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## **A Qualitative Approach to Educational Research: Language Courses in English Studies**

### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a qualitative study focusing on the role of language awareness in university language courses that form part of English Studies (ES). Language constitutes the subject matter of students' discipline and the ES degree is the initial training for future language teachers and other language-related professionals. Therefore, the models and views of language presented at university will influence graduates' future professional practice. This study focuses on how language awareness is approached in language classes and on lecturers' and students' views of language and learning. This article will discuss how a qualitative methodology was used to find out about participants' practices and views on language and learning, through immersion in a university language course over a term. Using a descriptive-interpretive paradigm, data were gathered from classroom observations and interviews, and analysed through the combination of ethnography and discourse analysis. This paper presents the methodological underpinnings of this research, decisions on the selection of data, interaction with participants, researcher's stance, and warranting. Through the understanding of participants' practices and views, this study provides a picture of how language awareness is approached in a university language course.

### **1. Introduction**

This study focuses on language courses in the English Studies (ES) degree in a Spanish university. The ES degree consists of different types of courses that are taught in English: literature and culture, linguistics, and language development. ES students, as non-native speakers that are specializing in a foreign language and culture, need to develop a high level of proficiency in English, with specific academic and professional needs. On the one hand, they have to cope with specialised courses taught in the foreign language. On the other hand, as future ES graduates, they have to acquire specialised competences related to their professional training, whether as language teachers, translators, or consultants. It is relevant to find out how these students learn the language, since they are not ordinary language learners, but have a clear academic and professional orientation. Thus, they not only need to know the language, but also about the language, for they need to develop sophisticated language-related competences in addition to language proficiency.

As Leaver/Shekhtman (2002) have pointed out, there is a lack of models for learners who are trainees in the language professions. Research focusing on ES students' preferences as language learners has identified an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) orientation, with skills such as academic reading or note-taking (e.g. Kormos et al. 2002, Moreno 2003). However, the design of language courses is somehow indefinite, in contrast with literature and linguistics courses, which have clear objectives and contents. In this sense, Kormos et al. (2002: 518) point out that "the language needs of English majors in non-native contexts are often given little thought under the tacit assumption that they have to know everything anyway". There are other factors that may contribute to this indefiniteness. University departments are usually composed of lecturers with a clear orientation towards linguistics or literature, so a question that can be raised is about the profile of lecturers who teach language courses. Besides, these courses also occupy a particular transition

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position in the ES degree. On the one hand, they are part of an academic programme that includes language-related courses that specialise in linguistics and language teaching methodology. On the other hand, students themselves are gradually moving from the role of a language learner towards that of a language teacher or expert (Szesztay 1996).

Therefore, in the context of the ES degree, this study focuses on language development courses, and, more specifically, it looks at how lecturers and students reflect on language and learning in the classroom. In order to explore how language is approached in courses addressed to learners who are also trainee professionals, this research is based on a theoretical framework that integrates different strands: (i) 'language awareness' or 'knowledge about language', (ii) educational linguistics, and (iii) the development of teacher knowledge, with the role of language proficiency for non-native speakers.

From a language teaching perspective, in the 1980s, with communicative approaches largely influenced by Krashen's theories, foreign language teaching was primarily oriented towards promoting acquisition, often neglecting an explicit focus on language. In this context, many scholars argued for the need to promote language awareness in language learning (see e.g. Carter 1990; James/Garrett 1991). In particular, Carter (1993: 139) put forward the claim that an explicit focus on language "can assist processes of learning a language in so far as knowing about a language is part of knowing a language". Building on educational proposals for introducing language awareness, Fairclough (1992) added another dimension, a critical approach – by using the term 'critical language awareness' (CLA). Related to critical language study and critical discourse analysis, CLA aims to empower students as citizens, developing their awareness of the uses of language in society and the power relationships embedded in them. On the other hand, from the perspective of SLA research, there have also been abundant discussions on the role of explicit and implicit knowledge in language learning (e.g. Bialystok 1978, Ellis 1990, Sharwood-Smith 1993). In particular, Ellis (2004: 244-245) distinguishes the following characteristics of explicit language knowledge: (i) it is conscious, (ii) it involves the possession of metalanguage, (iii) it is "learnable and verbalisable", (iv) it may vary in "breadth and depth".

If language awareness deserves a role in the education of language learners, it is even more crucial in the case of future language teachers and professionals (Brumfit 1991, van Lier 1996). In this sense, students' beliefs as language learners, as part of their 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 1975), are likely to have an influence on their future professional practice (see e.g. Peacock 2001). Considering ES students' academic and professional orientation towards language, linguistics, and language teaching, it is necessary to take into account a broad notion of language awareness, which encompasses sophisticated language-related competences that will allow future professionals to make informed linguistic judgments and analyses (Wright/Bolitho 1993, Wright 2002). Because of the academic context of this study, its theoretical framework should also take into account the concept of educational linguistics, based on the interplay of linguistics and language teaching (Spolsky 1978, Stubbs 1986).

Another key concept in this theoretical framework is the acquisition and development of knowledge in teacher education. Research on practising teachers has shown that they draw on complex systems of beliefs, personal and contextual factors, previous experience in learning and teaching, and subject matter knowledge (Woods 1996, Borg 2003), which form a body of teacher knowledge that is in constant evolution, as decisions made during classroom practices are based on this knowledge and further contribute to its development (Tsui 2003). Within this general framework of professional knowledge, the role of language improvement for non-native speakers needs to be taken into account (Berry 1990, Cullen 1994). Along this line, Wright/Bolitho (1997: 164-165) explicitly relate the development of knowledge about language to the development of proficiency in teacher education, by "involv[ing] teacher participants in both *talk about* language (...) and *use of* language as ways of extending their awareness and proficiency".

