

ABA ENGLISH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

UAB - Case Study

FINAL REPORT

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Abstract

This ABA English qualitative research was conducted as a pilot to ensure that students will use the course properly in the future. The first sample is composed of two English classes at the Autonomous University of Barcelona during the Fall semester of 2015. The study lasted for one semester (15 weeks). The classes were separated by majors: Humanities and Engineering. The students' age range is between 19 and 22. The majority of students are native Catalan or Spanish speakers.

Keywords: English as a second language (ESL); mobile learning; blended learning; effectiveness; natural method; English for real life; case study

Introduction

We live in an era of information technology and this affects all aspects of our lives and plays a significant role in the development of today's society, including education, and therefore language learning or ESL (English as a Second Language). For this reason, it is crucial to take advantage of modern technology to aid the task of English language education.

ESL students need further language support. They need practice in hearing language, reading language, speaking language and writing language in order to develop their experience and skills (Ybarra & Green, 2003). To carry out such tasks, students require a range of tools which can help them learn the language easily and effectively.

This paper aims to highlight the effectiveness of ABA English's methodology by using a blended approach to teaching English as a second language. It discusses different approaches and techniques which can help English language students to improve their learning skills by using technology.

The ABA Method

The course is based on a situational syllabus which focuses on the four basic skills of language learning: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The learner's role with this type of syllabus is to mimic and memorize what he or she has learned. The instructor chooses content based on the language that occurs in a given situation (Rodgers, 2001). The order of the sections in the units is based on this methodology in which speaking comes before writing and new structures and vocabulary come before speaking (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). The ABA English course contains 144 units, with 24 units in each of its six levels. Each unit covers the four basic language skills and is made up of the following:

1. ABA Film: This is a short film based on a real-life situation containing grammar structures and relevant vocabulary seen in context. This section is the basis for the rest of the unit, providing communicative functions and grammatical structures addressed in the other sections. Students can watch the short films with or without subtitles.
2. Speak: This section features ABA English's unique LRC (Listen-Record-Compare) technology, allowing students to repeat the dialogue they have just heard. This helps students to improve their pronunciation and practice using the grammar structures introduced in the film.
3. Write: Students complete a dictation by listening to phrases from the dialogue and typing what they hear. This method allows them to improve their spelling and fluency as they cannot complete the section if phrases or words are not written correctly. Students can also use the help button to see the correct answer and gauge their own progress by consulting the progress tool in their Campus.
4. Interpret: Students act out the roles of the characters from the ABA Films by recording the dialogue using the LRC technology. This makes the speaking experience more authentic.
5. Video Class: Students learn grammar structures in a video taught by an ABA Teacher. They can watch the videos with or without subtitles. The teachers in the Video Classes and the actors

and actresses from the ABA Films come from different English-speaking countries so students are exposed to a variety of accents.

6. Exercises: Students complete grammar exercises related to the unit, allowing them to also practice using new vocabulary.

7. Vocabulary: All new words from the unit appear in this section. Students once again use the LRC technology to practice pronunciation.

8. Assessment: This is the final test students complete after finishing the previous seven sections. To pass this section, students must score 8 out of 10 or higher.

Natural Method

The course is also based on the *natural method* in which students' natural predisposition for language learning is stimulated through the course content. Learning English occurs intuitively, just like children learn their first language through discovery.

The *natural method*, also known as the *direct method*, promotes language immersion through visual aids, acting, speaking and listening, and places less focus on grammar than traditional courses.

Research Design

Prior to starting the ABA course, students completed the Oxford level test to determine where to start. The Oxford Online Placement Test helps place students in the appropriate level class for a language course. It is also used as a quick measure of a student's general language ability.

This test is different from most other placement tests. Not only does it test grammar and vocabulary but it also tests how learners use that knowledge in order to understand the meaning in communication. The test has two sections: *Use of English* and *Listening*. It gives both an overall score and individual scores for each section. The test is online, allowing people to take

it anywhere: at home, at school, at work or under examination conditions if they choose. It is automatically marked with instant results. Students have the option of either British or American English; you select the variety of English tested and the mix of accents when you assign the test. It tests a person's understanding when communicating in English.

The study was conducted during a one-semester (15-week) course. Students were not required to complete one full ABA level. They were told to follow the order they felt best suited them. The students were required to study one unit a week in their own time and complete a worksheet containing information about the unit, what they had learned, their score and feedback.

