

“Authentic materials as a possible way of improving language performance in a high - pressure context”.

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RESUMEN

Al término de sus estudios académicos, los cadetes del Colegio Militar de la Nación deben ser diestros en el uso comunicativo de las cuatro macro habilidades lingüísticas – escucha, habla, lectura y escritura – como así también en el entendimiento de las normas de uso del código del idioma inglés, según establece en sus objetivos el Instituto de Enseñanza Superior del Ejército (IESE).

No obstante, estos objetivos sólo se logran parcialmente dado que el tiempo de enseñanza asignado a Inglés resulta escaso y la mayoría de los alumnos no posee suficientes conocimientos previos del idioma y además hay otros factores institucionales que, junto a la situación anteriormente descrita, crean un contexto de alta exigencia. Es debido a esto que las condiciones de enseñanza-aprendizaje distan mucho de ser las deseables.

En consecuencia, la actuación lingüística de los alumnos ha sido siempre menor a lo esperado, convirtiéndose así en una gran preocupación para docentes y autoridades. Luego de una profunda autoevaluación, concluimos que el nivel 2 era el más problemático por su incidencia en los cursos futuros. Esto conllevó a una reformulación específica de contenidos y estrategias de enseñanza-aprendizaje en ese nivel.

Este estudio pretende explorar posibilidades prácticas que podrían mejorar la situación a través del uso de materiales auténticos. El aspecto innovador consiste en que, hasta ahora, los cadetes han estado trabajando con material preparado para la enseñanza. Para el nivel 2, se decidió usar “textos auténticos” (no producidos con fines pedagógicos).

El análisis comparativo del grupo experimental y del grupo de control demostró que al finalizar el curso, los alumnos que recibieron la enseñanza a través de “textos auténticos” habían superado a los del grupo de control en la capacidad de realizar conexiones entre los contenidos y de comprender los procesos que subyacen a una comprensión eficaz. Asimismo, habían logrado almacenar sus conocimientos en la memoria de largo plazo. Esta permanencia del conocimiento les dio seguridad y les elevó la autoestima de forma tal que lograron trabajar independientemente del docente, como así también hacer predicciones inteligentes que reflejaban su entendimiento de los procesos funcionales del sistema lingüístico. Realizaron además mayor número de contribuciones voluntarias a la clase, lo cual demostró su sentimiento de menor nivel de presión.

Todas estas conclusiones se basaron en técnicas de evaluación objetivas especialmente diseñadas para este trabajo.

Resumiendo, los alumnos expuestos a materiales auténticos se sintieron menos exigidos, trabajaron independientemente y se convirtieron en mejores decodificadores que aquellos que trabajaron con material pedagógico tradicional.

ABSTRACT

The students at the Military College are constantly being pressed by matters which are both military and academic. Due to this, the learning conditions are far from desirable: the students' learning is hindered by the lack of time and the unfavourable conditions to study. After a thorough analysis of the situation, it was concluded that the second level of the English course was the most problematic, so the students' performance in English in the following levels was by far below everybody's expectations. The main objective of this paper is to verify whether the use of authentic materials can positively influence the process of acquisition of communicative competence in English in such a learning situation. What follows is a description of the performance of the two groups under study, the methodology of work applied and its results, which also includes charts that show the students' evaluation of the experience.

One of the most commonly used kinds of materials is the textbook but these do not generally cater for the needs of all the students in a class and so they may not always be very successful. So teachers should become materials mediators. I will explore the relationship between authentic materials and their relevance to this study.

I will refer to some general characteristics of the reaction of the students of both courses when faced to the two different classes of materials. Then, I will provide a description of the characteristics of each group concerning their decoding strategies, their command of linguistic exponents, their use of oral strategies and the atmosphere in the classroom. Later on I will consider how the atmosphere in the classroom during the lessons influenced learning according to the students' assessment of how these two elements were related.

FOREWORD

This paper is the result of my experience as a teacher of English in a military institution of university studies whose students are under conditions of very high pressure: the students in this institution live and study on the campus; therefore, they are both trained as military men and are given university tuition at the same time.

The students learn English during the four years of their training as part of their academic requirements. There are three standard levels: beginners, pre-intermediate and intermediate (the last one, divided into stages A and B), one for each year of their studies. But other levels are organised for those students who, for different reasons, already have an advanced previous knowledge of the language. I have been working in this institution for four years and a half, so I have had the chance of teaching all the different levels, both standard and advanced.

At the end of their course of studies, the students are expected to be proficient in the communicative use of the four language abilities – i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing – as well as in the understanding of how the language system is realised as usage. Such are the objectives set by the Language Teaching Institute of the force (IESE).

However, these objectives can only be partially achieved as the teaching time – four forty-five minute periods a week – allotted for English turns out to be scarce, and most of the students have little or no previous knowledge of English. Other institutional factors influence the learning process. On the one hand, the students have very little time for recovering from the tension caused by their daily military and academic routine, and on the other hand the time assigned for academic activities is scarce. The whole situation creates a very special atmosphere which can be characterized by the very high pressure under

which the students are placed, while being militarily trained and subjected to university studies. As a consequence, they are constantly being pressed by matters which are strictly military, and by the lack of time necessary to comply with the requirements not only of English, but of the whole of the complete area of academic studies. Due to this particular situation, the learning conditions are far from desirable: the students' learning is hindered by the lack of time and the unfavourable conditions to study.

As a result, the students' performance, specifically in their English lessons and tests, has always been lower than expected, thus becoming a main concern for the teachers of English and the authorities. Consequently, some changes have been introduced in the programmes for each standard level in order to try to solve this problem or at least reduce its effects. After a thorough analysis of the situation, ***we came to the conclusion that the second level was the most problematic, as many of the notions that are basic for the following courses were not properly acquired***, so the students' performance in English in the following levels was by far below everybody's expectations. This led to a specific reformulation of the syllabus and of the teaching practice in that specific level.

This paper purports to explore some practical possibilities which may improve the above-described situation by using ***"authentic materials"***. The innovative aspect in it is that so far, the cadets at the academy have been working with published teaching materials, but for the second level, I decided to use authentic texts used in different social contexts. These materials have not originally been produced for teaching purposes.

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this paper is to verify whether the use of authentic materials as defined in section 2 can positively influence the process of acquisition of communicative competence in English ***in a high-pressure learning situation***. On the other hand, it is meant to be a contribution to the didactics of the teaching of English in the academy in question, and possibly in other similar institutions.

In order to carry out this study, I have worked with students at a military academy who are taking up their second year of studies. As I was assigned two groups in that level, I decided to change the kind of input material offered to the students in one of the groups. Thus, materials which were not produced for language-teaching or language-learning purposes would be used in one of the courses. The second group would be exposed to the material from the textbook used by the students in this level. The systematization and practice material was the same for both groups.

The hypothesis I will try to verify is that the students who are confronted with authentic reading, listening and video materials can become more proficient learners than those who are taught with the general coursebook.

The study has been carried out following an experimental, longitudinal model over a period of one year. Ideally, the experience should take longer to be able to assess the ongoing processes and outcomes more precisely, but this longer study is impossible to be carried out due to the changes in the conformation of the groups every year at the academy.

What follows is a description of the performance of the two groups under study, the methodology of work applied and its results, which also include charts that show the students' evaluation of the experience.

1. SOME THEORETICAL CONCEPTS.

As stated in the introduction, I will try to verify if students who are immersed in a high-pressure learning situation, can **improve** their communicative competence in English after being exposed to authentic-genuine materials for listening and reading activities. The forty students selected for this study are cadets in the second year of their course of study at a military academy.

Before approaching the descriptive aspects of the actual study, it is necessary to specify some of its basic underlying theoretical concepts.

1.1 Learning and acquisition: how they contribute to communicative competence.

Learning today is seen as a difficult, solitary task. Learning implies a deliberate intention on behalf of the students, who must concentrate their attention to it. Besides, without the necessary reinforcement, what has been learned might be lost, since learning is not a permanent capacity. Furthermore, due to the fact that it requires personal involvement and systematic reinforcement, some people are better learners than others.

It has been stated that one person **learns** when he or she is able to **memorize** and **call up** items; but soon after the knowledge acquired has been used for the purpose it was learnt for, the non-significant items start to be forgotten. From this standpoint, learning becomes a matter of individual effort and the students' memorisation of items while teachers measure the level of learning according to the students' performance in the tests given.

Rebecca Oxford, in *Language Learning Strategies* (1990) states that **learning** "is conscious knowledge of language rules, does not lead to conversational fluency, and is derived from formal instruction" while **acquisition** "occurs unconsciously and spontaneously, does lead to conversational fluency and arises from naturalistic use." Many experts have suggested that both **acquisition and learning** are necessary to develop **communicative competence** (Krashen, 1981).

What is **communicative competence** in this context, then?

Communicative competence is to be understood as the possibility to participate successfully in an exchange between individuals that enhances co-operation and establishes commonality, i.e., **the competence or ability to communicate**. Rebecca Oxford (op. cit.) provides a description of communicative competence by Canale and Swain that includes **grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence** and **strategic competence**; I will only take into account **grammatical competence or accuracy** ("the degree to which the language user has mastered the linguistic code") and **discourse competence** ("the ability to combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought"). Besides, the interest in the study of learning has shifted from **what** the students learn ("the product") to **how** the students learn, or acquire a foreign language¹ ("**the process**"). Thus, it becomes necessary to consider the **learning strategies** that will help students manage efficiently throughout this process.

1.2 Learning strategies.

The development of the kind of **communicative competence** described requires realistic interaction among learners using meaningful, contextualized language. Moreover, for students to participate actively in such authentic communication it is necessary that

¹ By *foreign language* we mean one that does not have immediate social or communicative functions within the community where it is learned; it is employed mostly to communicate elsewhere. (Oxford, 1990)

they use the appropriate **communicative strategies**. The word **strategy** implies planning, competition, conscious manipulation and movement towards a goal. In education, **learning strategies** are steps that the students take to enhance their own learning, essential tools for developing communicative competence. In other words, **learning strategies** are operations employed by the learners to aid acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information. They are specific actions taken to make learning faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations. After some time, with practice and use, learning strategies can become automatic.

It is thanks to these strategies that a conscious process as **learning** is turned into **acquisition, thus making knowledge more permanent**. Appropriate language learning strategies improve proficiency and enhance self-confidence.

Students can also regulate their own cognition, focus, plan, and evaluate their progress as they reach communicative competence by using their **metacognitive strategies**.