Considering the position of ES students as both language learners and trainees, as well as the central role of language in their professional training, this study focuses on how language aware-

ness is approached in the language classroom. By using a qualitative methodology which involves immersion in the educational context, it looks at participants' practices and views on language-related matters, in particular with respect to the academic and professional knowledge about language that future ES graduates need to develop. Drawing on different methodological strands in educational research, this study aims at understanding how lecturers and students approach language awareness in their classroom practices and what their views are on language and learning. Special emphasis is placed on the development of the research process, presenting the rationale underlying the methodological decisions adopted. Through research techniques that involve detailed observation of the educational context, this study aims not only at identifying what classroom practices participants engage in, but also at understanding the views on language and learning that underlie them.

## 2. Approach to the study

With the language classroom as the focus of this research, a qualitative approach was adopted, drawing on the principles of ethnography. Although the labels qualitative research and ethnography are sometimes used indistinctly in the literature (as pointed out by Edge/Richards 1998), ethnography is characterised by being "firmly rooted in the first-hand exploration of research settings" and thus differs from other qualitative methods that do not take as the point of departure the social context of the research (Atkinson 2001: 5). Precisely, in order to obtain a picture of participants' actions in their context, this study adopted an ethnographic approach, involving immersion in the educational setting, with the observation of a language course over a term. The main corpus of data consists of classroom observations, complemented with other types of data that could help understand the context in which participants' practices occurred and could shed light on their views on language and learning.

There is a long tradition of ethnography in second language classroom research (e.g. van Lier 1988, Watson-Gegeo 1988, Duff 2002, Chapelle/Duff 2003) which draws on frameworks from ethnography in mainstream educational research (e.g. Heath 1982, Cohen et al. 2000) and social sciences in general (e.g. Atkinson et al. 2001). This study follows the main principles of educational ethnography identified by Heath (1982):

- Research takes place in the context of a social group and aims at understanding and describing the norms and behaviours of its members.
- In order to achieve these goals, participants' views are incorporated into the research.
- Research is carried out through the researcher's immersion in the context.
- An inductive, exploratory perspective is adopted in the analysis of data.

Accordingly, data collection and analysis were approached in a holistic manner, with emphasis on describing the research context and participants, so as to be able to understand participants' actions and views in their context. As Watson-Gegeo (1988: 576) points out, ethnography involves "the study of people's behavior in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior", with the aim of "[providing] a description and an interpretive-explanatory account of what people do in a setting (such as a classroom, neighborhood, or community), the outcome of their interactions, and the way they understand what they are doing".

From this interpretive perspective, this research was approached with some general guiding questions that were adapted and modified as the research developed. Similarly, the categories for analysis emerged from the ongoing analysis of data and were subsequently refined and applied, through an inductive-deductive process (van Lier 1990). The analysis of data aimed at incorporating participants' viewpoints (i.e. an *emic* perspective) in addition to the researcher's (i.e. *etic* perspective).

Another principle derived from ethnography that played a key role in the design of this study is that of triangulation, which involves incorporating multiple perspectives to obtain a richer picture

of the phenomenon being investigated, going beyond a single theory, source of data, or method of analysis (i.e. theoretical triangulation, data triangulation, methodological triangulation, and investigator triangulation). Detailed discussions are offered in, e.g., Cohen/Manion (1989) in general educational research, and Allwright/Bailey (1991) and van Lier (1988), in language education.

Thus, in addition to a theoretical framework that draws on different strands, this research is also based on the combination of different data, such as observation and elicitation – or ‘watching’ and ‘asking’, to use van Lier’s words (1988). Following the principles of naturalistic research, observation took place in the context of the language classroom, in the form of non-participant observation (van Lier 1988). Parallel to observation, and apart from the regular informal interaction that occurred during the term, other types of data were collected, including course documents and materials, and especially interview data that were aimed at gathering participants’ (i.e. *emic*) perspectives. In the context of a qualitative approach, the notion of warranting was considered from an alternative perspective to the concepts of reliability and validity, which are normally used to evaluate quantitative research within a positivistic paradigm. With regard to qualitative approaches, it has been suggested that alternative criteria should be used that reflect the nature of the research. For example, Guba/Lincoln (1994) refer to ‘trustworthiness’ and ‘authenticity’. Similarly, from the perspective of discourse analysis, but applicable to qualitative work in general, Wood/Kroger (2000: 167), “propose that an analysis is warrantable to the extent that it is both trustworthy and sound”. In turn, these criteria involve ‘orderliness’, (in overall research procedures) ‘documentation’, and ‘demonstration’ (i.e. developing the argument in such a way that the report reflects the analytical procedures undertaken).

The concept of triangulation is also important in the evaluation of qualitative research. Although triangulation can strengthen ethnographic studies, by itself it does not necessarily guarantee quality (van Lier 1990). Similarly, Wood/Kroger (2000) also consider that triangulation is not a means for aiming at an objective reality – which would be contrary to the basic principles discussed above – but rather “a qualitative, discourse activity” in itself, to gain a deeper understanding of the context being studied.

