# APPROACHES TO LEARNING BY SPANISH STUDENTS OF ENGLISH PHILOLOGY. THE EFFECT OF THE TEACHING MODELS

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**ABSTRACT**

During the last two decades, research on student learning approaches has been increasingly taking into account a learner's perspective. Contributions such as those of Marton & Saljö (1976), Entwistle & Ramsden (1983), Crooks (1988), Biggs (1987,1989, 1993,1996) have helped to develop a coherent account of the different ways university students tackle their learning tasks according to their own characteristics, subject content and teaching context.

Work on approaches to learning in Spanish universities from a qualitative perspective is rather modest (De la Orden y col., 1986; Hernández Pina, 1996, 1998) and has focused basically on student perception of the academic context but without paying special attention to the teaching context and the possible effects assessment practices exert on student learning approaches. To evaluate this, Biggs' SPQ was applied to 253 Spanish students of English Philology from Murcia University. We wanted to know whether student motivation to learn is a function of the way of teaching and the type of assessment and whether any learning adjustments take place in the course of their studies to meet the teaching demands from the institution. Biggs model (1989, 1993) was used to explain which factors determine the quality of the outcome in learning in order to see how presage (institutional context), process (interpretation of learning context) and product (the outcome) interact. Results point towards an overriding effect the model of teaching and assessment practices exert on the quality of the outcome. Contrary to what might be expected, assessment based solely on multiple-choice testing leads many students to drop their initial deep or achieving approaches, typically linked to higher degrees, and adopt a surface learning strategy, associated with a low order of academic achievement.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Several theories of learning styles have developed over the past twenty years (see Riding and Rayner, 1998, for a review) in an attempt to understand how students construct knowledge. They all share an 'activity-based learning approach' (Laurillard, 1984) in the sense that they are specifically interested in style categorization, considering both the environment in which the learning takes place and the individual's reaction to the learning task.

Four main learning styles models have been identified by Riding & Rayner (1998: 53): those based on cognitive skills development (Reinert, 1976; Letteri, 1980; Keefe and Monk, 1986; Keefe, 1989, 1990; Griggs, 1991), models based on instructional preference (Grasha and Riechman, 1975; Dunn and Dunn, 1974, 1978; Dunn et al. 1989), and two learning process models based either on the learning process (Kolb, 1976) or orientation to study (Entwistle, 1979, 1981; Schmeck et al. 1977, 1991, Ramsden, 1979, Schmeck, 1988b, and Biggs, 1978, 1979, 1985, 1987, 1993). Their students learning taxonomies have a great deal in common. Thus, Marton and Saljö (1976) established two fundamental approaches to learning, surface and deep, which are kept by Entwistle and colleagues, although they consider a 'strategic approach' (1979) as a third possibility.

Similarly, Biggs maintains the deep vs surface dichotomy as basic, adding up an 'achieving approach' (1987: 10) which corresponds to his previous 'achieving dimension' (1979). Rather than envisaging student learning as an adaptation to specific requirements, Biggs envisages learning style as 'stable individual differences [that] interact with the perception an individual student has of the context.. ' (1987: 2). The combination of the motives for doing a particular task and the strategies adopted to fulfill such a task is what he calls an 'approach'. The so-called 'surface approach' is a reproductive learning style based on extrinsic motivation: it involves reproduction through rote learning. The student using this approach focuses on keywords and the literal aspect of the task components rather than on their meaning and treats them as unrelated to each other. It is effective for recalling unrelated detail (multi structural) leading to low cognitive-level outcomes (Biggs, 1989: 26). The 'deep approach', on the other hand, is based on intrinsic motivation. It focuses on content meaning rather than on the literal aspects. Students read widely and attempt to relate new information to relevant prior knowledge. It leads to structurally complex performance –relational or extended abstract. In Biggs's words, 'deep approaches to learning are those most consistent with the aims of university teachers' (1989: 27), although he acknowledges that the idea of what a deep approach can be varies according to the subject area. The third and final approach, called 'achieving', is based on a particular form of extrinsic motivation: it is ego-enhancement that comes out of achieving high marks grades. Those adopting this approach are systematic, plan ahead, and may resort to study skills to achieve their aims which are usually high degrees. Table 1 shows Biggs' three approaches to learning as a result of their corresponding motives and strategies.