The **perseverance and self-confidence** needed by learners to get involved in language learning actively, which is another requirement for achieving communicative competence, are developed through the use of **affective strategies**.

Language learning strategies can be considered thus, as **tools to solve problems while learning a language**. Guessing or reasoning strategies help to understand language and **intelligent guessing** is essential for listening and reading. This ability helps learners let go of the belief that **they have to recognize and understand every single word before they can comprehend the overall meaning of an exchange or piece of discourse**. Some elements that can help intelligent guesses are:

- Forms of address (they can help learners guess the meaning of what they are reading or hearing)
- General background knowledge (by associating newly heard/read/seen information with prior knowledge)
- Knowing the content of what has already been said, gives information for getting the meaning of what is being said and for anticipating what will be said.
- Observation of non-verbal behaviour (tone of voice, facial expression to understand what is being said).
- Perceptual clues concerning the situation and the listener's understanding of the situational context [**audible** (*background noise*) or **visual** (*nº of people, what they appear to be doing*)].

Contextual clues, co-operating mechanisms, asking questions, among other strategies, encourage greater amounts of **authentic** communication and thus enhance **discourse competence**. At this point it is necessary to define the concept of **authenticity** as used in this study.

What does **authentic** mean? According to Alan Davies (in *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 1986) **authenticity is a matter of involvement**. "A text," he says, "is **authentic** because **it is understood**." In this sense, then, authentic communication would be communication that is understood by all **the participants taking part in it**; everything the learners can understand is **authentic** for them. We could further say that it is the learner who **authenticates** either a text or a situation of communication. But then, it is necessary to establish a difference with what Ann Malamah-Thomas calls **authentic texts** in her book *Classroom Interaction* (1987, p. 145). She defines a text as **authentic "when it has not been specially written for pedagogic purposes"**. Thus, we could speak of **authenticity of materials** involving two basic characteristics: **materials will be authentic**

when they have not been written for pedagogic purposes and when the students can understand them. This **understanding** is the result of **intelligent guessing** as characterised above.

Intelligent guessing requires **self-direction**, another key-point when trying to attain communicative competence, and which is also encouraged by these language learning strategies. Learners need to grow into their **self-directive role** through a critical assessment of their current beliefs and attitudes, together with the acquisition of knowledge and study techniques that will allow them to manage their learning in an insightful and self-directive manner. This capacity of **self-direction** is important because students must develop their own autonomy. Many language students are passive and used to being told what to do. **Learner self-direction** often increases gradually and makes students become at ease and confident with the idea of assuming their own responsibility. **Self-directed students** gradually gain greater confidence, involvement and proficiency. Of course, once they have attained self-direction, students feel more motivated, and more highly motivated students use a greater range of appropriate strategies than do less motivated learners; and if this motivation is accompanied by that other kind of motivation that arises from the purpose of learning the language, we will have extremely proficient learners. So, the circle is closed: **learning strategies can help learners take control of their learning and become more proficient.** Rubin (1987, cited by Ian Tudor in *Learner-Centredness as Language Education*, 1996, p. 38), identifies some outstanding strategies that characterise the learning behaviour of successful learners, which can be summarised as follows:

- *The good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser who gathers and stores information efficiently.*
- *The good language learner is not inhibited and is willing to try out new options to get his message across.*
- *The good language learner is constantly looking for patterns in the language.*
- *The good language learner practises and seeks out opportunities to use the language somehow or other.*
- *The good language learner monitors his own speech and attends to meaning as well as to the context of the speech act.*

So considered, **self-direction** is the direct consequence of **strategic planning**, which, in turn, must be encouraged by the teacher of the course, although some teachers may find it difficult “**to let go of what they have been trained to see as their role of decision-maker, and may feel uneasy about transferring responsibility for pedagogic decisions to their students**” (Tudor, op.cit., p. 41). This statement leads us to consider the relationship of the teacher with his or her students as one point also to be considered. The teacher and the students interact with one another. The point I want to make here is that interaction means **acting reciprocally**, one of the ends of the process acting upon the other. The teacher acts upon the class, but the reaction of the class modifies his / her next action so the class reaction becomes an action in itself. Interaction then means **a two-way process with potential for co-operation or conflict**. The way the situation develops will depend on the attitudes and intentions of the people involved and on their interpretations of each other's attitudes and intentions. One might assume, though, that if we are in the presence of a teacher who does everything at his / her hand to foster self-direction, the reaction of the class will be more positive as the students will feel more at ease and the teacher will also feel rewarded. To illustrate this, we can quote Curran (1968). He states that “**the feeling of worth and value which a growing sense of**

unique self-acceptance produces creates an atmosphere of emotional security, and that this emotional security is a prerequisite for efficient learning.” Then, he goes on to conclude that when students feel good about both the course and themselves ***they will learn better.***

But we should remember that problems might crop up when there are students in a class with different levels of knowledge to draw upon. The solution I propose to help tackle this problem is the use of a variety of listening and reading ***authentic materials*** covering as many different topics and levels of knowledge as possible. At this point, we should discuss the issue of ***authentic materials.***

1.3 Materials.

In order to approach the discussion of authentic materials, we will refer to the concept of ***interaction*** discussed above.

We have accepted that there is interaction between the teacher and his / her class, but we have not mentioned a third participant in this interaction, ***the materials used.*** One of the most commonly used kinds of materials is the textbook. These three participants, teacher, student and textbook, communicate with each other in various different combinations and in many different ways. This ***third party***, whose role is not to be overlooked, will only facilitate communication between the students and the teacher if it reflects their experience and expectations of classroom learning and teaching. The trouble with textbooks is that they do not generally cater for the needs of all the students in a class and so they may not always be very successful.

The interaction between the ***materials*** and the ***students*** will be more fruitful and meaningful if the ***teacher*** becomes the ***materials mediator*** (I have chosen the word “materials” instead of “textbook” since teachers can resort to a large amount of sources, apart from textbooks, when they teach a class). I have chosen to use ***mediator*** as the teacher will have to select authentic or genuine materials, and he/she will become, in a way, a sort of ***writer.*** Tudor (1989) suggests that a teacher might collect a body of textual material in the target language containing instances of the teaching point in question in a certain unit. He also says that learners can be set the task of monitoring different sources for occurrences of the target constructions: television programmes, newspapers, advertisements, etc. Some form of guidance will always be required, though, but this form of approaching learning may either precede and lead up to rule formation or it may be used as a follow-up activity for learners to discover ***the rule in action in real language use.***

We can assume that teachers can be much the “possessors of information” as textbook writers, and that they are in a better position due to their close relationship with the students. Teachers will select material according to ***how comprehensible*** they can be to the addressees; such understanding allows to predict how readable these materials can be.

So, ***readability is related to comprehension,*** and ***comprehension,*** in turn, depends on the activation of ***relevant knowledge.*** It is important to activate the students’ previous knowledge that may fill in the gaps in messages; if people lack the knowledge necessary to make appropriate inferences, most passages would presumably seem arbitrary and nonsensical. Here, I would like to resume the discussion of the role of teachers as materials mediators. As it was said before, teachers are in a better position to select the appropriate materials than the textbook writer because of the close distance that exists between teachers and their students. Teachers can get to know about the needs, interests and previous knowledge of their class; students can elaborate the information to be learned by relating it to their previous acquired knowledge (Anderson

and Reder, 1978; Craik and Tulving, 1975; Rowher, 1966). The additional knowledge that might be given by the teacher to the learners will facilitate learning as long as it is semantically consistent with the information to be learned, but only if that knowledge clarifies the **significance** and makes it less arbitrary, i.e., if it connects **given information to new information**.

Clarke (1989) states that learners can become involved with the materials in many different ways. Externally imposed materials can be internalised by the students through their getting involved creatively and meaningfully with them; or they can internalise these materials by solving tasks related to the students, thus providing the students with a meaningful problem to solve.

Although the learners' initial assumptions about **significance** of certain items may not be appropriate, the act of reading or listening, or the act of searching clarification, is fundamental for the development of new expertise; thus, **cognitive activities** that enable them to understand as well as relate and remember information are very important too.

Brumfit, 1984 (p. 122) maintains that "**only when there are messages being carried out which are significant to users will there be full engagement with the linguistic code.**" Learning, then, is affected by **how students feel about themselves and how they perceive their relationship to their productions**. But what happens when students are not able to feel anything for the result of their learning? Then we are in the presence of students who feel their learning production does not belong to them, thus they feel detached from it; and they feel a deeper detachment as they get to higher levels of education. Because of this, their studies begin to lack a sense of direction and genuine satisfaction and personal fulfilment. Students are more likely to enjoy their work, and feel it belongs to them, when they develop broad and flexible activities and integrative approaches to knowledge.

Curran (1968) states that "**the feeling of worth and value which a growing sense of unique self acceptance produces,**" or "**the gaining or developing of that feeling**" produces a sensation of **emotional security** which is a prerequisite for **efficient learning**; a student is to be taught in order that he may be able to perform certain actions better or to make more intelligent decisions.

Learning is, then, affected by how students feel about themselves apart from the atmosphere that prevails in the classroom. The institutional climate tends to colour and give a certain perceptible feeling tone to the course, and this climate makes one associate the atmosphere with the substantive content and activities of the course. In this way, the student will hold certain **attitudes and feelings towards the course materials and activities**.

In this section we have defined and limited the various concepts that we will use in the development of the present study. In the next section we will explore the relationship between authentic materials and their relevance to this study.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS.

Before I begin exploring the relationship between authentic materials and their relevance to this study, I find it necessary to define what **authentic materials** means within this study and why they have been chosen for it.

Within the scope of the theory of naturalistic language acquisition, what do we understand by **authentic materials**? D. Abè, F. Carton, M. Cembalo and O. Régent, in Philip Riley's *Discourse and Learning* (1984), define an authentic document as one which "**has not been produced for language-teaching or language-learning purposes**", that is, "**not a didactic document...(but)...one which has been produced (as a message) in a real communication situation**" (p. 322). These authors then remark that those texts, either written or oral, which have been modified for language-teaching purposes are not authentic. As regards the reason why authentic materials should be used, the authors suggest two: "**firstly, they represent a fraction or the whole of a real piece of communication produced in a given situation, or an accurate copy of it (...); secondly, if ...(they)...are chosen to correspond to the learner's needs, they will, by definition and because of their richness and variety, form an accurate and exhaustive syllabus**" (p. 323).

