an acceptable standard, especially written work that most fully exemplifies and examines their progress within the subject. This refers not only to level of language, a significant and perennial concern, but also to the simplicity of analysis that students' discussion of Literature too often appears unable to break away from. How is it that our students (or at least a good many of them), having received fairly intensive exposure to oral and written models of literary discourse, appear to be incapable of analysing and discussing texts in anything other than the most rudimentary manner? What is going wrong here? What conclusions can we draw?

At this stage of events, it is typical (I think) to forward certain *theories*: one is the well established idea that students are, by nature, a fairly lazy tribe and just don't do the work expected of them; another is the notion that most young students in the 21st C form part of a post-textual culture, or at least one in which the centrality of the written word has been replaced by its on-screen variation, frequently truncated or simplified. In its wake, this brings associated ideas of the inability to concentrate sufficiently on static text and the comparatively demotivating nature of non-interactive content. And then there is the argument that much educational content at secondary level—perhaps because of the great number of subjects that students are required to take at that stage—eschews students' personal reflection and insists, instead, on spoon-feeding a series of key concepts and responses directed primarily towards passing pre-

university exams. When students are then placed in a context that specifically requires them to reflect and respond personally to the material they have been taught—as is the case with university study—they consequently find it particularly difficult to do so.

Each one of these ‘theories’ is, to a certain degree, rather debatable (and also of far greater complexity than this sketch can possibly reflect), though it is not my concern here to engage any further with them. But they are useful to my discussion in the sense that they locate the problems faced in the L2 Literature class, both by students and by teachers, in an elsewhere. And in light of this, the question that I would now like to focus on is the following: what if the cause of this problem were not external to our context? In other words, what if our own perfectly justifiable, perfectly reasonable approach to teaching L2 Literature were actually producing obstacles to students' more effective adaptation and progress in the subject?

In the ambit of Education Studies, we have long been used to describing the act of learning through a variety of metaphors: the empty slate; the vessel to be filled, and so on. To these perhaps we might also add the notion of osmosis, primarily a biological process of solvent absorption that, by extension, has come to indicate the gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas or knowledge. This latter metaphor, it seems to me, perfectly captures our underlying assumptions about students' *uptake* of the language and procedures of literary analysis. For, although we expose students, in a direct and indeed directed manner, to the necessary textual models that set out both the rhetorical ways in which Literature can be discussed and the methodological ways in which texts are dissected, our belief is that this should eventually lead—more or less unequivocally—to the osmotic absorption of these models, all of which should then be evident in students' own written work.

But, instead of work that indicates the beginnings of a productive engagement with model texts, our students' written assignments at this early stage in their university careers is often characterised—as I have already suggested—by an emphatically simplistic use of language, as if the subject of their discussion leads them to what I would call a defensive mode of writing, intentionally avoiding the relative rhetorical complexity that we require, and retaining instead those more basic features of the language that they can at least be sure of. I would also say, at this point, that

this defensiveness—if that is what this is—actually reveals a very intelligent linguistic response to a context that is overly challenging of most students' abilities (in their first year of university study), a strategy through which students revert to default language production on the basis of grammatical/rhetorical forms that are unquestionably correct, if far from stylistically/academically suitable. I would further posit that this corresponds, first, to students' realisation of the considerable discrepancy between their own current level of language production and the apparent requirements of their course; and, second, to their apprehension of evaluation, bearing in mind that the written work produced at this level is graded specifically in terms of students' ability to articulate fairly complex responses to the Literature studied in Year One.

In our approaches to modelling students' understanding of acceptable critical approaches to the discussion of Literature, we have—perhaps inadvertently—been shoring up the notion of *scaffolding*, a concept that has become central to learning strategies in cognitive psychology. As the term suggests, scaffolding provides a temporary framework of provisional support from which it is possible to attain specific objectives, much as a scaffold provides a temporary platform from which to carry out particular tasks in construction or restoration. Once those objectives have been attained, the scaffold is then dismantled.

Many of us will be familiar with Stephen Krashen's idea of the input hypothesis from Applied Linguistics, which proposes that learners comprehend language input that is marginally more advanced than their current level. Krashen termed this level of input 'i+1,' in which 'i' designates language input and '+1' is the next stage of language acquisition. To this, we should also add the ideas from another American researcher into linguistics and cognitive psychology, Jerome Bruner (who in fact coined the term 'scaffolding' in such contexts). Bruner, opposing Chomsky's nativist accounts of language acquisition, posited instead a social interactionist account, suggesting that learners make a concerted use of available contextual resources as a staged strategy in *acquistional* gain (this was further divided into what Bruner called 'soft' and 'hard/embedded' scaffolding, depending on whether students were gently pointed in the direction of making certain connections or whether such connections were made explicitly evident to them). At all events, both Krashen and Bruner are, in turn,

indebted to the foundational ideas of a soviet educational psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, who argued that the acquisition of new knowledge is dependent upon both previous learning and current instruction. This idea he termed, rather memorably, the zone of proximal development.