Following the trend of analysing style models grounded in orientation to study, research has been done by Van Rossum and Schenck (1984), Watkins (1983), but mainly by Biggs (1979, 1987b, 1987c, 1988d, 1989, 1996), trying to link these approaches to the outcomes of learning in educational contexts where the learner's perspective is increasingly being taken into account -although he acknowledges that such contexts are 'complex to the point of idiosyncrasy' (Biggs,

1989:21). He follows Marton's view (1981) that research into learning should be from the perspective of the learner as a self-determining element rather than as a passive subject.

*Table 1.* Biggs' Approaches to Learning (1985, 1987)

| **APPROACHES TO LEARNING**<br>**Motives and strategies (Biggs, 1987:11)** | | |
|---|---|---|
| **SURFACE** | **DEEP** | **ACHIEVING** |
| ➢ SEES TASKS AS AN IMPOSITION (EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION) | ➢ INTEREST IN THE ACADEMIC TASK (INTRINSIC MOTIVATION) | ➢ EGO-ENHANCEMENT (A KIND OF EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION) |
| ➢ SEES TASKS AS DISCRETE /UNRELATED | ➢ TASKS ARE INTEGRATED INTO A WHOLE | ➢ ALLOCATE TIME TO TASK ACC. TO GRADE EARNING POTENTIAL |
| I. MOTIVE<br>➢ FOCUS ON CONCRETE AND LITERAL ASPECTS OF TASK | I. MOTIVE<br>➢ FOCUS ON CONTENT MEANING AND PERSONAL INVOLVING | I.MOTIVE<br>➢ FOCUS: ACHIEVING HIGH GRADES WHETHER OR NOT MATERIAL IS INTERESTING |
| ➢ REPRODUCTION THROUGH ROTE LEARNING | ➢ TRIES TO THEORIZE ABOUT TASK AND FORM HYPOTHESES | ➢ SYLLABUS COVERAGE IN THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY (STUDY SKILLS) |
| II. STRATEGY:<br>➢ REPRODUCTIVE: LIMIT THE TARGET TO THE ESSENTIALS | II. STRATEGY:<br>➢ TO MAXIMISE UNDERSTANDING READING WIDELY | II. STRATEGY:<br>➢ SYSTEMATIC PLANNING AND BEHAVES AS A 'MODEL STUDENT' |

At university level, the quality of student learning is a crucial concern of teachers and academic authorities alike. Educational achievement depends not just on the student's specific approaches to learning but also on the teacher's messages towards the students' performance and the way they envisage the whole context of teaching. The institutional demand can be learning can be considered from three standpoints according to Biggs (1989: 22). It can be seen from a quantitative perspective as the amount of information one learns, irrespective o whether it is understood or not. When, however, learning involves understanding and knowing how to interpret the world, he talks of a qualitative perspective. This conception would in his opinion, as well as Entwistle's (1984), prevail in higher education institutions. The third perspective, called institutional, refers to validated learning, something that corresponds to the university, a repository of a body of knowledge that is expanded and transmitted to students by agreed sets of procedures and officially acknowledged to those who fulfill certain criteria of excellence.

These three conceptions of learning correspond to identical conceptions of teaching. From a quantitative dimension, the task of teaching is seen as a mere transmission of a body of knowledge that the student has to store in his or her mind and assimilate. If learning does not take place or is inadequate, it is the student's fault: possible lack of motivation, lack of ability on his/per part, not required level, etc. The implication, then, is that knowledge is something external that has to be discovered, and once discovered, taught in certain quantities and scored as correct or incorrect. This idea runs counter the one held by most philosophers of science who see knowledge as something 'constructed' rather than 'discovered', the constructed conceptual system is accepted until disproved or the whole paradigm is replaced (Kuhn, 1961). Assessment in this tradition involves accurate reproduction of previously learned contents. It also assumes that such contents are dichotomously assessed as either correct or incorrect, the correct answers providing an index of the student's competence in a given subject. Multiple-choice tests are a clear instance of this type of assessment.