About authentic materials, Phillips & Shettleworth, in their article *How to Arm Your Students: A Consideration of Two Approaches to Providing Materials for ESP* (in *Methodology in TESOL*, Ed. Long & Richards, 1987) say that ESP materials, as designed for teaching, reflect a classroom discourse that bears little relation to communicative uses of the language and this "**entails the necessity of creating the conditions for activities which encourage the student to transfer the language taught in the classroom to use in communicative situations**" (p. 105). This is in agreement with what I said in the previous section about the students' capacity to transfer new knowledge into new situations. Phillips and Shettleworth maintain that **one should pay attention to the strategies needed by the students as well, even though the authors are discussing authentic materials for specific purposes**. These ideas can be applied to the materials used for this study too. The materials chosen are authentic in the sense described above.

Even though authentic materials can help in the acquisition of the four macroabilities, in this paper the emphasis has been focused on the use of **listening** and **reading** materials. These materials may help for the induction of grammatical rules which can be generalised. In relation to selection of materials, Phillips and Shettleworth point out that the importance of the language points exemplified and their frequency of occurrence must be one of the criteria for choosing the text/s to be used. They also maintain that authentic materials stimulate more realistic classroom discourse, if a task-oriented methodology is adopted and, when teachers monitor the efficiency or the skill techniques, they can identify language problems when they arise and prescribe remedial work where necessary. About the role of the teacher, we can quote Goodman and Goodman (in *Vygotsky and Education*, 1990, p.236) who say that **teachers mediate by asking a question here, offering a useful hint there, directing attention at an anomaly, calling attention to overlooked information, and supporting learners as they systematise what they are learning into new concepts and schemas**.

In the next sections, I will describe the characteristics of listening and reading materials and how they can facilitate the process of language acquisition.

2.1 Listening materials.

One of the criticisms made to textbooks is that they lack emphasis on teaching listening comprehension in general. Also, it has been said that there is a lack of available material specifically developed for and focused on the teaching of listening skills (Suzanne Herschenhorn, in *Teaching Language as Communication*; p. 65 and ff.). Several authors have suggested many ways to make up for this lack of listening practice. Fries (cited by

Herschenhorn, op. cit.), for example, says that oral reading to the class of fairly lively dialogues from literature can help. But, even if the teachers were consummate interpreters, would they approximate **real language**? In order to help a teacher out of this dangerous corner, **authentic materials** will be of great assistance. Besides, such materials can offer the learner instances of real language use which will hardly be present in teacherese, and this will help the learner to develop their competence to understand natural language (Belasco, 1969). Belasco suggests using "interviews, newscasts, speeches, popular songs, excerpts from original plays, etc, recorded live for developing listening skills." Other possibilities are relating personal anecdotes to the class, having the learners take or leave messages, make appointments and get information via the telephone, or listening to interviews or short taped live conversations or dialogues between native speakers in unrehearsed, typical situations. The best technique Herschenhorn suggests for the purposes of the study I had in mind is the use of short taped segments of radio or TV news and weather reports or talk shows. The author recommends going from pre-questions, such as *what? who? where? when?* to focusing on main ideas, examples given, descriptions, or, in more advanced situations, structures, vocabulary, idiomatic expressions or register. At this point, I disagree with Herschenhorn, since I believe that the study of structures, vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and register can be carried out even in elementary levels of language study, provided the materials **have been prepared appropriately enough to ensure comprehension**.

Jack C. Richards, in *Listening Comprehension: Approach, Design, Procedure (Methodology in TESOL, 1987)* says that in order that the learner acquires particular micro-skills in listening, it is necessary to manipulate either the input or the tasks set. Since the input cannot be manipulated if we are to stick to the purposes of this research, what we need work upon is the tasks we design for our learners. We should not forget that **not all the tasks aid comprehension**. For example, Richards maintains, responding to true/false questions focuses on memory rather than on comprehension; also a cloze exercise which requires supplying grammatical items while listening, for instance, to the news, does not reflect the purposes for which people listen to news. "*It is not a situation which corresponds to any real-life listening purpose, and hence involves a low degree of transfer*". It is an undeniable fact that most of the activities our students perform are very similar to these, and as the degree of transference is so low, student involvement is not successfully attained. About pre-listening activities, Richards sustains that they set a *purpose* for learning and in doing so they enhance **involvement**.

Porter and Roberts (in their article *Authentic Listening Activities*, op. cit.) also state that there is a mismatch between the characteristics of the discourse that is normally heard and that used in the ESL classroom and suggest as a solution for learners to be able to cope with this, exposition to **authentic language**.

Other listening materials used for this study, are **audio-visual** materials. What has been said for listening materials holds good for video materials as well. Films could be added to the list of listening materials. Thanks to the availability of cable TV and the possibilities of access to it, it is also possible to video-record programmes, shows, reports or any other sort of materials in English.

P. Riley, in his article *Viewing Comprehension: l'oeil écoute* (Riley, op. cit.) remarks that in face-to-face interaction there is a number of **non-verbal, extra-linguistic** sources of information and meaning and that such factors as proxemics, kinesics and deictics are all part of a message. So, in the case of video materials there is another dimension that

facilitates comprehension: it involves more than one sensory channel, as is the case with pure listening materials. Marianne Celce-Murcia, in her article *Language Teaching Aids* (in *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, 1990) includes these video materials in her classification of Technical Projected Aids, which comprises overhead and opaque projectors, slides, filmstrips, movies, videotape and television. As regards movies, which constitute the main kind of viewing material used in my research, she suggests that English-language movies might be used with all kinds of learners, provided they are given some background information and tasks to perform while viewing the film, though the students should perform certain tasks before and after viewing as well.

To sum up, authentic listening and audio-visual materials are instances of real language use, which may facilitate the acquisition of micro skills in listening comprehension. When a real communicative purpose is involved in listening activities, involvement is enhanced and so is transference.

2.2 Reading materials.

Alderson and Urquhart in *Reading in a Foreign Language* (1986) point out that problems in reading in a foreign language might come not only from problems with the foreign language but also with reading problems in general. This aspect must be taken into account. They also state that ***if a text is found not to be readable, attempts may be made to alter it in order to make it more readable, or simpler.*** This process of simplification, they go on to say, may be very complex.

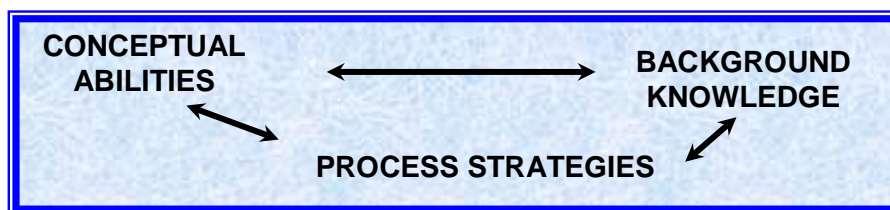
As William H. Gaskill maintains in his article *The Teaching of Intermediate Reading in the ESL Classroom* in *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (1990), ***it is not easy to choose a set of reading materials which is responsive to the heterogeneity of backgrounds, abilities and interests found in any ESL/ EFL class.*** Evidently, it becomes necessary to resort to a variety of sources to cater for this heterogeneity of demands in the class. We may say, though, that it is not the ***reading materials which should fit the learner but that the learner must be provided with the appropriate tools to approach any kind of reading material. As with listening materials,*** the learners must be taught to “read” the clues given by the text and by what is around it, pictures or paratextual features, in order to get to understand its content. We are after a ***successful reader*** as defined by Cohen and Hosenfeld (1981:296) define this concept:

“Successful readers keep the meaning of the passage in mind, read in broad phrases, skip unessential words and guess from context the meaning of new words. In contrast, unsuccessful readers lose the meaning of sentences as soon as they decode them, read word-by-word in short phrases, rarely skip unessential words, and turn to the glossary for the meaning of new words.”

Furthermore, learners should be instructed into using different strategies that will help them get the gist of written texts. These different strategies include reading for the main idea, finding topic sentences, finding familiar words (those words the learners know through their use in their own language, like *shopping centre, football* or *software*) and transparent words (those words can be read *through languages*, like *commercial* and its Spanish form *comercial* or the French *commerciale*).

In this way, the students will be encouraged to become as independent as possible in their approach to reading. Thus, they will feel more self-confident and involvement will be fostered.

Ronald Mackay (1987) states that reading, as well as listening, are comprehension skills that involve the perception and interpretation of all the signals that make up a text. Anne Anderson and Tony Lynch (1988) agree with him: **there appears to be an important general language processing skill that influences performance in both listening and reading.** Therefore, the comprehension of a text depends on the appropriate interpretation of those linguistic signals. Thus, the teacher must identify which signals may **facilitate** comprehension and which signals may **hinder** it. We could add, as Carrell and Eisterhold (1987) have noted, that **“a reader (or listener) reconstructs a message according to his/her schema, that is, his/her previous knowledge.”** Coady (1979) provided a model for the ESL reader which already took these ideas into consideration:



This triad of abilities, knowledge and strategies is at work during the decoding process of the signals in a text. Carrell and Eisterhold suggest that these signals, which Mackay calls **data**, are collected through **bottom-up** processing and assimilated through a **top-down** process. We could apply these ideas to the decoding of listening materials as well.

To sum up, what we intend our students to do, both when reading and listening, is to decode all the linguistic and paralinguistic elements that will help them comprehend a text and to assimilate them in such a way that they can infer knowledge of the language and later transfer what they have learnt to new reading and listening situations. This, I believe, will help our students become self-directed agents of their learning. And I have intended to achieve this aim through the use of authentic materials.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY.

In this section I will describe the subjects (units of analysis) selected for the study and the syllabus planned for their level of English. After that, I will outline the methodology employed for the development of this research.

As I said before, two groups of cadets in their second year of studies at a military academy were chosen. The control group, which I will refer to as A, was composed by 21 students (20 male and 1 female) while group B, the experimental group, consisted of 19 students (17 male and 2 female). Both groups were heterogeneous as the cadets came from different provinces all around Argentina and one of them in the experimental group came from a neighbouring country. This heterogeneous cultural, social and geographical background provoked quite a variety of **communication difficulties** at the moment of their participation in the social communicative interaction in the classroom. The students in both groups under study took the first year of their courses in different groups of English, so all of the cadets had different teachers of English, and, consequently, different learning and teaching experiences. I gave the students a questionnaire to answer in order to have an idea of how aware they were of their abilities and how they rated their performance (see chart 4.1).