Extrapolating these ideas to our own context, it seems plausible to suggest that our students must also benefit from the conscientious application of scaffolding strategies—by themselves and by their teachers—to their own learning processes. But this begs the question, in the case of L2 literary studies, exactly what element constitutes the scaffold? Is it—as our implicit assumptions would appear to support—the English-only textual models facilitated to our students as a means of approximating the more effective rhetorical analysis of Literature? Well, perhaps; but then again, given the results, perhaps not. I believe that there is an alternative. I propose that the cognitive-linguistic-rhetorical scaffolding genuinely required by our students at this point in their own academic development is the combination of the textual models that we already provide and the possibility of producing written critical responses to the study texts—based on these critical models—in the students' own language, thus liberating them from language evaluation in English for such tasks. In my view, this would bring about two highly constructive results. First, it would allow students to replicate the broad rhetorical features of critical response in their own languages and therefore generally within their own ability to stylistically modulate and experiment with possible critical engagements with a given text. Second, it would immediately free students from the over-riding pressure of the language-based evaluation that, to my mind, activates a primarily defensive form of writing. Taken together, this approach would give students a 'comfort zone' from which to discuss Literature in relatively advanced, sophisticated ways that would in turn function as a bridge towards eventually activating, in English, the required language and the necessary analytical approaches in the subsequent years of their degree study. I posit that this would lead to more effective later critical study of literary texts and more immediate student satisfaction with literary study, facilitating the transition from secondary to university education far more effectively, at least in the ambit of this particular discipline. This proposal could usefully be evaluated by applying it to a single class group in opposition

to a test group from another class of first-year cohorts, and could then be tested over a longer time frame by carrying follow-up studies throughout the degree.

Most especially, I am not suggesting that any other aspect of our current general approach to teaching Literature be modified: classes should, of course, continue to be given in English; all literary texts should be English-only; most or all critical texts should also be only in English. The single element that would be modified—and only during the first year of study—would be students' ability to produce all written responses to their study texts (including in examinations) either in Catalan or Spanish, or in any other language that the teacher feels confident to assess.

By facilitating this possibility, and by encouraging teachers' specific indication of those methodological and rhetorical features that characterise model academic writing, I believe that we would then essentially replicate Vygotskys' optimal learning conditions of previous learning (in the first language) and current instruction (explicit highlighting of the L2 models), and, in principle, thereby empower our students' more effective engagement with the subject.

By 'engagement,' I specifically refer to students' ability to comfortably and constructively fulfil the demands of accuracy, relevance and, perhaps most especially, voice. That is, by removing the obstacle of linguistically assessed written work in L2, we would allow students valuable time to develop a fuller, more attuned and more sophisticated form of response, first by consolidating an explicit awareness of rhetorical and methodological requirements, then by the opportunity to replicate these from the security of their first language as the bridge that subsequently connects this to their own L2 written production in the second year of study.

Finally, as I have already suggested, I propose that this be assessed through a single test group, whose results should be compared—both in year one and year two—with other groups from the same student intake that are not following this initiative. If no substantial gains are made, very little will have been lost; but, in contrast, if we detect noticeable differences between the written work produced in year two by the test group and that produced by their non-test peers, then we will be in a far stronger position—as teachers—to facilitate our students' development in Literary Studies.

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SARA MARTÍN ALEGRE, “Teaching How to Write Academic Papers: Pushing the Limits in the Second Year”

ABSTRACT:

Assessment in the second-year subject *Literatura Victoriana* includes the writing of a brief academic paper on one of the two novels we teach: Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Students are asked to produce a 1,000-word argumentative essay based on the 350-word model they learn in the first year (in 'Literatura Anglesa del s. XX'). The novelty for them is the compulsory inclusion of quotations from at least three valid academic secondary sources (monographs, chapters in collective books, articles in journals).

We monitor students' progress by asking for a proposal (title, 100-word abstract, bibliography, passages from the primary and the secondary sources) mid-semester, followed by a tutorial if necessary. Students already take a library course in the first year designed to teach them the basic methodology required to find bibliography. We have, besides, written over the years since the new 'grau' or BA degree started a series of documents to help them.