From a qualitative perspective, the teacher interacts with the learner to get him/her engaged in appropriate learning activities. The learner is considered an active person engaged in the construction of new knowledge to interpret the world (Piaget, 1950. The teacher's task consists not in knowledge transmission but in helping students to understand providing them with an appropriate motivational context, and a well-structured knowledge base (Biggs, 1989:29).

From this perspective, practices can be 'developmental' or 'ecological' (Biggs, 1996: 8). They are seen as developmental in the sense that the student develops or constructs knowledge by stages which constitute assessment targets amenable to be framed in a model such as Biggs and Collins SOLO taxonomy (1989: 24). This taxonomy caters to the growth of knowledge in a quantitative as well as in a qualitative sense. The ecological perspective, on the other hand, assesses knowledge in a real setting, it is about the procedural knowledge required by those concerned with professional training.

From an institutional perspective, the teacher is seen as the effective manager who sees the learner as an element within a complex teaching scheme. The learner needs to be taught, but at the same time, his or her knowledge has to be validated by the institution according to set standards. Unlike the quantitative and qualitative conceptions of teaching, the institutional is inextricably linked to assessment practices, which have a strong bearing on students learning approaches. Biggs's '3P-model' (1989:25) tries to represent those factors that would determine the quality of the outcome in learning (Figure 2) as well as the teaching requirements (Figure 3) within a university context.

*Figure 1.* **Biggs' '3-P Student Learning Model**

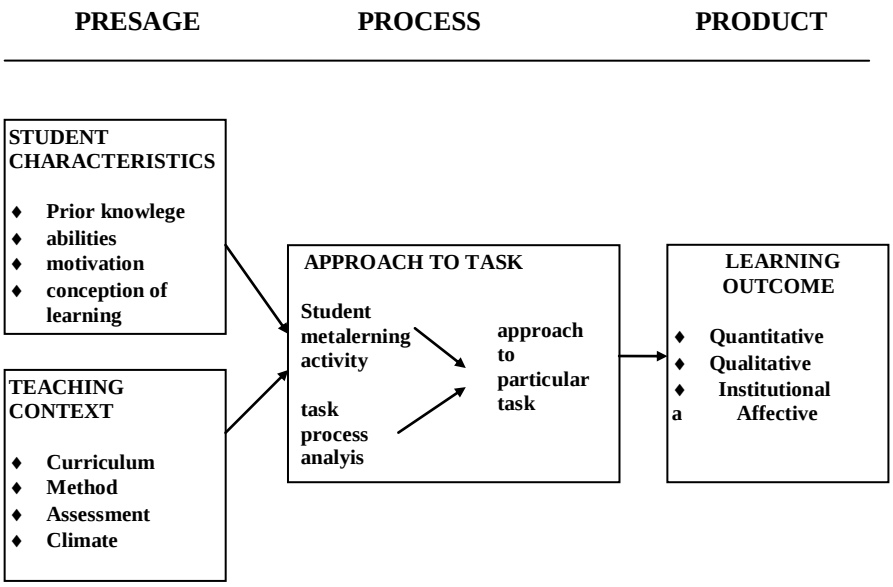
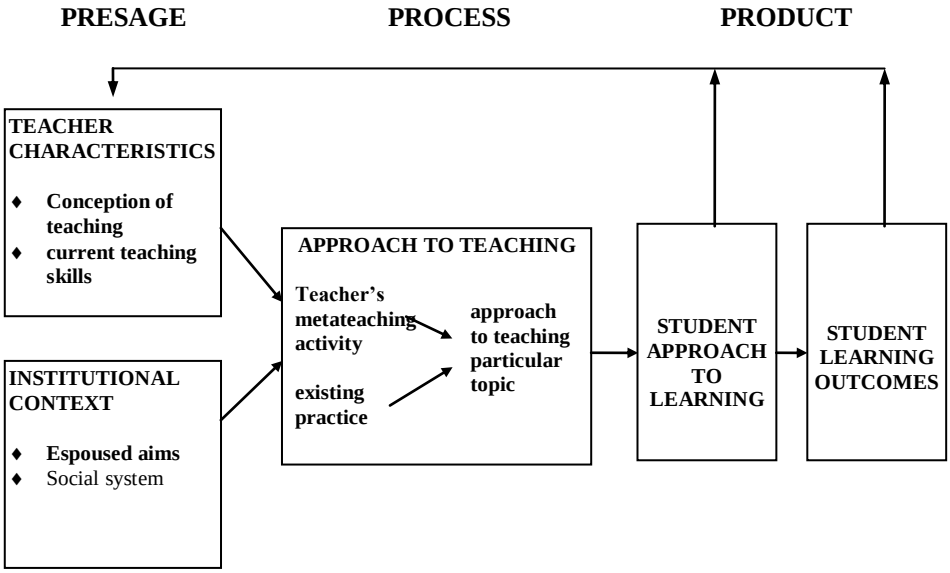