Another question that arises in relation to ethnographic research is the consideration of ethical issues (e.g. Guba/Lincoln 1994, Cohen et al. 2000, Denscombe 2002). In this study, some ethical concerns arose in relation to the contribution of participants, university lecturers and students that committed part of their time to interacting with the researcher and allowed access to their daily practices. Precisely, because a study of this type involves a certain degree of intrusion in people’s lives, some considerations were taken into account at different stages of the research. Decisions were made to keep a balance between choosing the most appropriate instruments for collecting data according to the aims of the research, and showing consideration towards participants, trying to avoid unnecessary intrusion, respecting their independence, and protecting personal information (e.g. through the use of pseudonyms). These concerns are related to what Cohen et al. (2000) call ‘the cost/benefit ratio’, as an overriding principle guiding social research. Another consideration in this study was that of obtaining participants’ consent, which not only involves access to the research setting, but also negotiation throughout the process. Participants in this research showed an attitude of active collaboration, making themselves available during the process, facilitating immersion in the context and the collection of different types of data, both formally and informally (e.g. numerous informal encounters, extensive interviews, or examples of materials).

### **3. Research questions**

In keeping with the principles of ethnographic research mentioned above, rather than using initial hypotheses and predetermined categories, the research began with a set of guiding principles to focus the study and the processes of data collection and analysis:

- Language courses in ES are different from other EFL courses in that they are addressed to future language professionals and that they should prepare students for academic work in English.
- According to the official curriculum, the objective of language courses is to improve students' proficiency in the language and to introduce them to the basics of language analysis.
- Considering that these courses form part of a degree programme that includes specialised courses in linguistics and language teaching, it is worth looking at the orientation that language courses receive, through the observation of everyday practices and the analysis of classroom discourse. In this sense, this study focuses on how participants engage in metalinguistic activity (i.e. language awareness).
- Since future ES graduates will engage in language-related professions, especially language teaching, it is relevant to look at the models and views of language that are presented through university training, which may become part of their developing professional knowledge (i.e. as part of their 'apprenticeship of observation', Lortie 1975).

From these assumptions, some specific research questions were derived, according to the general aims of this research: to find out how language awareness work is carried out in language courses that are addressed to students who are academically and professionally oriented towards language. The details of the questions for the overall study as well as their theoretical underpinnings are discussed in Arnó (2009). In particular, taking as a point of departure the particular orientation given to this university language course (aims, contents, and approach), this paper focuses on the following questions:

1. How is language awareness approached in the classroom? In particular, how do participants engage in metalinguistic activity through discourse?
2. What specific language-related areas and topics do participants focus on?
3. What models of language are transmitted through classroom practices? And what are participants' views on language and learning?

#### **4. Data collection and analysis**

This study was carried out through immersion in a university language course over a term (observing classes and interacting with participants), and it is based on three types of data: (i) classroom observations, (ii) interviews to lecturers and students, and (iii) course documents and materials. By combining different types of data, this research aims at understanding classroom practices in their context and capturing participants' views, rather than achieve generalisation. Previous studies such as those of Mitchell/Hopper (1991) used interviews to elicit teachers' accounts of their training, Borg (1998, 1999) combined classroom observations and interviews to find out about the relationship between teachers' views and their actual practice, and Cots/Nussbaum (1999) used observation, interviews and documents to find out about secondary school teachers' views on language and on curriculum requirements.

Before discussing the approach to data collection and analysis, it is necessary to describe the context of the study, including both the academic context of the ES degree and the specific context of the university being observed. With regard to the different components of the degree programme (language, linguistics, and literature), the language development strand includes compulsory courses, usually complemented with optional ones. The compulsory courses are described in the official state curriculum as follows: "Basic training in the description of the English language. Theory and practice of English". Thus, these courses include both explicit knowledge about language and procedural knowledge, with special emphasis on the development of proficiency. In the particular context studied, language courses are offered in the first years of the degree and usually take place in mixed-ability classes, as students enter university with different proficiency levels.

The course observed, 'English Language 2', took place in the spring term of the first year of the ES degree.

#### 4.1. Classroom data

Classroom observations constitute the main source of data for this study, which involved two classes of the same course ('English Language 2') taught by two different lecturers. A total of twelve 90-minute sessions were observed over a term, which were audio and video taped, while the researcher took field notes, and they were transcribed. A first approach to the analysis of classroom data – complemented with that of documentation about the educational context – provided an overview of the course and of the aims of each session. The analysis of classroom data focused on how participants carry out metalinguistic activity in the classroom. Specific attention was paid to the segments in the discourse in which participants focus on language-related matters, i.e. 'metalinguistic episodes'. This unit of analysis was inspired by the notions of 'language-related episodes', or LREs (Kowal/Swain 1994, Swain/Lapkin 1995), 'focus-on-form episodes', or FFEs (Basturkmen et al. 2002), and 'meta-talk' episodes (Borg 1998). Episodes were identified on the basis of participants' orientation towards the discussion of a particular language point (i.e. from an *emic* perspective) as well as on the basis of specific class activities leading to a focus on language (i.e. from an *etic* perspective). In either case, attention was paid to how participants signalled the boundaries of episodes. The analysis of metalinguistic episodes took into account different aspects:

- Are they planned or unplanned?
- Who initiates them?
- How is metalinguistic activity carried out through interaction? (i.e. its interactive framework)
- What class activities give rise to a focus on language-related matters?

The analysis of classroom discourse needs to take into account its complexity, and 'multi-layered' nature, with its 'Russian-doll' structure (Jarvis/Robinson 1997). In order to approach this complexity, there are several frameworks that can be useful for the analysis of classroom discourse, taking into account that participants interact with the aim of fulfilling pedagogic goals.

The discourse analysis model of Sinclair/Coulthard (1975), based on the IRF exchange pattern (Initiation-Response-Follow-up), can be taken as a point of departure. In their analysis of classroom discourse, Sinclair and Coulthard identified a characteristic pattern that involves an initiation move by the teacher, followed by a student response and closed by the teacher's evaluation/follow-up. Going beyond a purely linguistic analysis, this basic pattern – or 'triadic dialogue' (Lemke 1990, Wells 1993) – has had an impact on classroom research, in terms of the pedagogic functions that it can fulfil: presentational talk (Barnes 1992), specific teacher techniques such as recaps or reformulations (Mercer 2000), or monitoring students' learning (Nassaji/Wells 2000), for example.