Sample Description

The sample is made up of 66 students in two different English classes which I taught at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. One class was made up of 29 fourth-year Engineering majors and the other class was made up of 37 third-year Humanities majors. Students were not grouped according to their level and so both classes had a range of English levels, from Beginner to Business, with Upper Intermediate being the most common level.

Use of the ABA Course in the Classroom

The ABA course was interwoven with the UAB English course as part of a blended approach, allowing students to enhance their language skills in all four areas. As the UAB class was mainly focused on conversation skills, the ABA course proved useful for reinforcing grammar points with Video Classes. Students were required to study at least one unit per week (a minimum of 15 units) in their own time and complete a report. This report included the unit studied, their score, a summary of what they had learned and their feedback on each unit.

Units Studied by Level

See below an overview of the units studied in each level. The most studied level was Advanced and the least studied was Beginners.

Figure 1 - Beginners

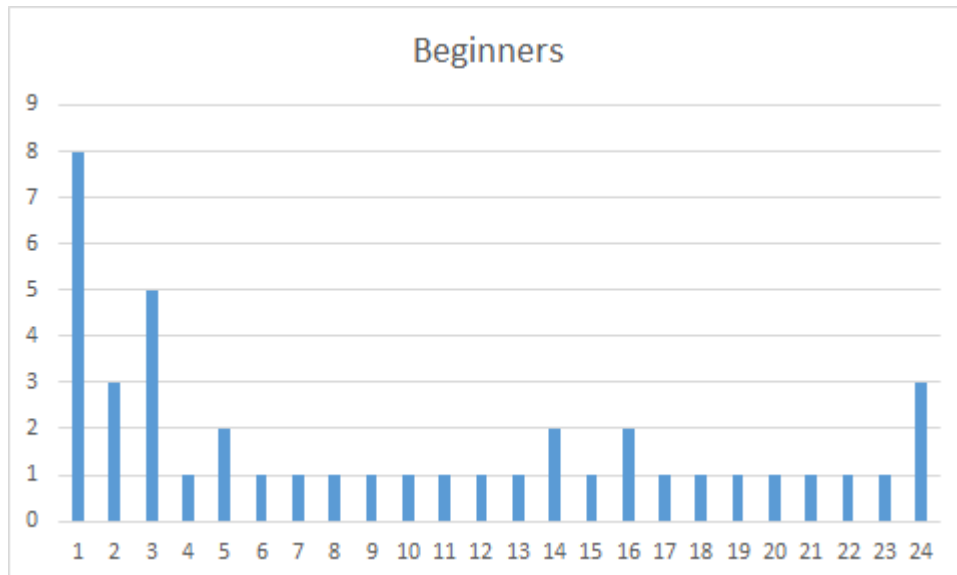


Figure 2 - Lower Intermediate

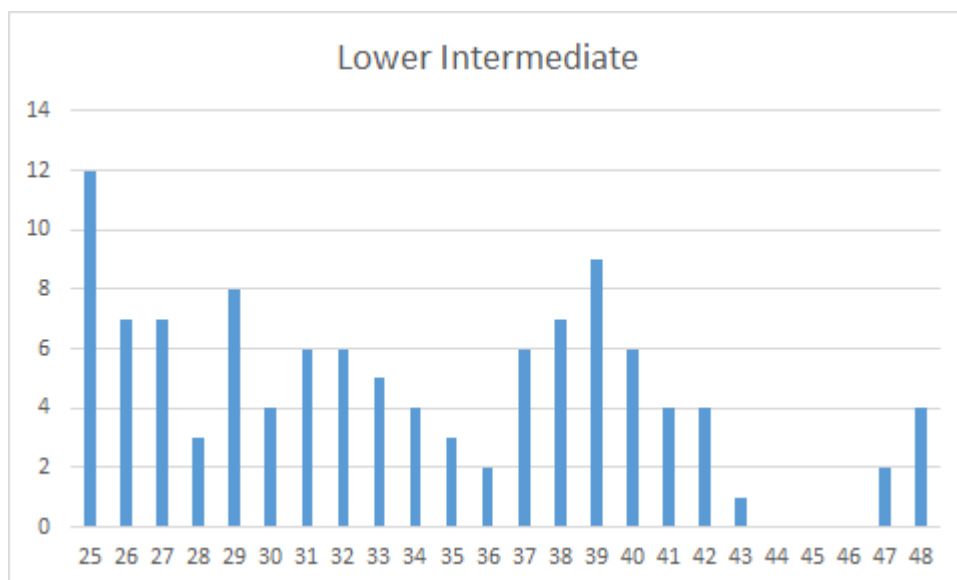


Figure 3 - Intermediate

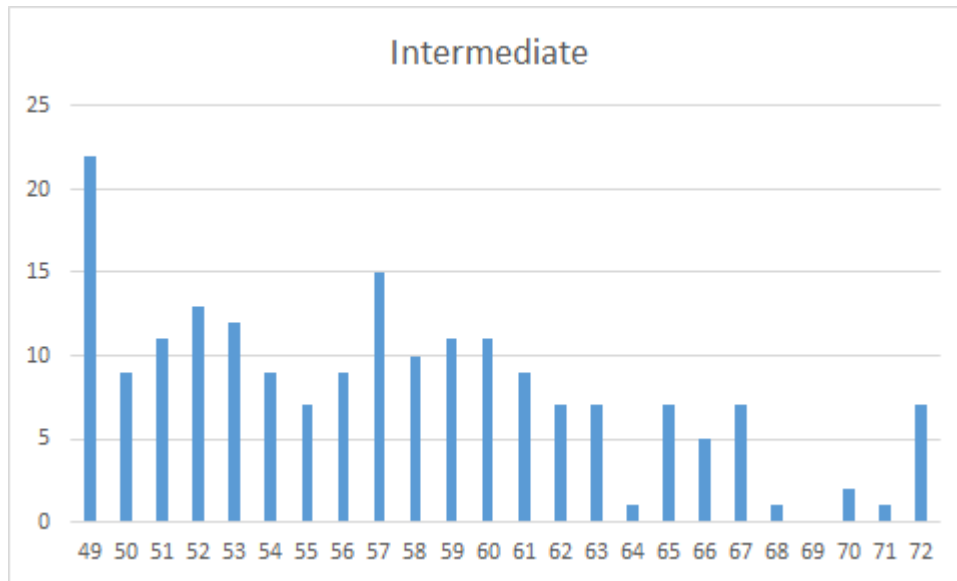


Figure 4 - Upper Intermediate

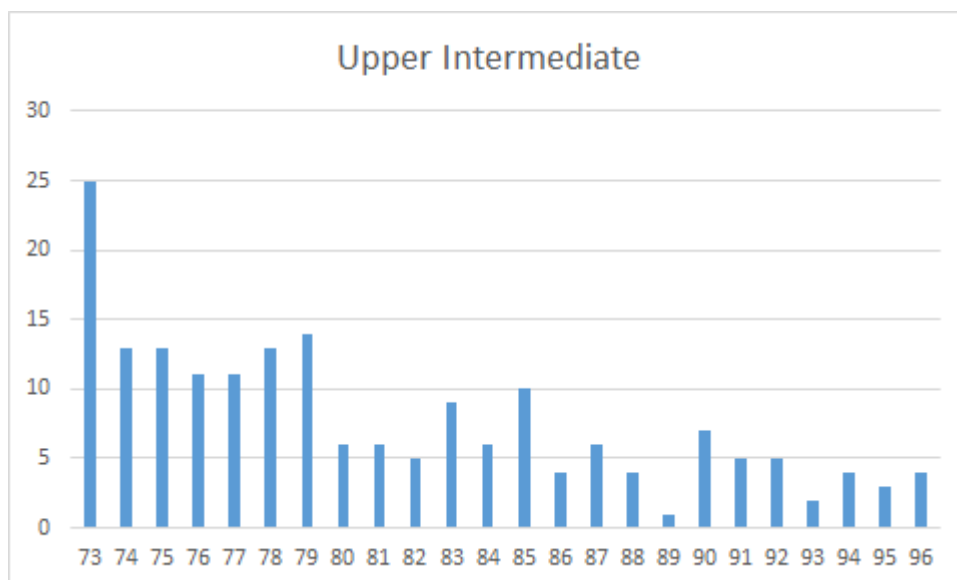


Figure 5 - Advanced

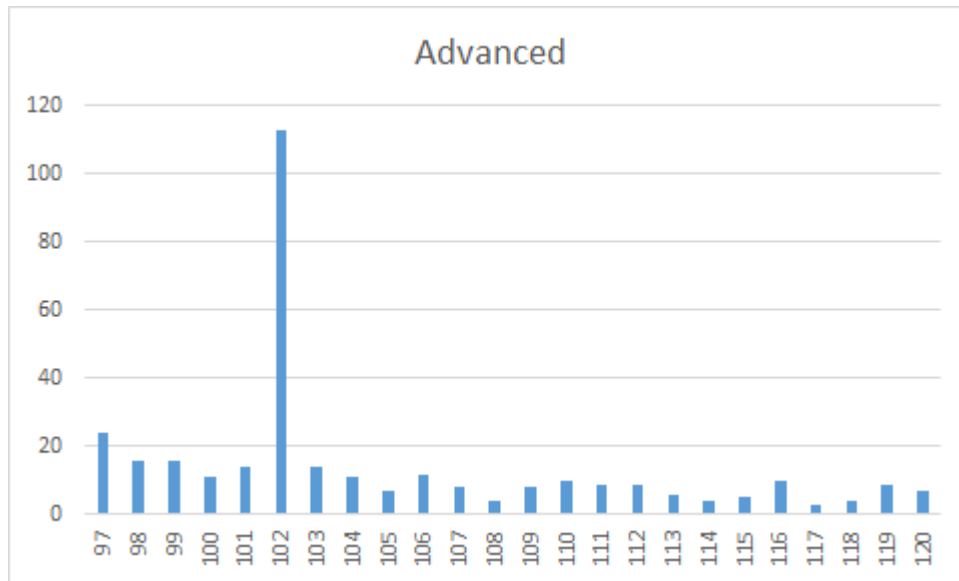
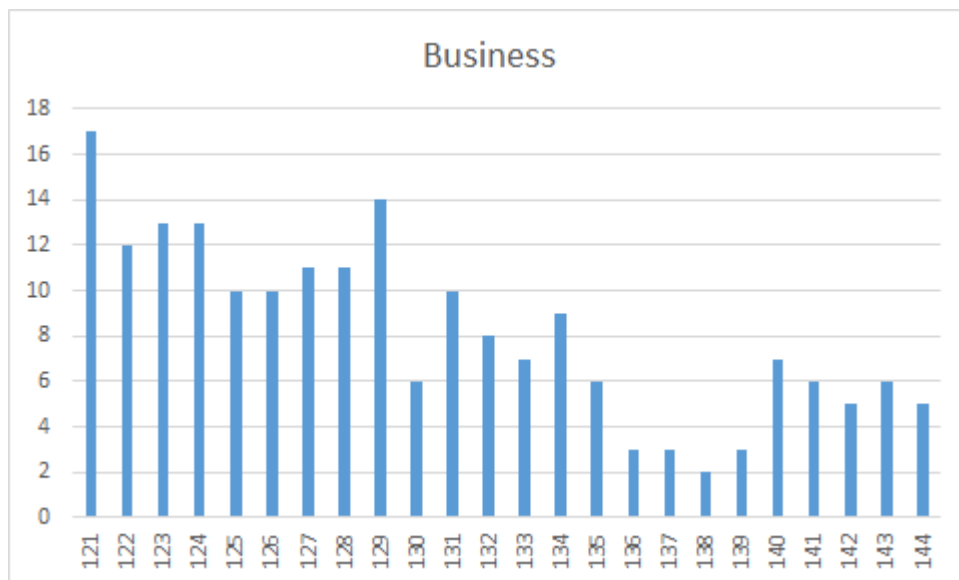


Figure 6 - Business



Main Results

After reviewing students' progress and feedback (see Appendix I), the following conclusions have been drawn:

Many of the ABA Films represent real-life situations, which are useful for students. The majority of participants found the course to be interactive, dynamic and fun. They emphasized that the video classes were an effective and entertaining way to learn grammar. Having the option to watch the films with English or Spanish subtitles is helpful, especially for lower level students. The course provides a wide range of vocabulary, examples and expressions. The Listen-Record-Compare technology is an effective (although sometimes long) way to improve pronunciation. The "Interpret" section can be a great way to practice conversation and to make students feel they are taking part in a real conversation. Students enjoy listening to different accents (mainly American and British) and working on their pronunciation. The exercises are a good review of material learned in the unit; some students even asked for more.

On the other hand, it seems that students were not aware of the option to write to their teacher; only 4 out of 66 students did so.

Below are some quotes from students who were happy with the course:

Student 1 (Engineering):

"With this final unit I finish the Business level and I would like to say that this course has really been very beneficial and useful in order to learn and revise English grammar, vocabulary and some writing. In addition I have been able to do all of this by having a good time. What more could I ask for?"

Student 2 (Engineering):

"I think that it was very useful complementing the subject with the ABA English course, although they will have to focus on the grammar or do much more basic writings. Finally, I

have to say that I began with a low English level, almost without English, but currently I have improved thanks to this subject.”