*Figure 3.* Biggs's '3-P Teaching Model'




This model hinges on three main components that determine how students do their learning and what they may expect from it. There are, first of all, presage factors, which refer to characteristics, prior to learning, the student brings with him, such as motivation, expectations, prior knowledge, etc., and those found in the university teaching context. This context includes all those factors which are out of the control of the student, for instance, course content, methods of teaching, assessments, etc., which will condition to a large extent the learning experience. The process factors refer to the way students approach a given task. The student will interpret the teaching context from his/her own perspective focusing on learning itself, not on the contents of learning, through a meta-learning activity responsible for a given approach

(surface, deep, achieving) which will in turn condition the outcome of learning. (Biggs, 1985). This outcome may be described quantitatively (how much it was learned), qualitatively (how well it was learned), institutionally (how good the accreditation is), and affectively (how the student feels about his learning experience).

## II. AIMS

The improvement of student learning involves one of the three kinds of adjustment to teaching: additive (i.e. surface), interactive and contextual. According to Biggs (1989: 28) 'students read their messages from what lecturers actually do in their teaching and assessing, not from what they say....In fact, assessment provides the most important single source of such messages'. Following Biggs' 3-P model (1989), we purport in this paper to see from a qualitative perspective the effect one presage factor such as the teaching context exerts on process (approaches) and product (students learning quality). In particular, we want to describe:

a. The way teachers specify their instructional objectives in a specific learning context
b. The assessment methods used in such context
c. The learning approaches used by our students of English Philology
d. Student learning approaches according to course level
e. The relationship between the students' approaches and their learning outcomes considering their context of learning (assessment methods and course level).

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Sample

The target population was 253 undergraduate students of English Philology at Murcia University (Spain). Those enrolled in their first, second and third year were following a new curriculum where except for two disciplines, all the rest are taught in English, the core subjects being English language, English linguistics, and English literature. Fourth and fifth-year students belonged to the old curriculum, consisting of two initial years doing foundation courses, all taught in Spanish except for one English Language course, plus three years of specialization in English Philology. The following table shows the frequencies and percentages of our sample according to course year and gender.

*Table 2*: Course year

| SAMPLE: COURSE YEAR | | |
|---|---|---|
| | FREQUENCIES | PERCENTAGES |
| FIRST YEAR | 31 | 12.25% |
| SECOND YEAR | 100 | 39.56% |
| THIRD YEAR | 50 | 19.75% |
| FOURTH YEAR | 38 | 15% |
| FIFTH YEAR | 34 | 13.4% |
| TOTAL | 253 | 100% |

*Table 3*: Gender

| SAMPLE: GENDER | | |
|---|---|---|
| | FREQUENCIES | PERCENTAGES |
| MALE | 55 | 22% |
| FEMALE | 198 | 78% |
| TOTAL | 253 | 100% |

### 3.2 Instruments

Biggs Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) was used to measure students learning approaches. This 42-item questionnaire provides scores on strategies and motives for surface, deep, and achieving approaches. The two scores (motive and strategy) can then be combined to give a general approach score. Reliability was calculated for the Spanish sample.