Besides the difficulties brought about by this diversity of backgrounds and origins, the students' class-time is fully booked up with academic activities necessary to accede to their university degree.

As regards the English syllabus for the second year level at the academy, it is divided into six units, called *grupos conceptuales* (conceptual groups or units). These units include all the *contents* which the cadets should have acquired by the end of the year. For the sake of simplification, I shall call them *units*.

The syllabus requires the students to do a lot of intensive practice, for which they do not have enough time left, as it was shown before. Then, the academic schedule needs some consideration too². The academic programme is divided into two terms, February-June and July-November. Each term is interrupted for several reasons all throughout. There is a holiday week at Easter time during which the cadets carry out religious activities, after which they have two operational weeks, for military instruction. In June they have one week off to study for their mid-term tests, or to sit for final exams of one-semester subjects. After that week, they have two other operational weeks. The last two weeks in July are the winter holidays. The next break in the schedule comes in September, when they go on military instruction for two other weeks. After that, classes continue until the first week in November, when they finish. There are other days off, two or three national holidays as well. The peculiar characteristics of this schedule make it essential to consider all these interruptions in the planning of lessons, tests and revision periods, since during the weeks the cadets are not having lessons they are being faced with very hard military work, and they come back more tired than they usually are.

As regards evaluation, there is a Central School of Languages (IESE), which sets the passing standards for all the military academies. These standards focus on linguistic competence rather than on communicative competence. This means that many of the activities and exercises students will have to do will be based on this conception, in spite of the teachers' intention to foster communicative competence.

The structure of the second year level test consists of:

- A **written test** which includes:
 - A **reading comprehension** exercise;
 - A **syntax** exercise;
 - A **multiple choice** exercise and
 - A **writing** exercise.
- An **oral test** which consists of describing a sequence of pictures for students to make up a story.

The **reading comprehension** exercise represents 25% of the total score.

The **syntax** section consists of two kinds of exercises. First, students have to provide the correct tense and form of verbs given in brackets. Secondly, they are asked to fill in the blanks in a passage. This is in fact a blank filling exercise because the words which are missing in the passage are not just systematically deleted, as this technique requires. The exercises in this section add up to 25% of the total score.

The third exercise, the **multiple choice** section, represents 20% of the total score.

² This schedule described next was changed into its present design as from 2002. Now, the weeks devoted to teaching are comprised in two big groups and the operational weeks are between them, so that the course is less affected than it was at the time the research was being carried out.

The **writing** exercise consists in writing a 100/120-word passage about one of two given topics. This exercise represents the 30% of the total score of the test.

The written part, then, comprises a total score of 100, the passing mark being 60. Oral performance is evaluated on a different day and its total score is 100 marks too. The evaluation of the cadets' oral performance is not as objective as the evaluation of the written part; what teachers assess is: use of the language, fluency, interaction, vocabulary and predisposition to speak, in that order.

As seen from the description of the test, there is no formal assessment for listening comprehension at this level. This makes it difficult for teachers to assess whatever progress there may be in the development or use of listening strategies.

Thus, in agreement with the Central School of Languages standards, most of the exercises aim at evaluating **linguistic** rather than **communicative** competence.

Students are supposed to be evaluated twice a term. There is a mid-term test in June and a second mid-term test, in fact a final one, in October. However, during the year and before each of those two main tests, students are evaluated through *notas* "C"(which I will refer to as "C" marks). These evaluations are assigned either for classwork, compositions, ten-minute tests, project work, or oral lessons.

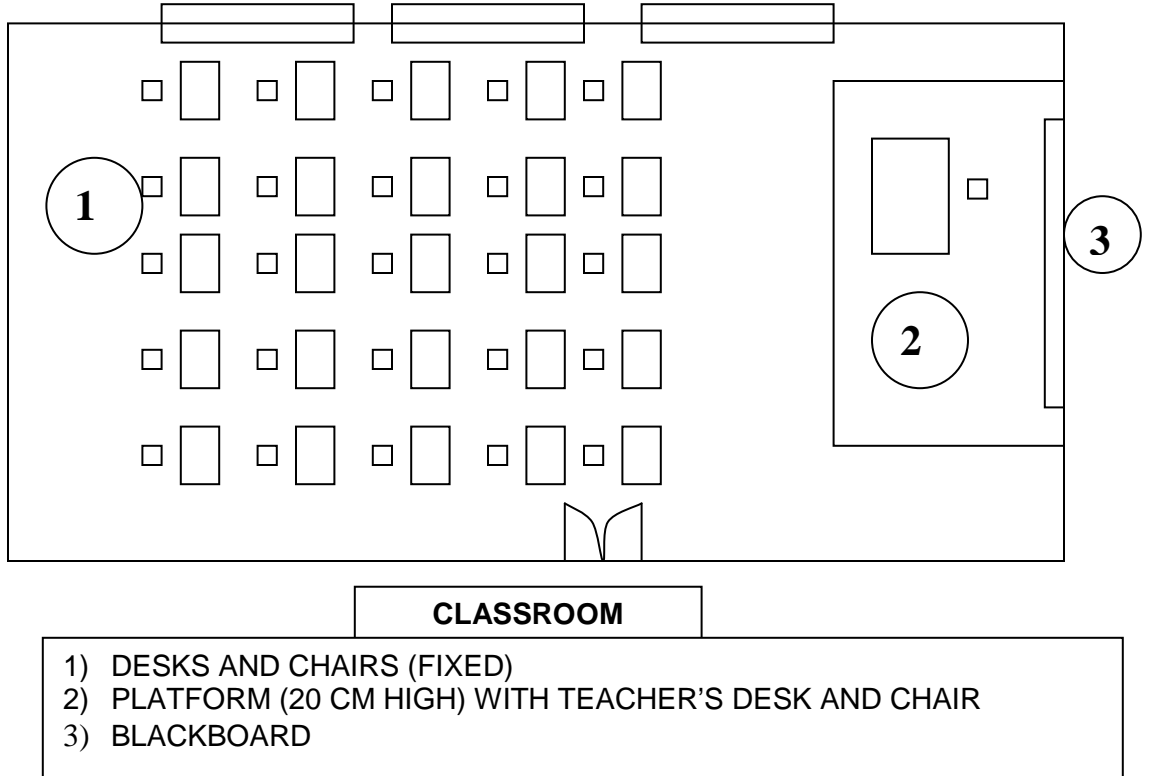
The mid-term and final tests are given through a system of invigilation. The cadets are given out their tests by an officer, who invigilates during the exam development. Cheating or its facilitation by any cadet is severely punished; those who are caught cheating or helping others are expelled from the academy.

As regards the influence of the physical context, when it comes to the physical distribution of desks in the classroom, the academy's is not a favourable one. Bailey and Celce Murcia (1990) state: **Rooms with fixed desks and/or laboratory-like partitions on the tables have an isolating effect on the students. It is difficult, at best, to promote small group interaction in a room full of barriers.** (p. 317). This is precisely the kind of rooms and laboratories we have at the academy³. Later, the authors mentioned add (p. 317): **Frequently a teacher has little or no control over the facilities.** This is also true in our case. (Picture 3.1 shows a typical classroom at the academy, while picture 3.2 shows the laboratory where the listening activities are usually carried out.) So they conclude that, being such the case, **much can be done to improve the environment**, that is exactly what I intend to do through the course of action I intend to take, since, as the same authors suggest, **a good social climate promotes communication.**

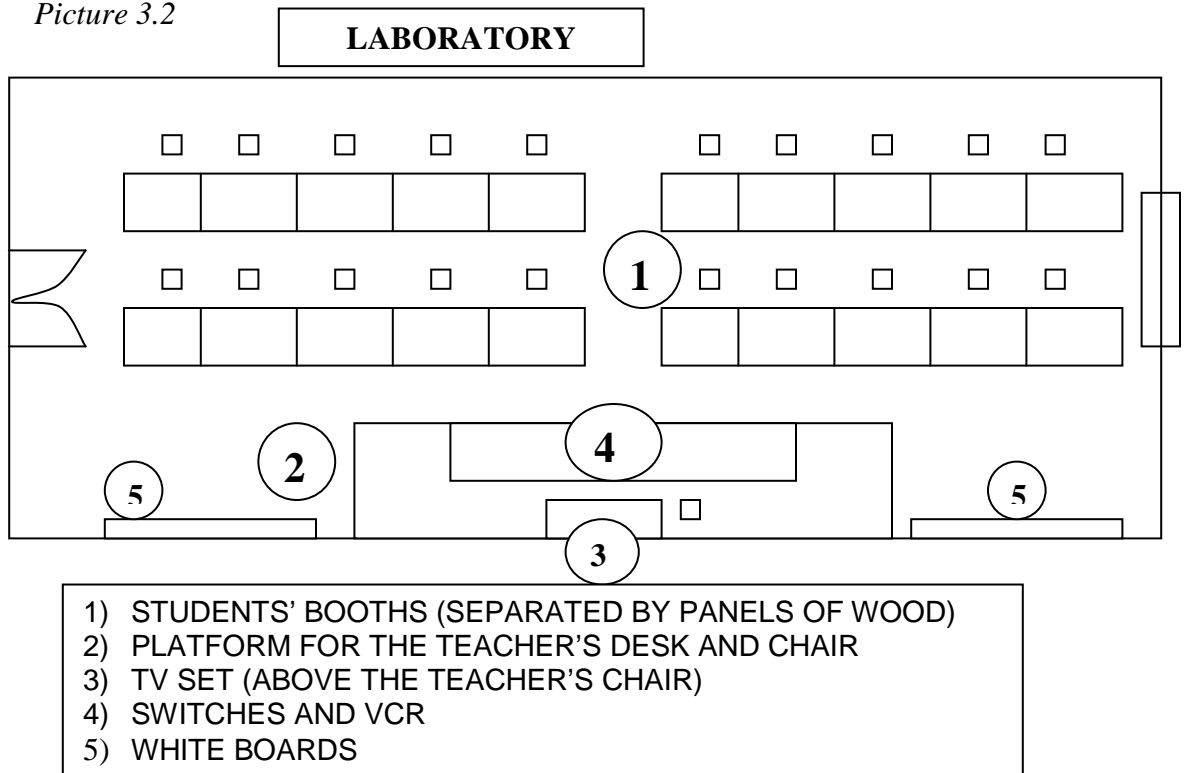
Perhaps one of the most important factors to consider is the teacher's attitude towards his teaching, since, as these authors assert, **it is unlikely that students will become actively involved in the material if the teacher doesn't seem to be enjoying the course** (p. 318). Marjorie B. Wesche (1983) said, **involvement ensures learner response and more elaborated or 'deeper' processing of the stimulus. It thus leads to better long-term retention and a greater likelihood of access to the new knowledge when a subsequent context offers appropriate cues** (pp. 375-376). So, with an adverse seating arrangement, we are to work on involvement from a different perspective (i.e., materials) if we want our learners to perform better.