Factors for Effectiveness

Effectiveness is based on progress made in the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. In the ABA course, the Listen-Record-Compare technology allows students to improve their listening and speaking skills by interpreting characters from the ABA Films. The writing section allows students to listen and write down what they hear.

Limitations of the Study

As students were not required to complete one level of the course, it is difficult to assess their improvement. Students completed the Oxford placement test prior to starting the course but not at the end. By taking the same level test before and after the study, we would have been able to determine exactly how much they had improved. The Oxford placement test does not include a speaking section.

The role of the ABA teacher was not strongly emphasized in this study. The option to write to the ABA teacher provides an opportunity to practice one's writing skills and receive feedback, as well as establish a personal rapport. As only 4 out of the 66 students actually wrote to their teacher, it is clear that the ABA teacher did not play an important role in students' progress.

The majority of students who participated in the study are native Spanish or Catalan speakers, therefore we cannot generalize based on the progress results. The students are also university age (19-22) therefore we cannot compare the results to that of a wider age-range sample.

Although the number of students who participated was limited, participation was high and feedback was thorough. These factors will be taken into account for future studies.

Conclusions

When educational resources like study material are easily accessible via a smartphone or tablet, students can benefit tremendously. Limitations such as access to a computer and physical location are removed from the equation and convenience enriches the new experience. As m-learning becomes increasingly widespread, teachers are starting to implement the use of apps such as ABA in the classroom.

Overall, learner satisfaction was very high for this group. Students enjoyed the course and felt that it helped them improve, especially their listening and speaking skills. Having the course available both in mobile and web versions allows students flexibility to study at their convenience. The ABA Films provided real-life situations that the students found relevant and helpful. Some of the ABA Films were considered to be a bit sexist or outdated by a number of students. Considering that the course dialogue was designed to encourage students' emotional engagement and thus language retention, the objective was, in a way, accomplished as many students expressed their moral opinions regarding the content.

Taking into account that lower level students improve more rapidly and the most-studied level in this study was Advanced, it is natural that higher level students improve less over a short period of time. We can therefore conclude that ABA is indeed a useful addition to a blended learning course.

References

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Rodgers, *Principles of Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Instruction*, 2001

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Dogget, *Eight Approaches to Language Teaching*, 1986

<http://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/english-level-test/grammar>

Appendix I

Table 1: Number of units studied per level

Level	Unit	# of students who completed the unit*
BEGINNER	1	8
	2	3
	3	5
	4	1
	5	2
	6	1
	7	1
	8	1

	9	1
	10	1
	11	1
	12	1
	13	1
	14	2
	15	1
	16	2
	17	1
	18	1
	19	1
	20	1
	21	1
	22	1
	23	1
	24	3
LOWER INTERMEDIATE	25	12
	26	7
	27	7
	28	3
	29	8

	30	4
	31	6
	32	6
	33	5
	34	4
	35	3
	36	2
	37	6
	38	7
	39	9
	40	6
	41	4
	42	4
	43	1
	44	0
	45	0
	46	0
	47	2
	48	4
INTERMEDIATE	49	22
	50	9

	51	10
	52	13
	53	12
	54	9
	55	7
	56	9
	57	15
	58	10
	59	11
	60	11
	61	9
	62	7
	63	7
	64	1
	65	7
	66	5
	67	7
	68	1
	69	0
	70	2
	71	1

	72	7
UPPER INTERMEDIATE	73	25
	74	13
	75	13
	76	11
	77	11
	78	13
	79	14
	80	6
	81	6
	82	5
	83	9
	84	6
	85	10
	86	4
	87	6
	88	4
	89	1
	90	7
	91	5
	92	5

	93	2
	94	4
	95	3
	96	4
ADVANCED	97	24
	98	16
	99	16
	100	11
	101	14
	102	13
	103	14
	104	11
	105	7
	106	12
	107	8
	108	4
	109	8
	110	10
	111	9
	112	9
113	6	

	114	4
	115	5
	116	9
	117	3
	118	4
	119	9
	120	7
BUSINESS	121	17
	122	12
	123	13
	124	13
	125	10
	126	10
	127	11
	128	11
	129	14
	130	6
	131	10
	132	8
	133	7
	134	9

	135	6
	136	3
	137	3
	138	2
	139	3
	140	7
	141	6
	142	5
	143	6
	144	5

*Each student was required to complete 15 units