Despite all this preparation, however, the paper consumes much teachers' and students' energy, basically because techniques learned in the first year need to be re-learned in the second year. We need to work, then, on giving continuity to a learning process that now appears to be split, particularly thinking of the TFG (the BA dissertation).

Keywords: L2, Literature, assessment, second-year study, academic paper

According to the documentation the Department and I myself keep, the academic paper has been a central feature in all the versions of the second-year subject on 19th century Literature, which I have been teaching since the academic year 1993-4. I distinctly recall marking the first papers produced by second-year students in *Pràctiques de Literatura Moderna i Contemporània II*, a 5-credit semestral that complemented its theory-based twin, and which was introduced in the 1992 four-year *Llicenciatura* syllabus. In the plan or syllabus which I myself followed as a student, the 1977 *Llicenciatura*, assessment was mostly based on exams in the first cycle (that is to say, the first 3 years). The papers I wrote, and that I still keep, indicate, however, that the paper was a common requirement in second-cycle electives, both for Literature and Language: I produced 18 in two years.

When the old 5-year *Llicenciatura* became, as I say, a 4-year degree in 1992, we transformed the annual subject *Literatura Anglesa I*, which covered from Romanticism to Modernism, into two semestral subjects. The one focused on the Victorian period was called *Literatura Anglesa Moderna i Contemporània II* (21771) and was started in 1993-94 by Prof. Aránzazu Usandizaga and myself. Whereas the method of assessment for the theoretical part was based on class participation and exams, in the practice-based twin course, which I developed together with Prof. Núria Augé, the academic paper became the main focus. The assessment information included in the course description explains that the final grade was based on a paper (65%), the group presentation of an academic article (25%), and class discussion (10%). The course, as I recall it, was very intense and high level, with students doing mostly quite well.

We were still teaching these *Pràctiques* in 2002-3, when the annual subject *Gèneres Literaris Anglesos del Segle XIX* (28456) was developed for the new 2002 four-year syllabi, starting in 2003-4. We lost then the practice-based complementary course but I myself, together with Prof. Joan Curbet, re-introduced the paper in *Gèneres* the following academic year, 2004-5. According to the course description, this was worth 60% of the final grade. I didn't teach the subject between 2006 and 2008, but returned to it in 2010-11, when I had to write the syllabus or *Guia Docent* for *Literatura Victoriana* (100246), part of the new ECTS-based four-year *Grau* or BA degree.

I'll focus now on the current version, which I have coordinated with the collaboration of the other three teachers involved in the subject: Prof. Laura Gimeno, Prof. Esther Pujolràs and Prof. David Owen. I believe I can safely say that the four of us agree that teaching students to write an academic paper at this stage, the second year, is absolutely necessary. At the same time, we four dread the process of tutoring and marking the papers, which has become much more time-consuming than it was in the recent past. This is due to the fact that, as we know very well, after the implementation in 1990 of L.O.G.S.E., students have been accessing university with a very deficient secondary education, having never written a paper (with the exception of the final research project, which is not quite this type of text but, rather, a report). The subsequent implementation in 2002 of L.O.E. has worsened matters. The old *Curso*

de Orientación Universitaria or C.O.U. which my generation took was far more demanding as regards the particular matter of the academic paper.

As things are now, then, we take it for granted that new first-year students have never produced an argumentative essay, which is the basis of the Anglo-American style academic paper we teach. This is why I myself assumed a great deal of the task of producing guidelines.

It is really very difficult to trace the genealogy of these documents but, apparently, the first version dates back to 2003-4, when I first taught the annual course *Literatura Anglesa: Segle XX* for the new 2002 syllabi, and I produced a “Guia de Treball pels Exercicis Pràctics (2003-4).” This is actually a descendant of practice started in 1995-6, when I first taught *Pràctiques de Introducció a la Literatura Anglesa*, the twin course of the theory-based course first taught, I believe, by Prof. Felicity Hand. These mid-1990s *Pràctiques* were already focused on writing brief argumentative essays and doing a bibliographical search. Coinciding with the development of the new European-style 2009 degree, I produced more formal guidelines, including “Searching for Bibliography” (2009-10) and “Essay Guidelines” (also 2009-10). Together with Prof. Alex Vraciu, I transformed this second document into “Writing essays for *Usos Bàsics de la Llengua Anglesa* and *Literatura Anglesa del s. XX*” (in 2010-11).

