Spanish Students at UK Universities: Computer-Mediated Responses To Academic Writing Problems

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A mis padres por su constante apoyo

Abstract

The UK is one of the countries which hosts the highest number of international students in its universities. While traditionally many of these students have come from Commonwealth countries, the UK has experienced recent growth in the number of in-coming European students. This increase raises questions about how students adapt to the host country and to a different academic environment. This is turn has implications for the provision of appropriate support by receiving institutions. A review of existing research suggests that little research has been undertaken on the experiences and needs of specific international groups. An investigation was therefore undertaken into the experiences of one of the largest European groups studying at UK universities, students from Spain.

The experiences of Spanish students studying at two universities in South-East England were investigated by means of a questionnaire, individual interviews and focus groups. The analysis of this data revealed that these experiences, and in particular the challenges students felt they faced, were broadly similar to those reported for international students generally. However, the analysis also highlighted how Spanish students' evaluation of their home educational environment inflected their orientation to their host learning environment, making them generally positively disposed to key features of UK academic culture. Nevertheless, this did not lessen the challenges they felt they experienced in developing the required language skills to cope with typical features of the UK academic life, such as participating in seminar discussions and writing academic essays. Spanish students typically felt that their prior education in Spain had not prepared them linguistically for these tasks. Perhaps paradoxically, then, the investigation also highlighted the fact that many Spanish students did not attend English Language support programmes provided by their UK universities, reporting pressures on time and a sense that these programmes were unable to address their specific needs.

As a result of this finding, the dissertation investigates the role of L1 Spanish transfer in formal academic writing and proposes a simple web-based form-focused resource aimed specifically at providing explanation and practice on

typical areas of linguistic difficulty for Spanish students such as doubling consonants in English spelling, avoiding vocabulary errors due to 'false friends' and correct word order. The rationale behind the design of this pilot resource is presented and a limited evaluation study is reported, based on both quantitative and qualitative data. Despite significant weaknesses in the validity of the quantitative data, the evaluation broadly suggests that the sample group of Spanish students responded positively to the resource and confirmed its potential value among a range of approaches to supporting international students in their development of academic writing skills. This dissertation thus aims to make a modest contribution to broadening understanding of the international student experience and suggests that a simple, but targeted, linguistic resource for students from specific language backgrounds can be a useful addition to university support strategies.

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Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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1.0 <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

This chapter introduces the issues to be investigated, discusses the motivation for the study and defines the key problems which it will address. It describes its aims and rationale and proposes the research questions which will guide the investigation.

1.1 <u>RATIONALE AND AIMS OF THE STUDY</u>

Student exchange and student flows across borders are an important part of the internationalisation of higher education. Worldwide, more than 1.8 million people studied outside their country of origin in 2000 and the figure is set to rise to 7.2 million by 2025 (Sussex Centre for Migration Research Annual Report, 2004). The UK has traditionally been the European country receiving the highest proportion of students from outside its national boundaries. Castro and Fernandez Lopez (2005: 2), indicate as main reasons for this the high quality of its educational system, the use of the English language, the historical links established in the past with its colonies and the facilities available in universities for foreign students. Together with the United States and Germany, the UK receives half of the world's foreign students (UNESCO, 2005).

For decades, the UK has been enriching its student body with students predominantly from Commonwealth countries. However, more recently there has also been a general rise in the number of students arriving from other European countries. According to UNESCO (2005), of the 227,273 incoming students in the year 02/03, 103,085 came from European countries. For UK universities, this may have specific implications for student support since, for most European students, English is a foreign language, whereas for Commonwealth students it tends to be a second or even first language.

In the last decades of the 20th century, most of the research conducted on the student experience of studying abroad was situated in the fields of psychology and educational studies (Altbach, 1991). Research focused on mental health problems (Furham & Trezise, 1983), maladjustment (Furukawa & Shibayama,

1993), racial discrimination and culture shock (Furnham, 1997). Some studies have drawn a somewhat gloomy picture of the student experience abroad (see for example Ying & Liese 1991; Ward & Searle 1991; Yen & Stevens 2003). Increased prevalence of loneliness, depression and slower academic progress than host nationals are among the negative effects revealed. However, these studies focused primarily on students from Asian contexts, where the differences with European backgrounds, relating to culture, climate, social norms and academic systems, are particularly strong. As Bochner and Furnham (1986) suggest, the degree of difficulty experienced by a student studying abroad is related to the cultural distance between the students' culture and the host society. This view is supported, for example, by a recent study of foreign students in Norway, which concludes that general satisfaction among European and North American students is higher than those of Asian and African origin (Sam, 2001).

In recent years, there have been more studies focusing on student inter-European mobility, and particularly on the impact of student mobility within the framework of the European Union's ERASMUS programme (see for example Opper et al., 1990 and Teichler, & Maiworm, 1997). This research reports a high level of satisfaction among European students with the general experience and with the academic, professional, linguistic, and personal/cultural practice, to a point that a majority of students in the Opper et al. (1990) study report that they perceive their academic performance to be better during their stay abroad than they would have expected it to be at home. While such findings may apply equally to non-ERASMUS students engaged in inter-European mobility, there is a need for more research in this area. More specifically, given the potential impact of different linguistic, cultural and academic backgrounds on students' ability to function effectively within a different higher education system, there is a need to move away from the tendency to aggregate findings from students from different countries.

One of the biggest exporters of students to the UK from within Europe is Spain. According to HESA Student Records (July, 2002), Spain has for the last couple of decades been one of the top five European sender countries. The

number of students from Spain in UK universities for the academic year 2002/03 was 7,390 students (UNESCO, 2005). The UK is the top European destination for outgoing Spanish university students, with 34% choosing a UK university in 2000/1 (Eurostat, 2005). Despite this, no studies have thus far focused specifically on the experiences of students from Spain studying in the UK. This study, in its first part, therefore sets out to investigate the kinds of challenges this particular group faces in adapting to UK higher education.

It then seeks to explore an example of a specific area of support that Spanish students in the UK might benefit from, focusing on how their accuracy in academic writing in a second language might be promoted, taking into account specific formal features that appear to be problematic due to first language transfer. As recognised by key researchers in this field (see for example Cownie & Addison (1996); Blue (1993); Turner (1999); Klineberg & Hull (1979); Furnham, (2004), proficient command of the English language is a key factor contributing to a successful experience of living and studying in the UK. International students from non-English speaking backgrounds tend to have greater academic difficulties and to experience episodes of anxiety, frustration and/or depression (Blue 1993: 5). Consequently, it is important for UK universities to offer international students support in developing their English language skills. Academic writing frequently has a high priority in this support provision since most university assessment takes a written form.

Typically, English language support in UK universities is provided through face-to-face classes, but such classes may not of themselves be able to adequately address the needs of specific groups of students. Given that some of the language needs of a learner group are determined by their own language, the second part of this study explores the ways in which Spanish students' first language might be the source of specific difficulties in academic writing in English. Given the dangers of fossilization of incorrect forms, I will concentrate only on the errors they commit due to influence of L1.

Review of different pedagogic approaches to supporting the development of writing skills suggests that the current emphasis on communicative methods

and process approaches to writing may not adequately address shortcomings in the linguistic accuracy of higher education students. If we further accept the widely held view that L2 learners beyond the critical period *become psychologically incapable of acquiring full L2 grammatical competence on the basis of mere exposure* (Hawkins & Towell 1996: 201), the argument for pedagogic intervention targeting key linguistic features relevant to academic writing in English becomes apparent in the case of international students with English as a second language studying in the UK.

Recognising, then, that explicit attention to formal features of the target language may need to complement the naturalistic experience of learning through using the target language, leads to the third part of this thesis where a specific proposal for a self-access web-based resource, targeted at specific formal areas of linguistic difficulty for Spanish students, is presented and evaluated. It is evident that not all aspects of language learning tasks are equally suited to independent study. Gaining practice in oral interaction skills, for example, may be challenging for a person studying on their own; the context of group experience and shared communication is normally required for effective practice. Conversely, recent authors have argued that work on language forms may be better accomplished through individual study rather than in the classroom (Garrett, 1998; Hall, 1998; Torlakovic & Deugo, 2004). A study by Broady (1996) conducted among first-year students of French and German in a UK university, reports that only 30% of the sample felt that 'grammar has to be explained by an expert: you can't learn it on your own'; however, 61% agreed that 'a lot of grammar can be learnt without the teacher'. Breeze (2002) who replicated Broady's study with a sample of students enrolled in upper-intermediate language classes at a Spanish university, concludes that grammar ranks low on these students' list of what should be covered in class and what they think is better left for self-study. The proposed resource therefore aims to complement current communicative pedagogies that work well in the classroom with a CALL package which will give a partial solution to some of the specific linguistic challenges faced by a given group of international students which cannot be easily addressed in a multicultural classroom.

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1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following three sets of research questions frame this study. They are based on a careful review of the current literature, as well as my own experiences as a Spanish student in the UK working with international students:

1   i.   What challenges do Spanish students face in adapting to UK academic culture?

ii. To what extent is their experience distinctive from that of other international students, as represented in the literature on international student experience?

2   i. More specifically, what difficulties do they experience in relation to academic writing in English?

ii. What kinds of difficulties may be attributable to first language interference, and are therefore specific to this group of students?

3.   i. What kind of flexible provision could be made to address these specific   linguistic problems?

ii In particular, would self-access web-based material, consisting of explanations and quizzes, be efficient and effective in helping Spanish students address these specific linguistic problems?

1.3 HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses are generated from the above research questions :

H1   The broad experiences of Spanish students are different to those of other international groups.

H2   Spanish students experience academic writing problems in English that are attributable to L1 influence.

H3   Self-access web-based materials, consisting of explanations and quizzes are efficient and effective in helping Spanish students address specific linguistic problems.

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1.4 <u>SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY</u>

The present study seeks to make a modest contribution to the current body of research into the experiences of studying abroad by considering the experiences of a particular national cohort. Students abroad do not constitute a homogeneous group and the challenges and needs of each subgroup may be distinctive to those of other subgroups.

The study also reflects on student perceptions of the information and other types of support provided by host institutions to facilitate academic integration and the development of linguistic skills. In particular, it highlights the need for flexible, self-access support in addition to timetabled sessions. It also suggests that materials which address the specific linguistic problems of students from a particular language background can be a helpful addition to the range of learning resources provided to support academic writing.

The specific proposal tested in this study is for the electronic delivery of targeted language learning materials in the context of a university's electronic learning environment. The approach taken to the design of the materials is one of simplicity and deliberately limited scope. Student responses suggest that in an electronic environment, such materials can work effectively. This has some implications for our understanding of the range of resources which students might find helpful.

1.5 <u>ORGANISATION OF THE STUDY</u>

This dissertation comprises seven chapters. The present chapter provides the introduction, where I describe the objectives of the study and its background so that the readers can orientate to the major themes and argument.

Chapter two describes and discusses the general issues relating to the experiences of international students abroad, more particularly the specific challenges facing European cohorts in the UK. These challenges include cultural, educational and emotional matters, as well as the difficulties related to

language. There is also an attempt to define the learning culture in Spain and the role of English as a foreign language in this country in order to shed light on any specific challenges Spanish students in the UK may face..

Chapter three provides an outline of the methodology to be employed in the investigation itself. The research was conducted using a mixed paradigm, both interpretive, enabling understanding of the subjective world of human experiences (Cohen & Manion, 1989) and normative, to sketch a broader picture of the issues involved. The type of evaluation study, the rationale for the choice of methods and instruments, and ethical issues are considered. The organisation and structure of the investigation is highlighted.

Chapter four comprises the student experience analysis where I report on the findings of the qualitative and quantitative data collected on the experiences of Spanish students in the UK.

Chapter five reviews the theoretical debates on how a first language may influence performance and development in a second language. There is a contextualisation of this discussion through a review of typical error patterns in the written work of Spanish students. Literature on pedagogical intervention, in particular error correction and form-focused instruction, is also reviewed.

Chapter six describes the principles for the design and development process of the web-based materials comprising form-focused explanations and quizzes. The evaluation carried out to measure the effectiveness of these materials is also presented and its findings reviewed.

Chapter seven provides the conclusions. Recommendations are made based on the analysis of the data collected and on the literature reviewed. It also lists the limitations of the study and suggests directions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDYING ABROAD

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2.0 <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

This chapter discusses the issues and sets the context for the investigation. It consists of a review of the relevant literature relating to the general experiences of international students abroad, with a discussion of the main issues of the experience, considering first, the pre-departure factors that may affect students' later adjustment to the host community and university, and second, the challenges encountered after arrival. As the primary concern of the current investigation is the experiences of Spanish students in UK higher education institutions and how they differ from the experiences of other international groups, special attention will be given to the European context. Also explicit mention will be given throughout the chapter to particular features of the Spanish cultural and educational system, which may have an effect on the impact and severity of the challenges. The chapter will conclude with a review of studies which focus on the experiences of specific national groups of European migrant students in the UK.

2.1 <u>STUDY ABROAD STATISTICS</u>

As noted in the previous chapter, globally, student mobility has grown considerably over the past 25 years, and it is predicted to continue increasing rapidly during the next decades. The total global demand for international student places will increase from about 2.1 million in 2003 to approximately 5.8 million by 2020, with demand for places in the main English speaking destination countries forecast to increase from about 1 million places to about 2.6 million places[1].

Overall, international students prefer English-speaking countries as places to study. Traditionally, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia have received the highest proportion and variety of international students (also called overseas or foreign students), and it is in these four countries where the great majority of research on studying abroad matters has been carried out.

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1 Figures from www.britishcouncil.org

As regards sending countries, Europe accounts for a third of the total: France, Spain and Germany, in that order, being at the top of the list. A high proportion of European international students move to other European countries (see Joint Working group of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth and UKCOSA, 2000: 14, 17).

2.2 <u>GENERAL EXPERIENCES OF STUDYING ABROAD</u>

Studying in a new and foreign country is often an exciting and rich experience. The benefits of student mobility for the individual student have been well-argued and documented. For example the personal, academic and professional pay-offs, such as increased maturity, self-confidence, linguistic competence, and better academic performance have frequently been noted in the literature (see Balaz & Williams, 2004; Coleman, 1996; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Immelman & Schneider, 1998; Opper et al., 1990; Stryker, 1997; Teichler & Maiworm, 1997). In a report published by HEFCE and carried out by two UK universities (2004: 36), most students had very positive views about their study abroad period. For instance, 95 per cent of the students surveyed about their period studying abroad felt that the experience enhanced their personal development, and 90 per cent felt that it was relevant to the development of an international career. Interviews yielded more nuanced accounts. The main benefits were seen in the social, cultural and linguistic realms; academic benefits were stressed less often. From a different perspective, in the same study, staff reported that students returned from a foreign stay 'transformed'. Increased maturity, self confidence, linguistic competence, better academic performance, cultural understanding and a clearer purpose in life were frequently remarked upon by staff.

As well as benefiting personally from their time abroad, international students are also seen as bringing direct benefits to the host country and host institution: while the economic benefits of recruiting international students are undeniable, governments also recognise the importance of international students for economic, trade, cultural and political reasons (see Greenaway & Tuck, 1995 and Williams, 1982).

Nevertheless, research on studying abroad matters in general has shown that despite all the benefits, international students encounter a number of challenges during their period of study abroad (see Cunliffe, 1993; Kinell-Evans, 1990; Okorocha, 1997). The challenges identified are complex and involve a range of different issues but most commonly relate to: personal and social problems, such as feelings of homesickness and culture shock; differences in approaches to teaching and learning; inadequate second language competence; and the high levels of stress that such problems may produce. Intra-European student mobility has had its own obstacles. A Green Paper published by the European Commission (1996) analysed the issue in detail at the European level. From the list mentioned, lack of knowledge of a foreign language and of certain cultural aspects of the target community were considered the main obstacles to mobility. Other practical challenges mentioned in this report were lack of information prior to going abroad and lack of suitable and affordable accommodation.

In a more recent analysis, the ADMIT report (2002) identified three key barriers common to most countries participating (France, Germany, Greece, Sweden and the United Kingdom). While these barriers, namely language, finance and recognition and/or admission, were common, their effect on mobility was significantly different in case of the individual countries. According to this report, financial obstacles were particularly important in the case of inward mobility to the UK. The difference in cost of living between countries of Southern Europe and the UK were considered *as enormous compared with the constantly decreasing monthly ERASMUS[2] allowance* (Szarka, 2003: 131). This report also considers the cultural and attitudinal factors which work against mobility, as well as the lack of information and various administrative barriers, which can also hold back mobility.

What follows is a detailed analysis of the factors that may affect student adjustment to the host community and university as described in the literature.

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[2] ERASMUS (European Action Scheme for the Mobility of European Students) is the name given to an exchange programme that enables students in 31 European countries to study part of their degree in another country (www.erasmus.ac.uk). For more information about this programme see section 2.5 in this chapter.

The factors are presented according to whether they appear prior to departure or after arrival to the host country.

2.3 THE PRE-DEPARTURE STAGE: FACTORS THAT MAY AFFECT LATER ADJUSTMENT

Motivations underlying the decision for studying abroad and adequate pre-arrival information play an important role on students' welfare on arrival, social integration to the new community and academic performance while abroad.

2.3.1 Decision-making motivations

At the pre-arrival stage, one of the aspects of interest is the range of variables that might influence the decision to study at a particular host country and host university. It is apparent that the general patterns of global student mobility are influenced by a wide variety of factors that include the geographical region of the world, historical connections to particular countries, language, and education systems. There are also a range of other reasons why a particular international student might choose one destination country over another for study; these include the perceived quality and reputation of the country's education provision, its accessibility, affordability and the employability resulting from the qualification obtained.

Mazzarol et al. (1997) identified six factors found to influence student choice of an international HE institution. Firstly, they emphasised the importance of knowledge and awareness of the host country. The international standing of the potential host country's qualifications was an important component of this factor. Secondly, they reported the impact of personal recommendation, whether this was from a friend, family member or sponsor. Thirdly, cost considerations were raised. This included obvious components such as exchange rates, cost of living, as well as fees, but also aspects such as the availability of part-time work, and social costs such as crime and racial discrimination. The fourth factor identified was the environment, which relates to the physical climate and lifestyle of the potential host country. Fifthly, they identified geographic proximity as a factor, and particularly the ease of transport to and from host country. Finally, they

discussed 'social links', by which they mean whether or not the intending student has family or friends already living in the country.

The ADMIT report (2002: 166), recounts among the most important reasons given by other European students for choosing to study in the UK a belief that a degree from this country and a higher level of English proficiency would improve their job prospects. Finding exactly the course wanted, and geographical proximity of the UK to the home country were also factors reported by a high percentage of the international students taking part. Experiencing other cultures and broadening horizons, gaining a different perspective on their subject, and experiencing different teaching and learning methods, as well as wanting to meet students from many different countries, and a particular interest in the British culture were also important reasons noted, particularly by female students. As an additional interesting fact, the most frequently mentioned individuals exerting a positive influence on the decision to study abroad were the respondent's mother, father or a close friend.

Allen and Higgins (1994) in their survey of international students studying in British higher education institutions also report that the most frequently mentioned reasons for wanting to take a higher education course abroad are for 'the opportunity to travel/experience different cultures' followed by 'receive a better quality of education' and better job prospects in their home country with a qualification from abroad. In this study, over two-thirds of respondents had decided to study in the UK because of the English language. The USA, Australia and Canada were the most popular alternative countries considered, also mainly because of the English language being spoken. Over half had been influenced by the high standard/quality and reputation of UK education and the international recognition of UK qualifications.

Wiers-Jenssen (2003: 395-396), reporting on the experiences of Norwegian students abroad, concludes that what she calls 'pull' factors (surplus of benefits abroad) play a dominant role in students' reasons for studying abroad; for example, 'interest to study in a foreign environment' and 'love for adventure' are the two main motivations for the subjects in her study deciding to studying

abroad. Wiers-Jenssen (2003: 407) claims that being motivated by 'pull' rather than 'push' (lack of benefits at home) factors increases overall motivation. 'Push' motives were mostly connected to curricular issues, such as 'strong desire to enter a certain profession' and 'not admitted to the preferred study in Norway' reported by Norwegian students. Regarding choice of host country, Wiers-Jenssen also concludes that language is a decisive factor. Norwegians' knowledge of the English language is reasonably good, as English is a compulsory subject in school from the age of six, but they find it advantageous to improve their skills by studying in English speaking countries. Recommendations from family or friends who have formerly studied abroad and geographic and cultural proximity to Norway again were important factors in their decision of a host country.

When Slovakian students in Balaz and Williams' (2004) study were asked to rate their motives for studying in the UK, it was again English language improvement that was considered fundamentally important by most respondents. Their results accord with Teichler and Maiworm's (1997: 42) findings that language learning, followed by social development, are the main objectives of participants in EU-sponsored ERASMUS mobility schemes. It is interesting to note in Balaz and Williams' study that there were no statistically significant differences between the motives of students on university courses and those on language and vocational courses. Participation in university courses was perceived as being more important for acquiring language skills than specific disciplinary or professional competences. This, according to Balaz and William (2004: 225) is related to the particular market value of English language in a transition economy.

The studies reviewed suggest that when choosing a host university in the UK, English language plays the most significant role. Moreover the studies reviewed above, show that 'pull' factors or a positive interest in getting to know new people and a new culture increases overall satisfaction of students experiences abroad (see for example Wiers-Jenssen study, 2003). According to Trooboff et al. (2004: 204), one of the primary goals of study abroad is to provide exposure to and involvement in the local culture. Therefore, one of the important measures of the effectiveness of study abroad is whether or not students are motivated to make the most of the cultural integration opportunities abroad. However, putting effort into

academic work seems also very important, since doing poorly academically is problematic even when one is well adapted to the host community. Thus, a balance of student motivation in these two dimensions of the study abroad experience – cultural involvement and academic performance – is key to success.

Balaz and Williams' (2003) study analyses the experiences of students once they have returned to their home country, and thus reports on students' fulfilment of their initial motives. Results of self-assessments suggest that they experienced success in enhancing language acquisition, but in addition, living abroad had enhanced other competences, including self-confidence, openness to learning, and flexibility. In contrast, acquiring qualifications was considered far less valuable. These findings are broadly in accord with King and Ruiz-Gelices' (2003) observation that outgoing British ERASMUS students value the linguistic and cultural aspects of their placements more than the academic ones. Balaz and Williams also found out that although network construction or making friends was not usually a manifest objective of student migration, in many cases it proved in students' retrospective accounts to be an invaluable support of the experience.

2.3.2 Pre arrival information

Accurate information helps planning and allows for more realistic expectations about the period abroad (Weissman & Furnham, 1987). Pre-arrival information plays an important role in international students' initial welfare and adaptation to the host university and the host country. A report published by HEFCE (2004: 40), concludes that many non-movers interviewed highlighted lack of information as an important deterrent. In fact, the third most cited reason for not going abroad was 'insufficient information on possibilities to go abroad'. In the interviews conducted in this report, students also referred to the timing of promotion, indicating that appropriate information ought to be given earlier.

In Allan and Higgins' (1994) survey, 62% of respondents thought that it was very important to receive pre-arrival details of the content of their course; however, the most frequently reported difficulty which respondents had experienced in obtaining information about undergraduate study in the UK was precisely finding information on the content of their course, but this was precisely the area of most

frequently reported difficulty. Lord and Dawson (2002: 9) emphasise the importance of clarity in the information provided for international students as a result of their survey in which students from Mainland China and the Indian subcontinent severely criticised information and provided about courses and their links in terms of progression.

Katsara (2004: 83) in her study on the experiences of Greek students in the UK (see below section 2.5.3), reports that insufficient pre-arrival information was a serious problem affecting students' preparation for their period of study abroad and that false expectations concerning the new academic and social environment created problems for adjustment on arrival. The majority of the students in her investigation claimed not to have been fully informed about the British education system having to rely primarily on information from friends and family. Katsara (2004: 83) points to the lack of specific information, particularly on British study methods, and an accurate portrayal of tutors' roles and university regulations, as underlying many Greek students' perception that their preparation for their period abroad was inadequate. These students expressed a need for more information on the specific course programs and on the learning context. It was also clear that more information on British culture and life in the UK in general would have been appreciated.

Despite the conclusions of these surveys suggesting that international students do not have access to accurate information, study and diploma handbooks informing on national systems of higher education, describing the structure of institutions of higher education and course programme, entry requirements and admission regulations, fields of study, types of degrees, and so forth, as well as condition for foreign students, are published widely in Europe. However, Teichler (2003: 329) points out that while the information provided by these handbooks might be helpful in facilitating student mobility in Europe, it does not help the students to get a realistic view of the subtle barriers to mobility as well as on the differential prestige of study opportunities.

2.4 <u>THE CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AFTER ARRIVAL</u>

Studying abroad implies many challenges and adjustments. As strangers in an unfamiliar environment, students encounter a foreign language, a different culture and an educational model that may deviate significantly from the one they are accustomed to. The students also have to establish a new social network. This section reviews the literature on challenges experienced after arrival.

2.4.1 Socio-cultural and emotional challenges

Clearly, international students studying abroad experience the culture and society of the host country in a variety of ways. Learning about and experiencing the host country culture and society is necessary in order to cope with life and study there, as well as to serve one's own social and cultural needs during the study period, and it is in itself a valuable area of learning which enriches knowledge and competence in the long run (Maiworm et al. 1991: 61). As Elton mentions (1982: 12), the effects of travelling to a foreign country – culture shock, uncertainty and loneliness – are themselves considerable obstacles to study even when no other difficulties are present. Every country has its own social customs and, as argued by Furnham (2004: 16), travel from one's home country to a foreign country and trying to settle there very often brings emotional discomfort.

Bochner and Furnham (1986) suggest that the degree of difficulty experienced by a student studying abroad is related to the cultural distance between the student's culture and the host society. According to this claim, European students may adapt quicker and more easily to UK universities than students from cultural backgrounds such as the Far East, Asia or Africa, and they may either not experience negative effects of cultural adaptation or experience them with a lower degree of discomfort.

2.4.1.1 Culture Shock

Oberg (1960) is generally credited with first describing culture shock, which he suggests is a psychological reaction to a change in cultural environment. It is an experience described by people who have travelled abroad to work, live or study or even when abroad on holiday. The main symptoms of culture shock are

reported to be psychological disturbance, a negative reaction to the new surroundings and a longing for a more familiar environment (McKinley et al. 1996).

Makepeace (1989: 23) argues that culture shock is likely to occur when all the familiar cues or signs of daily social interaction are lost, most of which operate at an unconscious level. These include how to greet, pay for purchases, give instructions and accept or refuse invitations. When all or most cultural systems are new then comparatively simple tasks require great energy and thought. Thus, a person becomes anxious, confused and apparently apathetic until he or she has had time to develop a new set of cognitive constructs to understand and enact the appropriate behaviour. Hence, frustration, anxiety, depression and even hostility to the new environment characterise the phenomenon.

A number of studies discuss culture shock among international students (see for example Barker et al., 1991; Furnham, 2004; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Educational publications, directed at international students and people who work with them, typically warn of culture shock when a student arrives for the first time in the host country (Kinnell-Evans, 1990; Makepeace, 1989 and UKCOSA, 2004). The information on culture shock in the publications cited above is modelled on the U-curve hypothesis (Lysgaard, 1955). This model proposes that a student experiences an initial 'honeymoon period' in which they are fascinated with the experience in the new culture and many positive factors of host culture are perceived. This stage, however, is followed by a phase of 'feeling bad' in which the language difficulties and behavioural differences make it difficult to develop personal contact with locals, leading to frustration or depression. However, these feelings are finally overtaken by a period of 'recovery' in which students start to feel more comfortable with the new cultural habits. The final phase occurs when the student adjusts to the new culture, feeling integrated within new social networks.

Although the U-curve hypothesis and its shape has been challenged by studies of cultural learning which have provided evidence that for example there is not always a 'honeymoon period' and that depression is not universal (Church, 1982),

it appears that many practical problems do indeed decline over the course of time. However, authors such as Ward et al. (1998: 290) conclude that *despite its popular and intuitive appeal, the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment should be rejected*. Bochner and Furnham (1986) had already rejected the hypothesis claiming that foreign students often never fully adjust as predicted by the U-curve hypothesis, and suggest an alternative "social skills" model of cross-cultural accommodation. This model argues that students can be strategic in what they learn, employing enough behavioural traits to 'get by', without necessarily understanding or accepting the new culture.

Further, even if 'culture shock' seems to be a clearly documented phenomenon, it should not be seen as a universally uniform experience. Some cultures are more similar than others and individuals, whatever their culture, vary in their capacity to withstand stress and shock. As Kim (1988: 131) reminds us, not all people migrate for the same reasons, or come from the same background. Nor are their subsequent adaptation experiences uniform even in the same host environment.

According to Babiker et al. (1980), the degree of psychological adjustment difficulties is a function of the dissimilarities between culture of origin and culture of contact. Ryan (2000: 77) also argued that the greater the cultural shift in terms of language, values, customs, philosophies and ideology, as well as other factors such as diet, climate and geography, the more the student is likely to experience difficulties and distress. Furnham and Bochner (1982) reported that international students in the UK, who came from culturally similar regions, experienced less social difficulties than students from culturally distant regions.

Furnham (1999) points out that in theory some people may not experience any negative aspects of shock; instead they may seek out these experiences for their enjoyment. Adler (1975), Bochner (1982) and David (1971) have stated that although culture shock is more often associated with negative consequences, it may, in mild doses, be important for self-development and personal growth. In this way, culture shock is seen as a transitional experience, which can result in the adoption of new values, attitudes and behaviour patterns. However, only a few

researchers have seen the positive side of culture shock. There is by-and-large agreement that exposure to a new culture is a stressful experience.

Some authors make suggestions to alleviate the negative aspects of culture shock. Makepeace (1989: 24) suggests that staff in HE institutions needs to be aware that the phenomenon exists and help students understand that it is a normal transitory reaction and that talking about it with other international students can be helpful. Kinnell-Evans (1990), McKinley and Stevenson (1994) and Ryan (2000) asserted that extensive induction and pre-sessional orientation courses are especially worthwhile. In these courses, universities run active programmes of social and cultural events and prospective students are provided with specific information about their new culture, enabling students to settle more quickly, develop confidence, and access any support they might need. In Allen and Higgins (1994) the majority of respondents (87%) who had attended an induction programme had found it useful. However, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that university orientation courses for international students reduce the distress caused by culture shock.