Another framework of analysis is based on the combination of conversation analysis (CA) and ethnography (Seedhouse 2004), in a methodology that shows how participants interact to achieve pedagogic goals, providing a context-embedded analysis of classroom discourse. Also in relation to its pedagogic nature, classroom discourse can be analysed from a socio-constructivist perspective, considering that interaction is the means through which participants construct and share knowledge (e.g. Vygotsky 1978, Wertsch 1985, Mercer 2000). Classroom discourse is therefore a pedagogic construct with processes that are carried out and managed by teacher and learners as they adapt their discourse to achieve their pedagogic goals. Jarvis/Robinson (1997) relate a linguistic and a pedagogic analysis of classroom discourse, by extending the traditional IRF exchange. They identify three stages in the pedagogic construction of discourse: focus-build-sum-

marise. This three-stage pattern can serve as a guideline to identify specific functions of utterances in relation to instructional discourse.

Taking into account these different frameworks and considering the pedagogic nature of classroom discourse, the present analysis combines a macro- and a micro-approach. It tries to understand how participants carry out metalinguistic activity through interaction, taking into account the overall context and incorporating both an *etic* and an *emic* perspective.

## 4.2. Interviews to participants

Participants' views were collected through semi-structured interviews (see e.g. Silverman 1993). An individual interview was carried out with each of the two lecturers observed and four group interviews were carried out with students (two groups from each class). They were carried out at the end of the term, after the observations, and they were conducted in the speakers' L1 (Catalan). Since there had been constant informal interaction during the term, the interviews also allowed participants to refer to events and views that were already familiar to the observer.

The lecturers were interviewed individually so as to capture their views, refer to their practices and draw their teaching profile. On the other hand, students were interviewed in small groups, in order to favour discussion and minimise the potential limitations caused by the asymmetry between the researcher and participants. A group discussion was also expected to elicit richer and deeper views, facilitating the contributions of participants that could otherwise feel inhibited. In this sense, group interviewing seemed especially appropriate for students, since they are part of the same community and share the same norms and values (see e.g. Cohen et al. 2000).

In ethnographic studies, interview data can yield participants' perspectives on their own practices – i.e. as a source of *emic* categories. Given the focus of this research on ES, it is also relevant to find out about participants' views on the types of knowledge that future language professionals need to acquire, on their university training (and language courses in particular), as well as on more general aspects of language and learning. A general agenda of topics was developed for both types of participants, but the development of the interviews took a different orientation according to each role. The framework for the interviews consisted of these four general topics, which were not necessarily dealt with in a linear form, but constituted a common ground to facilitate the interpretation of data:

1. *Level and focus of university language courses*: Students' proficiency level, level of language courses and linguistic demands of the ES degree, views on university language courses.
2. *Relationship between language courses and other courses in the ES degree*: Role of language courses in the ES degree, the relationship between language courses and other language-related courses (e.g. linguistics), the overall training of ES graduates, and their professional needs.
3. *Specific accounts of lecturers'/students' experience in the course*: Exploring personal experiences, approached from the different perspective that each role involves. In the case of students, references were also made to previous language learning experience.
4. *Views on language and learning*: Several topics were explored depending on participants' profiles, which were approached from their personal experience.

Interview data were also expected to shed light on the lecturers' teaching styles so as to outline a profile of each. Besides, since the observation of teacher-led classes provided information about the lecturer's rather than the students' performance, the interviews to students would also be useful to delve into their practices and views.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the analysis was approached by identifying key segments that would allow connections to be made between different ideas. Relevant sections were grouped under different topics, which then facilitated the construction of narratives. Referring back to the principles of this research, the implementation and analysis of the interviews

can be approached from an interpretive, constructive perspective, in a dialogic manner (Schwandt 1994). In fact, the process of conducting an interview, in itself, already involves analysis, as the researcher has the opportunity to interpret and respond to the interviewees, to prompt further elaboration of ideas while checking the researcher's interpretation throughout the dialogue.

## 5. Results and discussion

The combination of different types of data and the observations carried out over a term provide a general picture of the course observed. After a general overview of the course, the following sections deal with the analysis of participants' practices in the development of metalinguistic activity as well as with their views on language and learning.

In general terms, 'English Language 2' can be described as a grammar-based course, with a syllabus organised as a series of grammar units (such as conditionals, word formation, determiners and quantifiers, pronouns, etc.), including a block devoted to 'textual cohesion' (e.g. cause and effect, purpose, connectors and modifiers). According to the course description, it aims at "develop[ing] students' ability to use the language" and "improv[ing] students' accuracy", especially with regard to "written texts". There is a focus on the presentation of explicit knowledge about language, as the course aims "to complement language practice with the acquisition of relevant linguistic knowledge", providing students with "basic training in the description of the English language". Course documents make it clear that this course is oriented towards the analysis and practice of grammar structures. It should be noted that optional language courses are offered simultaneously, which focus on communication practice and skills development. The course observed is also regarded as a preparation for further linguistics courses specialised in morphology and syntax (both from the practices observed in the classroom and from the lecturers' interviews). The course is taught by two lecturers (Lisa and Monica<sup>1</sup>), but both classes follow the same syllabus, with the same course contents, structure, and materials. The lecturers observed were both in their early thirties. Monica's background is related to ELT and methodology, while Lisa's is oriented towards linguistics.