### 3.3 Procedure

A Spanish version of the SPQ was administered to English Philology students during a regular teaching period by the authors of this research. The application time was about 30 mins per group. Upon completion of the questionnaire, each participant obtained three separate scores -one per approach- being classified in the profile with the highest score. The data were fed into a computer and analyses were undertaken using the Standard Statistical Package SYSTAT 5.1

## III. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

For our first objective, instructional objectives, the contents of ten-course subjects were analysed. Ideally -our institution is not too strict on this-, each subject syllabus should consist of an introductory statement about the general aims of the course, which reflect the teacher's orientation towards the subject, and the objectives about what the students should be able to do as a result of a course of study. To this, it should follow a methodological orientation as to how to achieve the objectives. If the orientation is the transmission of content, the teaching method will probably be based on lectures and assigned reading. If the aim is the personal development

of the students, teachers will usually resort to small group teaching or individual tutorials as the usual procedure. Finally, there should be some comment on the type of task assessment the students are supposed to expect. This has to be closely linked to the objectives and the methodological orientation adopted.

Ten-course syllabi were randomly chosen in order to see the extent to which the above requirements were met. We found that none of the courses presented a general statement or introduction to the course contents. Besides, only two out of the ten syllabi made explicit reference to the general aims of the course subject. A simple majority (six out of ten) specified the objectives in terms of what the teacher expects the students to do throughout the course. Obviously, all syllabi reflect the contents of each subject, although only in three a distinction is made between contents of a theoretical vs. an applied nature. The methodological orientation did only appear in two syllabi and, as far as assessment procedures are concerned, not all of them refer exactly to the stated aims and objectives, although there is in all mention, however scanty, to the way students achievement will be validated. All syllabi include a short bibliographical section.

So, although all lecturers are fully aware of the contents of the course and assessment procedures, very few seem to be knowledgeable of curriculum planning practices where content teaching is done following a specific methodology and assessed according to the aims/objectives proposed. Even fewer seem to realise the impact a given method of teaching can have on the students' ways of approaching an academic task thus forcing them into specific learning approaches. The mismatch between objectives and assessment can affect students' learning and foster quantitative thinking. Teachers would easily acknowledge that the more clearly the objectives are formulated the more the learner will concentrate on what is demanded from him/her in order to succeed on a given course, and yet, little effort seems to be made in our institution to remedy this situation.

The role assessment procedures play in student learning was another issue we were interested in. As Crooks (1988) states in a review on the impact of classroom evaluation, assessment practices exert a profound impact on student learning and is perhaps one of the most critical of all tasks facing teachers –'learning is driven by assessment' Biggs writes (1996:11). Yet, many assessment procedures and practices reveal little awareness on the part of the teacher of the importance assessment has for the student. In our sample, assessment procedures were typical of a summative nature, where course contents are assessed at the end of the teaching period on a multiple-choice test basis.

Only occasionally mention is made to what we might call formative assessment (based on the improvement of the teaching and learning methods), but even those, make no comment as to how to carry out such evaluation. Our results confirm previous research (Marton and Säljö, 1976; Thomas and Bain, 1984; Hernández Pina's (1996) who found that learning quality is

heavily influenced by the way teachers assess their students. Indeed, assessment based solely on multiple-choice or even objective tests seems to lead students to adopt a surface learning approach; especially so in cases where students, confronted with an overloaded curriculum, resort to short-cut tactics such as relying entirely on previous tests in the preparation of their subjects. In fact, Ramsden and Entwistle (1981: 375) found that heavy workload influenced students with a deep orientation towards a surface approach. On the other hand, teachers' aims clash with institutional constraints such as massive classes impossible to assess other than by multiple-choice tests. As Biggs puts it, it is a question of balancing what we want (our aims) with what is allowable (what the institutional system allows us to do), but it may well be that formal evaluation may generate per se a surface approach as Entwistle suggests (1981:16).