2.4.1.2 Homesickness

Furnham (1997: 17) describes the key psychological features of homesickness as a strong preoccupation with the thought of home, a perceived need to go home, a sense of loss relating to the people, places and things at home and a concurrent feeling of unhappiness, unease and disorientation in the new place. The condition of homesickness may be mild and acceptable to the student abroad or it may be severe and very worrying. Unsurprisingly, accompanying feelings of isolation and loneliness may make it very difficult for the student to work adequately.

As Makepeace points out (1989: 23), the feelings of homesickness may be particularly strong with the onset of winter and the return of the first set of assignments if grades are not particularly good. However, as with culture shock, when bonds are made with friends and classmates, new routines of daily life have been formed, study methods, accents and teaching styles become more comprehensible, then the unpleasant effects of the transition are usually mitigated.

<u>2.4.1.3 Social interactions</u>

As the above discussion suggests, the social needs of international students appear to be as important as their academic needs (see below section 2.4.2), as social interactions are likely to affect academic performance. The extensive literature on interactions between international and domestic students (Bochner et al., 1985; Butcher, 2002; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Martin, 1994; McGrath, 1998, Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2001) has considered the quality and quantity of contact, friendship patterns, social support networks, and the functional roles of intercultural interactions. The results of the research converge to indicate that the amount of cross-national interaction is typically low; that international students expect and desire greater contact, and that interaction with host students is generally associated with psychological, social and academic benefits for the international student.

Bochner et al. (1985: 690) state that international students may typically belong to three distinct social networks each serving a different psychological function: monocultural, bicultural and multicultural. The monocultural network consists of bonds with compatriots, and its function is to provide a setting for the rehearsal and expression of students' own ethnic and cultural values. Students see this network as being most important for coping with loneliness, homesickness, study problems and adjustments in the new environment, a view reinforced by Kim (1994: 9). The multicultural network consists of bonds with non-compatriot foreign students, and its function is recreational as well as providing mutual support based on a shared foreignness.

The bicultural network consists of bonds with host nationals, and its function is to facilitate instrumentally the academic and professional aspirations. According to Kim (1994: 9), interaction with hosts provides international students with feedback about their communication, as well as information about the host country. Through this process, they reduce stress, become more psychologically healthy and functionally fit, and develop an increased sense of intercultural identity. Klineberg and Hull's (1979) study of international students' experiences in many countries documented this reciprocal relationship between contact and adaptation. They concluded that increased contact leads to better psychological

adjustment, which in turn, leads to increased and more satisfactory contact. Martin (1994: 18) claims that it is often those students who interact the most with host culture members who experience the most difficult adaptation but also the most satisfying intercultural experience.

Confirming the importance of the monocultural network for emotional support, recent research shows that international students prefer close friendships with co-nationals (Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2001) (for results on Spanish students analysis see chapter 4 section 4.3.4). It also confirms that students who befriend members of the host culture ultimately have a more fulfilling and enriching studying abroad experience (Butcher, 2002; McGrath, 1998). Many students who fell into the first category, in Butcher's research, expressed regret that they had not interacted more with domestic students. Returnees who fell into the second categorisation bemoaned their peers for not mixing more.

Perhaps paradoxically, studies have consistently shown that the least salient network is the bicultural one. For instance, Furnham and Bochner (1982) found that close links with British people accounted for only 18 per cent of the friendships of 150 international students in Britain. In another survey involving international students in the UK (Adams et al., 1991: 107), it was discovered that nearly half of the students spent only one hour or less per day speaking English with British people and that a number spent no time at all, or a mere five to ten minutes in this kind of interaction. In Katsara's study (2002), Greek students reported that differences between Greek and British cultures made it difficult to develop effective relationships, therefore the students surveyed tended to make friends with members of their own cultural group, admitting that these relationships lessened their chances to practise English.

Thus, despite all their good intentions, it appears that many international students go home disappointed with this aspect of their social life. As early as 1971, Yates had argued that there was a clear need to integrate international students more closely into the social and recreational life of the British students. Initiatives an institution can take to reduce barriers between hosts and foreign students have been reported in the literature. For example, Makepeace (1989: 35) proposes a

pairing programme which essentially involves matching home and international students. Host students need to meet their 'partner' regularly to check out how they are adjusting and to offer guidance and referral to central support services if necessary. There is some evidence to show that where host students are paired with international students, academic success and retention rates are improved (Westwood, 1986). According to Makepeace (1989: 35), pairing may be the cheapest and most effective method of achieving several worthwhile aims. In Canada and Australia promising results had emerged from these peer-pairing schemes involving home and international students (Westwood & Barker, 1990). However, later efforts, reported at a UK university (McKinley & Stevenson, 1994), failed due to the lack of time and interest of home students.

2.4.2 Academic challenges

International non-English-speaking students who decide to take studies in English-speaking HE institutions are confronted not only with problems of functioning in a different language (see 2.4.3), but also with the need to adapt to a different educational culture. The importance of academic adjustment goes well beyond language and cultural factors (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991 and 1997). Some of those adaptation problems are rooted in past learning experiences. As Adams et al. (1991: 2) point out, educational structures and systems differ internationally, hence, international students bring with them learning experiences that may be very different to what they experience in the new host university. What worked back home may no longer be considered valid. This leaves students with the task of rebuilding a new understanding of what works and what does not.

According to Ryan (2000: 16) cultural background and experience shape not only learning development, but *also determine what we value as knowledge and learning*. Richardson (1994) states that the approaches to learning vary systematically from one culture to another. He found that all systems of higher education documented as their aims the two distinct approaches towards knowledge: a transformative orientation and a reproductive one[3]. He found

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[3] In transformative learning understanding emerges from a transformation of the information in relation to the learners' prior learning, rather than through a focus on aggregating quantities of information that remained unconnected to prior knowledge; learning is a process of active knowledge construction by the individual to extract meaning from the learning

however that the tendency towards the reproductive approach varied across cultures.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1986, 1996 and 1997) may help explain how different educational systems reflect social attitudes and values. He defines 'power distance' as the extent to which the less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in power and consider it to be normal. In educational institutions, large power distance may affect the teaching situation in such a way that both teachers and students expect the teacher to take all initiatives, which may result in a less student-oriented learning environment. The tendency in these societies is to have teacher-centred classrooms where the teacher is the expert; he/she is respected, and never contradicted or criticised; students only speak in class when invited by the teacher. However, in low power distance countries, teachers expect students to be independent and to show initiative, students may question and contradict the teacher and students can speak spontaneously in class (Hofstede, 1986: 313). 'Uncertainty avoidance' is defined by Hofstede (1997) as the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous or threatened by situations which they perceive unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable: situations which they therefore try to avoid by strict codes of behaviour and a belief in absolute truths. Based on Hofstede's (1986: 314) definition, it can be claimed that societies with strong uncertainty avoidance are characterised by low tolerance of ambiguity, vagueness, and imprecision: students prefer explicit instructions and they get frustrated by the concept of 'independent learning'. These cultures are also characterised by low risk-taking, since there is a need to avoid failure. Teachers are seen as knowing it all and if they are 'good' they would use academic language. Student accuracy is rewarded and there is a strong need for affirmation and consensus. On the other hand, in cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance there is a high tolerance of ambiguity, vagueness, and imprecision. Risk-taking is high, as mistakes are seen as part of the learning process. Student innovation is rewarded, and conflict is used constructively and seen as fair play.

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task. Reproductive learning, by contrast, indicates an understanding that learning is a process of reproducing rather than transforming knowledge. Therefore, there is no transformation of the information to develop personal meaning and limited or no connection to the learner's prior knowledge. Strategies that facilitate this sort of learning are memorising or reproducing facts and studying without reflection (Brownlee et al. 2003)

Hofstede (1980) suggests that four clusters can be identified between European countries (see below table 2.1). He based this classification on a survey carried out among IBM employees in these European countries and others around the world. Despite having been criticised for his data collection methods (McSweeney, 2002), large-scales replications of his research have been carried out (Hofstede, 2001; Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; van Nimwegen, 2002) that usually confirm most of his findings.

Group	Countries	Characteristics according to Hofstede
Latin	Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Portugal	Large power distance Strong uncertainty avoidance
Anglo-Saxon	UK, Ireland	Small power distance Weak uncertainty avoidance
Germanic	Germany, Austria, Switzerland	Small power distance Strong uncertainty avoidance
Nordic	Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark	Small power distance Medium uncertainty avoidance

Table 2.1 Hofstede's characteristics from groups of countries

Borrowing Hofstede's classification, Wierstra et al. (1999) described the experiences of a number of European students who studied at least 3 months within the framework of an international exchange program. They were asked about their way of learning at the home university and at the host university, in particular about the extent of constructive learning and reproductive learning. Large differences were found: the group of South European countries scored relatively highly on reproduction-centredness, and relatively low on seven other characteristics related to activating (process-oriented) instruction and which are much appreciated by students. The profile of Anglo-Saxons was the opposite of the South European countries. In UK universities, students are required to demonstrate that they appreciate that others' findings are not to be simply accepted and reproduced, and to show that they understand how knowledge in a certain discipline is constructed. This educational system emphasises personal development, while in Southern European countries the comprehensive acquisition and accumulation of knowledge is given more importance.

Hofstede's findings have been criticized by authors such as d'Iribarne (1991) and Mc Sweeney (2002) who argue that his approach to a complex phenomena is reductionistic and simplistic; but it is still intriguing to use his results for a

classification of western European educational systems, particularly in reference to the UK and Spain. In terms of the present research, Hofstede's classification (see below table 2.2) suggests that these two countries have clearly distinctive approaches to education related values which in turn will shape their approach to learning.

	Power Distance	Uncertainty Avoidance
UK	Low (35)	Low (35)
SPAIN	High (57)	High (86)

Table 2.2. Hofstede's (1980) countries culture dimensions (UK, and Spain) [4]

At an educational level, the difference between English and Spanish 'uncertainty avoidance' scores seems to be corroborated by evidence gathered by Paucar-Caceres (2000) experiences of English and Spanish students participating in a foreign exchange program. English students, who participated in the exchange and spent a year in Spanish institutions found the Spanish education system 'structured' and the approach very different to the open-ended learning situations they were accustomed to in England. These are typical expectations of countries with a weak 'uncertainty avoidance' (UAI for England is 35, see above table 2.2). The other key cultural dimension: 'power distance' could also have implications at an educational level, for instance in large power distance societies such as Spain (PDI for Spain is 86, see above table 2.2) teachers are typically treated as the authoritative, all-knowing leader expected to take initiative in class. Spanish students participating in the exchange were, in general, very much surprised by the open, participative, less structured, and approachable style of English lecturers.

Thus, students may need to take intellectual shifts; they may require a change from previous approaches, which may have worked well enough at another level of education and in another culture, to a new approach.

> *If they* [international students] *are to succeed in the academic culture (of the host society) they will have to assimilate to some degree the norms of that culture which may or may not resemble the norms of their L1 academic culture* (Blue, 1993: 98)

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[4] Actual values based on the scores on three attitude survey questions for a stratified sample of seven occupations at two points in time.

Nevertheless, as previously pointed out, it is partly due to the distinctive features of each national system of higher education, that study abroad can be such a valuable experience. Literature shows that the manifestations of diversity in academic systems are mainly made apparent in the following areas: modes of participation, relationships with tutors, learning styles and approaches to learning, and writing conventions.

Regarding modes of participation, O'Donoghue (1996: 76) highlights the importance of students becoming aware that their academic success is dependent on their adopting some new forms of behaviour. For example, they have to realise that in order to be able to get the most out of tutorials and lectures it is necessary to do some reading before hand on the topic to be dealt with. As suggested above, some international students may hold the cultural view that tutors and lecturers are repositories of the truth, wisdom and knowledge to be passed on to students, and thus may avoid asking questions. In UK learning institutions students are encouraged and expected to ask questions in order to clarify any doubts regarding their own understanding. Students may also be asked to give their own views on issues being discussed in class and support that view with a valid argument. Students' view of the undisputed authority of the lecturer and/or their concern for losing face should they ask a foolish or absurd question influences most significantly the level of involvement (Lynch, 1994; Shin & Lee, 2000).

International students will also bring their own expectations about student-tutors relationships to the new academic environment reflecting cultural-specific patterns and orientations of behaviour from their own educational experience. In cultures with small power distance there is a great deal of informality, and rules and professional protocol are often loosely articulated or practised inconsistently. Some tutors may want to be called by their first name, while others prefer to be addressed more formally. The lack of specific etiquette for approaching a tutor can be puzzling to students who are used to more formality in their home culture. An example of this is provided by Novera (2004), in an study carried out in Australia, where Indonesian students reported finding it intrinsically difficult to provide critical comment on what lecturers said: further for them, interrupting a lecturer in the middle of the presentation was considered rude. According to

Novera (2004: 481), behaviour that was culturally appropriate in Indonesia could be interpreted as classroom passivity in Australia.

Regarding learning styles and approaches to learning, in the UK educational system, mastery of acceptable critical reasoning is considered to be essential for academic success and failure (Atkinson, 1997; Benesch, 1999). However, still in many European countries, the emphasised and validated learning practice is memorisation which emphasises the accumulation of knowledge, rather than the capacity to evaluate and construct knowledge. Richards and Skelton (1991: 40) observe that international students in the UK evaluate less, and evaluate less critically. This, in their view, is a matter of previous cultural socializing.

Wierstra et al.'s (2003) research at Dutch universities suggests that international students do adapt their learning approaches to the characteristics and demands of the host learning environment. For example, the Southern European students showed a tendency to learn somewhat more constructively and less reproductively during their stay at a Dutch university because they experienced the Dutch learning environment as less reproductive and as providing more opportunity for student involvement. In this study Wierstra et al. also investigated the extent to which students' learning environment preferences were determined by their customary learning environment and habitual learning orientations. They found that students from strongly contrasting learning environments all tended to reject a reproductive learning environment with an emphasis on learning facts. Generally the ideal learning environment should in the opinion of the students imply much personalisation (small distance between teacher and student) and much student involvement.

A culture's pattern of thinking may also have an influence on the writing conventions practised in a group. Kaplan (1966) was the first to point out that writing conventions differed across cultures and that discourse is organised differently in the different languages, for example, the 'linear' way of presenting ideas in English contrasts to the 'parallel' way of Semitic languages, 'circular' way of Oriental languages and 'digressive' way of Romance languages. The conclusion is that different cultures organize ideas in accordance with different

beliefs, values, and conventions of how one presents knowledge in that culture. For example, Mauranen (1994) suggests that the difficulties of Finnish students were due to differences between academic writing conventions. Compared to English expectations, the Finnish did not state main points clearly, leaving that to the reader. Scollon (1997: 353) summed up the general position of researchers of contrastive rhetoric as follows:

> *A very broad range of studies have shown that no language or culture can be reduced to one or two diagrammatic structures that might be applied across the board from internal cognitive schema to paragraph structure.... At the same time, strong clear evidence, amply demonstrated across the languages of the world, shows that there are situationally, generically, or stylistically preferred compositional forms and that these are not the same from language to language or from culturally defined situation to culturally defined situation.*

As the academic writing difficulties of Spanish students will become the focus of our investigation, more in-depth discussion of this topic will be presented in chapter 5 (for example, for English-Spanish contrastive rhetoric work see chapter 5 section 5.2.1).

2.4.2.1 The system of HE in Spain

In order to understand what shifts are required from Spanish students when in UK universities, it is important to review their home learning environment and contrast it with host learning environment.

Statistics show that the number of students entering Spanish universities has increased dramatically, especially during the last decades: in the academic year 1972-1973 the number of university students was 404,000; in 1999-2000 it reached 1,583,000, and the number is still growing (Vizcarro & Yániz, 2004: 183). However, university budgets are stringent. In 1998 the total budget per student was of US$5,038 compared to US$9,699 in the UK (Pérez-Díaz & Rodríguez, 2001). The results of these two factors have been large, crowded classes, especially in the social sciences and humanities. Simultaneously, a strong emphasis on research, the criterion for teaching appointment and promotion, has reduced attention to teaching. Educational methods have remained quite traditional and directed to large number of students, with the emphasis on learning

by rote. Moreira (2000: 128), claims that the Spanish HE system tends to rely on the "magisterial approach" of large lectures involving students in taking notes and memorising texts to be reproduced in a exam. This claim appears to be in broad agreement with Hofstede's classification of Spain as a culture with large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance (see above section 2.4.2).

Also Michavilla (2002: 49) perceived the limitations of the tertiary level system in Spain claiming that:

> *...degrees consist of a patchwork of fragmented knowledge, the gap between universities and the professional world is widening, that educational goals are not clear (let alone pursued!), and the rigid status of academic content areas builds up knowledge barriers and makes multidisciplinary approaches difficult.*

Educational outcomes often include high failure rates and poor preparation for professional work (Michavila & Calvo, 1998). The report carried out by Garcia-Valcarcel et al. (1991) indicates that 65% of drop-outs occur in the first year, and that in technical degree programs, as many as 30% of students repeat their first year, while the percentage of students who sit for exams is less than 30%. Later surveys by Arco Tirado et al. (2004), show that only 37% of students in five-year programmes complete their program successfully, 31% fall behind and 32% drop out, while in three year programs 53.5%, 25% and 22% are the respective equivalents. This low academic performance increases the length of time students spend at university, adding an extra 50% to the average theoretical length of degree programs, with 50% of students completing their studies.

2.4.3 Second language challenges

Since the late 1960s a gradually increasing literature has explored the second language issues associated with studying abroad. According to Pellegrino (1998), the majority of these studies have been highly product-oriented, focusing on the measurable advances students make in language proficiency and linguistic knowledge (see for example Balaz & Williams, 2003; Coleman, 1996; Freed, 1995; Lafford, 1995; Lapkin et al., 1995). While these studies tend to confirm increases in student fluency, they say little about the linguistic needs and difficulties that students experience while adapting to using a foreign language in

an educational context situation abroad. The area of research I am more interested in, explores the needs of studying in English as a second language. It is fairly self-evident that a proficient command of the English language is a key factor contributing to a successful experience of studying and living in the UK, as recognised by key researchers in this field (see for example Blue 1993; Cownie & Addison, 1996; Furnham, 2004; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Turner, 1999). Indeed, language difficulties appear to be the most challenging issue for the majority of international students (Mori, 2000), since a lack of English skills is likely to affect international students' academic performance, and academic difficulties in turn may affect their psychological adjustment (Lin & Yi, 1997). It may be especially distressing for students who have had high academic achievement in their home countries but cannot express their academic ability in English well (Pedersen, 1991). Moreover, language barriers often hinder international students from socially interacting with host students (Hayes & Lin, 1994), as lower levels of English fluency seem to predict higher levels of acculturative stress among international students.

2.4.3.1 The distinction between BICS and CALP

International students not only have to face the challenges of academic language, the formal registers used at the university, but also cope with the survival English needed in day-to-day situations, with their social interactions outside the classroom. These two distinct registers have been well defined by Cummins (1979), who introduced a distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills or "oral fluency" (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Ungrammaticality and slang are included among the more informal manifestations of BICS. On the other hand, CALP refers to formal academic learning, and includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material. This level of language competence is essential for students to succeed in universities. Cummins' research indicates that while BICS usually develop within six months to two years after arrival to the host country, it can take upwards of five years to gain CALP equivalent to that of a native speaker. Students need more time and support to become proficient in academic language.

The distinction between BICS and CALP has been criticised on the grounds that a simple dichotomy does not account for many dimensions of language use and competence (Wald, 1984). According to Scarcella (2003: 5), a binary view of language and its development rarely plays out in reality. Additionally, Scarcella (2003: 6) argues that some aspects of BICS are in fact acquired late and some aspects of CALP can be acquired early.

The BICS/CALP distinction has also been challenged for implying that social interaction is undemanding (Genesee, 1984; MacSwan & Rolstad 2003; Spolsky, 1984). However, the distinction was not proposed as a theory of language but as a very specific conceptual distinction addressed to specific issues related to the education of second language learners. The terms are often employed in describing two sets of linguistic proficiencies and they do serve to underline the major problems faced by immigrant bilingual children; likewise they can easily be used to highlight the needs of international students. Important implications for educational policies and practices arise from this distinction (see Cline & Frederickson, 1996). For example, educational institutions ought to understand that, in order for ESL students to read and comprehend content area textbooks and perform cognitively demanding tasks, such as writing research papers, participating in debates, and presenting research papers, they need CALP English that takes them beyond that of BICS English.

Specific ways in which educators' misunderstanding of the nature of language proficiency have contributed to the creation of academic difficulties among international students have been highlighted by the distinction BICS-CALP. An interesting finding is that of Collier (1995) who indicates that students in traditional English as a second language (ESL) programs in which development in social English is emphasized, do not do as well on standardized tests in English as do students in ESL programs in which academic English is emphasized. It may be that much of general English language teaching concentrates on equipping students with BICS proficiency at the expense of CALP and to the detriment of their academic success. As Cummins (1992: 17) explains:

> *Some heretofore neglected aspects of language proficiency are considerably more relevant for students' cognitive and academic progress*

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than are the surface manifestations of proficiency frequently focused on by education, and educators' failure to appreciate these differences can have particularly unfortunate consequences for language minority students.

Second language learners can, and generally do, acquire BICS and CALP language proficiency differently. For example, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) claim that even without formal classroom instruction, learners may acquire BICS. However, while BICS may be acquired through moderate efforts, it seems one must work diligently, in comparison, to gain competency in CALP (Howell, 2004: 14). Mere exposure to the spoken language will not assure the acquisition of CALP. Formal education is considered necessary, as demonstrated by the fact that some native speakers also need instruction in academic language.

According to Cummins (1998), if academic language proficiency or CALP is accepted as a valid construct then certain instructional implications follow. In the first place, as Krashen (1993) has repeatedly emphasised, extensive reading is crucial for academic development since 'academic' language is found primarily in written text. Opportunities for collaborative learning and talk about text are also relevant in helping students internalise and more fully comprehend that academic language they find in their extensive reading of text. Cummins (1998) states that writing is also crucial because international students not only consolidate aspects of the academic language they have been reading, they also build up knowledge through language and (hopefully) receive feedback on their performance which will help them to strengthen their abilities.

2.4.3.2 English and academic skills

Jordan (1999) points out that as well as reading effectively for study purposes and writing in the appropriate academic register, other CALP skills necessary to be successful in tertiary students include areas such as effective lecture listening comprehension and note-taking and participation in class discussion and tutorials, and library research.

Since the beginning of the 80's studies have been undertaken to investigate the EAP needs of international students. One of the first studies was carried out by Ostler (1980), who surveyed the views of international university students about

their English for Academic Purposes (EAP) needs in terms of major uses of the four skills and their assessment of their oral-aural proficiency. Findings showed that the top three needs were for reading textbooks, taking notes in class, and asking questions in class. There was also a significant need to use English for writing research papers and reading academic journals. Regarding perceptions of oral-aural proficiency, students generally rated themselves as better able to make themselves understood in non academic than in academic settings. As Ostler (1980) points out, this may be because the non academic settings require only a mainly formulaic use of language, whereas academic settings require more creative uses of language. This is in concurrence with Cummins' assumptions about academic language or CALP needing more time and support to be fully developed than BICS (see above 2.4.3.1). Ostler's research seems to be the earliest study of its kind, and subsequent studies are in many ways developments of and departures from it.

One year later, Johns (1981) reports on the results of a study in which respondents (students and faculty staff) were asked to number the skills in order of importance. This research provides some corroboration of Ostler's (1980) findings in the sense that reading is singled out as the first priority in both studies. Christison and Krahnke (1986) also researched into student perceptions of EAP needs. Their research not only focused on needs but also on lacks. Thus, for example, although, according to their results, reading is regarded as the second most frequent need, it is perceived as the easiest, or least difficult, skill to master.

A more recent study (Zhu & Flaitz, 2005) concluded that students' language needs may change during the course of their studies. Their results show that although reading and listening were seen to pose initial difficulties, students seemed to be able to learn how to cope with these difficulties gradually. Writing was, however, identified as the area of persistent difficulty for students. Zhu and Flaitz also researched the perspectives of faculty members, concluding that faculty members focused in particular on students' difficulties and needs as judged from course products (papers and presentations). Despite the limited number of participants in this study, which leads me to interpret the results with caution, Zhu and Flaitz provide us with a broad understanding of international students'

academic language needs and their results seem to coincide with previous research done in different contexts such as Australia and the UK.

For example, Ballard (1987) conducted a study in an Australian university. She states that in practice the language problem is sequential, concluding that the initial difficulties for international students lie in listening and speaking – in following different accents and colloquial speech, and in making themselves understood to staff, fellow students and in the commerce of daily life. According to her, gradual familiarity with the new environment usually eases this problem, though students may continue to have real difficulties with oral academic discourse when presenting a paper or joining in seminar discussions. The next problem area for most students will be reading: how to handle the amount of independent reading expected, how to read critically and identify the material that is relevant to their needs, how to take notes that will allow them to incorporate the thinking but not necessarily the precise wording into their own writing. Finally comes the language problem that, according to Ballard, never really goes away: the problem of writing academic English.

In the context of the UK research results are similar. An investigation into international students' linguistic difficulties in activities connected with their studies at a UK university was conducted by Geoghegan (1983). She found that the biggest areas of difficulty for international students were participating in seminars, and academic writing. These findings were broadly matched by Blue (1993, cited in Jordan, 1997) surveys conducted among students attending pre-sessional EAP courses between 1986 and 1990. The students' experience of studying in their own country was also surveyed and compared with their expectations of studying in Britain. It was clear that the majority experienced some disappointment or frustration as their expectations did not match the realities of the study situations, for example, they expected specific guideline on what to read and intensive correction of mistakes in English. This highlighted the question of differences in academic cultures pointed out by Hofstede (see section 2.4.2 above).

In this investigation one of the CALP needs, namely academic writing, has a significant role and will be further studied in chapter 5 of this thesis.

2.4.3.3 English language support

The importance of English language proficiency to academic success has led institutions to develop support services for international students whose first language is not English (QAA, 2006: 8). Different ways of delivering this support include pre- and in-sessional classes in English for academic purposes (EAP).

Cownie and Addison point out (1996: 222) that pre-sessional courses, as well as improving English language and academic skills, can also serve the social purpose of orientation to living in the UK, allowing students to settle in before the start of their academic course. In-sessional courses, which run in parallel with subject courses, provide the opportunity for integrated subject-language teaching and more specific work on the key skills of academic listening, writing and reading, as well as more 'common-core' EAP courses.

In both courses, writing skills together with seminar skills seem to have a high priority. Jordan (1997: 73), citing a BALEAP survey, gives an account of EAP course components and classifies them in order of importance depending on the time spent on each of them. From this study Jordan concludes that subject-specific aspects and academic writing are the most important and, therefore, the areas to which more resources should be allocated.

Some studies have evaluated the quality of EAP courses. Leki and Carson (1994) investigated how students perceived the writing preparation they had received on EAP courses and its relationship to their performance of writing tasks in their subject courses. Although the results indicated that ESL students were generally satisfied with the training they received in EAP writing classes and their final grades supported this perception, a large percentage of responses indicated a desire for more language skills: spelling, vocabulary and grammar. EAP writing classes were also criticised for being too easy, too superficial, and not challenging or sophisticated enough. Leki & Carson (1994: 93) explain this interest in more challenging work as relating to students' expressed wish for the EAP class to do

more to build their confidence. That is, it may not be enough to encourage students to write on topics that are interesting but non-academic, perhaps they can only build real confidence in their writing if they are challenged and succeed at writing on topics more central to their academic and intellectual lives. In the same survey half of the students taking part blamed themselves for not having taken the EAP classes seriously and half gave responses indicating that the EAP course did not specifically prepare them for certain technical or specialised forms of writing they needed in their content courses, such as writing a lab report.

Thus, international students appear to not always benefit from EAP courses. Institutions need to consider how they can best encourage students to take advantage of the EAP writing services offered, or to introduce other new ways of helping which are more flexible for students. For example, in some cases, timetable clashes and high demands on students' time prevent students from attending EAP classes (see results from student analysis in section 4.3.3). McKinley and Stevenson (1994: 15) point out that *free English classes are available at the university and numbers attending them are very small, largely because the academic courses are so intensive that more students find little time or energy left for language study*. Also Nesi (1993) claims that it is one of the ironies of EAP support teaching that those students with the greatest need are those who can least afford the time away from their studies. Nesi lists other reasons why students fail to attend language classes including timetable difficulties and differing needs within the groups.

2.4.3.4 The role of the English language in Spain

It is important for the current investigation to understand that apart from the difficulties reported in the previous section, which are common to all second language students abroad regardless of country of origin, there may be particular language issues which are related to previous foreign language education in the country of origin. As the present investigation concentrates on students from Spain studying in the UK, in this section I will evaluate the main issues of the role of English as a foreign language in Spanish society and education.

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The Eurobarometer report commissioned by the European Commission (2001), which surveyed language knowledge of languages in the 15 members of the EU that year and questioned more than 16,000 persons, shows that Spain comes lowest as far as English knowledge is concerned. Only 27% of Spanish respondents claimed to have a good knowledge of English, in contrast with the highest rates (88%) of the Swedish population. Figures from EUROPA[5] claim that only 18% of Spaniards speak, read, and write English with ease, as opposed to 31% of non-native English speakers in the EU at large. These statistics are hardly surprising, since if one compares the role of English in Spain with its role in other mainland European countries, especially Scandinavian countries, English in Spain is very much a foreign language rather than a second language. For example, in Spain, English is not used as a medium of instruction; English-language movies are dubbed into Spanish, and there is only a limited number of cinemas in some Spanish big cities that show movies in the original language. English is hardly ever used on personal or social occasions, and it is only very recently that English has been associated with better job prospects. In the Eurobarometer report (2001), Europeans who claimed to speak other languages were asked to state in what circumstances they used their foreign languages; they were given statements referring to informal conversations (written or oral), to exposure to the language through media, or studying subjects other than languages; Spain scored highly on only one statement, showing that Spaniards only use their English skills in the English language classroom.