For the shorter 6-ECTS credit *Literatura Anglesa del s. XX*, then, Prof. Laura Gimeno and I simply continued the mid-1990s practice, reformulated in 2002, of first teaching students to write a basic argumentative essay (inspired by the 350-word model used in the language subjects) and then have them learn how to produce a bibliography. We explicitly told students that they need to learn both skills in preparation for the second-year and all subsequent papers. We even used for the bibliography the authors taught in the second, not the first year, thinking this way we would be smoothing the path towards the paper. This turned out to be over-optimistic. Even though we also started sending students to the library to take a specific course designed for them, the process of producing a bibliography in May seemed to have been forgotten the following October... I must clarify that we did use secondary

sources for class discussion but did not ask students at this point to include any in their essays, which, in contrast, should always include quotations from primary sources.

In the current version of *Literatura Victoriana* assessment is based on a quiz testing the students' reading of Maureen Moran's introductory volume *Victorian Literature and Culture* (worth 5%), class participation (10%), an exam on the two shorter texts (35%) and a paper on one of the two longer novels, either Dickens' *Oliver Twist* or Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The paper is worth 50% of the final mark: 10% depends on the proposal, 40% on the final version.

We decided to have students write a short paper, around 1,000 words, that is to say, 3 times the length of the first-year essay, including quotations from at least 3 'valid' secondary sources, here 'valid' meaning academic monographs, chapters in collective volumes and articles in journals. I planned the course in the following way: the teaching of *Oliver Twist* is based on intensive close reading by the teachers, which helps students to focus on relevant passages in the primary source; for *Tenant* each student is in charge of a particular chapter and must select a relevant passage and comment on it in class, for the same purpose. In the meantime, they choose a topic from a list we offer, look for bibliography and prepare the proposal.

This proposal consists of a provisional title, an abstract (100 words), a bibliography with at least three valid items, 3 passages from the primary source and 3 passages from the secondary sources. It is handed in when we finish reading *Tenant*, and it is the object of an office tutorial if necessary. The teacher returns it with abundant notes and suggestions. In the second part of the course, focused on Stevenson and Conrad, students contribute to class discussion passages from secondary sources as they work on writing the paper and on finding, if required, better secondary sources. The final paper is handed in after Christmas.

Right now students are asked to read the following guidelines in preparation for these activities: "Writing an Academic Paper," "Reading an Academic Essay" (written by Esther Pujolràs) and "Working on Abstracts," which Esther Pujolràs and I have recently produced, with David Owen's collaboration. I believe this covers plenty of ground, though as you can see what is missing here is a sample essay.

We advise students to take the secondary sources they have to read as models for their own papers, as our own generation did, but this is not quite working as for most students academic English is a formidable barrier. I must acknowledge that since the 1980s when I was an undergrad student academic prose has become far more abstract. I learned to write academic prose from authors like Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fielder or Tony Tanner whose style was as literary as it was communicative. Since the emergence of post-modern theory in the early 1990s, however, academic prose has lost this intent to illuminate and communicate, being, it often seems, far more focused on flaunting the cleverness of the author. The sad result is that finding good research in English on the texts we teach which is also accessible to a second-year non-native undergrad is increasingly difficult. At one point, we used an essay written by a student and this year we have recommended that they take a look at the essays my own fourth-year students produced for my *Harry Potter* elective (2013-4).

We always make a point of explaining to *Literatura Victoriana* students that learning how to write an argumentative paper is essential, for there is nothing more important than learning how to organise your thoughts. I very clearly explain to them how this connects with academic life: what is a conference, what is a journal, how the model of the first-year essay connects with the paper, the TFG, the TFM, the doctoral dissertation. I also tell them that the paper teaches them skills indispensable for plenty of jobs that have nothing to do with academic life, for it will help them to write reports and a variety of other documents that require intellectual coherence and cohesion. This is why I have just carried out another experiment, consisting of reading in class a paper I presented at a conference, exposing this way my students to real academic practice. The presentation went well and they were able to correctly identify my thesis statement and main arguments, asking also pertinent questions. I don't know, however, how useful this will be in practice.

In an ideal situation, we should have a separate subject in which academic skills could be taught but as things are now we had to make the necessary decision to use the first- and second-year Literature subjects as the umbrellas under which these skills could be taught. My opinion is that the Language subjects use other methodologies less focused on developing arguments, though, of course, this is also crucial in their

papers and the TFG. Other teachers disagreed with my view, arguing that the second year is too early to teach students how to write papers—this might be the case but we cannot really wait, much more so if we consider the new three-year-BAs to be soon implemented.