All the teaching units have a similar structure. They follow closely the course materials (a pedagogic grammar with exercises) and they consist of two main components ('theory' and 'practice'), which are referred to by participants, both in the classes and in the interviews. The lecturers adopt a deductive approach, with the presentation of 'theory' (i.e. explicit grammar knowledge) followed by 'practice' (i.e. transformation or error-correction exercises). The units are closed with a review, consisting of a summary by the lecturer and a selection of exercises.

### 5.1. Classroom practices

From the classes observed, it can be seen that the course develops through teacher-led sessions devoted entirely to the presentation and practice of discrete grammar structures. Therefore, classroom discourse consists of sequences of metalinguistic episodes. The lecturer manages interaction and does most of the talk, with little student participation. It is also the lecturer who takes the responsibility for developing each unit, following a presentation-practice model, with the first part of the unit (i.e. 'theory') devoted to a detailed explanation of the grammar topic, and the second part (i.e. 'practice') devoted to exercises, to which students contribute through IRF exchanges.

In the analysis of classroom discourse, it is important to identify the segments that constitute metalinguistic episodes, i.e. how participants focus on a language-related topic through interaction. With regard to the discursive construction of episodes, attention was paid to the verbal moves used to mark the boundaries for opening and closing episodes. As the lecturers closely follow the course materials, metalinguistic episodes often derive from the different sections of the

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<sup>1</sup> The pseudonyms Lisa and Monica are used to identify the lecturers. Pseudonyms are also used whenever individual students are identified.



materials (explanations and exercises). However, speakers show their orientation to the activity by marking boundaries for opening and closing episodes (for a detailed discussion on the application of CA to the analysis of pedagogical discourse, see e.g. Mori 2004).

In these teacher-centred classes, metalinguistic episodes are initiated and managed by the lecturer. The following example (Extract 1) is a typical episode in the presentation of ‘theory’ in the first part of the unit on conditional sentences, in which the lecturer (Monica) gives an explanation from the course materials. She opens the episode by focusing students’ attention on the object of reflection, conditional sentences, and reads the explanations from the materials. She provides a lengthy presentation, reading the accompanying examples, and elicits brief contributions from the students to complete the explanations.

01 T<sup>2</sup>: excellent then can we turn to type two conditionals/ yes/ I’m following again exactly your notes and it says it says type two conditional in the type two conditional we have also a main pattern which is if plus past simple yes and then you have would plus infinitive without to I mean you should know after\_ you should know that after would we have an infinitive without to yes/ I mean xxx good if I won a million pounds I would travel round the world yes/ if plus past simple won a million pounds I would plus infinitive would travel round the world so the first sentence is pattern number two if I were you\_ yes/ if I were you I would go to the doctor yes if I were you that’s a simple past again would go again would plus infinitive without to pattern if you spoke again simple past Italian you would be able to apply for the job would plus infinitive without to be able to is an infinitive without two right/ in the sentences above the speaker the speakers are talking about hypothetical or imaginary situations be careful | number eh eh type one is possible *si apertes explotarà si toques s’encendrà oi*/ something possible going on number two is hypothetical it can be possible but it’s quite hypothetical in number one it is not impossible that a speaker will win a lot of money but it is very unlikely so why not? there is always a possibility mm/ number two if I were you I would go to the doctor the speaker imagines an impossible situation of course I can never be you xx if I were you but I’m not you so xxx it’s only a piece of advice number three the imaginary situation is a cont\_ is contrary to reality because the person does not speak Italian if you spoke Italian you would be able to apply for that job but you don’t speak Italian yes/ but still you can learn Italian | why not? yes/ why not? so in type two there is always a why not | you can still change what happens mm\ and then of course you have other patterns so you have the main one you have others “if they were doing the course with us it could be much more fun” | what is that? what is the difference?

02 MS: past continuous

03 T: yeah you have a past continuous instead of a past simple mm/ *si estiguessin fent el curs amb nosaltres seria molt més divertit* right/ you have past continuous fine/ if you asked him he might tell you what is that?

04 SSS: {modal}

05 T: yes you have modal a modal in the second part in the main clause instead of a x yeah/ *si li preguntéssis a lo millor t’ajudaria* if you wrote now you should get a reply soon differences/

06 MS: a modal

07 T: again x a modal in the same x right/ it is also possible to use the past continuous in the if clause as in sentence four five and six the verbs in the main clause are also modal auxiliaries so you have the main pattern and you have other patterns which are these again Sandra you cannot mix| Sandra you cannot mix the other patterns if you have this you can have that for example but not this and that right/ you cannot say well xxx clear/ [WRITES ON THE BOARD]

#### Extract 1. Monica – Session 1

Looking in more detail at how metalinguistic activity is carried out in this episode, we can identify two phases: (1) the presentation of ‘theory’, in the first turn, and (2) an inductive approach

2 See transcription conventions in the appendix.

to analysing different conditional structures, through a series of IRF exchanges. In the lecturer's presentation in the initial turn, we can identify different processes:

- Presenting rule as a formula (or formulating rules): “*we have a main pattern which is if plus past simple and then you have would plus infinitive without to*”, “*you should know after\_ you should know that after would we have an infinitive without to yes/*”
- Producing sample according to rule (i.e. to illustrate the rule presented): “*if I won a million pounds I would travel round the world yes/*”
- Analysing and labelling: “*if plus past simple won a million pounds I would plus infinitive would travel round the world so the first sentence is pattern number two*”
- Referring to usage or meaning: “*something possible going on*”, “*number two is hypothetical*”, etc.