Maybe due to a need to 'catch up' with the rest of Europe, an intense interest in English language teaching and learning has developed in recent years. Trujillo Saez (2002), has studied the current role of English language provision in Spanish secondary education, claiming that despite the undeniable progress in later years, there are still a number of problems and frustrations that have to be dealt with in order to provide students with quality provision. According to him, current efforts made in teaching do not lead to satisfactory levels of either fluency or accuracy, and communicative competence is still a utopia (for Spanish students' own perceptions see chapter 4 section 4.3.3). Trujillo Saez (2002) points out that the

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5 Gateway to the European Union http://europa.eu/

reasons for this shortcoming are historical, ranging from a poor tradition in language teaching, anchored in the grammar-translation method, to the difficulty of finding parents who can speak in English to support their children. Other reasons have to do with structural problems of the educational system, such as the large ratio of students per teacher.

Little published work has explored the history of English education in Spain, but a very recent work by Reichelt (2006) provides some insight. Reichelt (2006) points out that before the 70's English was almost totally absent from the educational system in Spain. However, an increasing openness on Spain's part after the fall of the Franco dictatorship in the mid seventies, together with an interest in joining the European Community led to an increased demand for the English language. According to two British Council profiles of ELT in Spain (1980, 1985), during the 80's, the number of English language schools increased. However, despite recognition of the need for English and enthusiasm for learning it, Spain suffered from an insufficient number of qualified English teachers, as well as a lack of long-term planning and coordinated curriculum development for English-language instruction. In secondary education, due to lack of English-teaching expertise, teacher shortages, large classes of mixed ability, few resources, shortage of teaching hours and the emphasis placed on getting students to pass the Selectividad[6] test rather than learn English, linguistic achievements have been, in most cases, quite low, and many students have left the educational system without a functional competence in English. Information from the British Council (1985) corroborates these assumptions by stating that average exit levels were typically considerably below the Cambridge First Certificate Level.

At the present time, students in Spain begin to learn English at an earlier age: the general pattern is eight years old[7], while before 1993, introduction of English was mandatory at age 11. In response to the previous use of a grammar translation teaching of English, curriculum reforms instituted in the 1990's emphasised the

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[6] University entrance exam in Spain. English is one of the compulsory subjects that need to be passed in order for a student to get into higher education.

[7] In 1996/97 a pilot programme was launched under an agreement between the Ministery of Education and the British Council and provides for the teaching of English at an early age, that is 3 years old; however, at this stage, only a small number of pre-primary schools are taking part in the programme. (Tierney and Alonso-Nieto, 2001: 10)

importance of oral and written expression and the use of English for exploring topics relevant to students' lives (Reichelt, 2006: 7). In 1999, the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture undertook a study of the English-language proficiency of 12-year-old students in their last year of primary school. Results indicated that students were performing best on oral comprehension skills and worst in written expression (Ministerio de Educacion y Cultura, 2000).

Not only has there been a shift in the role of English in primary education, at the secondary level, curricular reforms of the 1990's have introduced a focus on communication, cultural enrichment, motivations and independent learning. Additionally, trends have begun towards increased use of technology in foreign-language learning. However, the maximum class size is still quite large with 30 students per foreign language class (Eurydice, 2002). In 1999, the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture undertook a study of the English-language proficiency of 14 and 16-year-old students in their second and fourth year of obligatory secondary education. These students scored best on socio-cultural aspects, followed closely by listening comprehension, and, like primary students, scored worst on written expression. (Ministerio de Educacion y Cultura, 2000).

2.5 THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

In order to understand the specific problems of Spanish students in the UK it is important to look at the European context and aspects of European student mobility since this can provide insight into the distinctiveness of the challenges to be faced by particular international groups of students as described in sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 of the current chapter.

Teichler (2004: 22) defines Europeanisation as the regional version of internationalisation or globalisation[8]. The term implies the experience that the

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[8] Teichler (2004), defines internationalisation as the totality of substantial changes in the context of HE relative to an increasing frequency of border-crossing activities amidst a persistence of national systems. Internationalisation is often discussed in relation to physical mobility, academic cooperation and academic knowledge transfer as well as international education and research. Globalisation initially seemed to be defined as the totality of substantial changes in the context of HE related to growing interrelationships between different parts of the world whereby national borders are blurred or even seem to vanish. According to Teichler (2004), in recent years the term "globalisation" is substituted for "internationalisation" in the public debate of HE, whereby a shift of meaning takes place (Teichler, 2004).

academic relationship in Europe differs from those between Europe and many other regions of the world in terms of less culture contrast and opportunities for horizontal communication (see below section 2.5.2), cooperation, and community as well as of potential of integrations and joint action to shape the system. The phenomena of Europeanisation most frequently referred to since about 1990 were initially horizontal mobility and cooperation (notably "ERASMUS") and subsequently standardisation of study programmes and degrees known as "The Bologna process" (see below section 2.5.2).

2.5.1 History of academic mobility in Europe

In Europe, academic mobility has a long tradition which began with the birth of the European universities in the Middle Ages, when staff members and students of wealthy families came together from many countries.

> *Royalty would send their young men from England most often to Florence, Italy and France for a three year period. Once there, the young men were immersed in languages and cultures indigenous to those specific areas* (Peacock, 2005: 7)

For centuries since, this positive appreciation of mobility has been sustained. A boom in HE occurred after the World War II. In an increasingly industrialised and commercialised culture the need for HE was thought to be crucial in the development of a more modern society. The role of international mobility was not only to further promote educational and professional achievements but also – as a countermeasure to hatred and mistrust – to *contribute to furthering universal values and to mutual understanding across countries* (Teichler, 2003: 312).

From the 1970's onward, The European Community became the most active political actor in Europe in stimulating border-crossing mobility of students and reinforcing recognition of study in another European country (see de Wit 2002; European Commission 1994).

2.5.2 The European dimension of HE

Over recent decades, the EU has continued to encourage students and staff mobility in the field of education and training. Increasing mobility is one of the

most central possibilities offered by the Bologna process[9] established in 1999. Moreover, more recently, a new recommendation has been adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union to facilitate mobility of students and teachers within the Union. The following consideration is noted in the recommendation:

> *The transnational mobility of people contributes to enriching different national cultures and enables those concerned to enhance their own cultural and professional knowledge and European society as a whole to benefit from those effects. Such experience is proving to be increasingly necessary given the current limited employment prospects and an employment market which requires more flexibility and a greater ability to adapt to change.*[10]

Hence, student mobility has been the priority of the EU for several years already. A massive boost was given by the EU-financed Erasmus and Socrates programmes. Between 1987/88 and 2003/2004, more than 1 million university students spent an Erasmus period of 3-12 months studying abroad[11] and, according to figures from EUROPA[12], 2,199 universities (or other HE institutions) are currently participating in the programme. The UK is one of the major players in the 'Erasmus map' of intra-EU student exchanges. However, during the academic year 1999-2000 the UK received 20,705 incoming Erasmus students, but sent out only 10,056. By contrast, it is mainly the southern European countries which are the net 'exporters'. In the same academic year, 16,297 Spanish university students benefited from the Erasmus scheme.

Mobility encouraged by organised educational programmes like Erasmus has been referred to as horizontal or organised mobility. So far horizontal mobility has been

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9 In June 1999, 29 European ministers in charge of higher education met in Bologna to lay the basis for establishing a European Higher Education Area by 2010 and promoting the European system of higher education world-wide. In the Bologna Declaration, the ministers affirmed their intention to:
- adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
- adopt a system with two main cycles (undergraduate/graduate)
- establish a system of credits
- promote mobility by overcoming obstacles
- promote European co-operation in quality assurance
- promote European dimensions in higher education

10 Recommendation Of The European Parliament And Of The Council of 10 July 2001 on mobility within the Community for students, persons undergoing training, volunteers, teachers, and trainers. Official Journal of the European Communities 9.8.2001

11 According to Teichler's estimations (2003), this number should make up for more than two thirds of the total of the mobile students within the EU.

12 Figures available from the Gateway to the EU's website:
http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/erasmus/what_en.html

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the major type of mobility for a large number of students all around Europe, and it has been more popular than spontaneous mobility or 'free moving'[13].

The main objectives of these educational programmes have been described as follows[14]:

- To develop the European dimension in education at all levels.
- To promote a quantitative and qualitative improvement in the knowledge of the languages of the EU and to promote the intercultural dimension of education.
- To promote, in the Member States, wide-ranging and intensive cooperation between institutions at all levels of education.
- To encourage mobility of students, teachers, researchers and staff.

There has been some research which has concentrated on assessments of horizontal mobility programmes, mostly reviewing motivations, potential future mobility and organisational features. One of these studies was carried out by Opper at al. (1990) who highlighted the positive outcomes of study abroad for Erasmus students, claiming that students value particularly highly the opportunity to improve their language skills and develop friendships with host nationals. A majority of students in this study reported that they perceived their academic performance to be better during their stay abroad than they would have expected it to be at home, which is remarkable considering language barriers, different methods of learning and changed living conditions.

Another study is that of Teichler (1996) who evaluated the Erasmus programme from 1988 to 1995. He assessed students' reasons for studying abroad, learning a foreign language ranked the highest, followed by opportunity for self-development, desire to gain academic learning experience in another country and wish to improve understanding of the host country (Teichler 2002: 397). In his conclusions, Teichler states that generally students feel highly satisfied with the

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[13] Spontaneous mobility refers to students registered at higher education under standard procedures, thus not through any of the organised programmes like ERASMUS or SOCRATES. These students may also be called 'free movers', and unlike students who join a programme which commit for a period of up to one year, they may spend several years studying in a foreign country.

14 Information from the Council decision on SOCRATES, March 1995 Available at The Gateway to the EU http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c11023.htm.

experience and with the academic, linguistic, professional, cultural and personal benefits of their stay abroad; however they are dissatisfied with the support provided by host institutions.

Although many of the above findings may equally apply to free-movers, it is wise to be cautious in generalizing Teichler's findings too readily. As Coleman (1998: 183) states, *the danger of socially desirable responses is high where the body funding the study is also funding the residence abroad programme from which the subjects, both staff and students, are benefiting.* Additionally, the experiences of Erasmus students may be different to those of 'free movers' because their level of support is also different. For example, as Coleman (1998: 183) mentions, Erasmus students are provided with preparation before arrival, help with accommodation, foreign language instruction, and academic and administrative advice on arrival. On the other hand, free movers do not depend on any kind of organised financial or structural support, and it is mainly up to them to arrange their own support network.

2.5.3 Studies on EU national cohorts in the UK

In UK HE over 40% of all students come from EU member states (Phillips & Stahl, 2001: 281), but despite the recognized significance that the UK has as a host country to other EU university students, little research has been done on the experiences that specific EU national groups encounter when coming to this country to pursue their studies. However, there is in this research a considerable variety in the sample of populations, as there are studies from Scandinavian countries (Norway and Finland), Southern Europe (Greece) and Eastern Europe (Slovakia). It is this research, that although noted briefly in previous sections where the general experiences of studying abroad have been considered, is reviewed below.

Wiers-Jenssen (2003), surveyed the experiences and viewpoints of Norwegian students who spent one year or more abroad, the vast majority in the UK. In her conclusions, Wiers-Jenssen claims that, despite multiple problems in the first months after arrival that appeared to decline over the course of time, Norwegian students find studying abroad academically advantageous, and put much emphasis

on the social, personal, linguistic and cultural rewards they acquire in addition to professional skills. Wiers-Jenssen claims that, compared to students who remain in Norway, those studying abroad are more satisfied with their educational institution and tend to put more effort into their studies. The high level of satisfaction experienced by the group researched is interpreted by Wiers-Jenssen as a consequence of 'pull' motives for studying abroad, mostly connected to extracurricular motives such as love of adventure and desire to experience a different culture (see above section 2.3.1).

Katsara's (2002) study researched the experiences of Greek students in the UK, which appear to have been less positive that those surveyed by Wiers-Yenssen. This is not surprising since Greece, according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (see above 2.4.2), belongs to the Latin group, situated at the opposite extreme of the UK if considering the degree of power distance and the strength of uncertainty avoidance. Additionally, the Greeks are linguistically further away from the UK than Norwegians. Norwegians have a reputation for learning English easily since their first language may facilitate learning. Olsen (1999: 193), for example, states that there are many similarities in vocabulary and grammatical structures between English and Norwegian. The theoretical implications are that Greek students are likely to experience more emotional difficulties and distress than Norwegians, due to belonging to a more dissimilar cultural and linguistic environment.

Thus, Katsara (2000) highlighted a number of problems encountered by Greek students before and after arrival to UK universities. She reported that in general, Greek students' level of satisfaction in the host country and university was less than enthusiastic. Her findings reveal that the students surveyed had serious concerns, in particular about pre-arrival support from their host institution. Specifically, their concerns related to a lack of understanding of study methods and assessment. In her study, Katsara also claims that Greek students experience culture shock and encounter language difficulties, such as understanding spoken English and writing academically in this language. Katsara is one of the few authors who recognize that students from a particular national background may require a specially targeted approach and on the basis of her investigation, she made a variety of recommendations in order to propose ways in which the

problems of Greek students in the UK should be addressed. These included the use of IT to provide students with specific pre-arrival information.

Mauranen (1994) investigated a group of Finnish university students in the UK. This study revealed that the main difficulties these students encountered involved not only acquisition of English language, but also the way language is used in the academic context. She argued that given that study genres are essential components in any educational culture and involve highly inferred knowledge including various communicative and social norms, differences in study genre could constitute one of the main roots of students' problems when studying abroad. She claimed that Finnish students felt particularly insecure about their knowledge of how to participate in the different discourse environments, such as when is it appropriate to ask a question or interrupt someone in a seminar discussion. Moreover, Finnish students also find difficulties in reading and writing in English because Finnish academic conventions are different to the English ones. Mauranen (1994) claims that while English writers often state the main points at the beginning, elaborating them throughout the text, Finnish writers usually compose their texts by starting from the general and moving into the specifics. Compared to the English way of writing, the Finnish style may require more from the readers, who themselves have the responsibility of finding the main points of the text (for more information on contrastive rhetorics see chapter 5 section 5.2.1).

Balaz and William's (2004) study on Slovakian students in the UK differs somewhat from these described above, not only because it analyses students once they had returned to their country of origin, but also because it includes students in language and vocational courses as well as degree students. Balaz and William analysed motivations, acquisition of human capital in the UK, and the extent to which students have been able to realise individual welfare gains after returning to Slovakia. Their results report that students' evaluations of their experiences were highly positive, with substantial numbers also reporting improvements in their subsequent jobs and incomes. This study emphasized the value of study abroad attached to language competence, in particular, but also to learning, attitudinal and interpersonal competences, as well as networking.

Regardless of whether students report a greater or lesser degree of satisfaction and adaptation to the host country and institution, the reviewed studies above confirm that studying abroad is a social as well as an educational experience, and that students may encounter challenges in either area. Wiers-Jenssen (2003) mentions that the challenges are often temporary and they tend to vanish after the first months of stay abroad. Katsara's study reported that her subjects experienced culture shock, a disorientation that also tends to disappear after a relatively short period of time abroad. Together with experience of culture shock, Katsara's students, unlike Wiers-Jenssen's, did report having difficulties with the English language. Problems with the use of the English language, particularly when dealing with communicative and social norms, were important for Finnish students too (Mauranen, 1994).

While the students surveyed in the above research felt generally welcomed by the different departments in UK universities, some studies, for example Katsara's (2002), suggest that inadequate attention has been paid to considering how to facilitate their learning experiences given the particular impediments they face. Much has been done at UK institutions during the last decade to improve the support offered to international students. However, a lot may still be done, particularly in the area of language and in providing targeted assistance to specific national groups. Spanish students have not yet been the focus of any systematic investigation into the effectiveness of their educational experience in the UK, nor has any attempt been made to fully understand factors which militate against a successful study abroad experience. Given the high, and increasing, number of Spanish students in UK education - both as exchange students and as 'free movers'-, the initial exploratory study (presented in chapter 4) sets out to examine the experiences of a group of Spanish students studying at a UK University in order to ascertain the extent to which these experience may be distinctive when compared with those of other international students, as reported in current research literature reviewed in this chapter.

2.6 <u>SUMMARY</u>

As a result of a review of the relevant literature on study abroad issues and the European context, a number of key points have emerged which will help assess the first hypothesis stating that *the broad experiences of Spanish students when studying in UK higher education, are distinctive to those of other international students.*

Student mobility in the EU is becoming increasingly important and a lot of efforts are being made in order to encourage it and support it. The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that European students in the UK are less likely to experience acculturative distress than students from other geographic regions of Asia, Africa and Latin/Central America, since it has been suggested that less of a contrast in cultural patterns of behaviour and value systems allows for a smoother adjustment (Babiker at al., 1980; Furnham & Bochner 1982; Ryan, 2000). However, it has also been pointed out that there is not enough homogeneity in terms of cultural and linguistic environments in the EU in order to consider that all national groups will experience the same challenges when studying abroad. Hofstede (1980, 1986) suggests different clusters between European countries according to distinctive characteristics (see above section 2.4.2). According to him, some of these characteristics or cultural dimensions may help explain how different educational systems reflect different social attitudes and beliefs. Thus, it does seem reasonable to suppose that because experiences and needs are likely to be based on cultural experience, the factors that influence the educational experiences of Spanish students in the UK and the challenges they face are likely to be different, not only to those encountered by Korean or Lebanese students, but also by some European students.

By far the greater part of the relevant literature on European mobility to the UK up to now has considered international students as a homogeneous cohort, and only a few studies have focused on particular cultural group of students. It is in this work, that I believe I can achieve a more coherent understanding of the issues involved. Pertinent to our study was research involving Spanish students in UK universities. I did not find any study that focused on this particular group;

however, I did locate several studies in which specific aspects of the education of other European national cohorts of students in UK contexts were investigated. These studies focused on some aspects of the experience abroad of Greek, Finnish, Slovakian and Norwegian students. While most of this research highlighted the positive aspects of the period abroad; almost all of them reported on some obstacles to be overcome in order to benefit completely from the experience, being academic language one of the most severe challenges for most students, mainly because of its strong connections with social and academic adaptation.

To sum up, it may be concluded that being an international student means having to cope with a double adjustment: dealing with a new social environment and keeping up with academic commitments. There are factors during the pre-arrival stage that have an important impact on international students' subsequent adaptation to the culture and educational system of the chosen country. For example, the kind of motivations that students may have when deciding to study abroad will play an important role, since a positive attitude towards the host community and a genuine interest in its customs and language, or what Wiers-Jenssen refers to as 'pull factors', will facilitate adaptation. A second important factor that seems to help international students in adjusting and acculturating is adequate pre-arrival information. Research explored in this chapter shows that accurate information helps psychological preparation, allows for more realistic expectations and affects the interpretation of the severity of the obstacles to overcome. If institutions fail to meet the expectations of international students, problems can be felt more acutely. If high expectations have been created that cannot be fulfilled, the students will experience disappointment and poor adjustment.

It is clear from the review of this literature that support for international students in order to alleviate the difficulties experience is needed. The UK is always looking for ways to provide adequate support for their international students. Most universities in the UK already have support advisers committed to meet the specific needs of their international students. In some cases support and guidance begins in the home country with services including pre-departure briefings and an

arrival guide. On arrival some universities offer an airport collection service and there are orientation courses which include various cultural and social events. Ongoing support is frequently provided, which involves courses aimed to further develop international students' academic English; however it appears that these courses could benefit by incorporating more flexibility and by targeting the needs of all international students. Hence, it is important to carry out research into specific cultural groups.

In the current investigation a Spanish student experience analysis is carried out (see chapter 4). I am seeking to collect general information in relation to Spanish students' experiences in the host country and the host university, the target situation demands and the students' wants, lacks and needs in this situation, which will help me to find answers to the first research question stated in section 1.2 of chapter one: 1.i. *What challenges do Spanish students face in adapting to UK academic culture? and* 1.ii. *To what extent is their experience distinctive from that of other international students, as represented in the literature in the current chapter?*

The next chapter will review the methodology used to carry out the current investigation.

CHAPTER 3

THE METHODOLOGY

3.0 <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

The review of the literature on the experiences of studying abroad and European mobility has highlighted the following issues: first, that European students, like other international students in the UK, will experience challenges in three areas, namely socio-emotional, academic, and linguistic and it is essential that sufficient and readily accessible forms of support are available for them in each of these areas. Second, that European students do not necessarily form a homogeneous group; previous cultural, educational, and linguistic background will have an impact on the nature and severity of the challenges to be experienced by each cultural group. Third, having been presented with an overview of the background of Spanish students, in terms of culture and education, particularly in regards to second language, the need to further explore the role of this background in understanding the challenges of study abroad for Spanish students has been highlighted.

The current chapter presents the research approaches and methods selected to investigate the three research questions, (chapter 1 section 1.2) and explains the rationale behind their selection. Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the three stages of the investigation, each one corresponding to one research question. The figure shows how the research developed chronologically and summarises the aim of the different interventions, giving details of the research tools used and the sample of respondents. As can be seen, each stage of the research built on the previous one. In Stage 1, the term 'student experience analysis' refers to the research process by which the experiences and challenges facing Spanish students in UK universities were identified and compared with what was reported in the literature on other national cohorts of international students. This part of the investigation also sought to identify any key areas for specific support targeted at Spanish students. At Stage 2, the 'language needs analysis' refers to a limited investigation of L1-influenced linguistic difficulties in academic writing, an area of potential specific difficulty identified as a result of the 'student experience analysis'. At Stage 3, the 'evaluation' refers to the evaluation of student responses to, and potential learning benefits derived from, a web-based support resource,

designed to address some of the specific language difficulties identified in Stage 2.

INVESTIGATION ACTIVITIES	RESEARCH QUESTION	METHODS	SAMPLE (Spanish students)	PURPOSE
STAGE 1 STUDENT EXPERIENCE ANALYSIS	Question 1.i and 1.ii	- Informal discussions - Pilot questionnaire	-10 undergraduate and postgraduate students -10 UG and PG students	Initial understanding of issues. Validation of content and methodology to be used in the following stage.
		- Questionnaire - Individual interviews - Focus groups - Participant observation	-86 UG and PG students -12 UG and PG students -17 students divided into 4 groups - Spanish students	Find out the experiences and difficulties of Spanish students in the UK Suggestions for support mechanisms to alleviate some of the difficulties experienced
STAGE 2 LANGUAGE NEEDS ANALYSIS	Question 2.i and 2.ii	- Error analysis - Focus groups	- 15 written assignments - Four groups of five students	Find out difficulties of writing academic English and the errors committed.
ACTING ON RESULTS: DESIGN OF RESOURCE Question 3.i				
EVALUATION: CASE STUDIES	Question 3.ii	- Pilot pre-test -Participant observation - Interviews	- 2 prospective university students taking a course in the English language	Examine methodology.
		- Pre-test - Scheduled observation - Focus groups	- 10 UG and PG students - 10 UG and PG students - 10 UG and PG students	Obtain initial insights about mode of learning and materials.
		- Post-test - Individual interviews - Tracking records	- 10 UG and PG students - 10 UG and PG students - 10 UG and PG students	Find out students' attitudes and motivations one week after using the materials. Test the effects and effectiveness of the new learning mode and of the materials designed. Suggestions for improvement.

Figure 3.1 Overview of research activities

3.1 GENERAL BACKGROUND TO THE APPROACHES ADOPTED

In investigating all three research questions, this study sets out to explore the experiences and evaluations of a particular community of university students. The investigation of such 'social phenomena' has been framed within two contrasting paradigms of research, referred to by the generic terms, 'normative' and 'interpretive' (Cohen & Manion, 1980, 2000). The normative paradigm, also labelled as natural-science based, hypothetic-deductive, quantitative or even simply scientific, contains two major orienting ideas: first, that human behaviour is essentially rule-governed; and, second, that it should be investigated by the methods closest to those of the natural sciences. Furthermore, the normative approach is usually regarded as starting with theory, with a hypothesis being established before the research begins. As Cohen and Manion point out (2000: 22), the normative researcher tries to devise general theories of human behaviour and to validate them through the use of complex research methodologies. These methodologies may however risk pushing the researcher further and further from the experience and understanding of the everyday world and into a world of abstraction.

The interpretive paradigm, also labelled as ethnographic or qualitative, in contrast to its normative counterpart, is characterised by a concern for the individual and their perspectives (Cohen & Manion, 2000: 22). A major difference in the interpretive approach is that theories and concepts tend to arise from enquiry (Robson, 1993: 19). They come after data collection rather than before it. Because of this, it is often referred to as 'hypothesis generating' (as against 'hypothesis testing') research. Also, in the interpretive approach, data collection and analysis are not rigidly separated. An initial bout of data collection may be followed by analysis, the results of which are then used to decide what data should be collected next. The cycle is then repeated several times. Initial theory formulation also goes on at an early stage, and is successively elaborated and checked as the process continues (Robson, 1993: 19).

Undoubtedly, there are situations and topics where a 'scientific' quantitative approach is called for, and others where a qualitative naturalistic study is

appropriate. But there are *... still others* [which] *will be better served by a marriage of the two traditions* (Bryman, 1988: 173). Using more than one approach in an investigation can have substantial advantages, as one seeks to maximise the strength of each approach.

An interpretive approach with emphasis on people's "lived experience", is fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes and structures of their lives: their "perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments, presuppositions" (Van Manen, 1977), and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them. As noted above, an interpretive approach is best for discovery, exploring a new area, and developing hypotheses. Since, as seen in chapter 2, there is little literature focusing specifically on the issues affecting students of this particular nationality in the UK or anywhere else, it was felt that research question 1i. and 1.ii. (see chapter 1, section 1.2) could not be investigated through a large-scale normative approach.

However, in order to check the representations of issues in a larger group, from which findings could conceivably be generalised to the whole population, a normative approach was considered appropriate at an initial stage of the student experience analysis. The student experience questionnaire allowed me to collect potentially generalisable information about the population of Spanish university students, providing a foundation for a characterisation of their experience. An interpretive approach through, initially, individual interviews provided me with the opportunity to go into detail and more in-depth on some of the issues raised in the questionnaire by clarifying issues and follow up interesting responses. Focus groups, then, encouraged the participation and involvement of the students so that they could discuss and react to issues already identified in the individual interviews. In this way, I could ascertain a sense of collective feeling and perception about these issues.

3.1.1 Triangulation of methods

Manstead and Semin (1988) make the obvious but often neglected point that the methods selected in carrying out a piece of research depend very much on the type of research question being addressed. Using more than one method in an

investigation can have substantial advantages, even though it inevitably adds to the time investment required. As Robson (1993: 290) suggests, *using a single method and finding a pretty clear-cut result may delude investigators into believing that they have found the 'right' answer.* Thus, one important benefit of multiple methods is in the reduction of inappropriate certainty. Within a predominantly interpretive paradigm, multiple methods enable triangulation. According to Patton (1990), triangulation strengthens a study design, as it is a method for finding out about something by getting a 'fix' on it from two or more places. Patton (1990) explained that triangulation of methods will most often revolve around comparing data collected through qualitative methods with data collected through quantitative methods. With a single method, some unknown part or aspect of the results obtained may be attributable purely to the method used in obtaining the result.

In this investigation, an attempt has been made to incorporate triangulation at the different stages of the research. For example, the combination of questionnaires and interviews at the first stage, during the student experience analysis, was chosen to enhance the reliability of data interpretation. By using a questionnaire, responses to a set of predetermined questions from a representative sample of the population in question were obtained. This data could offset some of the pitfalls of interview data, particularly the possible danger of subjectivity and bias on my part. For example, in this case, at the time of analysing the data, I was living and studying in the UK and may have had preconceived ideas about my experience which could have influenced the particular phrasing of questions in the course of the semi-structured interview and the interpretation of participants' responses. Furthermore respondents may also be evasive in interviews or tend to give answers they think the researcher wants. Questionnaire data from a larger number of participants can help to minimise the effect of such respondent behaviour, although there is still a threat, even in questionnaires, of respondents giving the response they believe would be preferred. Conversely, some of the limitations of questionnaires, such as limitations of space to develop full answers, or dishonesty or triviality of responses, can be mitigated by using face to face communication, such as interviews or focus groups, in which the researcher can call for

clarification at any point and investigate reasons for unexpected or unusual answers.

Two different interventions were used to collect qualitative data in this study: individual interviews and focus groups. The advantage of focus groups over individual interviews is the potential for group discussions, thus yielding a wider range of responses. As Lindlof points out (1995: 174), focus groups capture very well the dynamic processes of natural group interaction or collective interpretation. In this investigation, focus groups were a useful opportunity to see participants sharing their opinions and group members influencing each other by responding to different ideas and comments throughout the discussion. Most students appeared stimulated by the experiences of other members of the group to articulate their own perspectives. In this way, the focus groups complemented the interviews by offsetting the limitation of interviews where some respondents may feel less able to share their thoughts in one-to-one conversation with a stranger.

The following sections will present in detail the procedure followed at each of the stages of the current investigation, it will highlight in each part the research question aimed to be answered and the methods utilised to achieve it.

3.2 THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE ANALYSIS

The student experience analysis in this investigation refers to the process by which the challenges faced by Spanish students in UK universities, including social, emotional, academic and linguistic are identified, prioritised and contrasted with what has been reported in the literature on other national cohorts of international students. Answers to the first research questions: *what challenges do Spanish students face in adapting to UK academic culture? and to what extent is their experience distinctive from that of other international students, as presented in the literature on international student experience?* were sought using a questionnaire, individual and focus groups interviews, supported by participant observation.

