

The Design and Development of an Online Course as a Preparation for a Cambridge PET Examination for the Listening Section

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Abstract

This study explores and describes the effect of implementing an adapted flipped classroom model version when preparing 29 undergraduate students for a Cambridge PET examination in an online learning environment. The specific research objective was to analyze the students' English proficiency level improvement through an online course. The study used a quantitative design method; online pre and post-intervention exams were used to collect data based on listening, reading and writing skills. The focus of this document will be on the listening skill section. Finally, a statistical report of what percentage of students were more likely to pass an Official Cambridge PET examination is presented. Results showed that 34,49% obtained passing grades in the Pre-intervention exam, and 51,73% obtained passing grades in the Post-intervention exam. The effect size of the Pre and Post-intervention exams was of 0.22 with a 9%ile gain which means there was a modest effect in general for the three skills mentioned above. In the listening skill section, students showed a 4%ile gain considered a quite small effect. In conclusion, more than 50% of the students demonstrated they would be likely to pass an official Cambridge B1 or intermediate level examination after the intervention. However, important aspects such as learners' time dedication, number of hours to practice, speaking skill practice and the intervention of more than one rater could be useful to improve the effectiveness of this innovation on learners.

Keywords: Online learning, autonomous learning, flipped classroom.

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Introduction

The purpose of this study was to develop a pilot online course for helping undergraduate students from Universidad Politécnica Salesiana (UPS), located in Guayaquil - Ecuador, who were in their last English level class reach an intermediate or B1 language proficiency level as well as the required strategies to be prepared for the Preliminary English Test (PET) which is a proficiency examination created by Cambridge University Press. The sample of this study was non-probabilistic consisting of 29 undergraduate students' ages 18 to 30 years in level 6 of the English program at the University of study. Non-probabilistic means sampling without using random selection methods; it requires researchers to use their subjective judgments, drawing on theory and practice, or experience (Lund, 2012). This course was implemented in two weeks dedicating 8 hours of practice for each of the language skills: reading, writing and listening. For this paper, the main focus will be the listening section.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard for describing language ability which is used around the world to describe learners' language skills. The CEFR (2014) explains that on a B1 or intermediate level, a learner is considered an independent user that is able to understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, "school", and leisure; deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken; produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest; describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions; and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Problem

For this study, it was identified that even after completing the 6 levels of the English program from UPS, many undergraduate students were not prepared to take the Cambridge PET exam nor had they reached an intermediate level based on results of institutional examinations. In addition, taking extra on-site classes was not an option for many students due to the fact that a high percentage of them had a low language proficiency level in English because of the lack of study time, difficulties attending regular face to face courses and above all, high costs.

With the interest of finding possible solutions to the problem aforementioned; the idea of online learning gave students the opportunity to study, learn and improve their English knowledge while continuing to meet their professional and personal time constraints. By the time the study was carried out, there were very few universities that offered online or blended English courses to improve learners' language proficiency in Ecuador (British Council, 2015).

Local Context

In Ecuador, higher education has become more demanding in learning a foreign language in the last five years. This is demonstrated by the promulgation of many new governmental regulations that require new levels of proficiency in a foreign language for university graduates. English is the predominant foreign language being required

for professional, social, economic, and educational purposes. On the other hand, technology has also become an important part of the educational system stimulating the demand for online programs or courses as a different option for studying in universities.

Foreign language learning in Ecuador has reached new heights by becoming a requisite for students at different levels of education. The Organic Law of Higher Education of Ecuador (Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior or LOES in Spanish), regulated by the Higher Education Council (Consejo de Educación Superior or CES in Spanish), stipulates in its higher education guidelines (Reglamento de Régimen Académico or RRA in Spanish), pertaining to foreign language learning, that every undergraduate student must achieve an intermediate or B1 English proficiency level based on the Common European Framework Reference for Foreign Languages (CEFR) once they have completed 60% of their coursework or they will not be able to continue with their program of study.