³ The distribution of desks and chairs has also changed as from 2001. These are no longer fixed to the floor and are easy to move around.

Picture 3.1



Picture 3.2



4. THE RESULTS.

In this section, I am going to describe and analyse the following elements and factors:

- The results obtained in the test evaluations in the area of reading comprehension.
- The students' evaluation of the kind of prevailing atmosphere in each group during the lessons.
- The students' evaluation in each group of the probable influence exerted by the different kinds of material used and their sustained performance.

In order to approach the process of drawing conclusions from the collected data, I believe it might be interesting to bear in mind the concepts developed in section 1 of authentic materials, learning strategies and communicative competence as regards their performance.

Before considering the performance of the groups throughout the study, I will refer to some general characteristics of the reaction of the students of both courses when faced to the two different classes of materials. Then, I will provide a description of the characteristics of each group concerning their decoding strategies, their command of linguistic exponents, their use of oral strategies and the atmosphere in the classroom. This description will include some charts that illustrate the students' assessment of these areas. Finally, I will describe their performance in the evaluations, as well as the behaviour shown while they were doing them.

When describing the results of the tests, I will group the exercises in the following way:

- 1) The reading comprehension exercise/s will be termed **decoding strategies**.
- 2) The syntax exercise and the multiple choice exercise will be termed **linguistic exponents**.
- 3) The writing exercise will be termed **writing strategies**.

The oral tests are formally marked only on two occasions, in the mid-term test and in the final test. No "C" mark is given for oral work, though there is some practice of oral expression. When shown in the result charts, I will include them under **Oral strategies**.

I will use the term **decoding strategies** to refer to the comprehension strategies that facilitate the understanding of what is expressed in English. These strategies will help students interpret the message beyond the explicit language expression. Both reading and listening comprehension strategies (the latter, when applicable) will be included within these **decoding strategies**.

General characteristics:

The students in both groups cannot negotiate or get to a consensus as regards making decisions or taking different courses of action when they have to solve a communicative situation. This makes the individuals incapable of reaching consensus due to their lack of **emotional security** which, as Curran (1968) had stated, **is a prerequisite for efficient learning**. This lack of security is also present when they have to carry out an activity in class and take longer to do it because they hesitate too much.

As regards **error correction**, we discuss the mistakes orally, in a sort of forum, where the students must account for what they generally risk as **correct answers** with evidence from the materials they have used or the activities they have done. This correction round is always carried out just after the corrected exercises are given back to the students.

The systematisation of the different topics studied is always done by the students and the teacher together, by analysing examples and having the students infer the rules.

In relation to evaluations, the instructions in the tests are always explained before hand, and the instructions of the different exercises are discussed and clarified at the beginning of the test. Mistakes are pointed out on their papers and signalled for discussion in class, as with the mistakes in the everyday activities. For further explanations, when necessary, the students are called up and the mistakes are discussed individually. After that, they are assigned remedial work.

Speaking (oral strategies) is also hindered by the students' lack of self-confidence. When they want to say something in English and they do not know how, they stop and get stuck. For example, once some students needed to use the word "unemployment" when describing the problems of a city, but they did not know that word. The students were told to use what they knew. They knew *have got*, but they were not able to provide "People haven't got jobs" as a way of solving their problem. I have tried to help students overcome this strategic problem by developing in them enough self-confidence to express their ideas freely and by helping them into using the words that they knew.

In order to get to know about their previous knowledge of English, and how much they remembered from the previous course, I gave the students a diagnostic test after a two-week revision period. The objectives and linguistic units for this revision period were those corresponding to the first unit of the syllabus. This diagnostic test included a Reading Comprehension exercise, a multiple choice exercise and a writing exercise-. All these exercises were intended to show how much the cadets could recall from previous courses. The experimental group was exposed to revision through video clips from two films. The control group worked with exercises from the book they had used the previous year. The results of the tests are shown in the following chart.

DIAGNOSTIC TESTS RESULTS				
COURSE	CONTROL GROUP (A)		EXPERIMENTAL GROUP (B)	
	PASSED	FAILED	PASSED	FAILED
DECODING STRATEGIES	73,01%	26,99%	82,46%	17,54%
LINGUISTIC EXPONENTS	76,19%	23,81%	60,52%	39,48%
WRITING STRATEGIES	47,61%	52,39%	36,84%	63,16%
OVERALL AVERAGE	42,85%	57,15%	36,84%	63,16%

As seen in the chart, the experimental group began the course with a better performance in the use of decoding strategies than the other group, as the **9,45%** difference in favour of the experimental group in the use of decoding strategies shows, although they did worse in the general average of performance of the whole diagnostic test; the results of the assessment of linguistic competence show a difference of **15,67%** in favour of the control group, which also did better as regards writing strategies: **10,77%** above the experimental group.

Next, I will describe the results of the study and I will analyze whether they show any modifications in relation to the diagnostic test results and in what direction.

In order to analyse the results of the present research, I will first concentrate on Group A, the control group. As regards the students' evaluation of their performance using the **decoding strategies**, only 19,04% of them felt their listening comprehension was good; about the same amount of subjects considered it poor and the rest, fair. In relation to their

reading strategies, 76,19% said their comprehension was good, 19,04% ranked it as fair and the rest, poor. Their evaluation of classroom atmosphere was, mostly, positive, but boring and non-didactic. Some of the subjects even defined lessons as stressing, and though some of them maintained that the relaxed atmosphere fostered motivation, many others said that motivation and the learning process were **hindered** by the prevailing atmosphere during the lessons. These feelings were made evident in their **resistance** to attend them, the long time they took to arrive at the classroom and their **negative reaction** when any work was assigned to them, either in the lessons or during their exams.

Still, some of them felt that they had developed awareness of their own learning progress. As the systematization of the topics was done through elicitation from the students, they felt that they were able to discover their own learning. But, in fact, through the analysis of their classwork, I found out that they were unable to understand the operating processes within the linguistic system. This can be possibly associated to their **lack of involvement** with the course. This assertion can be further reinforced by the fact that, in spite of their comparatively better performance in working with linguistic exponents, the students could not remember the topics they had studied. That is to say, their learning was not **significant**; they could not commit knowledge to long-term memory. They stored it in their short-term memory and, thus, vanished very soon. The students in this group also proved to lack self-confidence because of their inability to retain knowledge; for example, it was impossible for them to apply reading strategies (skipping words they did not understand and constantly asked questions about vocabulary). This may be some evidence of teacher-dependence; the subjects in this group were not successful readers as defined in section 2. They were even afraid of making guesses and taking risks, probably because they felt they were under examination the whole time, thus the “stressing atmosphere” some of the students described had prevailed all the time.

In section 1 we defined **self-directed agents of learning** as those learners who are able to transfer what they have learnt to new communicative situations. In that sense, and since the students in this group were not able to transfer knowledge, we cannot say that they have become self-directed agents of learning. They could not even think of equivalent expressions between Spanish and English, thus finding themselves at a loss when they had to say something. Here, as in their evaluations, they showed their lack of resources. We may attribute this to the two factors mentioned before, their lack of self-confidence and their dependence on the teacher.

We will turn our attention to Group B now. 20 % of the students in this group evaluated their listening comprehension as very good and the rest said theirs was good. As regards reading strategies, 6,66% of the subjects expressed that their reading comprehension was very good, and the rest were divided between good and fair. My observations of class performance showed that these students were able to reason well and applied the decoding strategies efficiently, as chart 4.1 shows.

When they had to define the prevailing atmosphere during the lessons, we find again that the majority described it as relaxed, amusing and didactic came up next. The reason for the term “amusing” was the use of authentic materials, which made time pass pleasantly and helped them feel they could learn better; this is also why they labelled lessons as didactic. They said that this atmosphere motivated them to work, made them feel at ease and fostered interaction between them. This was quite clear in their early arrival at the classroom and in the change from an original negative attitude towards any kind of work assigned in the direction of a better response to work.

Description per areas of study

A. DECODING STRATEGIES

Group A: When reading, this group always needed to be reminded about the importance of connectors and pronouns for comprehension. After the mid-term test, there were still lots of doubts as regards textual reference. By the end of the year, this problem had not been solved; they could not grasp the concept of “referring to something”.

As regards the students' performance in listening comprehension activities, they needed a lot of repetition and wanted to understand every single word. Listening was difficult for them all throughout the year because of their obsession with trying to understand every word. They asked for videos and songs.

Group B: This group began the course with no idea of what “global comprehension” meant. However, they became skillful to make content inferences quickly and precisely through the analysis of examples in texts, thanks to an acute power of observation and reasoning. For example, they were able to infer whether a preposition indicated location or movement according to the verb that preceded it.

As regards listening strategies, at first they were worried about making out what sounds they were listening to, mainly because they realized they could not perceive “ED” endings. Later, they developed strategies connected with auditory cues to solve exercises, for example finding rhyming words in songs or spotting words for their sounds and then guessing the meaning by relating them to the context where they were included.

The charts show that there was a positive shift in the students' self evaluation of their reading strategies. The majority of the students in both groups had ranked their reading comprehension ability as FAIR in February (57,14% in group A and 57,89% in Group B). However, by November these figures fell over 40%: only 19,04% in Group A and no students in the experimental group.

Second came those cadets who had evaluated their reading strategies as GOOD. This group grew larger by November; in Group A the increase was from 23,80% to 76,19%, while the 31,57% of Group B became a significant 80%.

While no students had rated their reading strategies as VERY GOOD in February 1999, almost a 5% in Group A and a 20% in Group B did so in November.

On the other hand, while there was a small percentage of students who had rated their reading strategies as POOR in February, this category showed no figures in November in either of the groups.

As regards listening comprehension, the two groups experienced a positive shift as well.

Most of the students rated their listening comprehension strategies as FAIR in February 1999: 71,42% in group A and 63,15 % in Group B. The figures in both groups decreased by November: the percentage in Group A went down by 9,48% while in Group B the decrease was of 16,49%.