This leads us to our third objective, to know what type of approaches to learning is used by students of English Philology. As Table 4 shows, 49% of the participants were classified as portraying a surface approach, 36% as using an achieving approach, and only 15% as being deep approach students. The majority of the participants favour, therefore, a superficial approach in their studies, which should be a matter of serious concern for those involved in improving educational standards. The mean for each of the three approaches was worked out, and again surface approach was predominant with a score of 47.31, being followed by a deep approach with 45.13, and finally, an achieving approach with 41.05 (Table 4).

We were also interested in knowing whether there were any differences according to gender. As Table 6 reflects, a high percentage of both men and women use a surface approach, men scoring slightly higher than women (5% vs. 48% respectively). On the other hand, more women than men showed a deep approach (37% vs. 34% respectively). And both groups use a similar amount of achieving approach (15%). These data partially confirm Biggs' (1987:50) who found that male students scored higher than female students on a surface approach but lower than female students on an achieving approach.

*Table 4* : Learning approaches used by Students of English Philology

| **APPROACHES** | **PERCENTAGE** |
|---|---|
| SA | 49% |
| DA | 36% |
| AA | 15% |

*Table 5*: Mean and Standard Deviation

| **TOTAL** | **Mean** | **Standard Deviation** | **Range** |
|---|---|---|---|
| SA | 47.31 | 6.36 | 34 |
| DA | 45.13 | 9.10 | 50 |
| AA | 41.05 | 8.37 | 46 |

*Table 6*. Learning approaches according to gender

| APPROACHES | MALE | FEMALE |
|---|---|---|
| SA | 51% | 48% |
| DA | 34% | 37% |
| AA | 15% | 15% |

*Table 7*. Means and Standard deviation

| MALES | Mean | Standard deviation | Range |
|---|---|---|---|
| SA | 47.62 | 6.43 | 28 |
| DA | 43.91 | 10.48 | 46 |
| AA | 40.00 | 8.36 | 32 |

| FEMALES | Mean | Standard deviation | Range |
|---|---|---|---|
| SA | 47.22 | 6.36 | 34 |
| DA | 45.47 | 8.68 | 46 |
| AA | 41.39 | 8.37 | 46 |

Our fourth objective consisted of describing the evolution of students learning approaches according to course level. Mention must be made first to some peculiarities of the Spanish educational system as far as optionality is concerned. Spanish students have a choice of several options as to courses to follow when they apply for a place in a university. Such options are nevertheless conditioned to the final scores they get at the end of their secondary education. This is extremely important since students' main interests will only be fulfilled if their final marks allow them to enter the institution of their choice. If their first option is not met, they are entitled to apply up to four further options of their preference, each of them meaning a step away from their initial vocational interests. In the case of our students, 92% chose English Philology as their first option, and only 8% came from other options. So practically all students are doing a course of studies of their choice.

In terms of learning approaches (see Tabñe 7), we found that the great majority of First-year students reflected a deep approach (36%), surface and achieving scoring slightly lower (32% in both cases). The deep approach had a higher mean too (x 4.19 ), but in general terms, there seems to be a balance in the use of the three approaches. With Second-year students, however, we noticed an increase in the use of both deep and surface approaches (47% in both cases). The highest mean score was found in the surface approach. The increase in surface approach from first to the Second- year appears greatly augmented in the third year (64%), whereas the deep approach was only favoured by 22%, and the achieving approach by just 14%. The surface approach gets the highest mean with a score of x 48.42. These results confirm other studies

(e.g. Watkins and Hatie, 1985) that reflect a decline in the use of a deep approach from first to Third-year students.

A change takes place with Fourth-year students. Here 42% of the group leaned towards a deep approach (42%), the surface approach ranking second (37%), and finally achieving (21%). The highest mean is found in the deep approach. Surprisingly, a high number of Fifth-year students fall back on a surface approach (62%), deep and achieving approaches ranking very low (20% and 18% respectively). The highest mean was found in the surface approach. Undoubtedly, this demands an explanation. As previously mentioned, students from the first three years are following a new syllabus characterised by a larger number of options and a lower teaching load per subject, whereas Fourth and Fifth-year students are following the old syllabus with a maximum of six subjects per year. Interestingly, we notice a similar evolution in the two groups: new syllabus students evolve from an initial deep approach to a quite extended surface approach in their third year; identical tendency is observed in the two final years of the old syllabus. These data confirm previous research on approaches in higher education (Watkins, 1982; Watkins and Hattie, 1985; Biggs, 1987; Lyn Gow & Kember, 1990).