A matter that certainly hinders the teaching of the paper is the fact that students in the combined degrees take *Literatura Victoriana* in the third year, which means that they produce papers for *Literatura del Romanticisme Anglès* and other subjects without having gone through the process of learning how to do this first. Also, although we enthusiastically thought that all Literature subjects after *Literatura Victoriana* could/should use the paper as the main assessment item, this has in the end failed to be productive. We have opted instead for introducing a wider variety of exercises, asking students to write one paper per semester. Incidentally, my own experience suggests that Erasmus students are not really better prepared than our own to write academic papers. The British students tend to produce, of course, better written papers but not necessarily better researched or argued.

Ideally, then, students progress smoothly from the proposal until the final paper in *Literatura Victoriana* and once this is done they have acquired the skills absolutely necessary to face the rest of the degree. Unfortunately, this is not true. What usually happens is that in the two weeks previous to the delivery of the proposal we teachers receive plenty of emails and visits by anguished students who simply feel overwhelmed by the task. This semester I have returned 50% of the proposals with indications to re-submit, and awarded a 0 for the first time ever to 5 of these. Good proposals may end up generating bad papers and the other way round. Most dismaying are the bibliographies offered in these proposals as they often show the student has totally forgotten the skills learned in the first year. Last year I even started using a template both for the proposals and for the final paper, thinking that in this way I would save the time I have been wasting on correcting papers with appalling layouts and edition. Even so, some students simply ignore them. Also, the Department's official "Stylesheet."

In addition, academic papers are plagued by the daunting problem of plagiarism. The teacher who objected to my stubborn decision to teach how to write

papers as soon as possible argued that students would plagiarise massively. The current *Guia Docent* indicates that plagiarism results in a 0 for the paper, which, since it amounts to 50% of the final mark becomes technically a 0 for the whole subject. We have been strict about this, no matter how unpleasant the situation, and have discovered in the process a peculiar variety of plagiarism. Typically, students explain that they made notes from other sources without properly identifying them, which is why they ended up mixed with their own text. When we have pointed out an obvious plagiarism they have shown surprise and indignation that the paper was to be failed because of what they considered a simple oversight. To be honest, I ignore the actual extent of the plagiarism we are dealing with and without anti-plagiarism tools this is hard to guess. What we have noticed is a great deal of intellectual laziness in the plagiarised papers, which borrow passages from easy to detect sources, such as Wikipedia, E-notes, Gradesaver and so on.

The amount of papers we mark has fluctuated between 45 and 65 per teacher, that is 45,000 and 65,000 words, which amounts to a substantial volume. I work very fast and even so I have never used less than three complete working days (about 25 hours, then) for this. An exam takes possibly about half the time to mark. Despite this, I am not willing for the time being to abandon the practice of teaching how to write academic papers in the second year. The oncoming degree reform might make this practice even more urgent, as the TFG might be advanced to the third year and this must be necessarily a paper for the Literature students. Indeed, what else could it be, if we are to take their education seriously? I'll continue, then, sharing with my colleagues for as long as I teach *Literatura Victoriana* or the equivalent the onerous task of pushing second-year students beyond their comfort zone to cross indispensable intellectual thresholds. And try to enjoy it.

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SUSAGNA TUBAU & MALOU VAN WIJK, “Two Kinds of Continuous Assessment and Students’ Success in *History of English I*”

ABSTRACT:

In this paper we discuss whether using a more intensive kind of continuous assessment and restricting the course syllabus to the Old English historical period might have played a role in students’ academic success in *History of English I*. To investigate this issue, we compare the final grades of two groups of students for the academic course 2012-2013 with three groups of students for the academic course 2013-2014. Overall, such a comparison reveals that students performed better during the 2013-2014 course, when their progress was assessed by means of eight regular in-class tests administered under exam conditions and the syllabus was restricted largely to the Old English period rather than in the academic year 2012-2013, when they were assessed by means of two in-class exams, two assignments and two short exercises and the course covered the introduction to Old English, Middle English and Modern English periods.