In order to meet the growing demands for language proficiency in English, many educational institutions are implementing the use of technology in their classrooms. For the Universidad Politécnica Salesiana (UPS), improving English proficiency using technology has been the core of the institutional strategic plan in the last five years. Ramos and García-Peñalvo (2013) explained that the implementation of Information Technology and Communication (ITC) in education has opened new learning environments such as virtual classrooms, Massive Open Online Courses is “MOOCS”, and Learning Management Systems (LMS).

To accomplish the goal of creating a model of an online English course; a virtual platform or Learning Management System called *Schoology* was the host of the course. The official website explained that this online platform greatly contributes to facilitating learning both autonomously and collaboratively at any time, from any place and even from different smart electronic devices such as tablets and smartphones (Schoology, 2017).

Innovation Objective

To develop appropriate strategies, tasks, and resources for improving English proficiency skills as a preparation for a PET examination in an online learning environment.

Innovation: Listening Section

After the pre-intervention exam, learners were exposed to different individual and/or group learning activities, tasks or assignments to reinforce the listening skill as well as give them the necessary learning tools, strategies, and/or academic resources to be prepared for a Cambridge PET examination.

The listening section was graded over 10 points being 7 the minimum score to be considered acceptable to probably pass a real PET Cambridge examination; this scoring range was selected with the purpose of aligning it with the one used by the participant university. The listening section was objectively and automatically graded by the online platform since the types of questions included matching, multiple-choice, and fill in the gaps formats.

Results were first calculated as means and standard deviations and then translated into a unit of measurement referred to as an effect size that expresses the increase or decrease in achievement or level of students' language skills improvement. Finally, percentile gain or loss was presented differentiating the pre and post-intervention results. Figures 1, 2 and 3 show how the listening section of the online course was visualized by learners.