The lecturer then moves on to the second stage of the episode, in which she presents a sample sentence and elicits from students the process of ‘analysing and labelling’, to work out the rules for ‘other conditional structures’. She closes this episode with a summary (turn 7) and a diagram on the board to remind students of the structures presented. In her summary, she uses the following processes:

- expressing judgments on use, i.e. feasibility (“*it is possible...*”)
- formulating rules (“*you have the main pattern and other patterns*”)
- prescribing form (“*you should know that after would we have an infinitive without to yes/*”).

As shown in the above episode, we can identify different processes in classroom discourse through which participants carry out metalinguistic activity. Following the methodological principles in this research, a recursive inductive-deductive process was adopted to the analysis of classroom data, which yielded different metalinguistic processes that can be grouped into the following areas (see the detailed taxonomy in Arnó 2009, based on an initial categorization in Cots/Arnó 2005):

1. Making judgments on the acceptability of language forms, with processes such as: ‘judging grammaticality/form’ or ‘correcting errors’, for example.
2. Analysing language samples and referring to rules: e.g. ‘analysing and labelling’, ‘applying/working out a rule’, ‘presenting rules as formulas/formulating rules’.
3. Expressing intuitions about language and judgments related to meaning: e.g. ‘judging according to use (i.e. frequency, feasibility)’, ‘referring to usage or meaning’.
4. Focusing attention on language forms: ‘modelling’ and ‘contrasting’.
5. Managing learning: e.g. ‘referring to a learning strategy’, ‘expressing perceptions of teaching and learning’.

Metalinguistic activity in the classroom, thus, involves the presentation, analysis, and practice of grammar structures at the sentence level, with emphasis on accuracy. This metalinguistic activity is carried out through an interactive pattern that consists of IRF exchanges, with brief turns in which students either provide an answer to the exercise or complete an explanation elicited by the lecturer. Then the follow-up turns are used by the lecturers for different pedagogic functions: evaluating the response, or analysing language forms. The latter function is widely used by Lisa, who uses specific exercise items as a springboard for presenting language analysis, using an inductive approach.

This practice can be illustrated with Extract 2, which shows Lisa's approach to language analysis in the ‘practice’ section of one of the units. This particular episode arises from one of the items in an error-correction exercise (“\**There goes she. Did you give to her the news?*”). After a student has provided the correct answer without any explicit reflection (turn 3), the lecturer uses a follow-up (turn 4) to encourage language analysis. She draws a diagram on the board with a syntactic analysis, labelling the components of the target structure (i.e. the metalinguistic process iden-

tified as ‘analysing and labelling’). She develops this analysis further through ‘contrasting’ (i.e. “*there she goes*” vs. “*there goes Amanda*”) and also uses guiding questions to prompt students to work out the rules for inversion, which she summarises, presenting them as a formulas (turn 14). In this episode, Lisa uses an exercise that simply involves the manipulation of forms in order to focus systematically on a specific language point, through an interactive process that has parallels with the focus-build-summarise pattern (Jarvis/Robinson 1997). The same pattern is repeated in the second part of the sentence, in which a student’s answer is used again as a springboard for systematic analysis.

- 01 T: number three <6> Gemma <3> number three | you don’t know Mariona | no one knows? || ok
- 02 FS: I don’t know
- 03 MS: there she goes?
- 04 T: ok the first part ok? in the first part it’s there goes she | mm? [WRITING ON THE BLACKBOARD] | there | goes |she [WRITING]ok this is an important structure we have the verb the subject xxx we say | we say that sorry xx we say | we said that <2>
- 05 MS: yeah?
- 06 T: xxxx | we say there\_
- 07 MS: there she goes
- 08 T: she goes [WRITING ON THE BLACKBOARD] mm? is it possible to have / is it possible to hear this/ [WRITING ON THE BLACKBOARD] it’s what we have here | yeah? there goes she | we have this verb | subject | but this is not possible <2> but still it is possible to hear this | Emma\_
- 09 FS: yes
- 10 T: how?
- 11 FS: when it’s | when is a: noun
- 12 T: when we have a noun | as for x if we have [WRITING ON THE BLACKBOARD] there goes\_
- 13 FS: xxx
- 14 T: ok | ok? when we have [WRITING ON THE BLACKBOARD] there goes Amanda or there goes the girl | all right? so we get here verb plus subject when this subject is a noun | right? <2> if we have a | pronoun what we have to do is use the normal order subject plus verb | yeah? | the second part\_
- 15 MS: did you give the news to her?
- 16 T: did you give the news to her | yeah? [WRITING ON THE BLACKBOARD] did you give the news to her? can you say anything else?
- 17 FS: did you give her the news?
- 18 T: yeah [WRITING ON THE BLACKBOARD] did you give her the | news | all right? remember that we have two options | we have the indirect object first | and then the direct object into x two or we can give the reverse order with the indirect object first and the direct object in second place without any xxxx | yeah?

These extracts exemplify the kind of metalinguistic activity that is done in the classroom. The lecturer presents grammar points in a discrete manner and students' participation is limited to brief responses to elicitation. The teaching units develop through predictable patterns of 'theory' and 'practice' episodes. As seen in the first extract, 'theory' episodes are usually planned and correspond to sections of the course materials from which explanations are derived. The lecturer signals the boundaries of the episodes, focusing students' attention on the language form that constitutes the object of reflection. On the other hand, in the 'practice' stage, the transformation exercises do not lend themselves to explicit metalinguistic work. However, explicit focus on language is found in certain follow-up turns, when the lecturer provides correction for wrong answers, or when she decides to focus on an exercise item to develop or elicit further analysis, as in the example above. In these classes, emphasis is placed on developing students' explicit knowledge about language, which, on the other hand, is restricted to grammar. Probably because of their academic orientation towards language, students are expected to acquire extensive metalinguistic knowledge of the structures of English, while on the other hand, they are assumed to apply their explicit declarative knowledge to develop implicit procedural knowledge, so as to produce accurate language forms.