Keywords: students’ success, *History of English I*, continuous assessment, Old English

1. Introduction

History of English I is a 6-credit course taught in the third year of the BA Degree in English Studies. As the main goal of the course is to introduce students to the discipline of diachronic linguistics by discussing the evolution of the English language through time, the course syllabus includes a great deal of interdisciplinary contents drawn from several branches of linguistics such as phonetics and phonology, morphology and syntax and draws heavily on first-year and second-year synchronic linguistics courses such as *Descriptive Grammar*, *English Grammar* and *Phonetics and Phonology*, among others. This is probably the reason why most students consider *History of English I* a difficult subject that is to be feared. Likewise, it is also the reason why we, as teachers, feel the need of finding effective ways to make the course more student-friendly while also ensuring that students acquire the concepts and skills required to successfully complete it.

In this paper we reflect on whether the kind of assessment and the scope of the course in terms of content might have played a role in students' academic success in *History of English I*. In particular, we investigate whether using a more intensive kind of continuous assessment that includes a higher number of in-class assessment items, on the one hand, and restricting the course syllabus to the Old English historical period rather than covering the Old English, Middle English and Modern English historical periods, on the other, result in increased students' success. For this purpose, we compare the academic results of two groups of students in the academic year 2012-2013 with two groups of students in the academic year 2013-2014. Our hypothesis is that using a more intensive system of continuous assessment and concentrating on just one historical period (namely Old English) in *History of English I* while leaving Middle English and Modern English to be covered in *History of English II* leads not only to a higher pass rate, but also to better grades, overall.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we present the aims and scope of the *History of English I* course for the academic years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, together with a description of the assessment items according to which the final course grade is calculated. In section 3, we report the academic results for the students who completed the course in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, whereas in section 4 we discuss the data presented in the previous section. Finally, section 5 concludes the paper and suggests some possible follow-ups.

2. *History of English I* 2012-2013 and 2013-2014: Aims, scope and assessment

Let us begin our investigation by comparing the aims of the course for the academic years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, which are significantly different in scope. As indicated in the course syllabus, after taking *History of English I* in the academic year 2012-2013, students should be able to (i) apply and develop the phenomena and processes of historical linguistics; (ii) relate the external history of the English language with the most relevant linguistic characteristics of the main historical periods, from Indo-European to contemporary English; and (iii) analyze and describe the characteristics of the lexicon in every different stage of the English language.

Conversely, after taking *History of English I* in 2013-2014, students should also be able to (i) apply and develop the phenomena and processes of historical linguistics, but, crucially, they should be able to (ii) relate the external history of the English language with the most relevant linguistic characteristics of pre-historical and Old English rather than with the main historical periods between Indo-European and contemporary English. With respect to the aim in (iii), in 2013-2014 students were not expected to focus only on the lexicon of the different historical periods of English, but to analyze and describe the phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and orthographic features of Old English, only. Finally, in the course 2013-2014, a fourth aim was added, namely (iv) to apply the knowledge and skills acquired to Old English texts.

As far as assessment is concerned, both in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 the final grade for the subject *History of English I* was the result of several partial marks obtained in continuous assessment. These activities, however, were different in number and nature in the two academic years that are being compared. In 2012-2013, the final grade was calculated as follows: 70% of the grade came from two Tests contributing 35% each; the remaining 30% came from two Assignments and a set of Exercises, contributing 10% each. These activities were scheduled throughout the semester, as shown in Table 1.

Date	Assessment item	Description
28/09/12	Exercise 1	Phonetic changes from Indo-European to Old English
19/10/12	Test 1	Exam covering contents on the introduction to historical linguistics and the origins of English (from Indo-European to Old English)
09/11/12	Assignment 1	In-class essay writing on a topic related to the pre-historic and Old English period
03/12/12	Assignment 2	In-class essay writing on a topic related to the Middle English period
21/12/12	Exercise 2	Exercise on the Lexicon
11/01/13	Test 2	Exam covering contents on the external history and its influence on the development of English, and the development of the English lexicon

Table 1. Assessment calendar for *History of English I* 2012-2013

In 2013-2014, the final grade was calculated by means of eight tests administered in class (but not taking the whole session) worth 70% of the grade (8.75% per test), and a final exam worth the remaining 30%. As was the case for the academic year 2012-2013, the Tests were administered throughout the semester, with each covering a small part of the course contents. This is shown in Table 2.