3.2.1 The pilot

The student analysis took place in four phases, starting with a pilot conducted in order to gain an initial understanding of the issues and test the methodology to be used in the following phases where a more ample sample of quantitative and qualitative data would be collected through questionnaires and interviews. The pilot study, as an exploratory exercise, started with informal group and individual discussions in order to identify common experiences and significant issues for a number of students followed by distribution of a pilot questionnaire designed based on these discussions. The technique used to recruit the students to serve as guinea pigs for the 'dummy run' was what is known as 'snowball sampling'[1]. For this pilot the final sample was a group of ten undergraduate and postgraduate students, seven of whom had just arrived in the UK and were only a couple of weeks into their course, while three had been in the UK for a period of 13 months to 26 months. The individuals in the sample represented the group for which the final tools were intended in terms of age, experience and background. The sample size appeared suitable to test the validity of the methods.

Only notes were taken of the informal interviews. These notes, the literature review, and my own experience as a Spanish national studying in the UK, allowed investigation of questions to be asked and provided the first clues as to the main problems that this community of students felt they experienced living and studying in the UK. The pilot study confirmed three fairly predictable sets of issues, i.e.:

1) relating to the immediate challenge of socio-psychological adaptation such as homesickness and culture shock, as well as practicalities such as the cost of living or differences in time schedules between Spain and England, were issues that emerged already at such an early stage.

2) relating to academic adjustment: soon after arrival students became aware of the obvious differences between the Spanish and English educational systems and they pointed them out during the informal interviews.

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[1] Snowball sampling means that the researcher identifies a small number of individuals, mainly acquaintances who have the characteristics required and uses them as informants to identify others who qualify for inclusion, and these, in turn, identify yet others (Robson 1993: 142).

3) relating to language: none of the students had anticipated before their arrival in the UK that their language skills might not be adequate, but became concerned about this after their arrival. The experiences reported fit under the term 'language shock' which is described as the frustration and mental anguish that results in being reduced to the level of a two-year-old in one's ability to communicate (Hile, 2001).

These three key areas provided the focus for the design of a pilot questionnaire (see Appendix A) which was distributed to the same group of Spanish students eight weeks after they had participated in the informal interviews. A particular insight derived from the pilot study was that the intensity with which students might experience problems in these three areas could be linked to the amount of pre-arrival activity and information, so a section was included in the definitive questionnaire and interview plan which asked students to retrospect on any pre-arrival preparation. Additionally, suggestions for support strategies which had been made by students during the pilot conversations were included for evaluation in the final study.

3.2.2 The student experience questionnaire

After the pilot had taken place, the first phase of the definitive investigation consisted of the design of a questionnaire and its distribution to Spanish students in two universities in the south of England. The format of the questionnaire is shown in Appendix C and the introductory letter that accompanied the questionnaire and explained the purpose of the investigation is included in Appendix A. A total of one hundred and forty questionnaires were distributed and eighty six were returned, a response rate of 61%. A higher response might have been obtained by chasing those who failed to respond. However, because of data protection regulations, students could only be contacted by their host university, thus limiting my range of actions. I judged that eighty six responses would provide a sufficiently broad representation of the sample population, with roughly the same proportion being returned from both institutions. Given the difficulty of increasing the response rate, time and effort were invested in pursuing the other data collection strategies such as individual interviews and focus groups (see below 3.2.3 and 3.2.4).

As suggested by Robson (1993: 243), questionnaires can be very efficient in terms of researcher time and effort, and they are widely used for data collection. Their advantage is that the number of respondents can be extensive and a representative sample can lead to scientifically acceptable levels of generalisation. In addition, standardised questions mean that there is no interviewer interpreting/distorting meaning. The definitive questionnaire used for this investigation was informed by the informal pilot discussions. It includes the mandatory closed-questions on personal background and, there are sections with questions on pre-arrival information, academic life, language issues, and socio-cultural problems.

There are problems to be recognised, however, in that the data may be superficial and there is little or no check on the honesty or seriousness of responses. In the case of closed questions, responses have to be squeezed into predetermined boxes, which may or may not be appropriate. For example, in the definitive student experience questionnaire, there was induced bias due to lack of attention to the wording of a close question which was undetected in the pilot questionnaire. As will be pointed out in chapter 4 (section 4.3.3) and also in chapter 7 (section 7.4), I believe that in closed question 21 (Appendix C) the definitions for respondents' choices skewed responses, since *unable* and *not very able,* are terms that imply a very strong lack of aptitude or skill. When data obtained from these questions was contrasted with data obtained through other tools – interviews and focus groups – the results were dissimilar.

The mere act of asking respondents a question may influence the way they perceive their reality, or at least, what they will tell about it (Sherman, 1980). Another possible bias in the students' experience questionnaire may occur in question 14; when asked about their knowledge level of English, students' natural tendency may have been to overstate, in order to maintain a positive self-evaluation.

Robson (1993: 243) claims that in questionnaire design there is a need to cut back open-ended questions to a minimum or spending a lot of time in coding and analysis would be required. Additionally, open-questions require more time and

effort from the respondents. It is important to keep the questionnaire short (no more than 15 minutes to fill in) in order to increase the likelihood of the respondents giving their co-operation. In the definitive questionnaire used in this investigation (see Appendix C), open questions have been kept to a minimum and there is only one open question at the end of each of the sections so that students are able to reflect and expand on any relevant issue.

3.2.3 The individual interviews

Cannell and Kahn (1968, cited in Cohen & Manion 2000: 269) characterise an interview as a conversation *initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information.* Patton (1990) defines its purpose as to find out what is in and on someone's mind. One interviews people to obtain from them what one cannot directly observe. Thus, an interview begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is knowable, and that it can be made explicit.

In the student experience analysis, it was judged that data on underlying motivations and experiences could not be easily ascertained in a structured postal questionnaire survey; thus, in order to get further insights into the questionnaire results, clarify issues and follow up interesting responses, individual interviews were carried out. In the student analysis questionnaire students had the option to write in their contact details if they wanted to further participate in the study. Of all the respondents who provided their details in the questionnaire, six males and six females were chosen to take part in the next stage of the investigation. However, the fact that they self-selected could present a limitation to the study, as it is likely that they were more inclined and motivated to talk about their experiences than the students who did not volunteer to take part. Self-selection limits the transferability of results and conclusions in this instance must be presented cautiously, referring to a group of Spanish students rather than Spanish students as a group.

The interviews focused on three temporal periods deemed important because they coincided with three different key aspects in the process of studying abroad (see Appendix D). The first of these periods was *pre-arrival* once students were

accepted by the host institution and started preparing for their period in the UK. The second was *on arrival* when students came into contact for the first time with the host country and the host university and had their initial experiences there. The third was *after arrival* once students were familiar with living and studying in the host country.

i.   Pre-arrival: Participants were asked to comment on aspects such as information received about the UK and the university selected prior to arrival; preparation of the students, including the role of foreign language command prior to departure from their home country; expectations about the host country and the host university, including the educational system and the programme of studies; level of familiarity with the host culture and the new academic environment; reasons for coming and objectives of the stay.

ii. On arrival: Participants were asked to describe first impressions when they arrived in the host country and university, as well as their current experiences in the UK including their ability to adapt to social and academic life, language difficulties, academic achievement, induction, accommodation provision, etc.

iii. After arrival: Participants were asked to give suggestions for support mechanisms which could facilitate their adaptation to life in the UK.

The format of the interview questions that served me as guidelines in this investigation is included in Appendix D. However, as a semi-structured format was used and participants were allowed to expand on their answers, other new questions not included in the pre-planned format arose during the conversations. As Robson (1993: 237) points out, there is with a semi-structured format *greater freedom in the sequencing of questions, in their exact wording, and in the amount of time and attention given to different topics*, providing the researcher with scope to follow up responses.

The twelve semi-structured interviews were carried out in my home, providing a quiet, relaxing environment. They lasted between 45-60 minutes each, and were conducted in Spanish, my native language as well as the native language of the subjects. his enabled them to express themselves freely without language barriers.

Although I took brief notes during the process of interviewing, all the interviews were tape-recorded to prevent any loss of substantial data, and to be used at a later stage to check the reliability of the study.

Of the 12 students interviewed at this stage, six were male and six female. It is important to mention here that, although no differences were found in the semantic themes arising from the conversations, some were noted in the communicative style of the two genders. In this case, male students talked about their experiences living and studying in the UK in a more anecdotal and personal way, while females remained more personally detached from the issues using fewer illustrations and examples. Females seemed to be more formal and aware of the context of the conversation, while males talked to the researcher as if talking to a friend.

The great majority of the students came from Madrid, but other areas of the country were represented: Andalusia, Basque Country, Castilla, and Catalonia. The age of these students ranged between 19 and 26. There were 8 undergraduates and 4 postgraduates. Among the interviewees, there were two exchange students and the rest were 'free movers'. All these Spanish students were living in the southeast coast area of England and studying at two different universities in that area. The subjects of study of these twelve students were varied.

3.2.4 The focus groups

Having obtained data from the questionnaires and the twelve individual interviews, there was a need to check the information gathered and to provide further illumination of the issues explored. The aim of this stage of the student experience analysis was to get group reactions to the issues under investigation and to check whether the issues relating to living and studying in the UK that arose at an individual level were similar to those which might arise in group discussions. Thus, twenty Spanish students who in the questionnaire stated their interest to further participate in the investigation were contacted.

In this investigation, focus groups proved to be an important tool to collect data because of the need to discover the behaviours and attitudes of a community.

Lindlof (1995: 174) states that focus groups create settings in which diverse perceptions, judgements and experiences concerning particular topics can surface. The advantage of focus groups over individual interviews is the potential for discussion and dynamic interactions to develop, thus yielding a wider range of responses. Focus groups capture very well the dynamic processes of natural group interaction or collective interpretation (Lindlof, 1995: 174). The participants share their opinions and group members influence each other by responding to different ideas and comments throughout the discussion. Members of focus groups are stimulated by the experiences of other members of the group to articulate their own perspectives.

As Robson observes, however (1993: 241), the limitations are that they are of little use in allowing deeper personal issues to emerge, and that group dynamics may deny access to data from one particular individual; additionally, group dynamics or power hierarchies affect who speaks and what they say. A particular problem is when one or two persons dominate the discussion. They may not only take over from the researcher, but also prevent others from contributing. The major challenge of this method is to ensure that all participants speak and all topics are discussed. In the present investigation, the groups were facilitated with a light hand; in some cases I had to overtly appeal for contributions. Indications from students' body language that they wished to contribute helped me to lead the focus groups without undue difficulty.

3.2.5 Participant observation

Robson (1993: 190) claims that, as the actions and behaviour of people are a central aspect in virtually any enquiry, a natural and obvious technique is to watch what they do, to record this in some way and then to describe, analyse, and interpret what has been observed. A major advantage of observation as a technique appears to be its directness. The researcher does not ask people about their views, feelings, or attitudes, but watches what they do, and listens to what they say. Among the disadvantages of observational methods, however, Robson highlights (1993: 190) the extent to which an observer affects the situation under observation, in particular if the researcher takes a very involved role as an observer.

Relevant to this investigation was my participation as a volunteer during the Orientation week for the international students programme organised by one of the universities taking part in the investigation for the academic year 1998/99. This participation provided good opportunities for observation and, in this way, the issues arising during the student experience analysis through other methods, were complemented and corroborated.

As explained by Robson (1993: 194), *a key feature of participant observation is that the observer seeks to become a putative member of the observed group.* In the present investigation, I did not have to play a fictional role, as I myself was an actual member of the group: a Spanish student in an English university. Thus, I was not only physically present, but also shared with the subjects life experiences, as well as previous and current educational background, social conventions and habits, mother language and non-verbal communication. This fact proved beneficial, not only for the observational purposes of the student experience analysis, but in several other contexts throughout the study For example, when focus groups were taking place, I was able to interpret modes of behaviour more easily than had I not shared a common background. In this way it was easier for me to manage the discussion in a more controlled way.

3.3 THE LANGUAGE NEEDS ANALYSIS

In order to answer research questions 2i. *what difficulties do Spanish students experience in relation to academic writing in English?* and 2ii. *and what kind of difficulties may be attributable to first language interference, and are therefore specific to this group of students?* it was decided to use a language needs analysis approach. Two different techniques were considered. The first, assuming that errors are reliable indicators of the learning problems of particular groups, consisted of a limited analysis of sentence-level errors of a sample of assignments written by Spanish university students in the UK. The second tool was again that of a focus group in which students were invited to discuss and reflect on the challenges they had to face in the area of English academic writing.

The relevance of a needs analysis as a preliminary step to any type of materials design, in particular ESP[2] materials has been stressed by authors such as Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) or Dudley-Evans and St. John who stated that *needs analysis is the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused course* (1998: 122). Taking this into consideration, this part of the investigation helped me to identify some of the most pressing needs of this particular group of students in relation to academic writing, which in turn led to the design of a resource seeking to support their academic writing skills.

Although some kind of error analysis was crucial in this investigation as a way to highlight the difficulties at sentence level that Spanish students face when writing academic English, it should be noted that it was not my intention to undertake an exhaustive analysis, nor was it the intention to collect a large corpus of errors that Spanish students commit when writing English, since this already exists in the literature (Bueno et al., 1992; Swan & Smith, 2001). However, through considering some of these errors, new insights and perspectives into the subject area were obtained.

A sample of assignments was collected from five different Spanish students – three assignments from each of them, one from each academic term. The students, studying different subjects, handed in the written samples once their corresponding tutors had marked them.

The error analysis differed from the techniques considered so far in that it was based on indirect rather than direct data collection. Instead of directly observing, or interviewing, or asking someone to fill in a questionnaire for the purposes of the enquiry, I was dealing with something produced for some other purpose. The nature of the written pieces were thus not affected by the fact that they were being used for the enquiry, as they were already existing documents to which I had access.

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[2] ESP English for Specific Purposes

In addition to analysing student products, it was considered important to have students' own perspectives on their main challenges and difficulties when writing academic English. Four focus group interview sessions were, then, organised with five students in each. This tool was particularly useful to identify difficulties related to discourse level of language use, as this was an issue much commented in the group conversations. Moreover, valuable suggestions for support to alleviate academic writing problems were obtained.

3.3.1 Acting on results: the design of the resource

All the information from the two initial stages of the investigation – the student experience analysis and the language needs analysis – was then compiled in order to inform the design of a resource that might address a specific section of student difficulties when writing in academic English. At previous stages in the investigation, students had expressed their interest in using IT to enhance the acquisition of their language skills. A description of the process of developing the prototype is resource in chapter 6.

3.4 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE CASE STUDIES

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this learning resource, to explore the way in which CALL programs may promote the development of learners' knowledge, and to reflect on the appropriateness of implementing the resource more widely, an empirical case study investigation was envisaged. As Robson noted (1993: 171), *an evaluation is an attempt to assess the worth or value of some innovation or intervention, some service or approach.*

Davey (1991) states that a study of case is a systematic way of looking at what is happening, collecting data, analysing information, and reporting the results. The idea is to discover what might be important to look at more extensively in future research. Thus, the case study is especially well suited towards generating, rather than testing, hypothesis. As pointed out by Adelman et al. (1979, cited in Nunan, 1992), one of the advantages of case studies is that results and experience described might serve a wider audience. It can be more accessible and can

encourage reflection on practices and consequently further research into different dimensions.

Merriam (1998: 19) described the main goal of case study research as follows:

> *A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in the process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research.*

He (1998: 11) went on to describe this type of research:

> *Data are collected through interviews, observations and document analysis. Findings are a mix of description and analysis – an analysis that uses concepts from the theoretical framework of the study. (…) the analysis results in the identification of recurring patterns (…) or in the delineation of a process.*

It has been argued that no one method is sufficient to capture all salient aspects of an intervention, and case studies typically use multiple methods (Keen & Packwood, 2000). This multiplicity of viewpoints, as claimed by Adelman et al. (1979, cited in Nunan, 1992) has the advantage of offering support to alternative interpretations. The methods used in the current case studies are both qualitative and quantitative. Scheduled observations, pre- and post-tests, and tracking records, will provide objective quantifiable information on students progress and attitudes towards the implementation, while interviews -individual and focus groups - will provide students' own perspectives and reactions on the implementation.

As noted above, the nature of the current evaluation inquiry is exploratory. It seeks to deepen our understanding of learners' attitudes and their effect on their interaction with a CALL program and later recall in a foreign language (i.e. EFL). In this exploration, emphasis is placed on the contrast/similarities amongst the responses of 10 different participants. Davey (1991), points out that there is a pitfall in the exploratory study which is that of prematurity, as the findings may seem convincing enough to be released inappropriately as conclusions. Consequently, when presenting the results of the case study evaluation in chapter

6, I have opted for a cautious approach to presentation showing indicative results rather than strong conclusions.

There is also a set of theoretical and methodological considerations specific to the domain of research on language learning and CALL that can justify the choice of a case study as an appropriate strategy of enquiry for the present study. For example, investigating ICT involves examining learners' interactions with the medium in order to understand their attitudes and behaviour while using it. Learners' interaction with the program can also be examined by analysing the trace – records from their navigations – they left while working with application and retrospective data obtained through interviews and questionnaires designed for the specific purpose of the study. In sections 3.4.2 and 3.4.3 there is a review of the qualitative and quantitative methods used in the case study evaluation. The following sections will describe the procedure followed for the case study investigation.

3.4.1 The procedure followed for the case study investigation

All the 68 Spanish students registered for the academic year 2002/03 at one of the universities participating were sent a letter (see Appendix E), describing the current project and asking for their collaboration. The Spanish students who contacted me within a two-week period were given a choice of dates and times to have a first meeting session and start the process of evaluation. Those students who did reply to the letter and showed interest in the project, but could not attend on any of the proposed dates did not participate in the evaluation. Eventually, there were ten Spanish students who self-selected in this way to form the case studies and participated in the evaluation of the resource.

The case study evaluation was carried out in three phases. There was an initial encounter with all students; trial period where students worked on the resource at their own convenience; and a second meeting, one week after, when students met me on an individual basis to complete a post test and carry out a semi-structured interview.

One of the aims of having an initial encounter with the ten students taking part in the case study was to make sure that they would be comfortable using the web-based materials. Moreover, other objectives were attained through this first meeting:

1) it was important to let students know what the project was all about and exactly what was expected from them during the whole process of evaluation;

2) it allowed me to obtain a profile of each of the students taking part, as well as testing their knowledge on certain areas of difficulty previous to the use of the resource;

3) it also gave the students the chance to familiarise themselves with the materials, making sure that all of them could log onto the resource without difficulties and could move around it easily;

4) it provided the opportunity for testing students' first reactions to a new mode of learning and the web-based materials designed specifically for them;

5) having all the students together in groups provided an opportunity for group discussions about issues that arose during the familiarisation with the materials.

The ten students were given one week to use and complete the quizzes in the learning resource. After this week the students were invited to meet me, on this occasion individually, for a second session in order to complete the process of evaluation. The main aim of this stage was to gather in-depth information about students' experiences of the mode of learning and the specific materials after using them in natural conditions. The instruments used at this stage of the investigation included qualitative and quantitative methods. They are outlined below.

3.4.2 Qualitative methods

The qualitative methods used for the case study evaluation included focus groups and individual interviews.

3.4.2.1 Focus groups

A set of focus groups interviews was conducted during the first phase of the case study evaluation. After students had sampled the intervention for twenty minutes, there was an opportunity for them together to discuss their first impressions and experiences of the web-based materials. Two sessions of focus groups were organised. The first one consisted of seven subjects, and the second was a mini focus group, which comprised only three students. Students selected themselves to one group or another depending on availability. Although it has been pointed out by Krueger (1994: 39), that the disadvantage of a small groups over others is that the reactions of respondents may be more limited, there was not any significant dissimilarity in the quantity or quality of the data obtained from the two groups interviewed in this case. These interviews were tape-recorded. In these focus groups students mainly stated preconceived ideas about the mode of study and gave initial insight about the specific materials. A full account of results obtained is given in chapter 6 section 6.9.

3.4.2.2 Individual interviews

The ten students participating in the case study evaluation were given seven days to study the materials and complete the quizzes in each of the four units designed to help them correct their academic writing errors. After that week, they were individually interviewed.

The format of the interview questions for this later stage of the investigation is included in Appendix F. The interviews were carried out in an office provided by the university. Unlike the interviews carried out for the initial investigation, the content of these was less personal, so it was appropriate to provide a more formal, less intimate context. Interviews lasted from 30 to 45 minutes each and, like the previous interviews, they were conducted in Spanish. Although I took notes during the process of interviewing, all the interviews were tape-recorded to prevent any loss of substantial data and to check reactions at a later stage. Interviewees gave their consent for the interview to be recorded.

The purpose for carrying out these interviews was:

i.   To provide insights about a new mode of study and to assess advantages and disadvantages of this mode of learning;

ii. To identify students' attitudes towards the mode of learning;

iii. To record Spanish students' reactions to the web-materials designed specifically for them;

iv. To obtain suggestions for improving the materials.

As in the interviews carried out during the student experience analysis, a semi-structured format was used based on questions formulated in advance, but I was free to modify their order based upon my perception of what seemed most appropriate in the context of the 'conversation'. I was also able to change the way the questions were worded and give explanations, or leave out particular questions if they seemed inappropriate with a particular interviewee.Other open questions not included in the pre-planned format also arose during the conversations. As Robson states, open questions provide no restrictions on the content or manner of the reply other than the subject area. Cohen and Manion (1989: 313) list the advantages of open-ended questions:

> *They are flexible, they allow the interviewer to probe so that he may go into more depth if he chooses, or clear up any misunderstandings; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of a respondent's knowledge; they encourage cooperation and rapport; and they allow the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes. Open-ended situations can also result in unexpected or unanticipated answers which may suggest hitherto unthought-of relationships or hypotheses.*

3.4.3 Quantitative methods

This evaluation also attempted to use quantitative methods to gather data based on scheduled observation, pre- and post-test questionnaires, and tracking records. The next sections provide information on the use of these tools.

3.4.3.1 Scheduled observation

Scheduled observation was an instrument used during the first phase of the case study to measure students' first reactions to the web-based materials. Facial movements and expressions, as well as students' use of the keyboard or mouse, and their verbal communication, addressing questions to either me or other students in the group, were measured using a structured plan (see Appendix G).

One of the first features to note that came out of this observation was the students' high level of familiarity with computers in general, and with the log-on system at the university in particular. None of the students showed any discomfort during the first minutes of the observation. All students logged on without problems and did not have to ask questions in order to start using the resource. For the first five minutes of the observation process, students were passively reading instructions from the screen, but afterwards they started using the keyboard and mouse, interacting actively with the machine. Students' facial expressions showed greater enjoyment when interacting – that is, having to use mouse or keyboard – than when passively reading from the screen.

3.4.3.2 Pre- and post-tests questionnaire

The web resource was designed to support the development of greater accuracy in students' production of English linguistic items which had been selected because of their likely susceptibility to L1 influence (see chapter 5). In order to evaluate whether students' accuracy in producing these items did increase as a result of the resource, a pre-test post-test design was used. The tests used were paper-based and comprised a selection of the quizzes appearing on the web site. The pre-test was administered at the start of the familiarisation period. The post-test, which was identical to the pre-test (see Appendix H), was then administered after the week during which the students had self access to the resource and had been requested to complete all quizzes (see chapter 6 section 6.6.4). It should be noted here that a number of difficulties came to light over the design and validity of the pre-test post-test procedures, leading to significant limitations in their validity. These limitations will be discussed in chapter 6 and chapter 7.

3.4.3.3 Tracking records

Additional to pre- and post- tests, there was a facility in *Blackboard* that allowed me to obtain quantitative data on the students' performance on the quizzes built into the web-based materials. These tracking records did not provide an indication of learning gain, since only final scores were available, but they did provide an indication of the items that seemed to be causing more or less difficulty. The most pertinent features of this analysis are presented in chapter 6 section 6.7.2.

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3.5 <u>METHODS OF ANALYSIS</u>

This section will describe the methods of analysis used after the data had been collected using the instruments reported above in sections 3.2 and 3.4.

3.5.1 Preparation for analysing the qualitative data

In transcribing the oral interviews, a series of decisions had to be made about the way in which what was on the tape was going to be presented. The first of them concerned the degree of completeness; it had to be decided whether to transcribe every word uttered by the students or whether to be selective. I decided to compile index cards containing a summary of the points covered in each interview, and then to transcribe in detail where the students referred specifically to the issues in the inquiry. Sections where the discussions moved completely away from the topic were summarised or omitted.

The way of translating the discussions into English was another key decision. All interviewees used a good deal of Spanish jargon spoken among people of their age. Making a literal translation of this jargon in English would have been a hard task, and inevitably the translations would not have achieved the most accurate results due to obvious differences between the two languages. Another option would have been to translate the interviews communicatively into slang English; however such a level of detail was considered unnecessary, as the purpose was not a detailed discourse analysis but rather a content analysis. In the interest of readability, I decided to produce a conventional, standard English for the translations of the oral transcriptions. This entailed a loss of the conversational essence. However, the relevant meanings were captured to allow appropriate analysis to be carried out.

Following the completion of each interview, I made a transcription of the relevant topics arising in each of the tapes. This transcription process helped immerse me in the data and helped me to think about what the interviewees were saying and how they were saying it. Each written transcript was read several times while listening to the corresponding audiotape to ensure accuracy of the transcribed tape and to come to a better overall understanding of each participant's experience.

Subsequently everything was typed into a computer in order to make the data more manageable.

The specific approach used to uncover the thematic aspects was content analysis. As defined by Travers (1969, cited in Cohen & Manion, 2000: 164), content analysis is *a multipurpose research method developed specifically for investigating a broad spectrum of problems in which the content of communication serves as a basis of inference*. The technique of content analysis consists of identifying appropriate categories and units of analysis, both of which will reflect the nature of the document being analysed and the purpose of the research. In the present investigation the themes that arose from each of the interviews were compared and then commonalities and differences among all of them were identified. Lastly, the overall themes were defined and I began the process of describing how they were interrelated. Rewriting continued until I felt the themes (parts) and the relationship between the themes (whole) captured as accurately as possible the way the Spanish students experienced life in a university in the UK. The whole of this process described above was recursive in nature, as developing analysis led to more coding and study of the data, which in turn informed later analysis.

3.5.2 Interpretation of qualitative data

> *The critical question is whether the meanings found in qualitative data through the tactics outlined here are valid, repeatable, right*. (Milles & Huberman 1984: 215)

Whilst it is hard to argue about validity, the other two qualities quoted by Milles and Huberman, namely *repeatable* and *right*, seem less straightforward. Atkinson (1990: 7) argues that when researchers analyse their data they are inevitably creating an interpretation. The transcripts are not simply presented and the reader left to interpret them; the researcher selects and groups certain ideas, re-presenting, therefore, the data. However, it is the researcher's responsibility to analyse data as thoughtfully as possible and to avoid deliberate misrepresentation or omission of inconvenient findings.

3.5.3 The analysis of quantitative data

The quantitative data to be analysed during the student experience analysis was generated from the small-scale primary survey with a sample size of 86 subjects. As Holt points out (1991: 260), in such small studies the emphasis tends to be on descriptive analyses and simple contrast. The analysis in the current investigation was restricted to taking one explanatory variable at a time, since cross-tabulations of more variables (age, gender, discipline of study, geographical origin, stage of study, motivation, duration of residence in England) would have resulted in a large table with comparatively few cases in any cell. Although the comparisons could have led to interesting social science questions, the data was not extensive enough to pursue this. Therefore, due to small numbers in each category they were not treated as independent variables.

The first stage of the analysis was data preparation, which involved inserting information from respondents in a grid. This was done in order to make the mass of data more manageable. Then, questions were coded. As the questionnaires consisted mainly of closed questions this process was quick. Regarding the open questions, the process of coding was more complicated and it involved defining categories from statements that had points in common.

The second stage of the analysis involved describing the data. It was mostly a matter of counting the number of times each code appeared in a column and checking that all the respondents were accounted for. Lastly, the third stage of the analysis consisted of the interpretation of the results. Descriptive statistics of the data for the student analysis are displayed in chapter 4.

Regarding the case study investigation, the data obtained from pre- and post-tests and tracking records mentioned above, was individually processed in order to obtain an overall description of each of the students selected for the case study (see chapter 6 section 6.8).

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3.6 <u>ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS</u>

As Robson points out (1993: 30), ethical dilemmas lurk in any research involving people and they start from the very beginning of the study. It is important that the researcher takes into account risks for respondents when carrying out any kind of social enquiry.

According to Sieber (1992: 80), a key ethical principle is to maximise good outcomes for science and the individual research participants whilst avoiding or minimising unnecessary risk, harm or wrong. One of these risks is the "mere inconvenience" such as boredom, frustration or stress, or taking time that the subject might more profitably spend in other ways. This potential problem was present in this research. However, I was aware from the beginning, and sought to employ appropriate approaches to minimise it at different stages of the investigation. All individuals taking part in the investigation were treated with courtesy and respect. On all the occasions on which they had to meet me, I made sure that they felt comfortable and that the atmosphere was pleasant. Snacks and drinks were provided for some of the meetings. At the beginning of each interview the student was advised of the possibility of pausing or even stop the recording, at any time required by them. However, none of the interviews was discontinued.

One of Sieber's (1992) maxims has to do with *voluntary informed consent*. He states that the consent of subjects should be obtained beforehand. *Voluntary* means that the subjects can take part in the research freely without any threat. *Informed* means that the subjects know exactly the purpose of the research. *Consent* means that the subjects agree to participate. *Informed consent* means that there is communication and that the subjects understand thoroughly what they are being asked to do. These issues were all relevant to the data-gathering procedures, and were respected at all times.

During this investigation it was originally problematic to contact Spanish students due to the Data Protection Act which forbids universities divulging the names and addresses of any of their students. However, as the two institutions participating

were willing to assist with this research project, they forwarded, on my behalf, to all their Spanish students, a letter, which accompanied the questionnaire. This letter, written in Spanish, comprehensively introduced the research project (see Appendix B). The letter made clear to all participants that while it was hoped that they would participate in the project, such participation was entirely voluntary. At no point in this letter were students forced or threatened in any way to take part in the investigation. Those students who did agree to participate returned the questionnaire in the pre-paid envelope provided. The questionnaires could be returned anonymously, but students who wished to involve themselves further in the investigation could insert their name and/or e-mail address at the end of the questionnaire so that they could be contacted at a later stage (Appendix C).

Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were also very important issues to be considered. As stated by the British Psychological Society's Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles and Guidelines (1991), information obtained about a participant during an investigation is confidential unless otherwise agreed in advance. Participants have a right to expect that information they provide will be treated confidentially and, if published, will not be identifiable as theirs. In the event that confidentiality and/or anonymity cannot be guaranteed, the participant must be warned of this in advance of agreeing to participate.

According to Sieber (1992), *privacy* refers to people and to their concerns in controlling the access of others to themselves. *Confidentiality* refers to data and how this data must be handled in accordance with the subjects' concern to control the access of others to information about themselves. *Anonymity* means that the names of subjects should never be revealed. He argues that the confidentiality agreement between the researcher and the subject is part of the informed consent agreement. The characteristics of this agreement are:

i.   the privacy of the participants is recognised;

ii.   the steps to be taken are stated and subjects are ensured that their identity will not be revealed; and

iii. the legal limitations to ensure confidentiality are stated.

Confidentiality is an important issue because subjects are usually more willing to share personal information if the data is anonymous. Sieber (1992) also referred to anonymity, which ensures that the names of the subjects and any other personal information are not revealed anywhere in the research work. In this study, privacy and confidentiality of all participants are preserved through anonymisation, as Delamont et al. (2000) recommend. This involves using pseudonyms and falsifying biographical details in such a way that does not change the meaning. In this thesis we have chosen to give the participants names that are subjectively similar to the original, Spanish sounding names have been kept in all cases to keep the cultural distance. Individuals in focus groups have not been identified in anyway. The quotations belong to a focus group number, rather than an individual.

Their names have not been revealed to third parties either. Additionally, the universities taking part in the investigation have not been mentioned anywhere in this dissertation, and although the area of work has been identified as the southeast of England, names of towns and cities have been excluded. In this way anonymity was guaranteed.

3.7 THE RESEARCHER'S ROLE

According to Patton (1990: 472), the researcher is part of the instrument in an inquiry. As a result, the report must include information about the researcher. This, he says, includes the experience and perspective the researcher brings to the field. In establishing an investigator's credibility therefore:

> *The principle is to report any personal and professional information that may have affected data collection, analysis, and interpretation – either negatively, or positively.* Patton (1990: 472)

My role in the first part of the investigation (student experience analysis) was that of a Spanish student in the UK researching the experiences of other Spanish students in the UK thus I was both a participant) and a researcher (an objective reporter). As a participant, I shared with the students the main issues under investigation: the academic, social and personal adjustment to the UK system, and the linguistic challenges. In my role as reporter, this familiarity with the issues

could have caused bias, as my personal preconceived notions of the student experience may have influenced my interpretation of the students' accounts. When doing qualitative research, this bias may also be unintentionally manifested in questioning. However, this does not mean that the efficacy of the interviewing is undermined, since personal and subjective ways of looking at the world seem to be inevitable in some of the stages of the research process, from the choice of research topic or methodology to the interpretation of findings. As Mehra (2002) highlights:

> *The qualitative research paradigm believes that the researcher is an important part of the process. The researcher can't separate himself or herself from the topic/people he or she is studying, it is an interaction between the researcher and the researched that the knowledge is created. So the researcher bias enters into the picture even if the researcher tries to stay out of it.*

My position in the case study was complex. Not only was I involved in the supervision of the students in the study and interpretation of results, but I personally designed the resource that is central to this study. I was then a participant observer in the research progress, whose participation was often peculiarly intense, due to this multidimensional role. Recording interviews and tracking students while interacting with the materials provided a point of contrast between what learners did and what they said. In this way, the validity of interpretation of their actions was enhanced.

It can be argued that my role as part of the community group in this investigation may also have had a positive effect, as it allowed me to build up a relationship of trust and familiarity with the subjects under investigation, which an outside researcher may not have achieved. The Spanish students may have felt more able to share their experiences with someone who understood the issues and who could converse with them in their native tongue.

Nevertheless, as previously stated, I was aware of the dangers of my role in this investigation. As both a Spanish student and a researcher, my comments could have some impact on at least some of the directions in which the discussions with the students went; thus various techniques indicated in the literature were exploited in order to minimise the influence of my own socio-cultural frameworks

and the risk of engaging in biased interpretation of the data. For instance, less-structured strategies were preferred in order to avoid creating a hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Very early in the investigation I found that this strategy worked well and was initially surprised by the readiness with which students talked to me. Students were in all cases enthusiastic about talking to another Spanish student researcher, and appreciated the chance to discuss their experiences, contrasting this with the lack of opportunities to talk about themselves in this way in other circumstances. The same eagerness evident during the individual interviews occurred during the focus group discussions as well. In fact, some students after their participation in the student experience analysis decided to create regular discussion groups for Spanish students with the aim of sharing experiences and having a support network from peers of the same nationality.

Having the interviews recorded on tape was a useful tool for me to check the reliability of the data. I listened to the interviews again weeks after they had taken place and tried to critically analyse my reactions as well as participants' towards questions and answers. This exercise made me realise that the participants saw me so much as a peer that they felt that they did not have to explain their experiences as thoroughly as they would have to an outsider. Similarly, I did not ask participants to explain as much as it could have been done because I felt that I understood. This highlighted the disadvantage of my role of participant observer: that points were sometimes expressed implicitly in my data. As a result, I had to go back to some of the students interviewed to carry out what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call 'member checks', a technique whereby the researcher's interpretation of data is checked with that of the actual students who produced the data.

Another technique used to avoid researcher bias was a reflective journal. Following each interaction with the subjects-students, and at some other stages of the investigation, I made entries in a reflective diary regarding my thoughts and ideas on the issues discussed. By noting down my thoughts in the journal, I was able to return to these at a later date and reflect on their validity and, in many cases, adjust them in the light of new research material.

3.8 SUMMARY

This chapter has sought to discuss the principal methodological issues which informed the development of the student experience analysis, the language needs analysis and the case study evaluation. It has shown how the structure was elaborated. The student experience analysis started with the production and administration of a questionnaire –informed by pilot interviews and questionnaire – which produced a normative, potentially generalisable picture of the key issues across a sample of 86 Spanish students. In order to go more in-depth on some of the issues, clarify and follow up interesting responses from the questionnaire semi-structured individual interviews were carried out which were subsequently followed up by focus groups which helped to get a community feeling as well as test and refine the information that had already been generated.

The language needs analysis was carried out through a limited error analysis of a sample of academic assignments written by Spanish students and a set of focus groups in order to get students own perspectives on their difficulties.

By acting on results, the design of a resource to improve certain English language skills was conceived. This intervention was evaluated following a case study investigation whose main aim was to explore the way in which CALL programs can promote the development of learners' specific skills and their attitudes towards a new mode of learning. The next chapter will describe the results of the student experience analysis investigation. Chapter 5 will describe the process of language needs analysis, while the results of the case study evaluation will be presented in chapter 6.

RESULTS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCES OF SPANISH
STUDENTS

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4.0 <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

In conclusion to chapter 2 the need for the study of the experiences of Spanish students in UK universities was established. It was also ascertained that this group of students may encounter several obstacles which may be related to previous background and therefore be distinctive to the challenges encountered by other international cohorts of students.

In the previous chapter the methodology of how the study was carried out was developed. It was noted that the data for this part of the investigation was generated mainly from questionnaires, individual interviews and focus groups. The objective of the current chapter is to present and analyse the data concerning Spanish students' experiences while studying in English universities in order to contrast results with the literature presented in chapter 2 and provide an answer to my first research question proposed in chapter 1. In the presentation of quantitative findings, a considerable number of graphics have been incorporated, while qualitative findings are presented extracting direct quotations in an attempt to adequately illustrate the views expressed. Quotations from individual interviews are followed by the pseudonym given to each student (see chapter 3.6). In focus groups, individual members have not been identified, but each group has been assigned a number.

4.1 <u>SPANISH STUDENT PROFILE</u>

Results obtained from questionnaires, being the most generalisable of the methods used in this investigation, have helped the generation of the profile of Spanish students participating in this investigation.

Figure 4.1 – Gender profile (Appendix C, Q1)
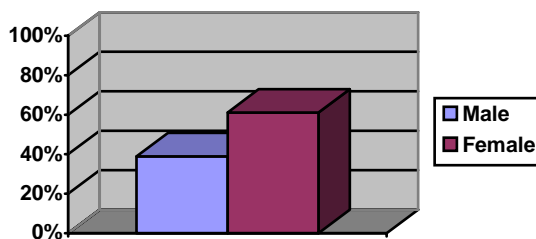
According to answers to Q1 of the questionnaire, in this investigation, the majority of the respondents (61%) were female, while a smaller percentage (39%) was male (Appendix C, Q1). This profile is consistent with Erasmus statistics (see figure 4.2), where it is shown that the number of female Spanish students who participated in the mobility programme during the academic year 2003-2004 is higher than the number of male students, in a similar percentage to the one encountered in the findings of the current investigation.

Figure 4.2 – Spanish students' mobility

MOVILIDAD DE ESTUDIANTES SÓCRATES / ERASMUS DE ESPAÑA
NÚMERO DE ESTUDIANTES POR SEXO Y EDAD. CURSO 2003-2004

EDAD	MUJERES	HOMBRES	TOTAL	PORCENTAJE MUJERES	PORCENTAJE HOMBRES
18	35	6	41	85,37%	14,63%
19	369	90	459	80,39%	19,61%
20	1.305	442	1.747	74,70%	25,30%
21	2.104	1.003	3.107	67,72%	32,28%
22	2.437	1.471	3.908	62,36%	37,64%
23	2.061	1.585	3.646	56,53%	43,47%
24	1.399	1.404	2.803	49,91%	50,09%
25	914	977	1.891	48,33%	51,67%
26	507	630	1.137	44,59%	55,41%
27	253	288	541	46,77%	53,23%
28	135	206	341	39,59%	60,41%
29	66	90	156	42,31%	57,69%
30	42	36	78	53,85%	46,15%
> 30	92	87	179	51,40%	48,60%
TOTAL	11.719	8.315	20.034	58,50%	41,50%

Graphic taken from http://www.mec.es/consejou/erasmus/imagenes/estadisticas/estudiantes_05.pdf

Figure 4.3 – Age Profile (Appendix C, Q2)
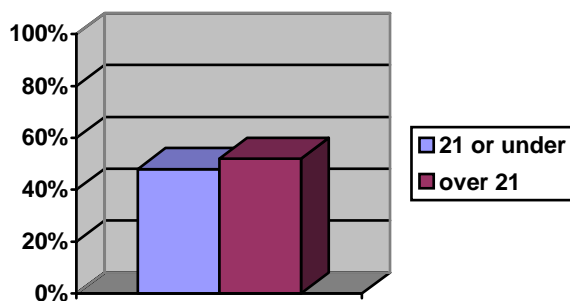
According to answers to Q2 of the questionnaire (Appendix C), 48% of the students were 21 years old or under, and 52% of them over 21. Further evidence

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of Spanish students' mean age is provided by Erasmus and shown in figure 4.4 below.

Figure 4.4 – Percentage of student per age
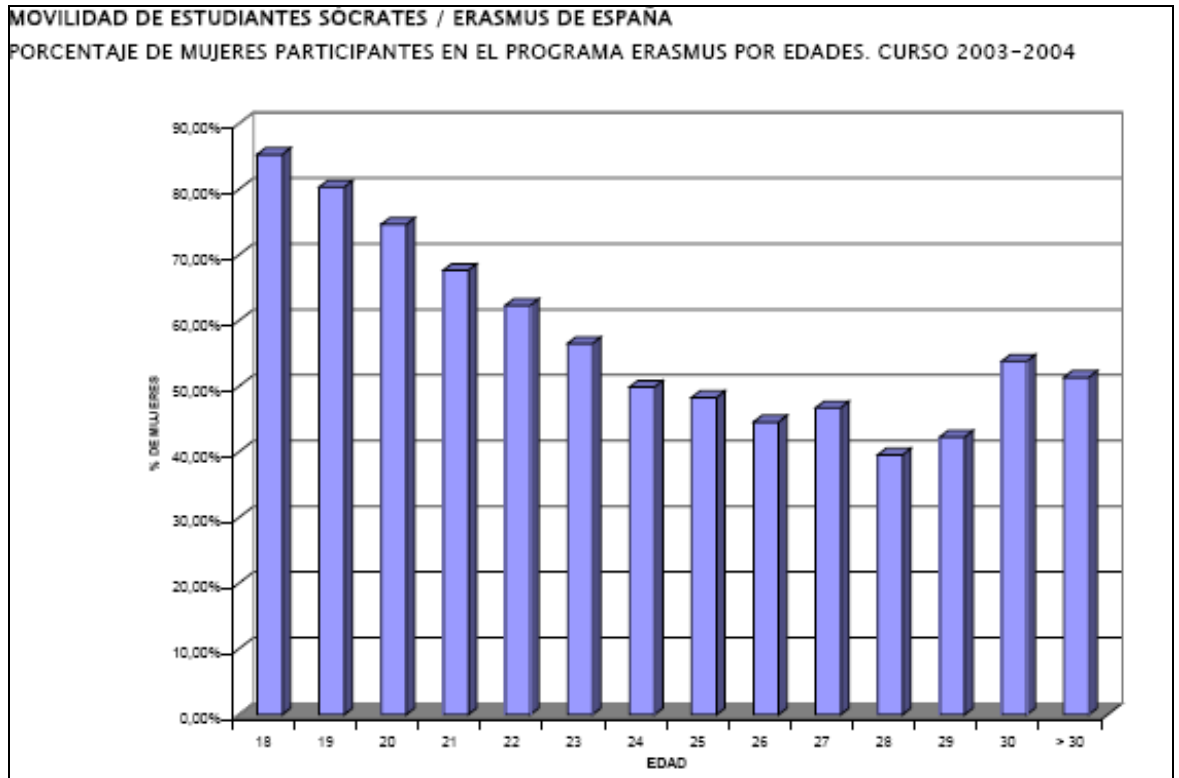
Graphic taken from http://www.mec.es/consejou/erasmus/imagenes/estadisticas/estudiantes_05.pdf

Figure 4.5 – Place of residence in Spain (Appendix C, Q3)
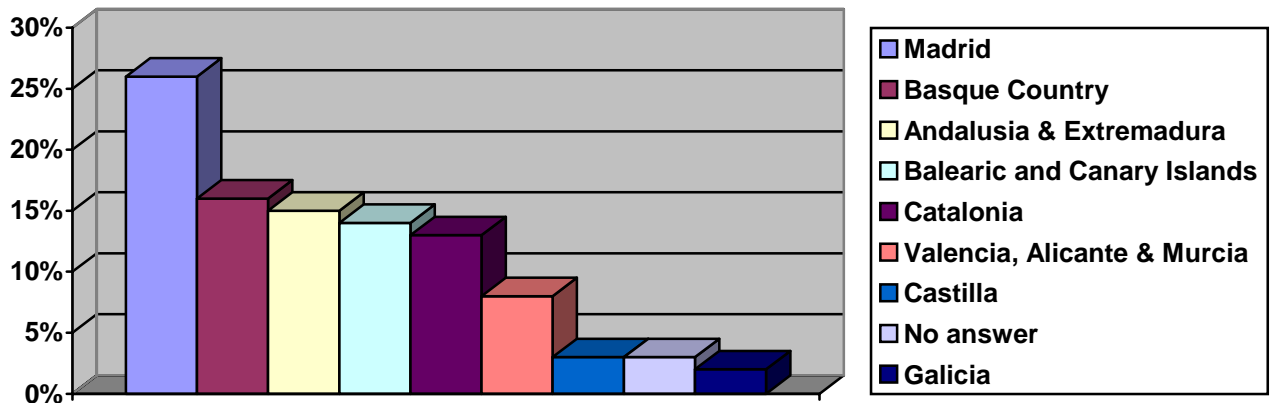
Not surprisingly, answers given to question 4 (Appendix C) show that the majority of the students in this sample (26%) came from the capital, Madrid, where the largest student population resides. The Basque country also had a significant representation (16%). This is not surprising either, since exchange

programmes exist between one of the two universities taking part in the investigation and a university in the Basque Country. Andalusia and Catalonia represented 15% and 13% respectively of the respondents with 14% coming from the Canary and Balearic islands. Fewer students came from the southeast coast (8%), only 3% from the central provinces of Castilla (3%) and 2% from the northwest areas (see figure 4.6 below for a comparison with Erasmus statistics). In the interviews carried out prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, the areas of Spain were represented in a similar proportion. Of the twelve interviewees, the majority came from Madrid but there were also three students from Andalusia, two from the Basque Country, one from Castilla, and one from Catalonia. Despite the nationalistic views which often portray Spain as a heterogeneous country with emphasis on the differences existing within the various regions and their particular cultures, in this investigation no significant differences were found in the reports made by students from different geographical origin.

Figure 4.6 Evolution of the number of Erasmus students per region

MOVILIDAD DE ESTUDIANTES SÓCRATES / ERASMUS DE ESPAÑA

EVOLUCIÓN DEL NÚMERO DE ESTUDIANTES POR COMUNIDAD AUTÓNOMA

	CURSO ACADÉMICO									
	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04
COMUNIDAD AUTÓNOMA										
ANDALUCIA	1.273	1.377	1.457	1.523	1.914	2.190	2.234	2.424	2.604	2.825
ARAGON	433	607	597	609	701	786	777	812	802	859
ASTURIAS	257	275	265	284	327	390	386	337	355	282
BALEARES	39	57	53	72	70	109	112	89	86	98
CANARIAS	202	284	246	312	348	454	438	467	484	505
CANTABRIA	79	97	108	113	117	160	182	192	181	187
CASTILLA Y LEON	862	974	984	1.031	1.133	1.257	1.337	1.368	1.560	1.651
CASTILLA-LA MANCHA	39	58	73	99	103	131	152	240	262	327
CATALUÑA	1.597	2.093	2.071	2.427	2.784	2.866	3.055	2.858	3.099	3.273
EXTREMADURA	69	102	110	111	110	109	159	200	268	298
GALICIA	248	351	367	366	427	533	670	707	764	969
LA RIOJA	2	15	18	26	43	49	65	61	46	64
MADRID	1.487	1.863	2.049	2.462	2.660	3.040	3.150	3.237	3.362	3.891
MURCIA	133	145	141	200	264	326	388	430	413	450
NAVARRA	237	254	223	249	282	340	338	367	406	405
PAIS VASCO	771	951	955	934	1.059	1.177	1.163	1.116	1.125	1.110
VALENCIA	809	1.040	1.124	1.650	2.039	2.380	2.552	2.498	2.441	2.840
TOTAL ESPAÑA	8.537	10.543	10.841	12.468	14.381	16.297	17.158	17.403	18.258	20.034

Figure 4.7 – Students' status (Appendix C, Q4)
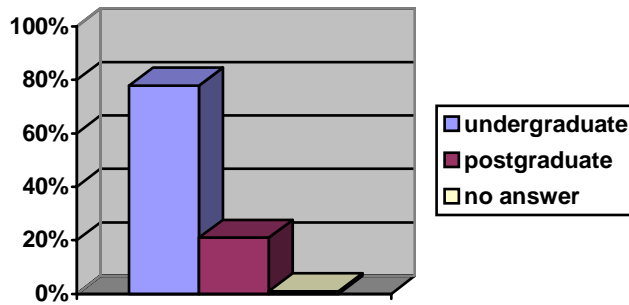
In line with national figures, the number of Spanish undergraduates in the sample is much higher than number of postgraduates (Appendix C, Q4). A total of 78% of the Spanish student population is undergraduate and only 21% postgraduate. These percentages are proportionally equivalent to the whole population of European students in higher education in the UK (see figure 4.8 below).

Figure 4.8 – Number of international student in the UK by mode and level of study
Graphic borrowed from http://www.ukcosa.org.uk/pages/hestats.htm

European Union students (non-UK domicile) in HE, 2003/04	Mode of Study		
Level of Study	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Postgraduate research	6,980	5,370	12,350
Postgraduate taught	15,465	8,465	23,930
Postgraduate other	2,330	2,780	5,110
First degree	36,995	2,415	39,410
Other undergraduate	3,245	5,505	8,750
Grand total	65,015	24,535	89,550

Respondents were following a variety of courses in UK universities. Spanish students are accustomed to Spanish universities where until very recently the variety of courses offered was limited, restricted only to traditional degrees. Even now, when a few more degrees have been introduced, they find the choice is smaller than in England. Thus, students often seek specific study programmes that are not offered in Spain. As one of the students interviewed put it:

> *I came to study in England because in Spain you have to study one of the same boring traditional degrees such as Law, Business or Economics. Here I could choose what I really wanted to do for my career* (Carlos).

Because the possible course combinations are very wide, it was decided that, for the purpose of this survey, it was not practical or statistically reliable to consider what type of course and subject combinations each student was enrolled in. It was, however, possible to more broadly categorise students under degrees of Sciences, Arts and 'other'. According to answers to Q5 of the questionnaires, it was found that 50% of Spanish students in this sample, were doing a degree which could be included in the Arts area; 47% were taking a degree in the Sciences area; 2% of the respondents were studying tourism, classified under 'other'; only 1% did not give any answer to this question.

Figure 4.9 – Area of study (Appendix C, Q5)
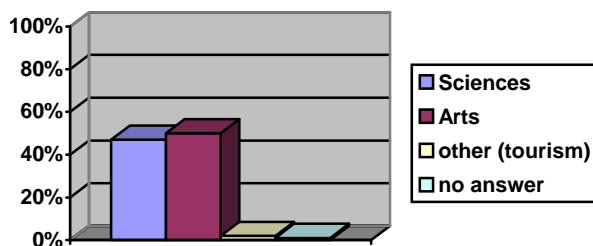
The majority of Spanish students who responded to the questionnaire had been studying in the UK for less than one year (54%). According to answers to Q6 of the questionnaire, a total of 34% of respondents had been studying in the UK for between one and three years. Only 13% of the respondents had been studying in England for more than three years.

Figure 4.10 – Years of study in the UK (Appendix C, Q9)
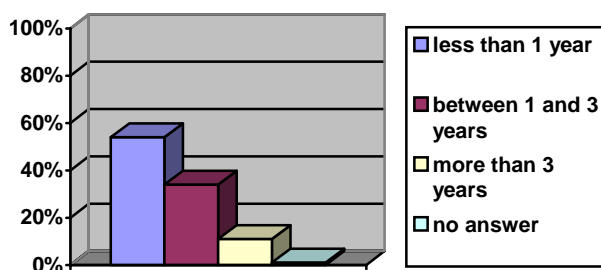
The profile of the survey sample in this investigation is shown to be representative, however, as mentioned in the previous chapter (section 3.5.3) because of small numbers in each category, the age, sex, geographical origin, stage of study, duration of residence in the UK, and subject of study, were not treated as independent variables.

4.2 <u>THE PRE-DEPARTURE STAGE</u>

Information was gathered on students' main motivations and objectives when deciding to study in the UK. Their expectations about the prospective host university and host country, preparation prior to arrival, familiarity with the country and its educational system, and pre-arrival information gathered from different sources were investigated. Results obtained via questionnaires will be presented in percentages and figure will be shown as illustrations. Results obtained via interviews and focus groups will be illustrated by quotations.

4.2.1 Motivations

Spanish students were asked to reflect on their main reasons for deciding to study in the UK. The majority reported that they wanted to experience something new, that they wanted to live in a new cultural and social environment, to meet people with different values and a desire to get a break from usual surroundings, and to escape from the known, from the routine. Comments taken from individual interviews and focus groups include:

> I wanted to experience something new because I needed a change in my life. I think that's why most Spanish students come here: to escape from the routine and experience something new (Iñaki).

> England was my way out, my escape, because I was fed up with Spain (Javier).

> The main reasons why I came here to study were: first, to learn a new language; second, to experience a new life, maybe because of my age – I was 22 then; thirdly to escape from the situation in Spain: I didn't like my job there, I didn't like what I was doing at all (Juanjo).

Figure 4.11 – Initial motivations for studying in the UK (Appendix C, Q9)
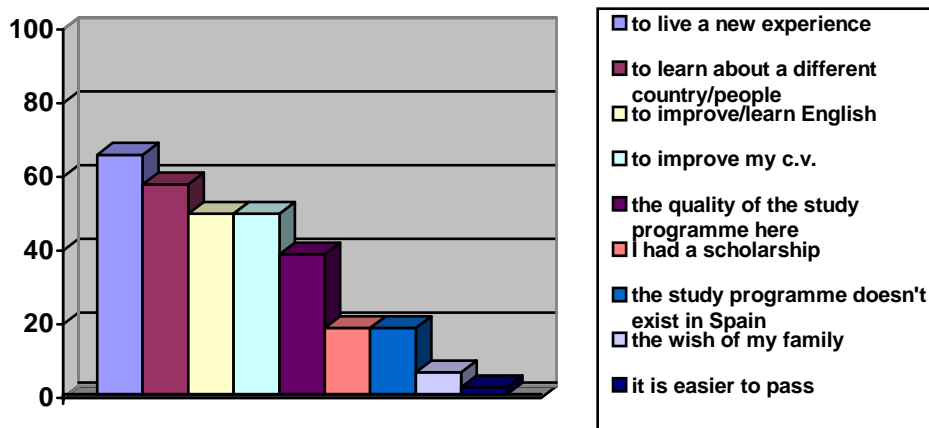
Results in absolute numbers

The reasons given coincide with those identified in the literature (see chapter 2, section 2.3.1), and contain a mixture of 'push' and 'pull' factors as defined by Wiers-Jenssen (2003: 395-396). According to answers to Q9 of the questionnaire (Appendix C), the two highest ranking motivations consist of typical 'pull' motives, such as 'living a new experience' a positive interest in 'getting to know new people and a new culture', which are factors connected to extra-curricular issues but, as claimed by Wiers-Jenssen (2003), very much linked to a successful and fulfilling experience of study abroad. The third reason mentioned is 'improving/learning a foreign language' which is a mixture of 'pull' motives and 'push' motives, aspects associated with a recognition of the practical benefits of studying abroad, since a higher level of English proficiency would improve job prospects in Spain. Other 'push' motives mentioned by Spanish students as reasons for studying in the UK are 'improving the c.v.', 'the programme of studies does not exist in Spain' or 'it is easier to pass' (see chapter 2 section 2.4.2.1 for failure rates in Spanish universities).

Results from individual interviews broadly confirm the findings from the questionnaire. As many as 70% of the Spanish students interviewed mentioned as their main reason to study in the UK to learn or improve their English language skills. This is in accord with findings from the literature for other European students (see chapter 2 section 2.3.1). This point is further considered later on in the investigation, since although it is a 'pull' motive associated with the general attraction of the experience abroad, it also represents potential difficulties, for

insufficient English proficiency may pose several challenges in coping with academic demands and integrating socially with other students and members of the host community (see chapter 2, section 2.4.3).

Dissatisfaction with the education system in Spain was also one of the frequently mentioned 'push' factors influencing students' decision to study abroad.

> *I hated the university where I was studying in Spain, and they are all the same: there are far too many students, very few resources, the content of the courses is old-fashion, and it should be updated. Innovation and investment is what Spanish universities need* (Iñaki).

Lack of learning resources in Spanish universities was a particularly dominant theme[1], especially for those studying IT related areas.

> *We are studying computing sciences and you are supposed to have access to the latest in technology. There in* [the university in Spain] *we didn't even have access to the Internet. And we had probably one computer to share between some 50 students; that means that doing the practice was a nightmare* (Rubén).

Students typically had positive evaluations of what UK institutions offered. In Spain, UK universities have a strong reputation and are well known for their innovation and the quantity and quality of their facilities and learning resources.

> *I was studying Computing Sciences in Madrid but I was failing all the subjects. I didn't like it at all, as was shown by my bad results. I could speak English. England is not so far away from Spain. It has a good tradition and reputation in IT; they say there are good resources and materials, so I decided to come and study here* (Javier).

> *Before I came here I didn't know what a library was. In* [the university in Spain] *the library is a wreck* (Rubén).

> *Here, you can go to the library and look at the books. In Spain you haven't got direct access to the books. And there you are only allowed to take two out for a week. Here, you can take a lot of books, I think fourteen, and keep them for three weeks* (Gemma).

> *As soon as we arrived they showed us the facilities offered in this university. They have a wonderful library, computers for everybody, a brilliant sports centre, the lot* (Dolores).

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[1] It was already mentioned in chapter 2 (section 2.4.2.1) of the limited budget per student in Spanish universities.

Half of the Spanish students interviewed for the purpose of this investigation suggested that improvements to the Spanish system needed to be achieved via the revision of courses contents and/or improvements in human and material resources. As noted earlier (see chapter 2, section 2.4.2.1), the Spanish education system has been criticised for its unimaginative teaching methods which place emphasis on learning by rote, and for its poorly motivated teachers and inadequate teacher training. These factors, together with the perception that universities in Spain are out of touch with the professional world, were reflected in the dissatisfaction expressed by the students interviewed.