## 5.2. Views and models of language and learning

The analysis of classroom materials and practices reveals a model of language awareness based on the transmission of explicit knowledge about language, using a bottom-up approach and considering language as the accumulation of discrete items to be studied and analysed (see Bolitho et al. 2003 for a contrast between language awareness as an approach vs. the transmission of explicit knowledge). This model could be described as a 'focus-on-formS' approach (Long 1991). From the analysis of the classes and the interviews, we can identify a view of language learning at this level which is based on achieving accuracy and developing the ability to understand and explain grammar structures. The extract below reflects students' perception of the course as oriented towards explicit grammar and accuracy:

*You realize that the course is oriented ... and I have ended up suspecting it, towards avoiding the mistakes, also, that everyone makes, or things like that, right? Those will be the precise questions they'll ask you, right? The mistakes we all make, for example, I don't know, false friends, which always come up, or things like that, right, I don't know, vocabulary as well. It is not that vocabulary is difficult, the lexis is not hard, but the grammar part...*

t'adones que realment l'assignatura està pensada una mica perquè... jo he arribat a sospitar, no?, per evitar els fallos, també, que fa tothom, o coses així, no?, tot just aquelles seran les preguntes que et posaran, no?, els fallos que solem fer tothom, allò, per exemple, jo què sé, els false friends, no?, que sempre surten, o coses així, no?, que no sé, el vocabulari, també. No és molt fort, el vocabulari no, el lèxic no era molt fort, però la gramàtica i això...

Extract 3. Students' interview – group 4

According to this prescriptive model, the source of knowledge about language comes from books, and the lecturers are responsible for selecting and presenting it to students. The role of the lecturer as mediator of this knowledge can be illustrated by the following class extract, in which Lisa explains the decisions made in gathering and structuring information from different grammar books.

T: so here is a list of sixteen elements <2> in order to | xx this list | what I did | was to look at different grammar books | yeah? there was no grammar book in which I could find sixteen items | yeah? some of them gave me eight nine ten twelve | yeah? and what I did was just like\_ go through to them | get them together | yeah? sometimes | they were like x number twelve and number eleven | where one is the other | shape for colour and colour for shape | but what I did was just to look at | how much they agreed | yeah? and if three of them said that shape came before colour then I chose this order | all right? yeah? so here you have it|

Extract 4. Lisa – Session 3

This idea is also mentioned in the interviews by both lecturers and students. As Monica points out, “*it is easier if someone explains something to you than having to read it yourself from twenty books*”. A similar view is expressed by students (Extract 5), who consider that teachers should present the language system in a straightforward manner, as a set of rules:

*They [teachers] have to explain [how the language system works] in a specific way so that you can understand it; sometimes they make it complicated and it is easier than that (...) they tell you when something is used and when it is not...*

Perquè ho entenguis t’ho han de dir d’una manera concreta, no? han de dir, a vegades se compliquen molt la vida, i no sé, és més senzill, no? (...) que t’ensenyen a dir, doncs... o, no ho sé, quan s’utilitza una cosa o quan no s’utilitza, ...

Extract 5. Students’ interview – group 4

Although both lecturers teach the same course with common characteristics, when we look in detail at the teaching models, we can identify two different profiles that emerge both from the views expressed in the interviews and from the classroom observations (see Arnó 2009). Monica’s teaching style is oriented towards ELT, while Lisa’s is oriented towards linguistics, as she herself points out in the interview (“*I have a style closer to the courses on syntax and morphology at higher levels than to first-year language courses*”). As the extracts below indicate, from these two profiles, we can see how a language course in ES can be oriented either towards a regular EFL course or towards language study (i.e. as if it were a foundation for further linguistics courses). In either case, both lecturers refer to the particular characteristics of university language courses, distinguishing them from both standard ELT and specialised linguistics courses. In Extract 6, Monica refers to the distinction between language courses and linguistics courses; the former should aim at helping students use the language, whereas the latter are oriented towards language analysis. On the other hand, Lisa (Extract 7) refers to the function of language courses as an introduction to language analysis, by relating her explanations in language classes to the more specialised analysis that is done in linguistics courses.

*M: [In language courses] you present an overview of the language ... the aim is to reach a level to be able to use the language. Linguistics courses are obviously linguistics; you’re talking about analysis...*

*M: [als cursos de llengua] Toques tota la llengua... la meta és assolir un nivell de llengua per poder-la fer servir. A les assignatures de lingüística és òbviament lingüística; estàs parlant ja d’anàlisi...*

Extract 6. Monica’s interview

*As I teach the syntax course, I sometimes make references to it. I tell them [students] that there may be something that may not be important now, that they don’t need to know, but that they will have to learn next year. I give explanations now taking into account the [linguistics] course they’ll have next year. I think this is not bad, because after all, they both deal with the same subject matter*

com que dono l’assignatura de Sintaxi, a vegades els hi faig referència. Els hi dic que potser hi ha alguna cosa que en el moment no és important, que no ho han de saber, però que l’any següent ho han de saber. Ja dono les explicacions pensant en el que serà l’assignatura de l’any següent. Veig que en part no està malament que hi hagi això, perquè no deixa de ser la mateixa matèria.