In second place came those students who ranked their listening comprehension ability as FAIR, but the numbers were lower in November 1999. In Group A the percentage went down from 28,57% to 19%, while in Group B the 26,31% shown in February 1999 was absorbed by higher categories in November.

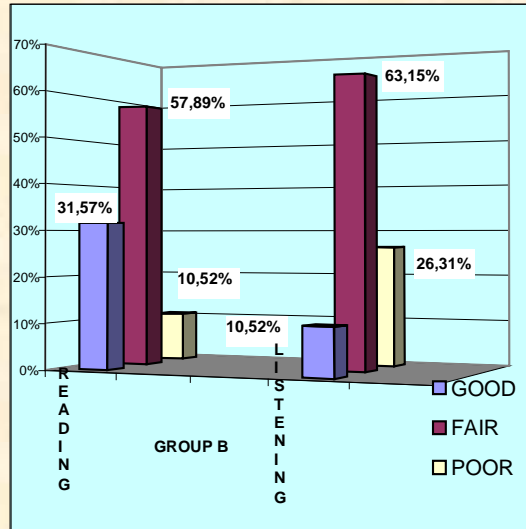
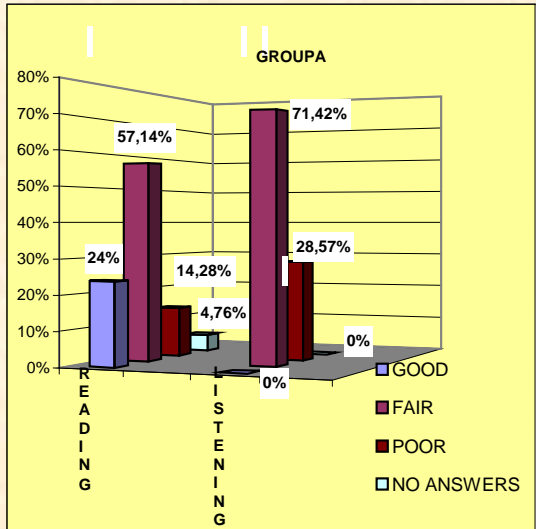
No students from Group A had evaluated their listening comprehension strategies as GOOD, but in November 19,04% of them did. In Group B, on the other hand, while the figures for good comprehension were 10,52%, in November they had reached 46,66% and 6,66% of the students assessed their listening comprehension as VERY GOOD while in

February no one had done so. None of the students in Group B rated their listening comprehension as VERY GOOD, either in February or in November.

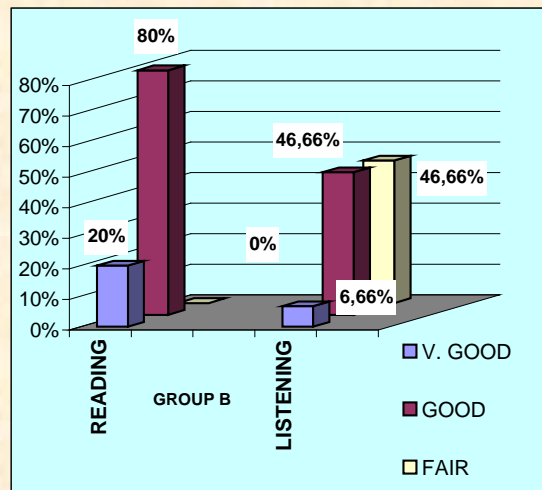
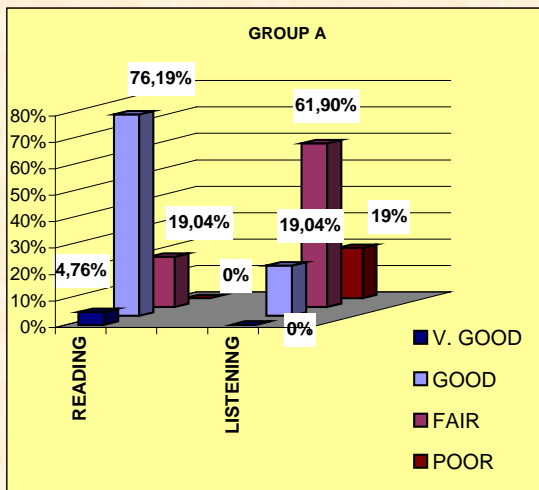
CHART 4.1

HOW DO YOU RATE YOUR COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH?

FEBRUARY 1999



NOVEMBER 1999



B. LINGUISTIC EXPONENTS

Group A: They showed great interest in points connected to linguistic competence. They could perceive the transformation from verb to phrasal verb very quickly and conjugated very fast.

However, it took them about four classes to relate the strategies they needed to solve a task with what they systematized. They were able to formulate rules by themselves, though.

An ever-present problem was their not remembering what they had seen. Even though they could systematize and make inferences, one class after that they seemed to have forgotten everything and the teacher had to explain everything from scratch time after time. For example, after working with the distinction between modals for three classes, they still could not get them right.

By the end of the year, the teacher had to go back to analyzing the forms of the verbs in the tenses studied because the students could not remember them. When it came to the correlation of tenses in use, they paid attention to the relationship between tenses when they were doing the exercise, but forgot about it later.

When it was time for revision, they asked plenty of questions; the number of questions grew larger before the final test.

Group B: This group was less concerned about linguistic exponents in spite of the fact that they could infer morphological occurrences easily (e.g., prefixation of adjectives for opposites). They could also deduce usage of the language through exponents in a given set of materials. They were also able to remember very well what they had studied and could recall structures and their uses. They could rephrase sentences or expressions using exponents studied previously. When they were working, they made observations about grammar points; they associated what they found with topics seen in preceding classes in order to guess the meaning of new items.

After the final field drills, they could remember grammar points clearly and were able to summarize previous work. They worked independently and efficiently; for example, they could deduce tense correlation after studying different examples carefully.

C. WRITING STRATEGIES

As the students' ability to produce written texts has not been a point for this research, I will only refer to it when I display the results of the tests, but I will not go into details of the writing activities carried out by the groups.

D. ORAL STRATEGIES

Group A: In class, they worked collaboratively, making contributions but making one-to-one word translations instead of finding equivalent expressions in English. This difficulty in expression led to more exposition and use of the language in class after the mid-term test, supported with mimicry

Group B: At first the cadets in this group felt embarrassed when they made a mistake. They tried very hard to achieve perfection. This led to more exposition and to freer communication. After that, they made a great effort to communicate their ideas in an independent way. They worked collaboratively in class to the extent of creating a story in English based on an experience narrated in Spanish by a classmate.

E. CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE DURING THE LESSONS

From the students' evaluation of classroom atmosphere during the lessons, we can see that the experimental group felt it to be more relaxed, motivating and didactic.

Even though more students from both groups evaluated the atmosphere as **relaxed** in November than in February, the difference was larger in Group B. Group A was the only one to assess classroom atmosphere as **stressing**, and then only a small percentage – 4,16%. But the percentage of students who rated classroom atmosphere as **boring** remained almost the same: 30,76% in February and 29,16% in November. On the contrary, in Group A, while only a 3,44% ranked the atmosphere during the lessons as

boring, no student did so in November. Quite the opposite, along the year more people evaluated it as **amusing** (17,24% to 26,31%) or as **didactic** (10,34% to 15,78%). These two categories did not come up in Group A. Some students in both groups evaluated the atmosphere during the lessons as **non-didactic** in February (11,53% in Group A and 13,79% in Group B), but in November the percentage in Group B climbed up to 12,50% while in Group B the percentage went down to 0%.

Group A: This group always assembled late for the class, and they did it very gradually; when a student was absent, hardly anyone knew why. Some cadets were difficult to handle: they had to be called to attention and asked to be quiet very often; they were detached from the rest, in their own world. Many other cadets did not even follow the commands they were given. They reacted badly to homework assignment; several students handed in their homework late and others did not hand in any homework at all. Most of them kept falling asleep. Before the winter holidays they refused to do any work in class because, they argued, they were not doing anything in the other subjects, and they wanted the same to happen in their English classes. It was difficult to encourage the students to carry on with the classes after the winter holidays. They did not pay attention and were always in a hurry to leave. They continued falling asleep. They were still very much teacher-dependent.

The situation worsened before they went away either on leave or for their field drills. They misbehaved; there was even rough playing, which I had to punish. The atmosphere was very tense because they often had to be told off.

After the last field drills, and before their final test, many cadets were working on chores connected with other subjects or sleeping. They had to be strongly told to start working on the activities assigned to them.

Group B: This group always assembled before the teacher reached the classroom and when a student was missing, there was always some other student who knew where the missing student was.

At the beginning of the year, when they were assigned homework, the students reacted negatively, but in time this changed and by the end of the year they showed a totally different attitude.

At the beginning of the second term they were very tired and needed a lot of help to carry on, but all throughout the year they became more attentive.

Charts 4.2 and 4.3 show how the subjects defined the classroom atmosphere during their classes.

CHART 4.2

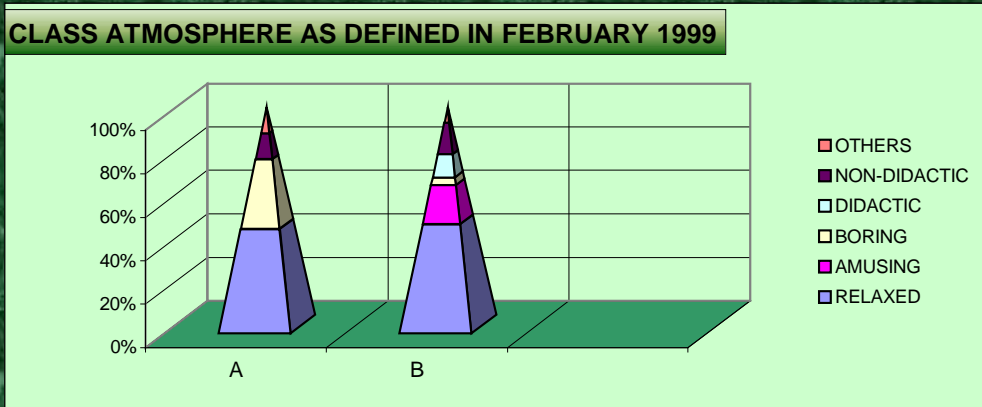
HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE THE CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE DURING THE LESSONS ?