*Table 8.* Approaches to Learning According to Year of Study

| APPROACHES | 1st YEAR | 2nd YEAR | 3rd YEAR | 4th YEAR | 5th YEAR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SA** | 32% | 47% | 64% | 37% | 62% |
| **DA** | 36% | 47% | 22% | 42% | 20% |
| **AA** | 32% | 6% | 14% | 21% | 18% |
| **TOTAL** | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

| 1st YEAR | Mean | Standard Deviation | Range | 2nd YEAR | Mean | Standard Deviation | Range |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SA** | **44.58** | **5.84** | **26** | **SA** | **48.33** | **6.16** | **30** |
| **DA** | **46.19** | **6.97** | **35** | **DA** | **46.77** | **8.77** | **43** |
| **AA** | **42.71** | **8.15** | **36** | **AA** | **40.62** | **7.96** | **45** |

| 3rd YEAR | Mean | Standard Deviation | Range | 4th YEAR | Mean | Standard Deviation | Range |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SA** | **48.42** | **6.33** | **27** | **SA** | **44.47** | **6.94** | **30** |
| **DA** | **41.30** | **10.46** | **46** | **DA** | **46.97** | **9.09** | **37** |
| **AA** | **40.82** | **8.67** | **36** | **AA** | **41.29** | **9.27** | **37** |

| 5th YEAR | Mean | Standard Deviation | Range |
|---|---|---|---|
| **SA** | **48.32** | **5.32** | **19** |
| **DA** | **42.91** | **7.89** | **34** |
| **AA** | **40.85** | **8.55** | **34** |

Our final objective consisted in analysing the relationship between the approaches used by our students and their learning outcome according to aspects of the context of learning such as assessment methods used and course level. As mentioned above, First-year students had a

higher percentage of subjects with a predominantly deep approach, while the rest of the group shared an identical percentage of surface and achieving approaches (32%). This means that 68% of the total, use appropriate approaches to their university tasks (deep or achieving) even though the teachers involved in the teaching of these students were grouped as inexperienced –we apply this label to those academic members with no more than two years of teaching practice in a given course subject– and their course syllabus was too sketchy as to methodology and objectives. Table 7 shows the percentage of failure rate (42.32% in subject 1 and 67.70% in subject 2) which could be taken to be relatively high if we bear in mind that English Philology was the first option for the great majority of the students (92%), therefore they were supposed to be a motivated group. The type of assessment used was, however, a multiple-choice tests.

Second-year students cluster around two approaches (surface and deep) shedding a 47.% each, although surface presented a higher mean (48.33 –see Table 8). In this case, the teaching staff in charge of the sampled courses was grouped as inexperienced lecturers, presenting a poorly developed course syllabus and relying on objective testing as the only assessment procedure. It is also remarkable the increase in the number of failed students (59.61% in subject 3, and 67.91 in subject 4 –the result of summing up the last two columns).

When we move to Third-year students, we observe a sharp increase in the use of a surface approach (64%) with 48.42 as a mean. The striking fact about these figures is that those involved in the subjects analysed are considered experienced academics (meaning by this, staff members with five or more years of teaching experience), yet this did not seem to have any special positive effect on the approach adopted. Although their course syllabi were uneven as to objectives and aims, we found that objective testing was the prevailing assessment method. The failure rate was again very high (64.4% in subject 5 and 58.97% in subject 6).

Only for Fourth-year students, the deep approach prevails over the others (42.11%) showing a higher mean (46.97). Their teachers were grouped as experienced academics and their course syllabi follow closely the main lines of a good course planning. This is reflected in turn in the number of students who pass the course (60.99% in subject 7, and 64.71% in subject 8). Quite surprisingly, Fifth-year students evolved towards a surface approach (61.76%) with a mean of 48.32. Their teachers were rated as experienced too, and their course syllabi, although not fully explicit, reflect the basic components of curriculum planning.