4.2.2 Pre-arrival Information

**Figure 4.12 – Did you receive information
about English customs before arrival? (Appendix C, Q10)**

Figure 4.13 – Sources of information (Appendix C, Q10)

Results in absolute numbers

**Figure 4.14 – Did you receive any information about
the educational system before arrival? (Appendix C, Q11)**

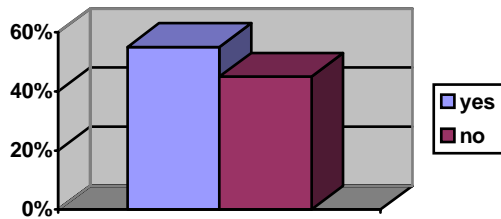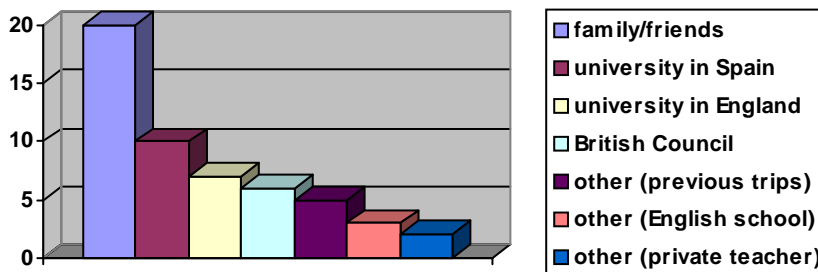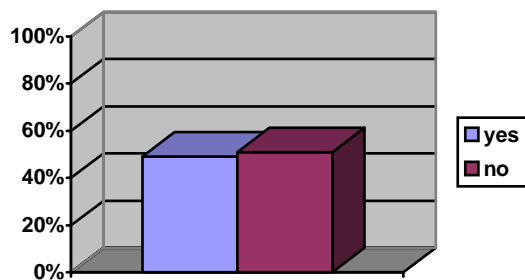**Figure 4.15 – Sources of information (Appendix C, Q11)**
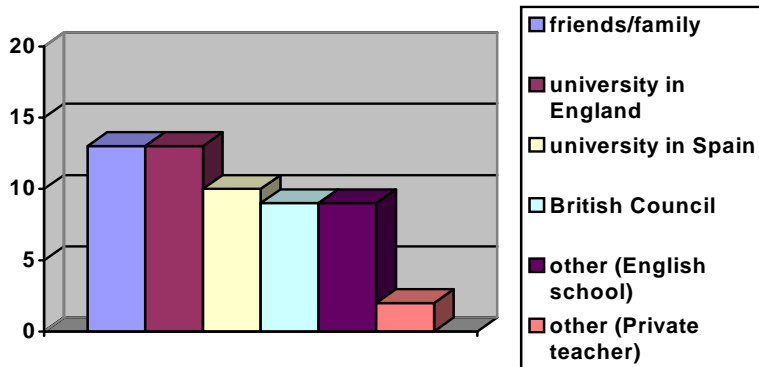
Results in absolute numbers

Figure – 4.16 Did you receive any information about the programme of studies? (Appendix C, Q12)
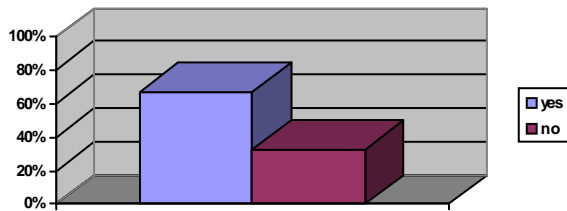
Figure – 4.17 Sources of information (Appendix C, Q12)
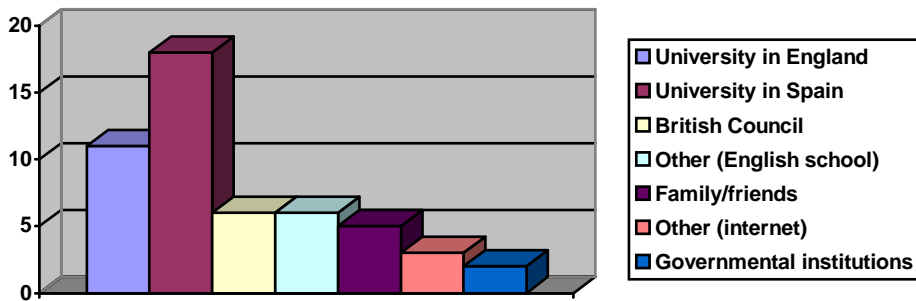
Results in absolute numbers

Figure 4.18 – Did you find the information useful?
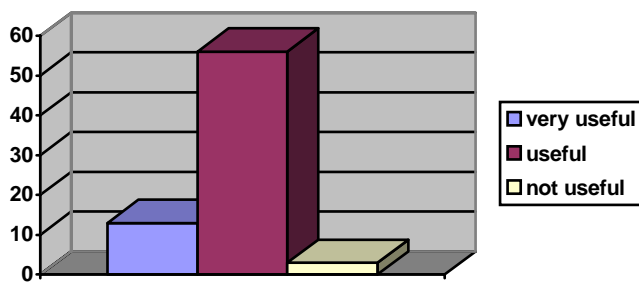
Results in absolute numbers

The analysis of questions 10 to 12 of the questionnaire (presented in figures 4.12 to 4.18) suggests that Spanish students did not have access to comprehensive information about studying and living in the UK before departure. As shown in figure 4.12, a surprising 45% say they had received no information on living in the UK prior to arrival; of the 55% who felt they had some information, the main source appeared to be relatives or friends. Also surprising is the fact that almost half (49%) claimed not to have received any information at all about the UK education system before their arrival (figure 4.14). These results were unexpected since the administration of the institutions concerned claimed to send out induction packages together with basic information on living in Britain to all their prospective students. The British Council also publishes leaflets for overseas students, about studying and living in Britain, though the results from this study suggest that this publication does not reach a great number of Spanish students. Although a higher number of students (67%) did receive information about the programme of studies (see figure 4.16), there is still a surprising 33% who did not have clear information about the subjects they were going to study or the specific content of their course. Of the 72 students who did receive pre-arrival information about aspects of the UK, its educational system or the programme of study, only 13 students considered it to be very useful; 56 students thought that the information was useful and 3 respondents did not find that information useful at all.

These results are in fact in line with findings from other studies of European students in the UK (see chapter 2 section 2.5.3). For example, in her survey on the experiences of Greek students in the UK, Katsara (2000) found that the majority of her subjects had not been fully informed about the British educational system and had to rely primarily on information from friends or relatives. Also the subjects of Lord and Dawson's study (2002) severely criticised the information received on their courses (see chapter 2 section 2.3.2). Despite universities' best efforts to publish accurate, reliable and updated information, it typically appears not to reach international students consistently.

Analysis from individual interviews and focus groups confirmed the findings from the questionnaires. A total of 60% of students interviewed stated that they had not

received complete, clear and concise pre-arrival information. There were differences, however, regarding the importance allocated to pre-arrival information. Some students claimed they would not have considered coming to study in the UK if they had not received their pre-information package, while others, having received the relevant documentation sent by the host institution, or logged onto the university website, indicated that they did not take the trouble to read it, either because the information was too dense or because it was written in English:

> –*I received all the information before arrival and from it I knew what to expect; otherwise I would have never come.*
> –*Nor would I.*
> –*Yes, but they give you too much information, it's all in English: a students' handbook with a report of the university policies and stuff regarding administrative matters. They also give you documentation about the programme of studies, the syllabus, and the modules... They give you more information than you can read and understand.*
> –*I logged onto the XXXXXX University website but I didn't look for any specific information; I only had a quick look at the pictures of the campus and the city.* (FG3)

Although all the documentation sent by the host institution should reach students prior to departure from Spain, two focus group participants complained that they only had access to that information once in England, giving rise to bemusement and frustration:

> –*On the last day of registration our co-ordinator came to us and told us: '...by the way, these papers are for you'. Those papers were all the documentation about how to get to XXXXXX, what buses to take from London, etc, and I thought 'if we are already here, why do we need all this stuff now?' There were also pieces of information about accommodation in the Halls of Residence but the deadline to apply for them was, of course, over "What a disaster!" I thought.*
> –*Yes, on my first day at the university they gave me a 'welcome pack'. Lots of pieces of information were included: maps, plans, transport, cost of living, etc. They should provide you with that information before arrival, not once you are here.* (FG2)

All those who did not receive any information at all prior to the beginning of the course reported a sense of confusion and a general feeling of being lost.

> –*I didn't get any information at all. I was completely lost.*
> –*I was lost. I didn't even know the date on which the course was supposed to start.* (FG1)

Despite being in an organised scheme (which, as mentioned in chapter 2 section 2.5.2 in theory provides students with support mechanisms from a very early stage), students on exchange programmes were the ones who reported the most serious problems about lack of prior information. It appeared that this happened because of confusion over the respective roles and responsibilities between the sending and host university.

> *When I joined the Erasmus programme in Spain, they told me that I'd receive all the information I needed from the university in England, but I didn't get anything. It was a complete adventure from the very beginning* (Rubén).

> *I thought that since there are students coming every year from* [university in Spain] *with the same exchange programme, the English university would have something ready for us, but they didn't, we had to manage on our own. What an experience!* (Iñaki).

In summary, it can be concluded that only a small proportion of the students taking part in the investigation felt well prepared to start their studies in a UK university. The majority experienced some confusion and felt that they lacked important information that would have helped them in the early stages of their experience of studying in the UK. As mentioned in chapter 2 section 2.3.2 access to accurate information prior to departure is important for international students in that it facilitates planning, helps develop realistic expectations, but also conveys a welcoming message, all of which clearly contribute to a successful study abroad period.

4.2.3 Perceptions of English language competence prior to arrival

The questionnaire asked respondents to retrospect on their English language competence before departure (closed question 14, Appendix C). Results showed that the majority felt confident in relation to their English skills, 60% classifying their competence as either 'very good' or 'good' 25% 'average', and only 14% 'poor' or 'very poor' (see figure 4.19 below). However, reservations about results to this question need to be made. Since the questionnaires were administered after arrival, and students were asked to retrospect back over a period of time, their responses may have been coloured by later experiences. Moreover, when the questionnaire was administered not all students had been in the UK for the same amount of time, which makes results even more contentious.

Figure 4.19 – How did you consider your level of English before you came to the UK? (Appendix C, Q14)
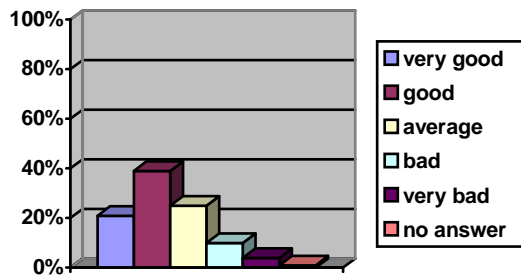
The positive results extracted from answers to Q14 will be called into question later, when in questions 23 and 26 and in focus groups and individual interviews, students report limited language skills as representing a significant obstacle to social integration and efficient academic work.

Nevertheless, it needs to be said that, in a way, the unrealistic estimations obtained from answers to Q14 are not overly surprising since most Spanish university students have typically studied English for more than ten years and have completed various examinations in the subject successfully. It seems that before they actually enter into contact with the English-speaking academic and social communities, they are unaware of any shortcomings as this quotation from one of the interviews suggests:

> *Before I arrived here, I thought my level of English was better than it really is. The first English person that addressed to me in English here, I thought he was speaking some other language. I wondered whether that was really the language I had been learning for so many years* (Angel).

Perhaps students' confident self-assessment of English language abilities prior to arrival helps to explain why only two out of the twelve interviewed reported undertaking any intensive study of English during the period immediately preceding their departure for the UK.

4.2.4 Pre-arrival support

In Q15 of the questionnaire (Appendix C), Spanish students were asked to evaluate the overall pre-arrival support strategies which could facilitate their adaptation to a new environment (Appendix C, Q15). The figure below shows the results of this evaluation.

Figure 4.20– An information website
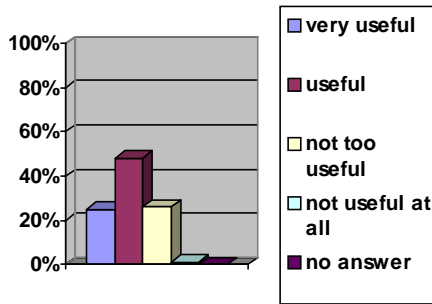
Figure 4.21 – Access to an intensive course on academic English
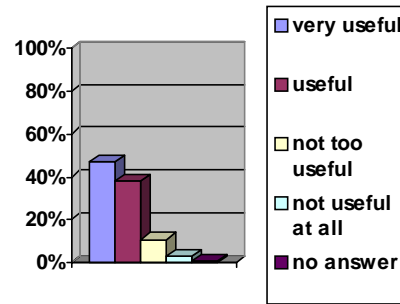
Figure 4.22 – Access to an intensive course on English conversation
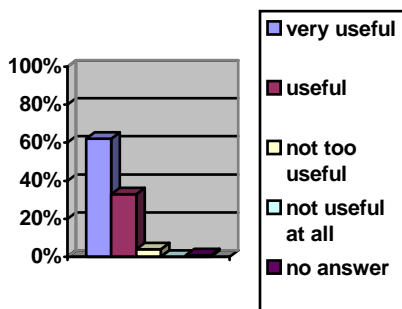
Figure 4.23 –Printed information about English customs and the educational system
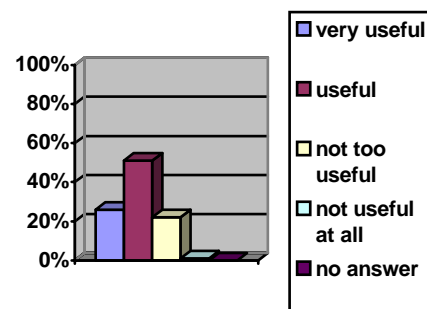
Figure 4.24 – A diary of the experiences of Spanish students who have studied here before
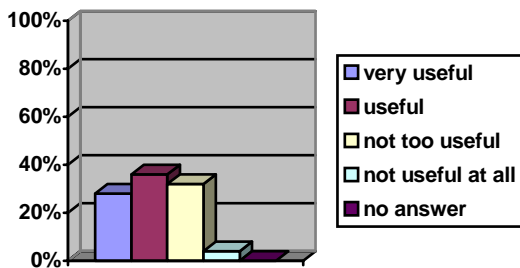
Answers to this question show that despite their initial apparent confidence about English language competence before arrival to the UK, almost all respondents felt that preparatory intensive English language courses would be useful: 95% felt that a focus on conversational English would be 'useful' or 'very useful' while 85% felt that a course on academic English would be 'useful' or 'very useful'.

4.3 CHALLENGES AFTER ARRIVAL

This section presents the results obtained from questionnaires and interviews about issues that originate after arrival. The topics discussed here include

language barriers, views towards a new academic culture, and challenges which may prevent complete integration.

4.3.1 Orientation programmes

The universities taking part in the investigation, like most HE institutions in the UK, organise induction and orientation programmes during the first weeks of the academic year. These events can be particularly valuable for international students (see chapter 2 section 2.4.1). They may include tours around the campus, guided visits of the library and computer pools, lectures about the practicalities of living and studying in the UK, and other university-related activities. During the interviews students were asked to evaluate the induction and orientation programmes specifically for international students organised by the host university in which they were enrolled. Although most of those interviewed did not attend any of the activities offered, all of them thought they were a very worthwhile idea to help students familiarise themselves with the different aspects of studying in England. There are many reasons why the majority may have not attended the orientation events. The most frequent reason reported was the priority of finding suitable accommodation. The four students who did participate in induction programmes evaluated them positively, recognising their value in getting to know the university and meeting other students:

> *As soon as we arrived they took us all to the library, and they showed us how to use it. They also took us to the Computer Centre and showed us how to use the e-mail service. I thought it was great. We don't have anything like these tours in Spain; there you have to find your own way around. Here I thought it was great* (Inma).

> *The first week was an induction to the university system. I got to know how everything works and I met many other international students. It was brilliant* (Javier).

It appears that these orientation programmes are an early positive encounter which helps diminish feelings of loneliness and initial culture shock.

4.3.2 Two different academic systems

From this investigation it can be said that there was a feeling among this sample of Spanish students of general satisfaction with the academic system of HE in the UK. During the individual interviews, they commented on the good organisation

of the university and an open-minded attitude, both of which they found lacking in the Spanish tertiary educational system. They also commented on the active involvement of students in UK universities. This supports the assertions given in chapter 2 (section 2.4.2) that define the British academic system as one which encourages active participation and close personal relations between students and tutors:

> –*The academic system is much better here than in Spain.*
> –*Exactly, unlike the Spanish, the British academic system is very organised* (FG3).

> *It is not like in Spain were people are writing a thesis as if it was top secret. There, they don't want to talk about it in case somebody is going to steal their ideas. However, here, they have an open-minded attitude. They know that knowledge is spread around thanks to discussion of what people are studying and researching. This is how one acquires knowledge. Knowledge is to be shared* (Isabel).

> *In Spain you students are numbers, here it is more personal. Also they give you credit and confidence to work on your own account being an active member of the academic community* (Angel).

This preference seems to be in accordance with Wierstra et al's (2003) claim that students generally prefer learning environments characterised by personalisation and involvement to those which are based on learning facts. Although this satisfaction with the UK academic system may help students to adapt easily to studying in UK universities, respondents still felt they faced challenges in coping with a very different *modus operandi* to the one they were used to, in which they could be successful simply through good retention skills and in which emphasis on developing independent thinking was never the focus.

> *The method of study is quite different here because you don't have to rely on your memory so much; you have to learn and research on your own, independently* (Alicia).

> *The Spanish academic system is completely the opposite of the English one. We have gone from one extreme to another* (Carlos).

> *The educational system is completely different. Here, it's not based on note taking, but on active work: presentations, essays and library work* (Dolores).

In order to better understand the differences in approaches to teaching and learning between the Spanish and English higher education systems, the

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questionnaire asked respondents to assess whether certain academic approaches received more emphasis in Spain or in the UK. The results are shown in figures 4.25 to 4.32 below which refer to question 16 of the questionnaire (Appendix C).

Figure 4.25 - Checking students' progress
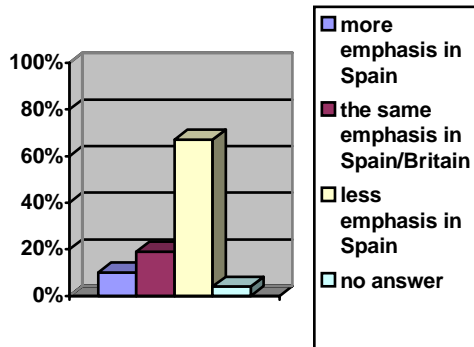
Figure 4.26 - Lecturer as the main source of knowledge
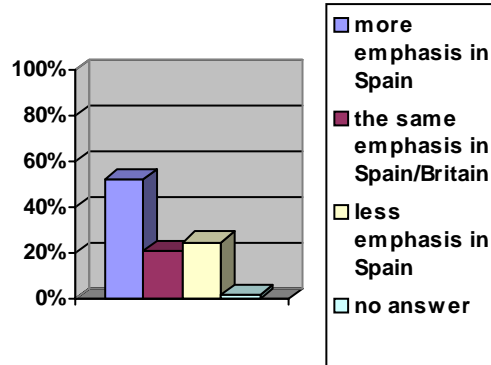
Figure 4.27- Oral presentations
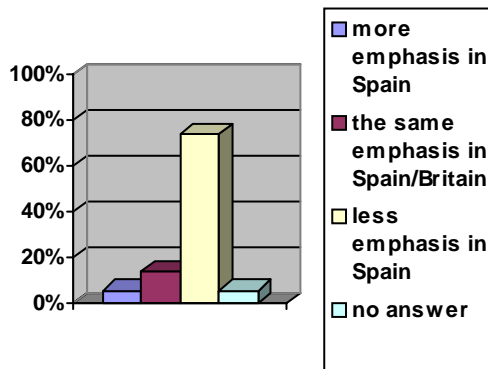
Figure 4.28- Participation in seminar discussions
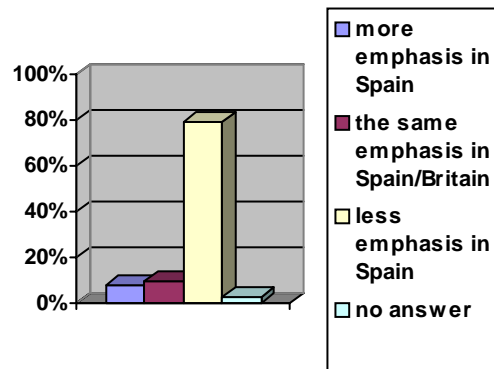
Figure 4.29 Taking and memorising study notes
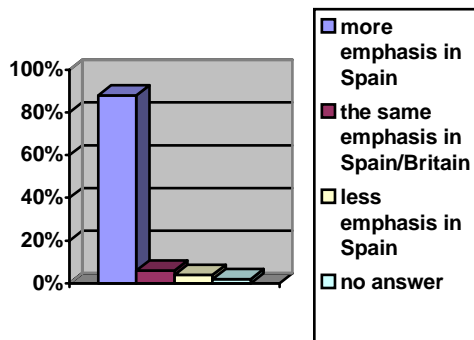
Figure 4.30- Writing essays
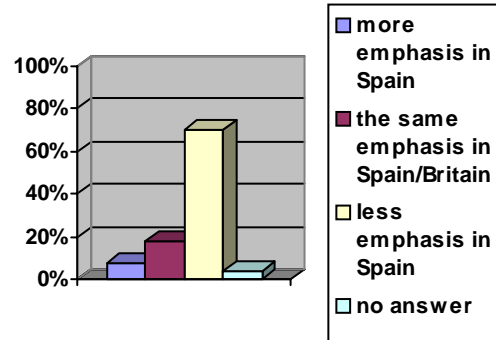
Figure 4.31 - Practical work
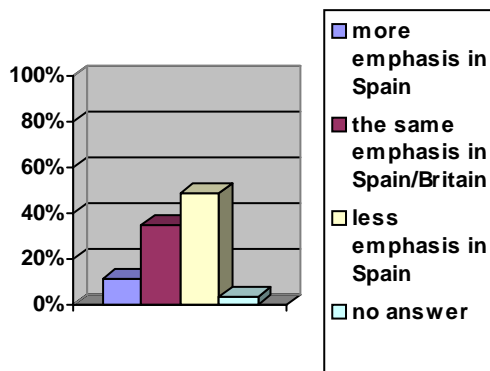
Figure 4.32 - Freedom to organise your own study
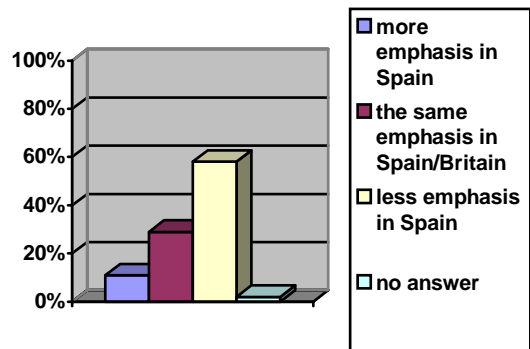
The results show that the majority of Spanish respondents distinguished the UK and Spanish higher education systems quite clearly, seeing each system placing emphasis on different approaches. For example, UK institutions of higher education monitor student progress more (67% of the responses) and put more emphasis on oral presentation skills, on seminar discussion skills (74% of responses in both cases) and on writing essays (70%). Spanish institutions place a lot more emphasis on taking and memorising lecture notes (88% of responses).

The response was less clear cut concerning the freedom to organise one's own study, with only 58% of respondents believing that this was more emphasised in the UK and only 52% of respondents thinking that the role of the lecturer as the main source of knowledge was more emphasised in Spain than in the UK. Finally, practical work was not seen as a clearly distinguishing feature: 49% of respondents judged that it received more emphasis in the UK than in Spain but 35% felt the emphasis was the same in both environments. Thus, according to the results, university education in the UK is characterised by an active in-depth involvement on the part of the student. In this sense, Spanish students perceptions are consistent with the characterisation of Spain according to Hofstede's culture dimensions classifications (1986, 1991, 1996) (see section 2.4.2), as having an educational system that is based on reproduction-centeredness, while the UK belongs to the group of nations where constructive knowledge is encouraged.

The focus group discussions confirmed the contrasting view of the two higher education systems.

–In Spain lecturers come to the class and talk, talk, talk; and there we are taking notes like crazy. In one hour you end up with some six pages of notes you've taken. The notes you take every day you have to learn them in order to pass the exam. In contrast, in England you can understand and assimilate everything because you have to do assignments and practical work. The system does not consist of memorising notes for the exam.
–Here you have to study daily; in Spain it is possible to start revising two weeks before the exam and still achieve good results.
–In Spain, the only important thing is the exam; here, in England, coursework is very important.
–We don't have exams here, we have to write assignments, so we don't have to memorise notes and we can choose the topic we want to study. Here it's not so boring. It's less dull than in Spain.
–In Spain you go to the class and sit down, the lecturer talks, you take notes and that's it. Here it's nothing like it. (FG4)

Students were typically surprised by the few hours of lectures that they had to attend in the UK, compared with what they were used to in Spain (see also chapter 2, section 2.4.2.1), but recognised that this was because other study methods received more emphasis:

We have very few hours of lectures a week but that's just as well because we have lots of assignments to write and that takes lots of hours (Juanjo).

Other differences between Spanish and English universities were mentioned. These related less to teaching or learning strategies, but rather to constraints arising from the different social distribution and economic situation of both countries. For example, in Spain the percentage of young people who enter university studies is very high compared with England. The reason may be that in Spain the model of education, until recently[2] imposed an irreversible choice between academic routes (via the BUP - Bachillerato Unificado Polivalente) and vocational routes (via the FP - Formación Profesional) at the age of 14. Once a student had chosen the FP programme, it was impossible for him or her to go on to university, so many youngsters chose the BUP even if, at the time, they might

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[2] The inclusion of the Spanish higher education system in the European Higher Education Area entails the implementation of specific proposals set out in the Organic Act on Universities. At present, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), undergraduate and postgraduate university studies and the Diploma Supplement (DS) have been brought within the legislative framework. This new regulation is already in force in Spain, though it will not be fully implemented until 2010. Not only that, but apart from the reforms to bring university education into line with the European Higher Education Area, the Ministry of Education and Science has drawn up a preliminary normative draft to amend the Organic Act on Universities. One of its major aims is the grant of greater autonomy to universities and to the Autonomous Communities not merely as regards matters affecting the selection of teaching staff, but also in the election of vice-chancellors and the membership of governing and social councils. The reform proposal tries to foster research and accountability. Furthermore, it aims at establishing a new qualification system which leads to a more effective and transparent process of teachers' selection. It also provides several coordination bodies, namely the General Assembly of University Policy (administrative level), the University Board and the Council of University Students in Spain. Information from EURYBASE (http://www.eurydice.org)

have been more suited for vocational training[3]. This seemingly illogical element of the educational system, plus the traditional disdain within Spanish society towards manual labour, caused the BUP to consistently enrol nearly twice as many students as the FP in the 80's. This tendency was further reinforced by a contracting job market during the economic recession of the 1980s. Only since the late 80s has the balance begun to shift toward the FP as marketable vocational skills have increased in importance against the gaining of academic qualifications. This shift is taking place still today at a very slow pace. The consequences of overcrowding in Spanish universities were commented on in both interviews and focus groups discussions.

In particular, students were impressed by the learning facilities offered by UK universities: libraries, computer resources and laboratories were frequently mentioned as being much better than in Spain.

> *In Spain there are no learning resources. There are no computers; the library is useless – there is hardly any material at all. It is very difficult to do your own research because there aren't any books. Because the academic system is so different here, they need to offer those facilities* (Dolores).

> *The library is amazing. I had only seen a library like in this university on TV and films, never in real life* (Iñaki).

> *At the moment of arrival I was quite depressed, but when I saw the labs I decided to stay here because I knew I was not going to get to use similar labs in Spain unless I was studying in a private university* (Angel).

> *My degree is based on practical lab work. In Spain we didn't have the chance to do all the practical work needed to become a professional because there were too many of us* (Inma).

Students also highlighted the lack of personal contact available in Spanish universities:

> *–In Spain classes are larger and there is less individual contact with lecturers than is normal in the UK.*
> *–In Spain there are too many students. Here, you have a more direct contact with lecturers in seminars; you can discuss doubts with them* (FG3).

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[3] The new reforms of Secondary Education in Spain have increased the age of compulsory education to 16. Nowadays, it is only at this age, when students, with support of experts will decide whether to take the route of Bachillerato (General Upper Secondary Education) or Formación profesional de grado medio (Intermediate Specific Vocational Training).

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> *There are only 10 of us during the seminars. The lecturer can follow the students' progress. In Spain lecturers don't know who you are, you're a number, not a person* (Beatriz).

They reported favourably on the frequent contact with academic staff, informality of treatment, and a more personalised type of education in the UK:

> *Here the contact with lecturers is more personal. In Spain you're a number; they don't know who you are* (Gemma).

> *Here lecturers are more informal and friendly* (Alicia).

> *My personal tutor is like my father; when I've got a problem I go to him, he gives me advice and tells me not to worry. If they see you have interest, they are very helpful* (Carlos).

> *I can see my supervisor whenever I want. He is always very open to help me out, even with my personal problems; that would be unthinkable in Spain* (Javier).

The questionnaire data reflect a similarly positive evaluation of the role, typical of British higher education, of the personal tutor. Personal tutors are members of the academic staff and their function is to offer confidential personal and academic advice to their tutees. Tutors are also a source of information on various aspects of university affairs, such as academic progress and university regulations. This system of personal tutors is unknown in Spanish universities. The responses to questionnaire question 17 are shown in figure 4.33 and 4.34 These show that the majority of respondents (85%) considered having a personal tutor a good idea. A total of 53% of the students classified their own relationship with their tutor as 'good', but there was a relatively high percentage, 22%, who claimed not to have any kind of relationship with their tutor.

Figure 4.33 – What do you think of the idea of having a personal tutor?
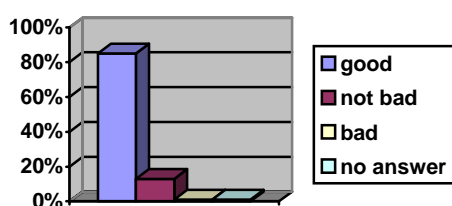
Figure 4.34 – How is your relationship with your personal tutor?

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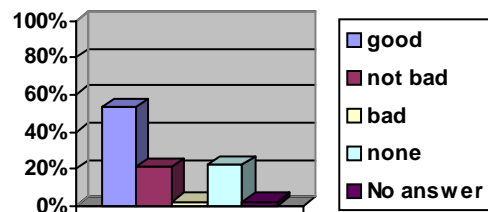
To summarise this section, it is clear that the Spanish students surveyed were aware of fundamental differences between the UK system and their own, but evaluated the UK higher education system positively. These results may imply that Spanish students should generally cope well with adaptation to the academic demands of UK academic life. As suggested by Wierstra et al's (1999) study (see chapter 2 section 2.4.2), the desires which students have about the learning environment are not related to the specific long-term experiences which they have with a particular type of learning environment. Students from different countries with strongly contrasting learning environments agree in their opinions about the desired learning environment, which according to them should not be reproduction-centred, should involve much personalisation (small distance between teacher and student) and much student involvement. Thus, while the change from one academic culture with small power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance to one with large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance can be particularly difficult (Wierstra et al. 1999.), the opposite seems to be welcomed by most students. Thus, although the interviews and focus groups suggest that Spanish students are not accustomed to active and independent approaches to studying, they show general satisfaction with these features of the UK academic system as well as with the quality and availability of resources, and the personalised education, particularly the relationship between tutors and students.