	Feb-99		Nov-99			Feb-99		Nov-99	
	A	A	B	B		B	B		
RELAXED	46,15	54,16	48,27	57,89	RELAXED	48,27	57,89	48,27	57,89
STRESSING	0	4,16	17,24	26,31	AMUSING	17,24	26,31	17,24	26,31
BORING	30,76	29,16	3,44	0	BORING	3,44	0	3,44	0
NON-DIDACTIC	11,53	12,50	10,34	15,78	DIDACTIC	10,34	15,78	10,34	15,78
OTHERS	11,53		13,79	0	NON-DIDACTIC	13,79	0	13,79	0
			6,89		OTHERS	6,89		6,89	

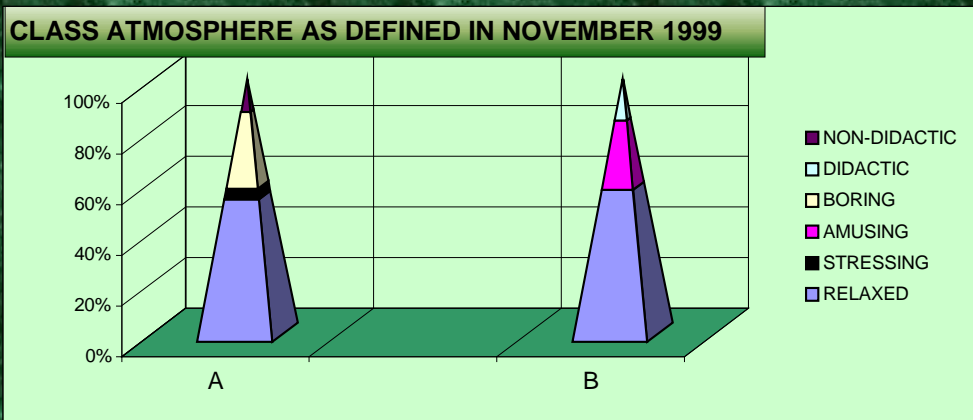
Chart 4.3: Classroom atmosphere as perceived by students in February and November.

CHART 4.3

FEBRUARY 1999



NOVEMBER 1999



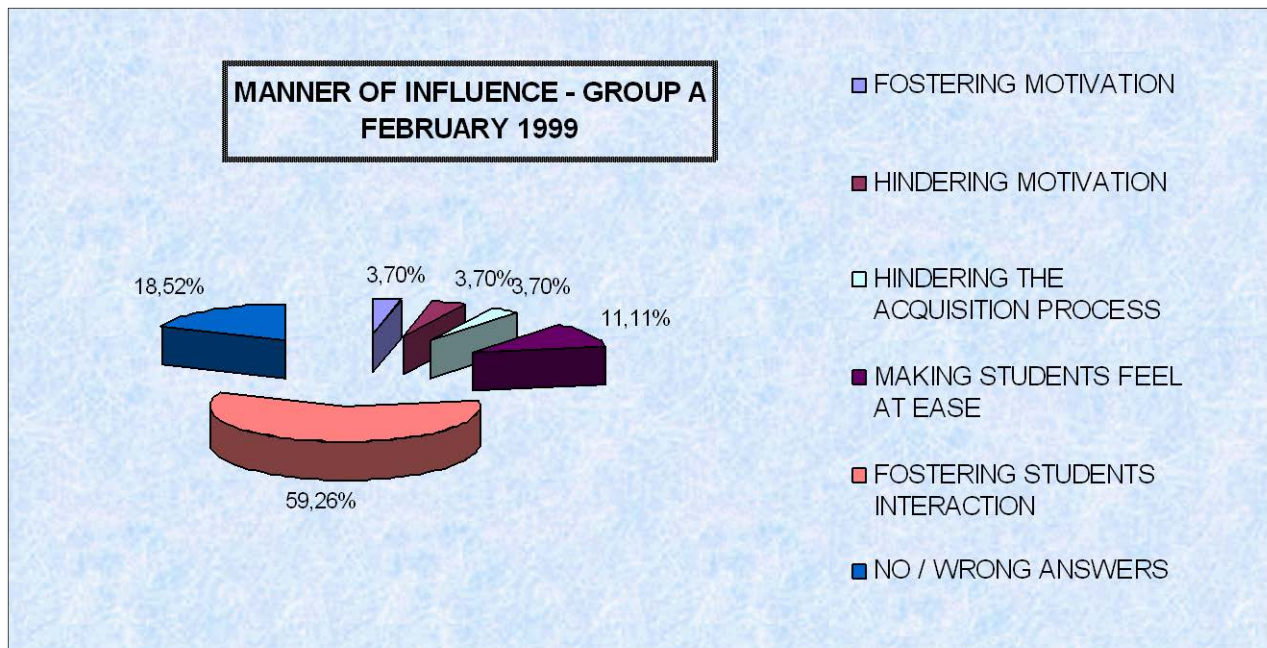
Now I will consider how the *atmosphere in the classroom during the lessons* influenced *learning* according to the *students' assessment* of how these two elements were related.

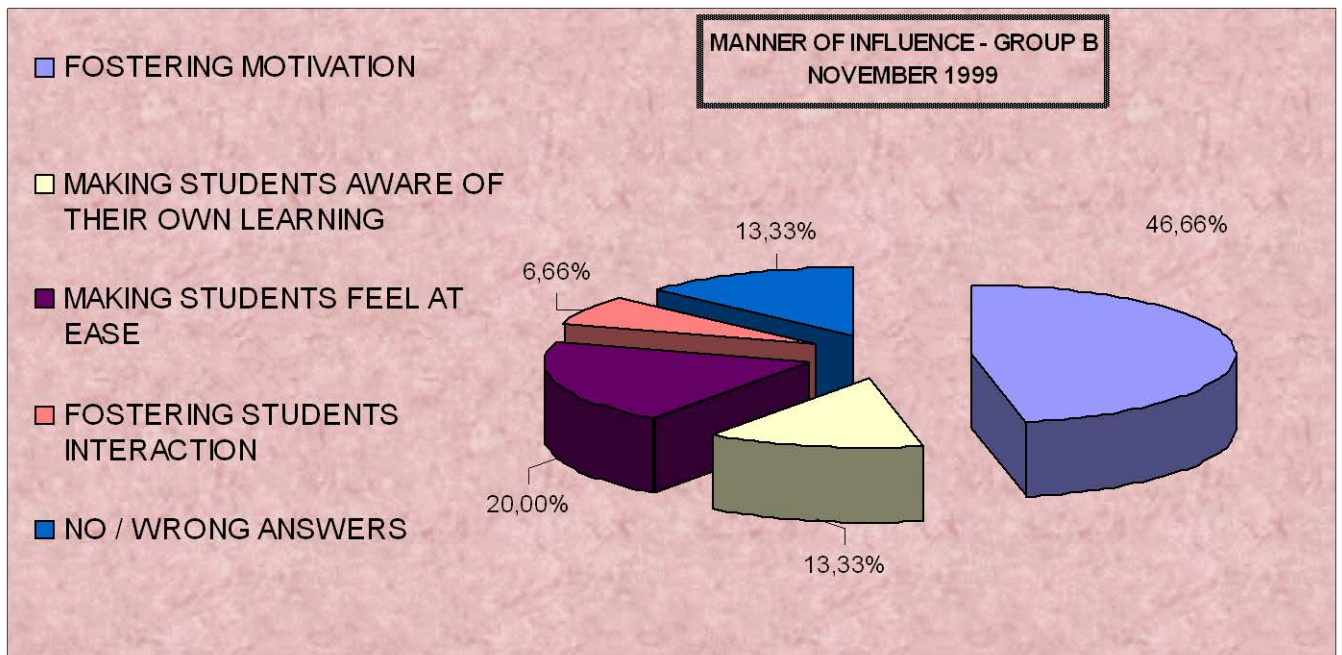
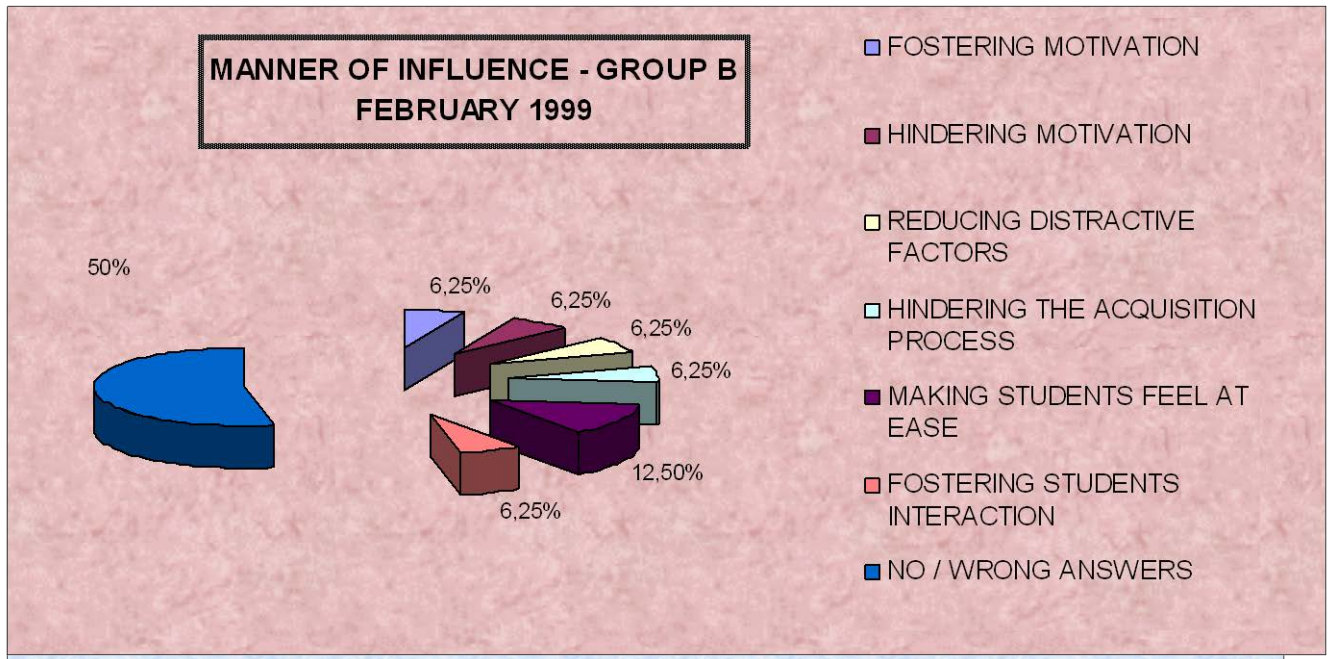
Even though both groups stated that the atmosphere was *relaxed*, the difference of perception between February and November was remarkable; while the control group showed an increase of 5,82%, the rise in the experimental group was of 40,41%. In spite of this, in November 12,70% more students in the control group said they had felt at ease, whereas the difference between February and November shown by the experimental group in this respect was only of 7,50%. Besides, both groups said in November that they

had **become aware of their own learning**, although the quantitative difference reflects **more awareness** in the experimental group (13,33% versus 9,52% of the control group).