Date	Assessment item	Description
18/09/13	Test 1	Short in-class test covering contents on the introduction to historical linguistics (part 1)
25/09/13	Test 2	Short in-class test covering contents on the introduction to historical linguistics (part 2)
07/10/13	Test 3	Short in-class test covering contents on the evolution of Indo-European to Old English (part 1)
14/10/13	Test 4	Short in-class test covering contents on the evolution of Indo-European to Old English (part 2)
28/10/13	Test 5	In-class test on Old English phonology and spelling
04/11/13	Test 6	In-class exercise on phonemic transcription
20/11/13	Test 7	In-class test on Old English morphology
04/12/13	Test 8	In-class test on Old English morphology and syntax
08/01/14	Final exam	One-hour-and-a-half exam covering all the contents of the course

Table 2. Assessment calendar for *History of English I 2013-2014*

In short, the subject *History of English I* covered a more extended time span in 2012-2013 (from Indo-European to contemporary English, and, hence, including Middle English and Modern English) than in 2013-2014 (from Indo-European to Old English, with Middle English and Modern English being dealt with in *History of English II*, which was taught in the second semester of the third year of the degree). In addition, the evolution of the Lexicon was part of the 2012-2013 course syllabus as a separate topic, whereas it was not in 2013-2014. In a similar vein, in the academic year 2013-2014, students actively practiced what they had learnt throughout the semester by spending some sessions working on Old English texts.

3. *History of English I* 2012-2013 and 2013-2014: students' academic results

As shown in Table 3, a total of 90 students (39 in Group 1 and 51 in Group 2) registered in *History of English I*, although only 82 completed the course (34 in Group 1 and 48 in Group 2). Of those who completed the course, 22 failed (26.82%), 46 passed with *Aprovat* (56.1%), 13 with *Notable* (15.85%) and 1 with *Excel·lent* (1.22%).

Students	Group 1	Group 2	Both groups conflated
Registered	39	51	90
Completed the course	34	48	82
Fail	9 (26.47%)	13 (27.1%)	22 (26.82%)
<i>Aprovat</i>	21 (61.76%)	25 (52.1%)	46 (56.1%)
<i>Notable</i>	3 (8.82%)	10 (20.8%)	13 (15.85%)
<i>Excel·lent</i>	1 (2.94%)	0	1 (1.22%)
<i>Matrícula d'Honor</i>	0	0	0

Table 3. Students' success figures for *History of English I* 2012-2013

Table 4 contains the average mark with which students of each group passed the course in 2012-2013.

	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Aprovat</i>	5.52	5.8
<i>Notable</i>	7.23	7.61
<i>Excel·lent</i>	9	--

Table 4. Average pass marks for students who passed *History of English I* in 2012-2013

Table 5 shows the figures for *History of English I* 2013-2014. As can be seen, a total of 83 students (52 in Group 1 and 31 in Group 2) registered for the course, although only 71 completed the course (48 in Group 1 and 23 in Group 2). Of those who completed the course, 9 failed (12.68%), 42 passed with *Aprovat* (59.15%), 18 passed with *Notable* (25.35%), 1 with *Excel·lent* (1.41%) and, unlike in the previous academic year, 1 passed with *Matrícula d'Honor* (1.41%). The average marks for those who passed are given per groups in Table 6.

Students	Group 1	Group 2	Both groups conflated
Registered	52	31	83
Completed the course	48	23	71
Fail	5 (10.42%)	4 (17.39%)	9 (12.68%)
Aprovat	32 (66.67%)	10 (43.48%)	42 (59.15%)
Notable	11 (22.91%)	7 (30.43%)	18 (25.35%)
Excel·lent	0	1 (4.35%)	1 (1.41%)
Matrícula d'Honor	0	1 (4.35%)	1 (1.4%)

Table 5. Students' success figures for *History of English I* 2013-2014

	Group 1	Group 2
Aprovat	5.88	6.04
Notable	7.29	7.76
Excel·lent	--	8.9
Matrícula d'Honor	--	9

Table 6. Average pass marks for students who passed *History of English I* in 2013-2014

4. Discussion

Comparing the data in Table 3 and 5 it can be observed that the overall percentage of students who failed *History of English I* in 2013-2014 is lower (12.68%) than the percentage of students who failed the course in 2012-2014 (26.82%). This is also true for each group dealt with separately (10.42% and 17.39% for Groups 1 and 2 in 2013-2014 vs. 26.47% and 27.1% for Groups 1 and 2 in 2012-2013).

In a similar vein, the overall number of students with a pass-mark (*Aprovat*) is slightly higher in both groups in 2013-2014 (66.67% and 43.48% in Groups 1 and 2 in 2013-2014 vs. 61.76% and 52.1% in 2012-2013), and so is the overall number of students with *Notable* (22.91% and 30.43% in Groups 1 and 2 in 2013-2014 vs. 8.82% and 20.8% in 2012-2013).