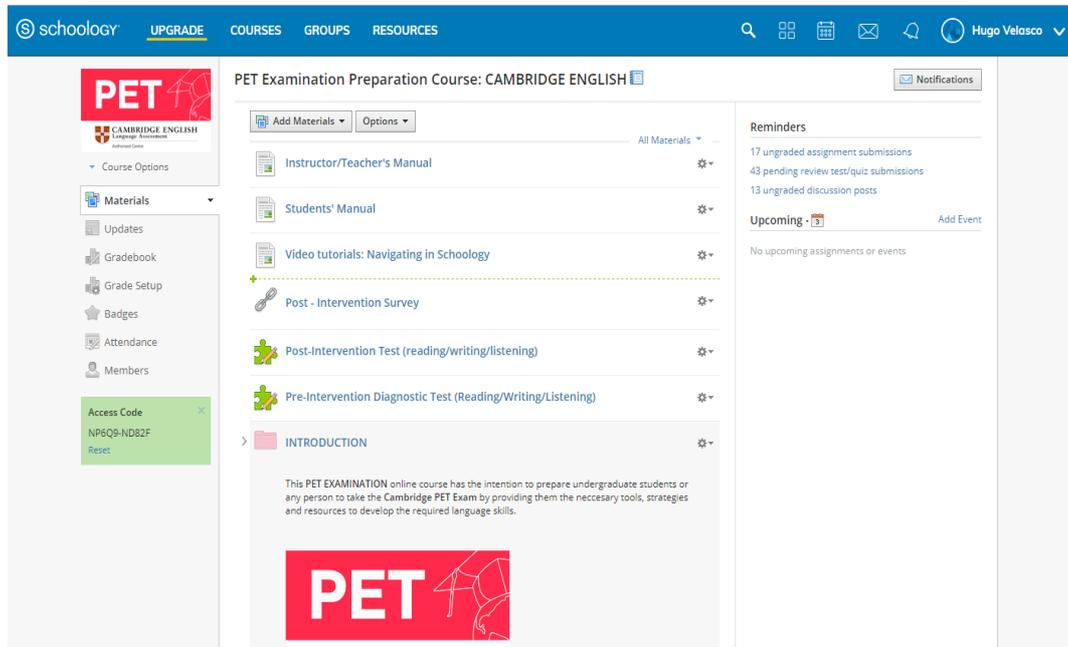


Figure 1: Main page of the online course

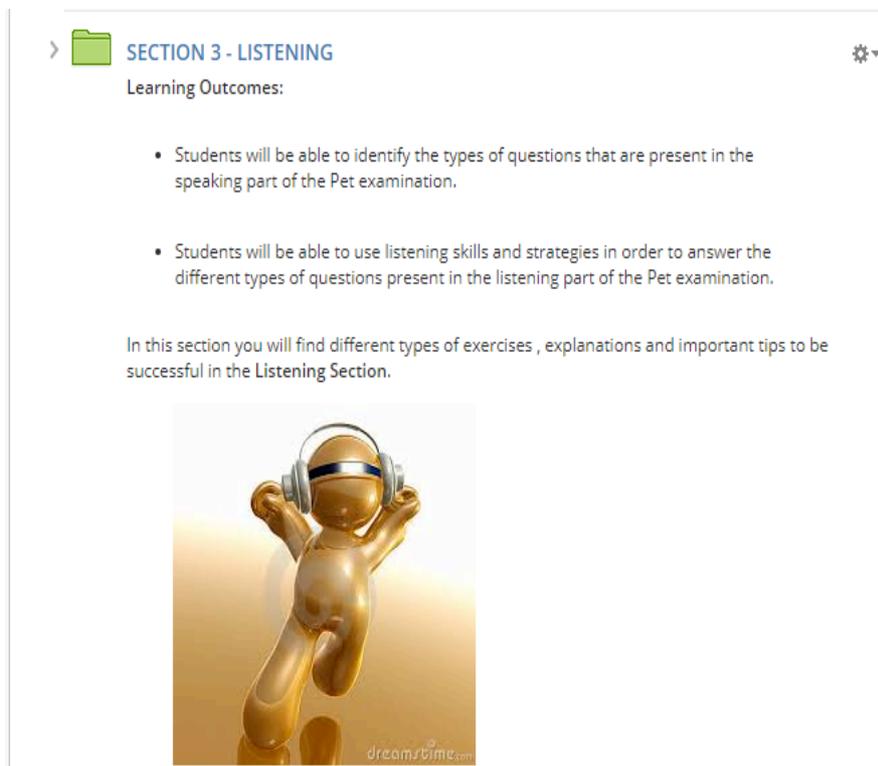


Figure 2: Online course – Listening Section

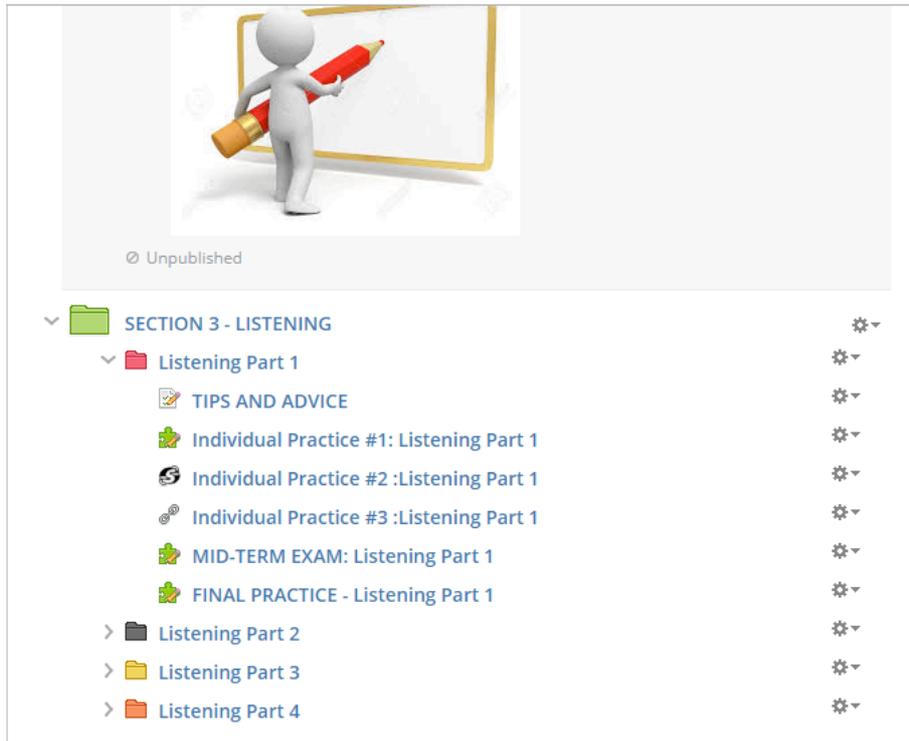


Figure 3: Online course – Listening Subsection 3

Lastly, the online course designed and implemented for this study might serve as a pilot for future study programs in meeting the growing demands for English language proficiency improvement.

Conclusions

In summary, the 29 participants of this study had a 9%ile improvement after two weeks of practice (8 hours per skill) in three out of four proficiency skills included in a PET Cambridge examination: reading, writing, and listening which means there was a modest effect. Consequently, for the listening section, there was a 4%ile gain resulting in a quite small effect.

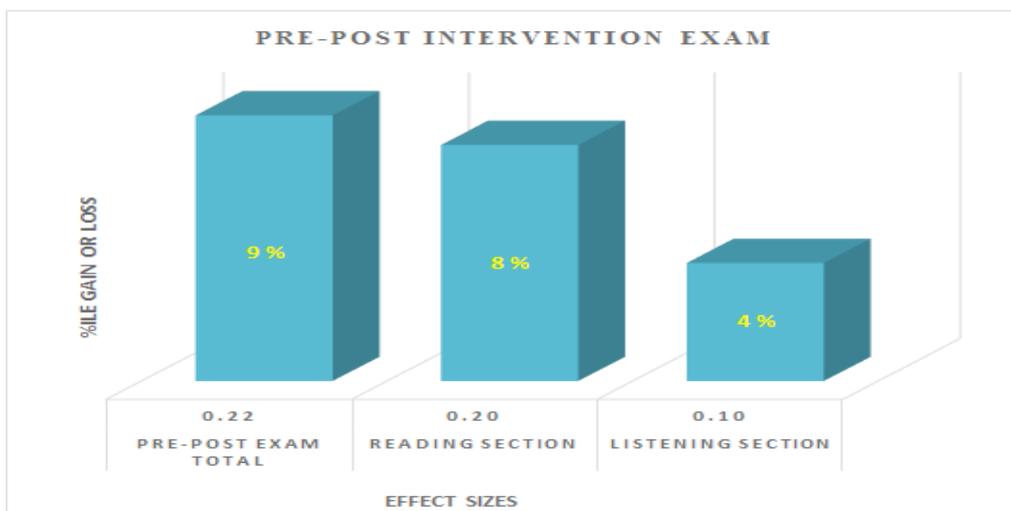


Figure 4: Pre-Post Intervention Exam Results.

In the end, final scores showed that 51.71% would be likely to obtain a B1 or intermediate English proficiency level in an official Cambridge PET examination after the intervention compared to the 34.46% that was obtained before the intervention. Additionally, learning the mechanics, types of questions and organization of the PET examination contributed to the learners' progress shown.

As limitations of this study, it is important to mention that the initial idea of this pilot project was to facilitate between 4 to 5 weeks of practice on the four different language skills; however, students took this course simultaneously with other subjects and the regular English class they have in each term or semester. This aspect reduced the student study time and consequently, the teacher had to adapt the content for a two weeks' plan. In addition, the speaking skill was not considered for this study since the time and students' availability was very short. The results of this pilot course gave an important and general idea of the English proficiency level of students; however, it did not guarantee they will certainly pass an official Cambridge PET examination.

The findings of this study may serve as a basis to plan and organize a more complete and longer online preparation course considering the four different language skills and more time for appropriate practice and learning. One significant recommendation would be to reinforce or invest more time on practicing the listening section since it was the skill which obtained the smallest improvement and it is usually the most challenging for students from Ecuador.

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