Extract 7. Lisa’s interview

When characterising the course, both lecturers establish a clear distinction between university language courses and other ELT courses, on the grounds that ES students, as future language professionals, need to develop explicit knowledge about language, in order to be able to analyse and explain linguistic phenomena. They also admit that this course departs from current models in ELT, which, on the other hand, are promoted in the methodology courses that form part of the same degree. Although they justify the specific nature of this course, a certain tension can be detected in their discourse. For example, Monica expresses her position against grammar-based courses (“*some years ago, language courses were only based on grammar and we’ve seen that this is obsolete*”). This belief is expressed in relation to regular EFL courses, as she justifies this particu-

lar grammar course as a tool to increase ES students' explicit metalinguistic knowledge. She describes it as a “*resource to learn the language*” (probably meaning ‘to learn about the language’), to help students develop their metalinguistic skills. Acquiring this type of knowledge would make up for what she perceives as the limitations of non-native language teachers and professionals, “*since they [ES students] don't learn the English language as if they were learning their mother tongue, because they don't live in the context, what we have to do is to explain the grammar, help them do the exercises and speak English, because sometimes it's the only input they have*”.

This tension also appears in students' interviews. Although they admit that the course provides them with metalinguistic knowledge, they are also aware that a grammar course by itself is inadequate for the development of fluency. In this sense, they express that it is the students' responsibility to develop their communicative competence (especially in speech) as it is not provided by university courses (i.e. “*complementary to the work done here*”). Like Monica, students also seem to adopt an ideal native-speaker model (see Cook 1999). Accordingly, they express the view that in their context, they can only aim at a high level of competence in written language (“*To really learn [the language] you must go abroad, written here, spoken there*”). They consider that it is only through immersion in the language community that learners can reach a high level of proficiency:

*You can never compare the level attained by someone who has been abroad with that of someone who hasn't, I don't know... you think you know the language but when you travel you notice the difference.*

No es pot comparar mai el nivell d'un que ha sortit, crec, amb el d'un que no ho ha fet mai. No sé... Quan vas a fora a ho veus; et penses que en saps i arribes allà i dius...

Extract 8. Students' interview – group 3

The model of language and learning that pervades classroom practices and that is explicitly referred to in the interviews is based on a view of language as consisting of the accumulation of discrete grammar structures at the sentence level. It involves explicit knowledge about language to be learnt systematically, considering that ES students, as future professionals, need to be able to understand and explain the language system as well as provide accurate models of language use. However, this model contrasts with current models in ELT (which, on the other hand, are the models promoted in methodology courses within the same degree). Language courses are therefore approached from the perspective of language study, so as to develop students' explicit metalinguistic knowledge as future non-native language teachers and experts, with a focus on giving explanations and on achieving accuracy (i.e. what participants refer to as a ‘*foundation*’ in language). As part of their ‘apprenticeship of observation’, the models presented through language courses in the ES degree may influence the formation of students' views on language teaching and, therefore, have an impact on their future professional practice. It appears that appropriate intervention throughout their education could help students modify and reconstruct their views of language and learning towards more dynamic models of language and learning (see detailed discussion in Peacock 2001).

## 6. Conclusions

This paper has presented a qualitative study that investigates how language awareness is approached in an English language course in the ES degree. Since language is at the core of the training of future language teachers and professionals, language courses merit specific attention, especially with regard to participants' views and practices related to language and learning. Considering the notion of professional language awareness presented at the beginning of this paper, as well as students' dual role as learners of English and trainee language teachers and professionals, it is worth looking at the models of language that they are being exposed to through language courses, which form part of their ‘apprenticeship of observation’.

Taking a qualitative approach and using ethnographic techniques, this study has looked at participants' practices on language awareness, paying attention to the underlying views. Therefore, data collection for this research involved immersion in a community, so as to find out about classroom practices and understand participants' behaviour together with the norms on which such behaviour is based. This study does not aim at providing generalisations, but rather it is based on different types of data from a single context, so as to construct a detailed portrait of lecturers' and students' practices and views on language and learning. Such an approach can yield a picture of how language awareness is approached in the ES degree.

From the data analysed, we can refer to the abovementioned notion of the 'indefiniteness' of university language courses, as regards their broad-ranging language goals (Kormos et al. 2002). Both through the classes observed and the views expressed by participants, it appears that ES students should acquire extensive explicit knowledge about language which they can analyse and explain to others.

Also from the perspective of students' transition from a learner to a professional role (Szesztay 1996), it is important to explore their views on language and learning. In the present study, the models observed can be related to traditional grammar approaches to language learning, focusing on accuracy and the written language. In addition to language as an object of study, it would also be desirable to approach language from a critical perspective, along the lines of 'critical language awareness' (Fairclough 1992), especially if we take into account that ES students will become the language teachers of future generations.

In sum, exploring the practices and views of language and learning presented in language courses constitutes a point of departure to design appropriate actions that can help students develop and modify their beliefs about language learning. Given the powerful influence of the 'apprenticeship of observation', such actions should be integrated in language courses themselves (Peacock 2001). University language courses can, thus, provide educators with a privileged position to approach and develop ES students' language awareness, taking into account the notion of professional language awareness presented at the beginning of this paper. Because of their position in the ES degree, these courses can provide a starting point for developing students' language-related competences and for encouraging reflection on language and learning, in order to help students, as future language teachers and experts, to gradually build up and refine their views and knowledge of language and learning.

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**Appendix – Transcription Conventions****Short pause:** |**Long pause:** ||**Pause longer than a second:** <number>

Overlapping:

=text speaker A=

=text speaker B=

**Interruptions (unfinished utterances):** text\_**Lengthening of a sound:** text:**Code-switching:** *text***Extralinguistic comments:** [text]**Unintelligible:** x (a symbol for every syllable)**Uncertain transcription:** {text}**Closed questions:** / (rising intonation) \ (falling intonation)**Open questions:** ?**T:** Teacher**FS:** Female student**MS:** Male student**S1, S2, etc.:** Identified students