Tables 4 and 6 confirm that the average mark for *Aprovat* and *Notable* is also higher in 2013-2014 (5.88 out of 10 in Group 1 and 6.04 in Group 2 for *Aprovat*, and 7.29 in Group 1 and 7.76 in Group 2 for *Notable*) than in 2012-2013 (5.52 in Group 1 and 5.8 in Group 2 for *Aprovat*, and 7.23 in Group 1 and 7.61 in Group 2 for *Notable*).

Therefore, it seems that we have empirical confirmation that the changes incorporated in 2013-2014, namely a more intensive system of continuous assessment and a narrowing of the contents covered in one semester, do favour an increase in students' academic success. The continuous assessment system used in 2013-2014, consisting of short in-class tests administered approximately every two weeks, forces students to regularly revise relatively small amounts of course content. This prevents them, to a large extent, from leaving revision to the very last minute and helps them memorize the relevant content more effectively. In addition, as feedback is given in class after each short test, students have the opportunity to detect areas of difficulty much earlier than with other assessment systems that involve larger amounts of course content and may take the teacher longer to mark. When students become aware of which content they have not properly acquired, they have the chance of clarifying it before going any further into the course.

With respect to the change in the sequencing of the course contents that was introduced in 2013-2014 (namely the teachers' decision to concentrate only on the Old English period), it seems to have contributed to increasing students' success in *History of English I*. As pointed out in the Introduction, *History of English* courses (both *I* and *II*) are considered 'difficult' by the students. Most of them attribute such difficulty to the extended syllabus which includes several centuries of historical facts and an overwhelming number of linguistic changes. This, as we have discussed earlier, can be somehow remediated by splitting the content in small doses that get tested at more or less regular intervals. Another source of difficulty that students often mention when asked for suggestions to improve *History of English* courses is Old English, which is perceived by most students as an absolute foreign language that reminds them very little of 'English'. This is even more the case for those students that have little or no knowledge of German, and/or are not familiar with languages with declensions, such as Latin. Hence, dealing with this historical period for an entire semester –together with an introduction to historical linguistics and some basic facts on the transition from Indo-European to Old English– makes it more accessible to the students.

In short, the academic results of the students who took *History of English I* in 2013-2014 are better than those of the students who took it in 2012-2013. We

hypothesized that this might be due to crucial differences in the content of the course and the system of continuous assessment. However, we cannot end this section without mentioning that we are aware that other relevant factors may be at play: as the groups of students that are being compared are not the same, it is possible that our results are also dependent on individual learning factors such as students' aptitude, former background, motivation, etc. Actually, a quick look at the 2014-2015 academic results reveals important differences between Group 1 and 2 in spite of the fact that these were taught by the same teacher. For example, while 45.71% of the students who completed the course failed in Group 1, only 14.63% did so in Group 2. Similarly, while only 5.71% passed the course with *Notable* in Group 1, 26.83% did so in Group 2. In broad terms, therefore, students in Group 2 obtained better academic results than students in Group 1. This difference must be largely attributed to individual learning factors, as the teacher and the teaching / assessment system is the same for both groups.

5. Conclusion

Although we might not be 100% sure that the changes we introduced in *History of English I* 2013-2014 are entirely responsible for an increase in the students' academic success, we conclude that the figures we provided earlier show that they certainly contributed to it in some way or other. Given that, as teachers of a subject that is highly demanding and considered difficult by the students, we are constantly thinking of ways in which this handicap can be solved, we take these results with enthusiasm, as they confirm that the action we took most probably had a positive effect. Future research, however, should be conducted to determine the extent to which the two variables considered in this paper (i.e. the scope of the syllabus and the intensity of the continuous assessment system) contributed to students' success.

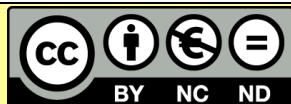
In a similar vein, in the future we would need to ensure that, apart from an increase both in the number of pass-marks and in the average marks of passing students, our students actually *learn* more (i.e. they acquire more concepts and skills, as well as a better understanding of linguistic evolution) as a result of a particular methodological change. As suggested by the audience of the conference where this

paper was presented, one possible way of answering this crucial question is to test how much our students remember from *History of English I* when they start *History of English II* in the second semester. If a particular change in the way *History of English I* is taught or assessed really *is* effective, academic success (i.e. the mark with which students pass the course) and learned content (i.e. what they remember from the course after passing it) should both increase. In this paper, we have shown that the changes introduced in 2013-2014 resulted in a higher pass rate and better grades. We hope they also resulted in our students having learnt the contents of the course better and for longer.

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