Multiple-choice tests were used again as the standard assessment procedure. The learning outcome of the number of students who succeed is higher (50.72 % subject 9, and 55.55% subject 10) than those who fail, although those figures are relatively lower than those shown for Fourth-year students.

*Table 8.* Breakdown of sample reflecting academic achievement according to course subjects

| ***COURSE SUBJECTS*** | +80% (Matrícula de Honor) | 70-80% (Sobresaliente) | 55-69% (Notable) | 40-54% (Aprobado) | Less than 40% (Suspenso) | Failure to attend final examination |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **ENGLISH LANG. Ia (319)** | 6 (1,88%) | 14 (4,39%) | 76 (23,83%) | 88 (27,59%) | 91 (28,53%) | 44 (13,79%) |
| **INTROD. ENG. .LIT. I (390)** | 6 (1,54%) | 19 (4,87%) | 34 (7,72%) | 67 (17,18%) | 98 (25,14%) | 166 (42,56%) |
| **INTROD. ENG. LIT II (302)** | 8 (2,65%) | 13 (4,30%) | 23 (7,62%) | 78 (25,82%) | 86 (28,48%) | 94 (31,13 %) |
| **ENGLISH LANG. IIb (321)** | 6 (1,87%) | 12 (3,74%) | 30 (9,35%) | 55 (17,13%) | 160 (49,84%) | 58 (18,07%) |
| **HIST. ENG. LANG. III (213)** | 2 (0,94%) | 8 (3,76%) | 32 (15,02%) | 38 (17,84%) | 56 (26,29%) | 77 (36,15%) |
| **MORPHOSYNTAX III (195)** | 1 (0,52%) | 3 (1,34) | 20 (10,26%) | 56 (28,73%) | 47 (24,10%) | 68 (34,87%) |
| **ENGLISH LIT. IV (259)** | 1 (0,35%) | 9 (3,48%) | 52 (20,08%) | 96 (37,08%) | 57 (22,02%) | 44 (16,99%) |
| **HIST. ENG. LANG. IV (241)** | 7 (2,90%) | 27 (11,20%) | 40 (16,60%) | 81 (33,61%) | 39 (16,19%) | 47 (19,50%) |
| **LIT. CRITICISM V (209)** | 2 (0,96%) | 13 (6,22%) | 51 (24,40%) | 40 (19,14%) | 21 (10,05%) | 82 (39,23%) |
| **ENG. LITERATURE V (198)** | 1 (0,50%) | 15 (7,57%) | 35 (17,68%) | 59 (29,80%) | 33 (16,67%) | 55 (27,78%) |

This trend seems to confirm previous research by Watkins and Hattie (1985), Biggs (1987) and Crooks (1988) that 'the longer students are exposed to university learning the more surface and less deep oriented their approaches to learning become' (Biggs, 1996: 10).

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Improving learning depends not just on a given learning style: it is also the teaching context, where programming, teacher experience, and type of assessment among other things impinge on the learning outcome. The way course syllabi are presented may determine a given approach. In our case, we have found out that from the institutional side, we found an uneven coverage of sections such as introduction to the topic, aims of the subject, learning objectives, etc. There is information on the theoretical contents, but neither the methodological orientations nor the assessment procedures always match the aims and objectives of the course. Even the bibliographical section may be at times too extensive or unrealistic.

Teacher experience no doubt may help, but from our data it does not seem that mere years of teaching experience compensate for a deficient course syllabus or unrealistic assessment procedures. Rather, it seems that students adapt their learning approaches according to the type of assessment they are confronted with. The shift from deep to surface approaches, the evolution that takes place from First to Third, or from Fourth to Fifth-year students, can only be explained in terms of adaptation of individual learning styles to a situation where educational achievement as reflected in the assessment procedures can be attained by moving to a surface approach. This approach, however, appears to be more strongly related to a higher failure rate than the other two approaches. Our study although not a longitudinal study sensu stricto, leads us to conclude that students may also develop a suface approach as a result of the number of years spent at the university, something that, as pointed out above, should be a matter of serious concern for any academic institution.

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