4.3.3 The challenge of language

The views found in the literature regarding the deficiencies in the history of English instruction in the Spanish educational systems (see also chapter 2, section 2.4.3.4) are supported by the subjects in this investigation who also negatively evaluated English language instruction in Spain, especially taking into account that students in the current investigation have not experienced all the reforms in English education in the UK since these changes have been carried out fairly recent and there is always in any new reform in education a period of transition. The following are typical comments from the focus group discussions:

> –In Spain, you listen to a bit of English, you read a lot and write some, but you never never speak.
> –I don't know what they teach you in Spanish schools but it's definitely not English

–It's funny, in Spain they teach you "How do you do!" and all that business, and to be honest, I haven't heard anybody talking like that, they come to you and say "all right mate?" we haven't learned that, how are we suppose to know? – and that's only one example; the way English people talk it's not the way they've taught us in Spain. (FG4)

As this extract shows, the students felt their knowledge of English was limited particularly at a conversational level because the instructional approach in Spanish secondary education did not encourage oral interaction. Those interviewed found oral discussions in English a challenging task, especially when the exchanges occur at an academic level. Ten students out of the 12 interviewed showed concern for their inability to express themselves adequately in the spoken language. The two interviewees who felt fairly confident about their conversational ability in English had already had extensive contact with an Anglophone environment, either through living in an English-speaking country, or studying at a British school in Spain. But even in this latter case, the student was part of the majority of interviewees who identified understanding 'slang' or informal, colloquial language as a particular problem.

I learnt English in Spain because I went to a British school. However, I wasn't familiar with slang because I wasn't in contact with young English people in Spain (Beatriz).

Once in the UK, results from focus groups interviews show that the Spanish students spent little time actually speaking English in any typical day. Although they mentioned being initially enthusiastic to develop friendships with host students, they often subsequently reported limited success with these attempts. More frequently, Spanish students ended up making bonds with other compatriots with whom they shared cultural values and language:

–You can live here knowing no English at all because you meet a lot of Spanish people and you speak Spanish all the time. You only need English to go shopping. You can survive here knowing very little English.
–90% of my day I speak Spanish although I know I shouldn't do it, but all the people I hang around with here are Spanish speakers (FG1).

These kinds of bonds are typical of what Bochner et al. (1985: 690) refer to as a monocultural network, which may nevertheless be important for coping with loneliness, homesickness, study problems and adjustments to the new environment (see chapter 2 section 2.4.1.3). Kim (1988) also stresses the

importance of one's own cultural group during the adaptation process as a means of providing emotional and social support (chapter 2, section 2.4.1.3). However, there are clearly significant disadvantages if students rely solely on a monocultural network. They are less likely to receive feedback on their communication from host nationals and they do not assimilate the culture that, although initially may produce some stress, ultimately should lead to better adaptation.

Spanish students commented that a particular difficulty for them was understanding English in conversational situations and making themselves understood by host nationals. The fast pace of conversations, rapid delivery of native English speakers, slang and varied accents, together with the lack of practice, were general concerns that meant that they felt more confident when having conversations with non-native English speakers. This was one of the reasons mentioned in questionnaires and interviews for their struggle to make acquaintances with host students (see figure 4.45 responses to Q26 in section 4.3.4). Feeling inhibited to make English friends because of the language barrier had a catch 22 effect, as clearly the less time Spanish students pass with English ones, the fewer the opportunities to improve their communication skills in English.

> *I don't think I can have proper conversations with English native speakers; I get lost too often. I have to keep asking them to speak slower* (Isabel).

> *I have to translate everything into Spanish. When someone talks to me I have to translate, and it's the reverse process when I speak. It's very tiring for my brain* (Juanjo).

> *The main problem for Spanish people is our accent because although we can understand a bit, we are not understood when we speak* (Angel).

> *When I arrived here I couldn't hold a conversation with an English native speaker. I used to say 'yes' all the time. Now my English has improved so much. Now I'm able to say 'yes, of course'* (Inma).

Despite these comments extracted from the interviews, one can see in figure 4.35 below that when asked in a closed question of the questionnaire (Appendix C, Q21) to assess their ability to participate in conversations with English speakers, 90% of respondents felt *able* or *very able*, and only 10% felt *not very able* or

unable to do so. These contrasting findings may again suggest that in general, Spanish students have a tendency to overestimate their competence in English. Alternatively, the questionnaire results may be an artefact of the questionnaire itself in that respondents were only given the alternatives of *'not very able'* and *'unable'*, both of which were probably avoided because they imply a significant lack of skill (see limitations chapter 7, section 7.4).

**Figure 4.35 – Assess your ability to participate in conversations
 with native English speakers (Appendix C, Q21)**
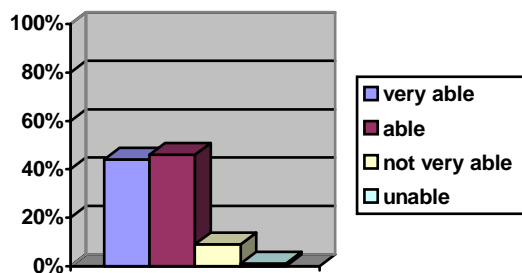
The students were rather less confident when they assessed their ability to deal with oral interactions in an academic register. When asked to assess their ability to understand and participate in seminar discussions in Q21 of the questionnaire, 23% of Spanish students felt *not very able* to perform adequately (see below figure 4.36), as opposed to the 10% who did *not* feel *very able* to perform adequately in informal conversations (see above figure 4.35). This result is consistent with Ostler's (1980) findings that students generally rate themselves as better able to participate in informal conversations in non-academic than in academic settings. They are also in accord with Cummins suggestions that BICS or communicative social language develops with less difficulties than CALP or academic language skills (see chapter 2 section 2.4.3.2).

**Figure 4.36 – Asses your ability and participate
in seminar discussions (Appendix C, Q 21)**
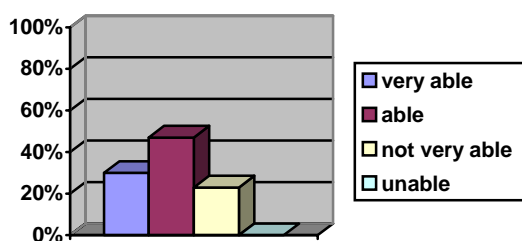
Specific reasons why students may find participating in seminars and group discussions an area of major difficulty were noted by Jordan (1997: 46):

i.   comprehension of spoken English;

ii.   the pressing need to formulate a contribution quickly;

iii.   shyness about the value of a contribution;

iv.   inability to formulate an idea in English and;

v.   frustration about being unable to join in the discussion.

Comments from the focus groups discussions confirm Jordan's view:

> *–At the beginning I felt very frustrated during seminars because I couldn't discuss what I really wanted to say, particularly in one of the subjects, Economics; it is a very specialised subject and I had to use specific Economic terms that I knew in Spanish but not in English.*
> *–When I'm aware that the group is discussing an interesting topic I want to give my opinion but I find lots of limitations with the language. I cannot express my opinion so I get frustrated* (FG2).

Spanish students who reported that they needed to improve their speaking skills indicated that they did not always feel competent enough in their speech to be easily understood by host academic staff and students. Several spoke of their frustration that they were incapable of expressing more complex ideas fluently in English. One student expressed it thus:

> *I want to make a contribution in a seminar. I know perfectly in Spanish what I want to say and how I want it to be understood, but the problem is I don't know how to express it properly in English. The problem with us [Spanish students] is that we tend to think in Spanish and when we want to communicate something in English, we can't put our thoughts into words* (Carlos).

As previously mentioned, the system of discussion and argument in seminars and tutorials as well as presentations is almost unknown in the Spanish educational system (see section 4.3.2 above and chapter 2 section 2.4.2). However, the UK educational system promotes self-expression and participation by the individual student.

> *In Spain we didn't open our mouths during the lessons; here there is more active participation* (Dolores).

> *In Spain if the lecturer asks a question, no one answers. Here everybody is looking forward to saying something, whatever it is. All this is very intimidating for me* (Gemma).

Since seminars and presentations are not teaching approaches used in Spain they can, at the beginning, be a distressing experience for Spanish students, especially taking into account that everything happens in a foreign language that they do not yet fully command. Several students recounted their experiences when they had to give a presentation in front of their classmates and tutors for the first time:

> *When I speak in public I always feel nervous but this time it was too much. Imagine me in front of a lot of people, speaking in a foreign language. I was forgetting everything I wanted to say* (Rubén).

> *I was not the first one to present, so I had the chance to see how the rest of my fellow students were doing. At first, I thought I would have to memorise it all, but then I realised that it's better to understand the topic and present it with your own words, not like a parrot* (Angel).

> *It was the only presentation I've done in my life and it was pathetic, very embarrassing and humiliating* (Dolores).

> *After I had already presented I realised that people prepare their presentations really well, using hi-tech like PowerPoint and distributing handouts. My presentation wasn't like that at all; it was rubbish because I didn't know* (Javier).

> *When I had to present for the first time I was so nervous that I couldn't sleep at all the night before. It's been one of my most horrible experiences ever* (Juanjo).

> *Presentations are on the one hand good because you improve your communication skills, but if you're shy, they are a pain, and they are humiliating!* (Iñaki).

Predictably, my investigation confirms that Spanish students studying in the UK experience difficulties in the area of productive oral skills, both in informal conversation and in academic contexts. However, they also reported difficulties in understanding both spoken and written language.

Figure 4.37 – Assess your ability to read and understand articles and books about your area of studies (Appendix C, Q21)

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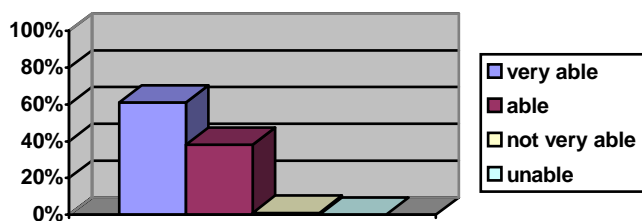
Figure 4.38 – Assess your ability to understand lecturers (Appendix C, Q21)
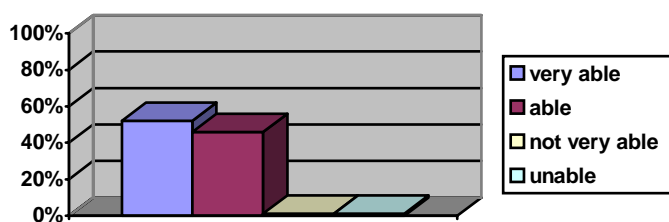
While results from questionnaires (see figure 4.37 and 4.38 above) show a very positive self-estimation of abilities regarding listening and reading comprehension, the interviews reveal some students' experience of difficulty. Some found reading in English demanding, largely because it was time-consuming, due, for example, to unfamiliarity with the specific vocabulary of their discipline. Carroll and Ryan (2005: 55) claim that students whose second language is English can take a third to two times longer to read than first language students, and often they have to read a text over and over to gain understanding. They also state (2005: 64) that lack of vocabulary as well as lack of control over 'known' vocabulary will slow students' reading and limit their understanding of texts. As one of the students commented:

> *It takes me ages to read an article of only a few pages because I have to look up every other word in the dictionary* (Iñaki)

Others, however, claimed to have no difficulties at all when reading in English:

> *I don't have any problems understanding what I read. Although I'm writing my thesis in Spanish most of my bibliography is in English; I am very used to reading in the English language, no problem whatsoever* (Isabel).

As noted from the review of the literature in chapter 2 (section 2.4.3.1), reading is often considered by students studying in a second language the easiest, or least difficult, skill to master (e.g. Christison & Krahnke, 1986).

In the interviews, students claimed that it was relatively easy to understand lecturers. They said that they could comprehend formal registers of language more easily than more casual registers. For this reason, they sometimes had difficulty in seminars following English students who, according to them, spoke 'slang' (but who may have been speaking in informal registers or with different local accents).

> *I understand everything the lecturer is saying; what I don't understand is what the rest of the students are saying* (Gemma).

> *When the lecturer says something, which has nothing to do with the topic being discussed, he changes the tone. The rest of the students all laugh, but I always miss the jokes because of this change of tone* (Inma).

Understanding lecturers was made easier because lecturers supported their lectures with visual aids such as handouts, overhead transparencies, lecture outlines, which provided the helpful support to understanding the spoken word.

> *There are so many international students that they try to facilitate things, so lectures are designed in a way that everybody understands them. Lecturers use OHP's, they give us handouts, etc.* (Dolores).

> *During the lectures, they give you handouts, they use OHP's, PowerPoint. Everything the lecturer says comes out in a written form somewhere, so it is not any problem to follow lectures* (Carlos).

Along with coping with seminar discussions, the other most serious language challenge reported was academic writing. While problems in the area of oral skills seem to attenuate after a while in the UK, difficulties experienced in relation to academic writing tend to persist. Furthermore, most courses in higher education evaluate students through some form of written expression such as essay exams, short-answer essays, research papers; therefore, academic writing occupies a large proportion of students' study time and is clearly a key skill for success at university (see chapter 2 section 2.4.3.2). The Spanish students taking part in this investigation reported not having undertaken any preparation in academic writing before arrival. They found it extremely difficult to structure an essay and to write critically. Style, grammar, and technical vocabulary also appear to cause problems. Looking at results of the Ministerio de Educacion y Cultura's study (2000), both primary and secondary students in Spain perform worst in written expression than any of the other language skills (see 2.4.3.4). Comments from focus groups and interviews included:

> *–The worst thing for me is to write in English.*
> *–I've got many problems with writing academic English. I spend hours trying it; what an English student would do in two hours takes me 24.* (FG4)

> *One of the lecturers advised me to enrol on an Academic English course to learn how to write. He said I didn't have many problems speaking but I*

had to do something with my written English or I would have problems passing my assignments (Iñaki).

I have problems with technical language. I don't know all the political terms in English. I can't use very specialised vocabulary from my discipline because I don't know it (Carlos).

In figure 4.39 below, it is clear that the Spanish students surveyed again assessed confidently their ability to write essays in English. Q21 of the questionnaire (Appendix C) shows that 80% claimed to feel either _able_ or _very able_ to write essays in English (80%). As mentioned above, the wording of the closed items could bias answers to this question, since 'not very able' and 'unable' imply a very high deficiency or lack of skill. Nevertheless, results obtained from interviews and focus group discussions, and also from the assignments collected to carry out the analysis of errors (see chapter 5), confirmed that Spanish students experience difficulties in this area.

Figure 4.39– Assess your ability to write essays (Appendix C, Q21)
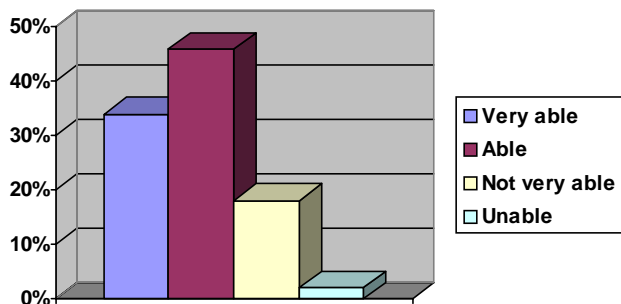
The nature of these difficulties is revealed in the comments from the interviews:

To write my first essay was hard work. Not only did I have to take books out from the library to research the topic I was going to write about, I also had to take out self-study guides to learn how to write an essay (Iñaki).

From the first essay I handed in to the last one, there has been a great improvement and I don't think it had to do with my linguistic abilities in the English language. The thing is that I didn't know how to write an essay, I didn't know how to structure it, I didn't know that you had to include an index and conclusions, and I didn't know many things about the form (Alicia).

As these quotations show, some of the difficulties of Spanish students have to do with the general conventions of academic writing and the lack of stylistic awareness. Academic writing requires skills that may not be essential in informal

writing. For example, it follows a formal structure, which is often less clearly demarcated, if at all, in personal writing contexts. Additionally, in academic writing it is important to follow rules of punctuation and grammar to make sure that the reader always knows what it is being referred to. Furthermore, academic writing, unlike other genres, is based on the citations of published authors. Judgements need to be supported by linking them to what published authors have previously written about the issue. One of the students commented on having had problems with plagiarism. Her comments suggest that she was never previously taught what plagiarism is.

> *I had never written a long essay before. I was accused of plagiarism. In Spain we used to copy stuff from books and we didn't use inverted commas* (Student D).

Carroll and Ryan (2005: 69) claim that most students understand the concept of plagiarism regardless of what culture they come from. According to them, international students may not understand the specifics of what is considered to constitute plagiarism or they may consider it a valid writing strategy.

The picture of challenges in the area of English language that the above analysis paints reinforces the importance of the English language support programmes, offered by host universities. Like most universities in the UK, the two institutions participating in this study offered both pre-sessional English courses before the beginning of the academic year and in-sessional support programmes during the rest of the academic year for those students who needed to improve their skills in English for academic purposes. However, although the majority of Spanish students interviewed reported having difficulties with their English language competence, and, in theory, welcomed the idea of joining an intensive English language course (see 4.2.2 above on pre-arrival support), most did not actually attend the free courses offered. The reasons mentioned for non-attendance included lack of time, ignorance about the availability of the courses, or inadequacy of the courses. In the focus group discussions students made the following comments:

> –*I haven't attended any English course, maybe I should have done but I have so many things to do and I haven't got the time.*
> –*I didn't know you could take an English for Academic Purposes course here.*

–The free English support course at the university is like the children's TV programme Sesame Street. I don't think two hours a week are going to help a lot to improve your English. I think it is more helpful to go to a pub and have a couple of beers with an English person. You're going to learn much more than in the lessons. (FG3)

A similar picture emerges from the one-to-one interviews:

They told me at the university that I should attend the English lessons offered, and I did, although I didn't find them very useful. I learned much more in my everyday life, going to lectures and socialising. I know that if I could repeat the first year of my degree now I would get better grades. I failed two subjects and I think it was because of my bad English. I couldn't follow the lectures; it was impossible (Angel).

During my first year I went to English for Academic Purposes lessons. It was a bit boring; I was falling asleep all the time (Iñaki).

Some Spanish students nevertheless valued English support lessons because it was a way to meet other international students and therefore participate in Bochner et al.'s (1985: 690) 'multicultural network',

English support lessons are good. I always have a good time there, although they are not too effective because it's only two hours a week, but you get to know other international students and start socialising with them. (Isabel).

Given the practical difficulties Spanish students seemed to experience in following organised English language courses, one of the conclusions from this part of the investigation is that alternative forms of support could be explored. This group of students would appear to benefit from a more flexible form of support and one which can be tailor-made to address their specific needs. This exploration will be the focus of chapter 6 where the potential offered by a web environment is explored. The proposal is to envisage a support strategy that can complement, rather than replace, the kind of English language support courses already in place in most universities. Such support would not aim to alleviate all the problems experienced by Spanish students, but rather would target some of their specific difficulties which might not be shared by other groups of international students.

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4.3.4 Socio-cultural and emotional issues and other adaptation problems

Adjustment problems mentioned by students included practicalities such as finding suitable accommodation, the cost of living in England, finding acceptable food, time schedules and, more importantly, adjustment challenges such as loneliness, homesickness and difficulties making good relationships with host nationals.

Regarding accommodation, statistics from the questionnaire (Appendix C, Q7) suggest that the great majority of Spanish students share accommodation with other students; 48% of them live in private accommodation, 26% live on campus, and 9% also share university managed accommodation but off campus. Another 9% of the students live with a host family, only 5% live on their own, 2% live with their partners and 1% of the respondents live with their own family (see below figure 4.40).

Figure 4.40 – Where are you staying? (Appendix C, Q7)

- private accommodation shared with other students
- university accommodation on campus
- university accommodation off campus
- with a host family
- private accommodation (living alone)
- private accommodation shared with partner
- living with their own family
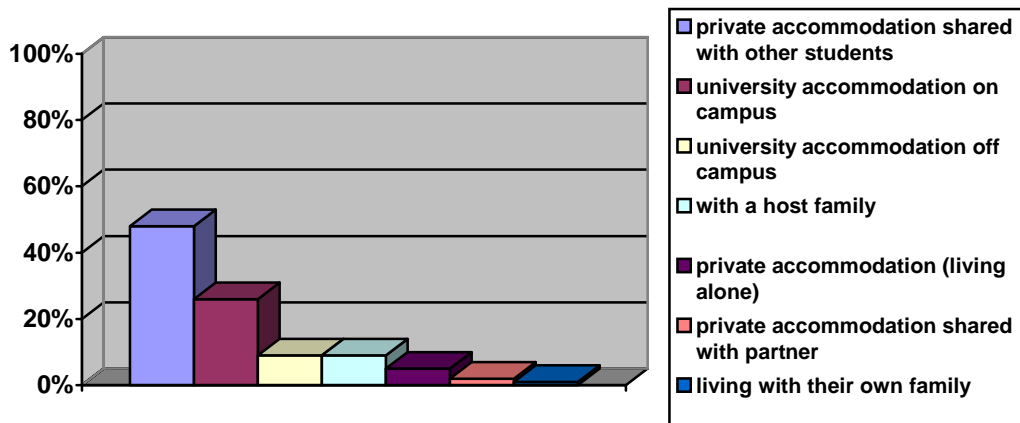
Figure 4.41– How satisfied are you with your accommodation? (Appendix C, Q8)

- very satisfied
- satisfied
- not too satisfied
- not satisfied at all
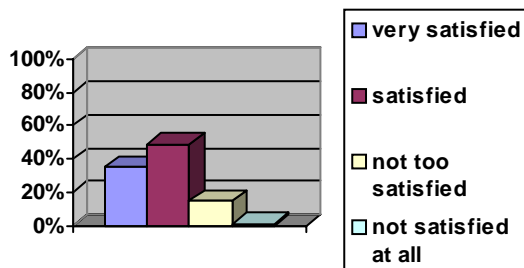
The majority of the respondents (84%) felt either satisfied or very satisfied with their accommodation. Good accommodation in a comfortable and relaxing environment is an important prerequisite for settling down to study. The sort of

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problems relating to accommodation mentioned by interviewees went from not finding a suitable place on arrival, to having difficulties with housemates or landlords, or being, in general, not happy with the accommodation to a point that they found it difficult to concentrate on their studies.

> *It was terrible – the first night I didn't even know where I was going to sleep* (Rubén).

> *The halls of residence are horrible: disgusting, small and very far away from the university* (Javier).

> *I lived for five days with a host family but I moved out. I was depressed and I needed to live with other students* (Angel).

> *As I came so late, I didn't have accommodation organised. They told me at the university that it was my problem. At that time, a congress was taking place in town, so it was very hard for me to find a place to sleep the first night* (Gemma).

Figure 4.42 –What aspects of English life did you have most difficulty in adapting to? Q23 Appendix C
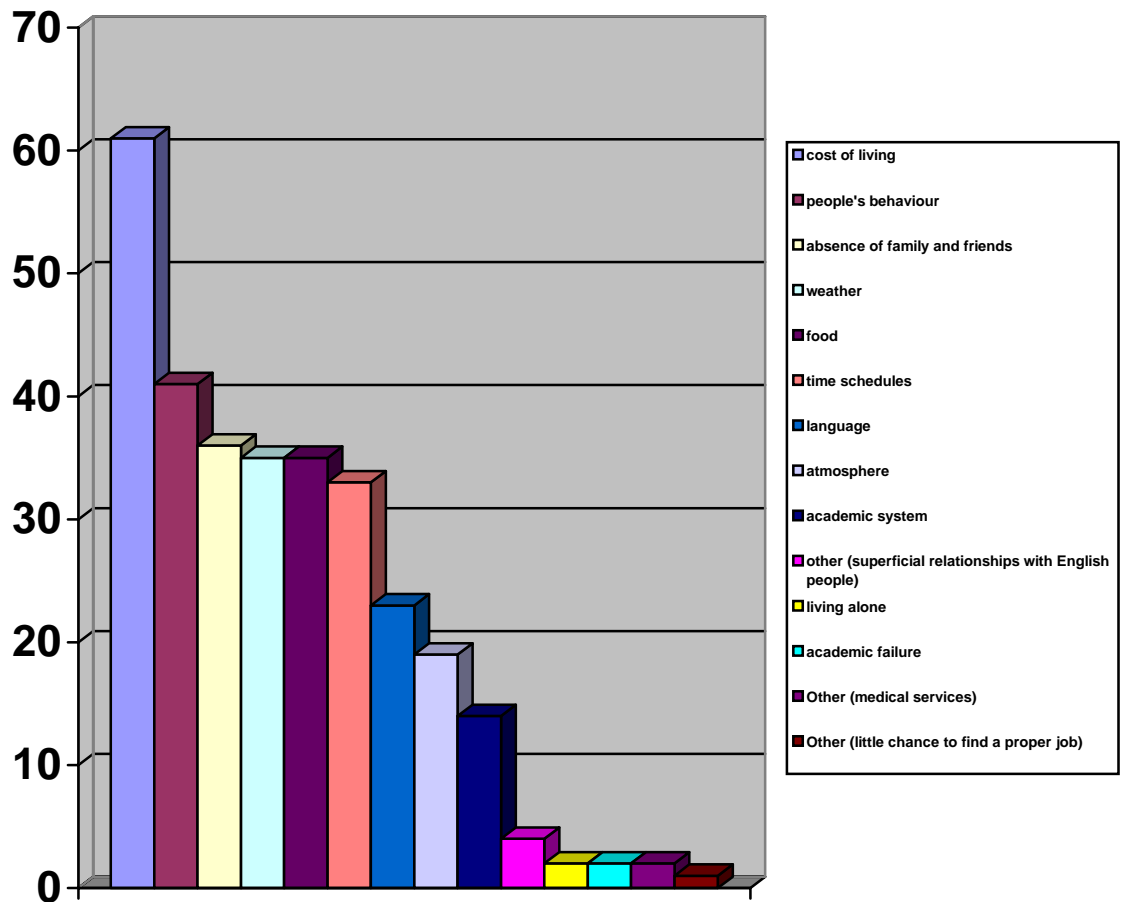
Results in absolute numbers

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According to responses to question 23 of the questionnaire (Appendix C), the area of main concern for Spanish students in this sample was the cost of living in the UK. This has been highlighted in the literature as being one of the biggest obstacles for mobility to the UK (see chapter 2, section 2.2). The picture emerging from interviews and focus groups confirmed that Spanish students felt unprepared for the high cost of housing, university fees, clothing, food, transport, books, etc.

> *–The cost of living is very high here. Books, transport, etc. are unaffordable.*
> *–Yes, everything is very expensive, particularly transport: it's expensive and the service is terrible; moreover trains and buses are very old.*
> *–We used to spend hours looking for a cheap place to have a coffee. The cost*
> *of living is very high here compared to Spain* (FG1).

'The behaviour of British people' emerged from the questionnaire results as the next most significant concern (chosen by 41 respondents). Next in significance were a group of problems generally related to adaptation to living in the UK: 'missing family and friends in Spain' (36 mentions)'getting used to the weather' (35 mentions) 'getting used to the food' (35 mentions) and problems adapting to English time schedules for daily life, such as 'commerce opening and closing times' (33 mentions). The comments made in interviews and focus groups confirm these responses:

> *In Spain eating is a social event; we eat all together around the table. Here, they don't care, they eat as they walk, or sitting on a bench in a park or even on a tomb in the cemetery* (Beatriz).

> *I don't like that they shut the shops at five o'clock in the afternoon, no comments about the pubs. In Spain I go shopping at eight in the evening* (Inma).

> *They have lunch and dinner too early, but now I'm used to it* (Iñaki).

> *Well, it's going to be easy to study in this country; everything shuts so early that there is nothing else to do than studying* (Gemma).

> *They shut clubs at two o'clock; you cannot buy alcohol after eleven. What a country! Thank God Spain is nothing like this!* (Angel).

In the interviews students reported signs of homesickness and loneliness; however, it seems that the feelings were not strong enough to make the student

feel extremely anxious or unable to cope. In general, these Spanish students seemed to integrate relatively easily to the new environment.

> *At the beginning I felt lonely because it was the first time I had been abroad. It was hard to get used to a new environment: the food – I lost weight – the different educational system. But now, I have English friends. I don't have any problem because I meet friends, but I remember that it was very hard during the first months, but I wanted to learn so I didn't mind* (Angel).

> *At the beginning you miss Spain a lot, the atmosphere there, your family, but in a couple of weeks you've adapted. The longer you're in this country the more adapted you become* (Alicia).

> *Over there, you always have your family's support, but here you're alone; if you have problems you have to sort them out yourself. Although there are some bad moments, eventually you learn and gain self-confidence* (Beatriz).

> *At the beginning I was depressed because I was alone. The first weekend I was thinking: 'what am I doing here? Why don't I go home?' Then, after the orientation week, I met people and I didn't feel so lonely although I did feel a little bit anxious because I was going to be away from Spain for five years and I had never been abroad before* (Angel).

> *Over there I had friends, I had a girlfriend, my brothers, my car. I had it all. Here I've got nothing, but I don't want to go back* (Angel).

> *I didn't go back to Spain straight away because I didn't want to disappoint my parents. Now, I don't regret that I stayed* (Javier).

> *I don't miss anything. I feel completely integrated into the country and into the academic system* (Carlos).

> *I don't miss Spain; I don't regret being here at all* (Iñaki).

Twenty-three respondents felt that language was a problem and fourteen saw adapting to the new academic environment as problematic. The Spanish students in this sample frequently mentioned that they had faced a variety of problems in the first months after arriving in England. However, as the quotations above show, they seem to interpret these problems positively, as challenges from which they had gained personality development; thus, it appears that the experience of practical problems declines over the course of time (as reported in the literature; see chapter 2 section 2.5.3 on the experiences of other European national groups in the UK).