When there was a feeling of amusement and didacticism together with the relaxed atmosphere I have referred to, students experienced a **higher degree of motivation**. This was the case with the group working with **authentic materials**. On the other hand, when this relaxed atmosphere came together with boredom and the feeling of lack of didacticism, as it happened to the students in the control group, this turned out to **hinder motivation, interaction between/among students and, worst of all, the acquisition process itself**.

Charts 4.4 and 4.5: How the subjects considered classroom atmosphere influenced their learning. (February and November 1999)





Performance of the cadets in their evaluations

The time allotted for the written test is of 90 minutes for the "C" marks and 120 minutes for the mid-term and the final tests. I have explained the marking scheme for the written test; now I am going to explain the criteria taken into consideration for the oral

exam. The methodology for the oral examination (only for the mid-term test and the final test) consisted of describing a picture story. According to the exam instructions, **the students are not interrupted unless they are not understood**. The students cannot fail any of the main contents of the previous course, as the standards of promotion require. The same holds for the new main contents of the course – i.e., past tense. However, they are allowed reasonable mistakes. Resourcefulness and success in getting the message through are favourable points for the examinee. They are given 5-10 minutes for preparing and doing this test.

Before describing the performance of the students in this study at the exams, I want to make it clear that for the evaluation of exercises which allowed two possible answers, I considered either of them correct.

Group A:

Unit 1- The students were frightened at the idea of having to write. They could not understand the instructions and asked a lot of questions about vocabulary. They were very cautious and went through the answers carefully before handing their tests in. Most of the cadets in this group attended coaching classes at the academy before sitting for the test.

Unit 2- The cadets needed a lot of explanation of vocabulary and complained about the length of the test.

Pre-test (before mid-term)- The subjects did very well at working with linguistic exponents, though less than 50% of the class passed this test. They asked a lot of questions about vocabulary, contents and instructions and did not remember past forms.

Unit 4- The students complained about the composition exercise. They said they had not been told about having to write one. They could not understand the instructions. They asked a lot of questions about vocabulary to include in their composition since they started working on it.

Unit 5- The students were very nervous when solving this test; they asked not to consider their tests in their evaluation and even not to be marked at all. They asked for permission to use their books and notes (which was denied). There was no composition exercise in this test.

Unit 6- They still asked a lot of questions about vocabulary.

Group B:

Unit 1- They felt they could not cope with the test, but they asked few questions. They handed in their tests very quickly and asked for permission to leave.

Unit 2- The cadets complained about the length of the test, but no questions were asked.

Pre-test (before mid-term)- The students did very poorly at linguistic activities; the past continuous was the weakest point of all. Less than 50% of the cadets passed it.

Unit 4- The students felt uneasy about the composition exercise; they asked a lot of questions about vocabulary for their compositions.

Unit 5- No comments about this test. The cadets worked on their own. There was no composition activity. The students showed a great improvement as regards intelligent guesses and comprehension of texts.

Unit 6- The students worked quite independently; they asked very few questions. The questions that were asked showed clear reasoning and careful reading (they paid a lot of attention to punctuation and the ways in which meaning could change if punctuation was wrongly used).

The charts below summarise the percentage of success in the tests described above.

Chart 4.6: Synopsis of percentage of success in the different tests

PERCENTAGE OF SUCCESS OF STUDENTS PER AREA OF ASSESSMENT

	READ. STR.		LING. EXP.		WRIT. STR.		% OF SUCCESS		ORAL STR.		TOTAL AVERAGE (*)	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
UNIT 1	73,01%	82,46%	76,19%	60,52%	47,61%	36,84%			N/E	N/E	42,85%	36,84%
UNIT 2	67,85%	51,37%	69,83%	68,40%	42,85%	68,42%			N/E	N/E	52,38%	63,16%
MID-TERM TEST	92,85%	97,05%	87,29%	84,31%	42,85%	52,94%	71,42%	82,35	71,22%	76,47%	71,32%	79,41%
UNIT 4	92,85%	94,11%	78,56%	76,46%	52,38%	64,70%			N/E	N/E	85,71%	76,47%
UNIT 5	68,25%	91,66%	34,91%	37,50%	N/E	N/E			N/E	N/E	66,66%	81,25%
UNIT 6	95,23%	100%	61,89%	43,75%	85,71%	87,50%			N/E	N/E	61,90%	50%
FINAL TEST	45,23%	62,50%	57,13%	70,83%	52,38%	62,50%	57,14%	76,92	42,85%	87,50%	49,99%	82,21%

(N/E= not evaluated)

(*) Includes written and oral exams in mid-term and final evaluation

Chart 4.7: Synopsis of success in tests after each unit

PERCENTAGE OF SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE AT THE END OF EACH UNIT

	UNIT 1		UNIT 2		MID-TERM TEST		UNIT 4		UNIT 5		UNIT 6		FINAL TEST	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
READING STRATEGIES	73,01%	82,46%	67,85%	51,37%	92,85%	97,05%	92,85%	94,11%	68,25%	91,66%	95,23%	100%	45,23%	68,75%
LINGUISTIC EXPONENTS	76,19%	60,52%	69,83%	68,40%	87,29%	84,31%	78,56%	76,46%	34,91%	37,50%	61,89%	43,75%	57,13%	70,83%
WRITING STRATEGIES	47,61%	36,84%	42,85%	68,42%	42,85%	52,94%	52,38%	64,70%	N/E	N/E	85,71%(*)	87,50%(*)	52,38%	62,50%
ORAL STRATEGIES	N/E	N/E	N/E	N/E	61,90%	76,47%	N/E	N/E	N/E	N/E	N/E	N/E	42,85%	87,50%
TOTAL PERCENTAGE OF SUCCESS	42,85%	36,84%	52,38%	63,16%	66,66%	79,41%	85,71%	76,47%	66,66%	81,25%	61,90%	50%	49,99%	82,21%

The following section will show the conclusions arrived at.

CONCLUSIONS.

In this section, I will try to analyse the results of the research in the light of the theoretical background described (section 1) in order to draw probable conclusions and I will suggest some possible action that might help our students become better language learners.

Before the revision period started, a survey was given the students to complete. They were asked to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do you rate your comprehension in English? (as regards reading and listening)

- 2) What kind of reading or listening materials are you usually in contact with?
- 3) How would you define the atmosphere of the English classes?
- 4) Has this kind of atmosphere had any influence on your learning?
- 5) If so, how?

These same questions were given to them at the end of the year in order to see how the cadets perceived their progress (the charts resulting from the answers have been shown in section 4).

The analysis of the students' work during the year showed that they were quite able to establish the necessary connections between the different topics and to understand the processes that are behind efficient comprehension (see charts before charts 4.6 and 4.7). Although their usage of linguistic exponents was not as good as that of the control group, they were able to remember what they had learnt for much longer, that is to say, in Krashen's words, they had acquired the right strategies to commit that knowledge to long-term memory.

This permanence of knowledge gave them security and self-esteem and helped them work independently. Their self-esteem changed throughout the year; when they did their diagnostic tests, about 95% of the cadets had handed in their tests fifteen minutes before the allotted time ended in the conviction that they had solved all the exercises satisfactorily enough. However, these tests turned out not to be very successful: only 36,84% of the subjects managed to pass it. This must have been a kind of self-esteem which had no real foundations. Later, they became more reflective and the feeling of self-confidence that grew in them was more connected with their concrete and real competence. The two aspects mentioned, security and self-esteem, led them to become independent from their teacher's guide and guided them into intelligent guesses which showed their understanding of the processes at work in the linguistic system. They also contributed to the class voluntarily, which is an index of their being at ease, as they had held, and they could express themselves openly because they did not feel under pressure.

It would not be too audacious to say that these students finally succeeded in becoming "self-directed agents of learning" in the sense we have described. They were able to transfer what they knew to new communicative situations, and although at the beginning of the year they were prone to seek for perfection in linguistic competence as they were using the language, they managed to become more communicative in the end.

The following chart summarizes the percentage of success in tests at the end of each semester. I have decided to consider the students' performance at these moments because it was then when the students took the tests that summed up how much they had acquired throughout each term.

TEST	GROUP A	GROUP B	INTER-GROUP DIFFERENCE
MID-TERM	66,66%	79,41%	12,75%
FINAL	49,99%	82,21%	32,22%
YEARLY DIFFERENCE	-16,67%	+ 2,80	19,47%

As the chart shows, at the beginning of the year the quantitative difference in performance between the two groups was not too wide, but it increased as the year went by. The performance of the control group decreased by the end of the year. The difference between the two groups between June and November is of 19,47%, as is the difference

between the decrease in the levels of performance of Group A and the levels of performance of Group B along the year. Although the group that worked with authentic materials made quite a difference, it is important to highlight the fact that these are the results of a year's work, which, in our opinion, is not representative enough. It would be necessary to observe the performance of these groups, or the cadets in them, for a longer period. But in practice, this will be quite difficult since, as we said when we described the composition of the groups. The students will be reshuffled the following year and all of them will be exposed to many different teachers and materials.

To sum up, the subjects exposed to authentic materials felt at ease, worked independently and became better **decoders** and strategic learners in general. In this light, I suggest that teachers working in a place with the characteristics of the institution where I carried out this study try to enforce a method of teaching which leaves behind the total, or almost total, dependence on the coursebook. Also, that they plan activities based on authentic materials which can make the contents easier to acquire and the atmosphere more motivating for a feeling of independence and self-esteem. This will make the students feel freer from pressure and more open to development and personal growth, i.e. they will strengthen their self-esteem and in this way they will become more strategic, independent learners.

NOTE: At present, every classroom at the academy is being furnished with its own TV set, VCR, personal computer, overhead projector and screen. This, together with the change of the furniture, makes it possible to enforce the use of authentic materials for language teaching. (July 2003)

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