A clear theme emerging from the questionnaires and the interviews was the difficulty that the students experienced in developing relationships with the host community. In the questionnaire, 53% responded affirmatively that they had difficulties in making English friends (Appendix C, Q25). Respondents were then asked to provide the main reasons for this (Appendix C, Q26). Figure 4.45 below shows that the majority of the respondents (31) felt that English people had not made the effort; 21 thought that the language had an strong impact on their failure to make friends with host nationals; 17 students blamed the different ways of living as the main reason for lack of relationships between Spanish and English students while 15 blamed themselves for not having made the effort to make friends with the English. These results are consistent with other studies conducted in the UK (Bochner et al., 1985; Furnham & Bochner, 1982). Furnham and Bochner (1982) found that close links with British people accounted for only 18 per cent of the friendships of foreign students in the UK compared with 39 per cent co-nationals and 38 per cent other overseas students. In Bochner et al's (1985) later study only 17 per cent of the international students in their Oxford sample had host national friends. The literature establishes that the ability and willingness to interact meaningfully with host culture peers are largely dependent upon cultural distance (see Ward et al. 2001), which seems to suggest that the initiation and maintenance of interpersonal relations among Europeans should be easier. Results from the current investigation do not corroborate this finding. According to these results, Spanish students find that cultural differences and lack of effort on either of the parts involved are strong elements that prevent the flourishing of relationships among host and guests students. The language barrier also plays a very important role for this shortcoming.

Figure 4.43 – From what nationality are your closest friends in England? Q24 (Appendix C)
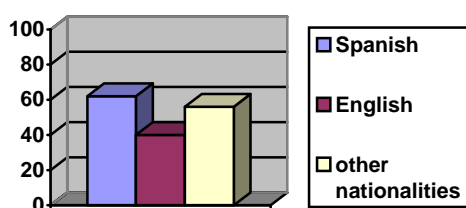
Figure 4.44 – Have you had any difficulty making English friends? Q25 (Appendix C)
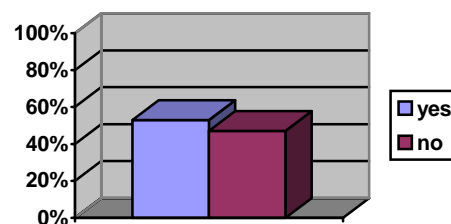
Results in absolute numbers

Figure 4.45 - Reasons for having difficulties in making English friends Q26 (Appendix C)
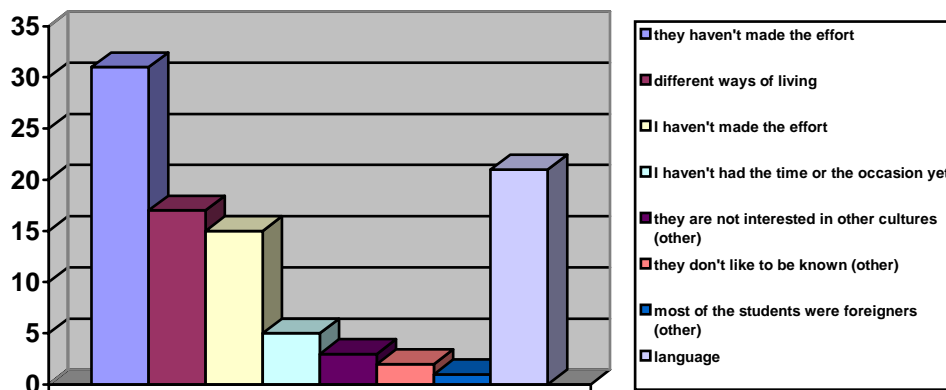
Results in absolute numbers

The interviewees confirmed that relationships with English home students were limited and provided some explanation for this. Because of what they perceived to be a 'distance' or 'coldness' from English people, including home students, they reported feeling greater affinity with either other Spanish or international students:

> *I get on better with international people. We're open to start a friendship or to get to know each other. This interest doesn't exist with English people* (Isabel).

> *At the university there is a very strong division between international students and home students. These two groups do not mix* (Beatriz).

> *The behaviour of English people is too cold. They are a little bit unfriendly, although I cannot really say, because I haven't met many of them; well, that says something, doesn't it?* (Javier).

> *My friends here are Spanish. It's probably the language: I can talk and express my feelings easily with them* (Dolores).

> *I only have a couple of good English friends. Generally, my friends are from other nationalities. English students exclude themselves from the rest* (Beatriz).

> *English people are very cold. Spanish people are friendly with foreigners; mind you, there are not so many foreigners in universities in Spain. Maybe here they are fed up and they've lost interest* (Inma).

> *I've felt rejected many times here for being a foreigner* (Iñaki).

> *I haven't got any friend in my class because they're all English and have nothing at all in common with me* (Alicia).

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I've met nice English people here but I've realised that they keep a distance; they don't want to get close. We Spaniards have a complete opposite character (Juanjo).

You have more things in common with Spanish people. To start with, you speak the same language, we all have the same educational experiences, so we all have the same problems here (Rubén).

4.3.5 On arrival support

The Spanish students were asked in the questionnaire about the level of support offered by the host university in certain areas (Appendix C, Q19). The results are presented in the figures below.

Figure 4.46 – Registration
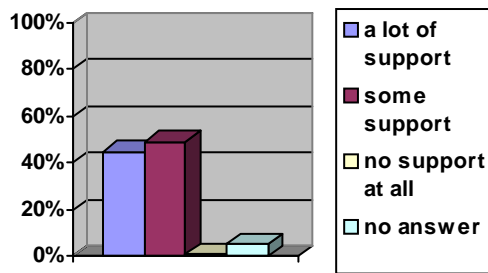
Figure 4.47 – Accommodation
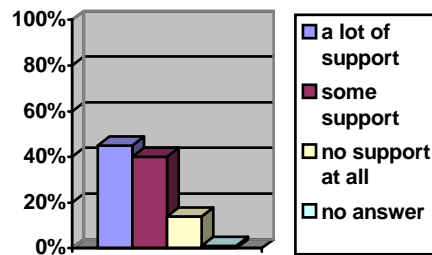
Figure 4.48 – Academic matters
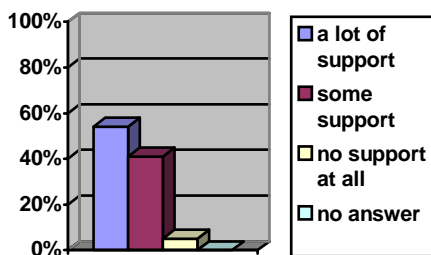
Figure 4.49 – English language provision
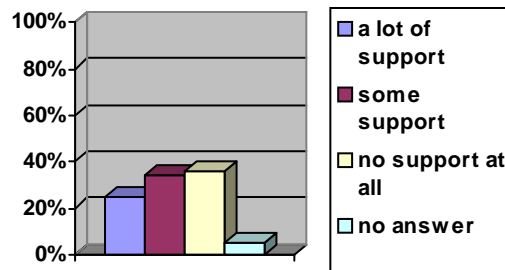
Figure 4.50 – Personal matters
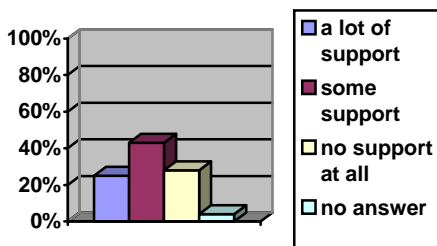
Figure 4.51 – Library services

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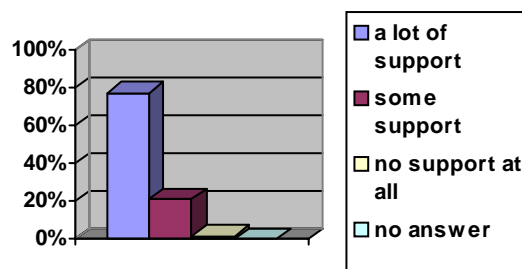
Figure 4.52 – Computer services
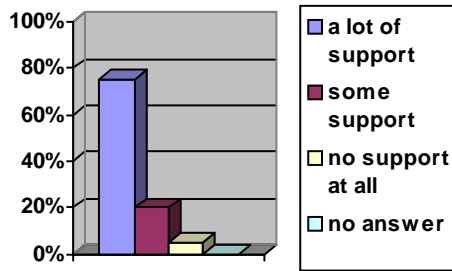
Figure 4.53 – Cultural, sport and leisure activities
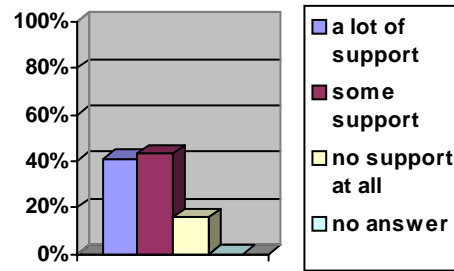
The majority of respondents appeared generally satisfied with the support that they received from the host university. They appeared to be especially positive about the support they received regarding registration, academic matters, library services, and computer services. The percentages were less high regarding matters such as English language provision and personal matters. Only 59% of the respondents reported having received *some support* or *a lot of support* with English language provision; 36% stated that they did not receive any support at all.

Respondents were also asked to evaluate a range of possible support strategies that could be offered by host universities to international students, once they had arrived in the UK (Appendix C, Q27). The results are presented in the figures below.

Figure 4.54 – The creation of a buddy-scheme that pairs you with a host student

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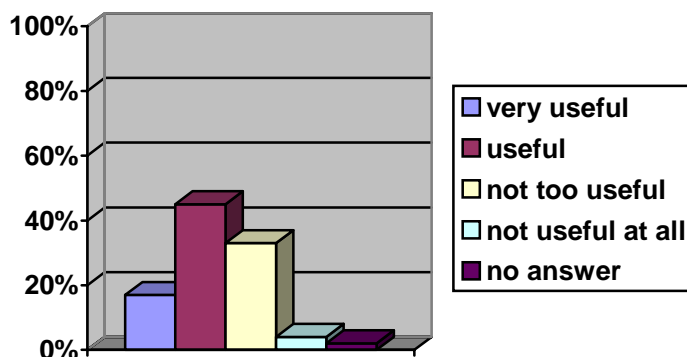
Figure 4.55 – Creation of an e-mail service that could answer your questions
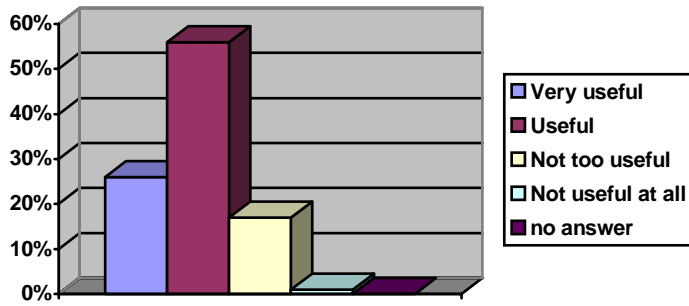
Figure 4.56 – To have access to an orientation course
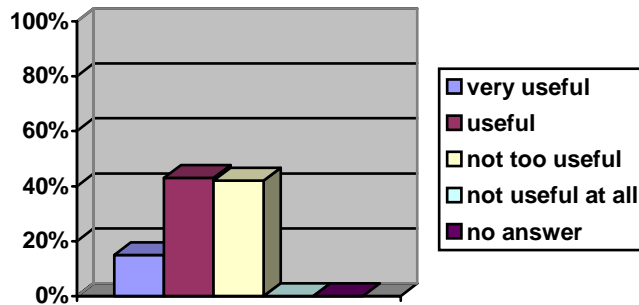
Figure 4.57 – Access to an intensive course on academic English which could introduce you to the new environment
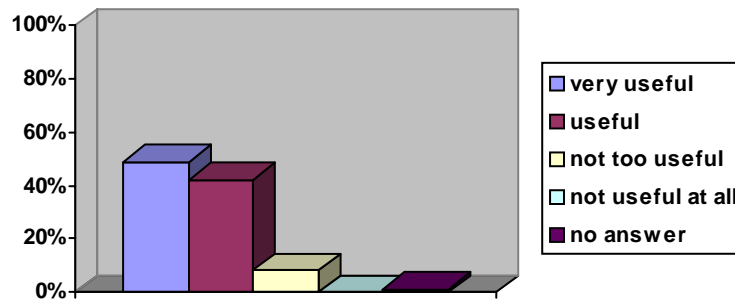
The most popular response was an intensive course in academic English, with 91% of the students considering it a useful or very useful way to improve their stay in the UK and only 8% who thought that it would not be very useful. The idea of having an e-mail service which could answer all their questions and queries was also quite well received with 82% of students believing that it would be a good support strategy. The other options were less strongly supported with 37% of the students claiming that a buddy-scheme would not be a useful idea to

promote integration and 42% stating that access to an orientation program would not be useful.

4.3.6 Spanish students' general feelings about studying in the UK

Although most of the respondents (50%) felt *completely integrated* living and studying in the UK, there remained a high percentage (49%) who only felt *partly integrated* and 1% who did not feel integrated at all (see figure 4.58 below).

Figure 4.58 – Do you feel integrated living and studying in the UK?
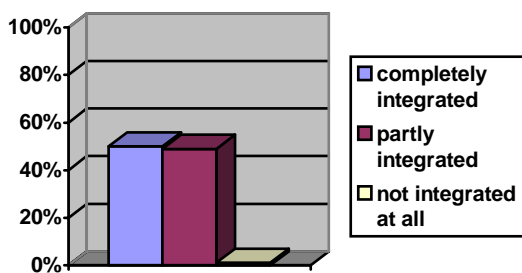
When respondents were asked in an open question to offer advice to a friend thinking about coming to study in a UK university, the answers were very varied. Twenty-three would have told their friend to come straight away without giving it any more thought. Seventeen of the respondents would have advised their friends to improve their English language before coming. These results suggest that Spanish students, generally considered the experience of study in the UK a valuable one. However there were a number who considered that the language barrier was a significant obstacle which needed to be important and necessary to be addressed before arrival while others thought that it was a good idea to come to England a few months or weeks before the first term so that they could get a feel of what things were going to be like.

4.4 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The analysis of results presented in this chapter suggests that Spanish students experience initial similar difficulties in nature to those of other international students as presented in chapter 2. However, although the problems are not exclusive to this particular group of students, it appears that the severity and roots

of these difficulties may be specific to them, as they appear to be linked to the previous educational, social, cultural and linguistic background.

Spanish students come from a cultural background that Hofstede (1996) describes as having large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance, which means that, in educational institutions, there is an expectancy of the teacher to take all initiatives, which may result in a less student-oriented learning environment than the one encountered in the UK and other countries described as having small power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance. Spanish students perceptions of the Spanish vs. English academic systems, seem to fit Hofstede's framework. Responses to question 16 in the questionnaire (see above figures 4.25 to 4.32) show that the subjects in this investigation believe that, unlike in UK universities, in Spanish universities they are allowed little autonomy; the amount of time they need to spend in plenary lectures there is felt to be excessive. Outside of lectures, little time is available for individual research and self-study, which may prevent them from organising and presenting their own arguments, and developing a critical approach to their area of study; it may also means that little feedback is provided on academic performance. On more practical terms, Spanish students have criticised the limited monetary budget in Spanish universities by applauding the high availability of resources and facilities offered in UK universities.

When the decision to study in the UK was made by my subjects, 'push' factors and 'pull' factors in similar doses -with a prominence of 'pull' factors- seemed to be in their minds. As the two strongest 'pull' motives, Spanish students mentioned a desire to meet other people and cultures, and living a new experience in a new country. It emerged during interviews and focus group discussions that these apparently positive motivations were often linked to a general dissatisfaction with the Spanish educational and social system. The Spanish students surveyed were searching for an escape from a situation which as their comments suggested they regarded as unsatisfactory and unfulfilling. They considered Spanish universities to be overcrowded and lacking to provide students with personal attention and sufficient resources for study. Additionally, as statistical analysis published by OECD (2003) indicates, being Spain one of the countries with the highest unemployment rate of university graduates, led students to mention other motives

based on the belief that a degree from a university in the UK and a higher level of English proficiency would increase their employability prospects. Another 'push' motive mentioned by Spanish students was that they could not study a course of their preferred discipline because it was not on offer in Spanish universities. Until very recently, Spanish universities only offered traditional degrees, and there was little choice of courses. With the introduction of private universities in Spain, the situation has just started to change, and the variety of courses on offer appears to be wider than in previous years. During the time in which this investigation was carried out, still Spanish students were seeking specific study programmes abroad that were not offered in Spanish tertiary education institutions.

Thus, it seems that whatever their degree of motivation for study in the UK, the majority of Spanish students interviewed perceived a lack of educational options and opportunities in Spain. These perceptions may have a positive impact on the way they adapted to an unfamiliar environment, in that those who chose to come to the UK may see themselves as more open-minded and willing to integrate into different, more flexible systems, which they regard as more beneficial to their personal and professional development. Wierstra et al. (1999) had already suggested that appreciation for learning environments that involve much personalization and student involvement is common among students from learning backgrounds which are reproduction-centred.

Hence, despite having to take a different approach to learning by becoming more involved into their own learning process, (e.g. preparing and giving oral presentations, participating in seminars and writing reports and essays), and despite difficulties that may be experienced in performing these tasks successfully, the Spanish students surveyed, as shown by the number of positive comments on UK universities, felt they adapted relatively easily to the expectations of the English tertiary educational system. However, there is one aspect of the experience that in retrospect, my subjects have evaluated as generally poor; this is regarding pre-arrival information.

Adequate and clear pre-arrival information has been mentioned in the literature as one of the key factors favouring international students' initial welfare and rapid

adaptation to the host country. Results from this investigation show that a large number of them either do not receive information they judge to be sufficient on the UK, its educational system or even the course programme they have enrolled on, or they do receive information well after arrival, when some of it is of little use to them.

Once in the UK, universities typically provide induction events which provide introductions to aspects of the host culture and may include campus and town tours. Spanish students thought that these events were a good way to meet other students and diminish their feelings of loneliness, as well as of culture shock. Nonetheless, not all students were able to attend since these events took place during the weeks of arrival; making arrangements to find accommodation emerged from the interviews as a competing priority for several students.

Linguistic difficulties play a particularly important role in understanding the challenges of study abroad, for as mentioned in the current chapter and also in chapter 2 (see 2.4.3), they may hinder both student' social adaptation and academic success. These difficulties appear to be more acute in the case of Spanish students than other European national cohorts (see for example the lack of language problems of Norwegian students in the UK in Wiers-Jenssen's study, section 2.5.3). In fact, as the Special Eurobarometer 54 revealed (see chapter 2 section 2.4.3.4), there are clear discrepancies between EU countries in their knowledge of foreign languages. In fact, while in other European countries people acquire English skills by using them at work, or by watching TV, or by conversing with friends and family as well as by studying subjects other than English, Spaniards complain about the lack of opportunities to be able to improve their English skills outside the language classroom. Moreover, from results of the current investigation, it can be argued that Spanish students are generally dissatisfied with the way they were taught English in Spanish schools, with a lack of communicative methods important to improve skills at conversational level and also lack of writing practise. In fact, a study undertaken by the Spanish Ministry of Education, which tested all English language skills in students from primary and secondary schools in Spain, points out that students' worst scores were in writing skills.

Writing, together with communicating in seminars and group-discussions have been ranked in this investigation as the most significant problems for Spanish students (see 4.3.3). Generally, the way language is used in the academic context and the differences that exist in study genre and academic conventions from on educational culture to another appear to be a challenge for Spanish students in the UK.

That linguistic difficulties are a concern for Spanish students is also suggested by questionnaire data from the current investigation in which indicate strong support by the students for an intensive preparatory English course prior to arrival (the strongest preference was for a course on conversational English followed by support for English for academic purposes) (see 4.2.4) and also strong support for an English for academic purposes course on arrival (see 4.3.5). The paradox is that such courses are, in fact, available to all students surveyed. The majority of students interviewed, however, did not take up these opportunities (see 4.3.3). Reasons given for lack of attendance to English classes were lack of time, lack of knowledge about availability of such courses and/or the limitations of the courses themselves. These points of view are in broad agreement with those of other international students are reported by studies on evaluation of English language support (see chapter 2 section 2.4.3.3 and chapter 5 section 5.5.2). Quite understandably, practical problems took priority on arrival in the UK and for some students it was difficult to attend pre-sessional courses. The later in-sessional face-to-face classes were not found particularly helpful or targeted on students' particular needs. A more flexible form of support, with a limited focus on the specific linguistic problems of these students might therefore be a suitable addition to the support resources currently available.

Nowadays, when one thinks about flexible forms of support, one automatically associates this with new technologies and the current possibilities that web-based materials can provide for language learning and improvement. In this sense, and although Spanish students do also have problems in interacting in oral English, I have decided to narrow down our support to one area considered particularly important: academic writing; not only does academic writing occupy a large

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proportion of students' study time, but it is also the form by which most courses in the UK are assessed. A university degree student is unlikely to progress without demonstrating proficiency in written English (see chapter 2 section 2.4.3.2). Additionally, as I am envisaging to use self-access approaches to supplement other support provision, I have to bear in mind that, despite offering great advantages, such as flexibility, in these approaches students work on their own and the main interaction emphasised is between student and computer. Since improving speaking skills is mainly done through interaction with other human beings, and given that Spanish students are in an English-speaking environment where opportunities of communication may arise in and out the classroom, I believe that the significance and necessity of addressing writing skills overcomes that of addressing speaking skills.

4.5 SUMMARY

After analysis of Spanish students experiences, my first hypothesis stating that *the broad experiences of Spanish students when studying in UK universities are distinctive to those of other international students* has to be refuted, on the basis that although some of the challenges faced by international students are similar regardless of country of origin, there are also substantial differences. For example, European students coming from countries similar to the UK in power distance size and uncertainty avoidance degree of strength do not have to adapt to new methods of learning and teaching. In addition, previous experience with the English language is an important factor which will either aid students in their total acculturation to the host country, community and university or, on the other hand, if students are not familiar with using the language in different contexts in the home country, their degree of adaptation will be reduced by this important barrier.

Taking into account that Spanish students have expressed their concerns in the area of English language competence and would appreciate additional support, my decision to provide supplementary flexible resources to improve one particular language skill seems to be a valid one. Since my idea is to provide with target-tailored support to this cohort of students, the next part of the investigation will try to focus on analysing what are Spanish students specific language needs.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE LINGUISTIC PROBLEM AREAS OF
SPANISH STUDENTS

5.0 <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

The results from the investigation presented in the previous chapter have confirmed that although the challenges Spanish students report are broadly similar to those experienced by other groups of European and non-European cohorts; their perspectives on, and evaluations of their experience of studying in the UK are influenced by their particular educational and cultural background.

The focus for the second part of this thesis (chapters 5 and 6) is to examine the implications for the development of a support resource for this particular group. One of the key areas that these students, in common with other international students raised as a concern was that of English language skills. However, if language challenges are not specific to Spanish students but shared by other groups, then a support strategy targeted at this particular group may not be an efficient approach for universities to take. This chapter, therefore, reviews the theoretical debates on how a first language may influence performance and development in a second language. There is a contextualisation of this discussion through a language needs analysis. I then review the literature on pedagogic intervention and in particular, error correction. This will then inform chapter 6 where I will explore the potential offered by web-based delivery of language tutorials and exercises.

I am concentrating on written language skills and not oral, because although participating in seminar discussions poses at least as much of a problem as writing academic assignments (see chapter 4 section 4.3.3), writing difficulties may be considered to be more persistent. Furthermore, most assessments for these students are likely to be written rather than spoken and writing is the skill where students allocate most of their time. Additionally, as I am envisaging the provision of some kind of web-based support resource, it is likely to be easier to focus on problems which occur in writing rather than on oral skills. These latter may be better addressed in the classroom.

5.1 ACADEMIC WRITING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

Writing is still the major method of assessment in UK tertiary institutions, and it is not unusual for modules and courses assessed by one or two pieces of writing (McLean & Ramson, 2005: 58). Schmitt (2005: 63) states that there are factors other than initial competence in the English language that will impact on students' ability to produce acceptable academic writing. First is their previous experience as readers and writers; according to them, many students, from a variety of countries, have been asked to write very little in their secondary school years and lack practice here (for the situation of Spanish students see chapter 2 (section 2.4.3.4) and chapter 4 (section 4.3.2. and 4.3.3). Second, is the size of an individual's vocabulary; lack of vocabulary, as well as lack of control over known vocabulary, will restrict students' written output. A third factor is students' ability to produce grammatically accurate writing, where language has meant a focus on meaning has led to a reduction in accuracy-focused instruction (see section 5.4 in this chapter).

Kroll (1990: 2) also states that the difficulties second language students face are not only related to the general difficulties inherent in learning a second language, which may be of course significant since most second language writers are still in the process of acquiring syntactic and lexical competence, but also the way in which first language literacy skills may transfer to, or detract from, the development of second language skills. Although the literature on the difficulties of international students writing English may provide a general contribution to understanding the issues for all students, it is important to recognise the specific difficulties to be faced by native-speakers of a given language.

It is therefore, important for this investigation to be able to identify the particular difficulties of Spanish students. The theories underlying contrastive analysis (CA) and error analysis (EA) will be reviewed in the subsequent section (5.2), since they provide important information about surface-level errors due to L1 transfer. Work on contrastive rhetoric on different rhetorical and cultural preferences for organising

information will also be reviewed in section 5.2.1 of this chapter.

5.2 THEORIES THAT EXPLAIN THE ROLE OF L1 IN SLA

There are many different factors that interact and influence the linguistic performance and development of a second or a foreign language learner. However, the influence of the first language on second language use and development has long been a key debate in the study of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), captured by terms such as 'language interference'[1] 'transfer' or 'cross-linguistic influence'. These three terms suggest somewhat different conceptions of how a learner's L1 may contribute positively or negatively to their development of an L2. 'Interference' suggests that the L1 necessarily hinders the development of the L2, while the term 'transfer' may capture both positive and negative influences. Both terms are associated with contrastive theories (see section 5.2.1 below) where a study of first and second language can reveal potential areas of difficulty and facility. On the other hand, cross-linguistic influence is a theory neutral term, coined by Sharwood Smith and Kellerman (1986). This term includes under the same heading the notion of 'transfer', interference', 'avoidance', 'borrowing' and L2-related aspects of language loss, emphasising, in this way, the importance of looking for how L1 knowledge interacts with other factors.

5.2.1 Contrastive theories

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) was developed by Lado in 1957 (Ellis 1994: 306) and had its origins in the behaviourist views prevailing in the US in the 1950's and 1960's. The basic premise of the behaviourist approach is that most human behaviour is learned through a continual process of responding to stimuli (in Byram 2004: 74). The response learners give to such stimulus will be reinforced if successful. Through repeated reinforcement (positive feedback), a given stimulus will elicit the same response time and again, which will then become a habit. Thus, because language development was seen as the formation of habits, it was assumed

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[1] Behaviourists regarded errors as primarily a result of interference when the learner transferred native language 'habits' into the L2 (Ellis, 1994: 47).

that a person learning a second language started out with a handicap; the habits formed in the first language, would interfere with the development of new habits required for second language (Lado, 1964 in Lightbown & Spada, 1999: 34). This led Lado (1957) to set out the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, that if structures in the first language are similar to those of the second language, then transfer will be positive and learning will take place easily. If, however, structures are realised differently in first and second language, this will create learning difficulties (or interference) which will result in errors and lack of learning.

The CAH led to the assumption that errors (and therefore language difficulties for pedagogical treatment) were largely accounted for by L1 interference. However, subsequent research (reported in James, 1980) found that this assumption was ill-founded: not all errors predicted by the CAH are actually made by learners (as reported by Ellis 1994: 308) and conversely, errors which learners do make are not all predictable on the basis of the CAH. All this suggests that the influence of the learner's first language may not simply be a matter of the transfer of habits. It thus became clear that Lado's contrastive analysis could not alone accurately predict learning difficulties, although it could be useful as one tool among many in prediction, and could also be useful in the retrospective explanation of errors. These developments along with the decline of the behaviourist and structuralist paradigms towards the end of the 1970's, considerably weakened the appeal of CA.

Nevertheless, researchers and teaching professionals (e.g. Littlewood, 1983; Marmaridou, 1990) recognise the value of CA in the search for potential sources of trouble in foreign language learning. As Byram claims (2004: 142), CA should not be overlooked in the preparation of textbooks, production of teaching materials and syllabus design. Furthermore, CA has branched out to analysis beyond the sentence level; Danesi (1995: 210), for example, claims that *interest in CA is somewhat rekindled by the possibility of extending its methodology into the area of pragmatics and cross-cultural analysis.* In particular, studies have been undertaken under the heading of Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) which have explored different languages'

preferred ways of constructing text. CR provides insights into students' problems with adjusting to English conventions by supplying contrastive information about the rhetorics used by other cultures. It clearly has applications in second language writing pedagogy in that it can help teachers and learners identify the cultural model of writing of a given speech community (Brookes & Grundy, 1990 and Haarman et al., 1998). Additionally, Kaplan (1988) predicted a second application when he wrote that CR could serve:

> *to make teachers aware that different composing conventions do exist in different cultures and that these different conventions need to be addressed in teaching composing [and] to make students aware that there exists a set of conventions that the student is expected to be able to manage.*

Grabe and Kaplan (1996: 194) state that much CR research has focused on differences between Spanish and English. Kaplan's (1972) early work on contrastive rhetoric suggested that Spanish transfer effects led to L2 English writers creating texts which revealed rhetorical digressions and elaborations not typically associated with English writing. Norment (1982: 12) agrees with Kaplan:

> *When native Spanish subjects produced written text about a particular topic and in a specific mode, they developed their thoughts and ideas in a sequence of sentence types that produced an organisational structure which begins initially as a linear pattern, then 'breaks' for a tangential extension of the topic and then proceeds to develop the topic in a linear sequence.*

In 1987, Ostler, in one of the first major cross-linguistic and cross-cultural quantitative studies on contrastive rhetoric, compared and contrasted the syntactic and rhetorical patterns used in essays written by native English speakers and those written by three groups of international students, among them native Spanish speakers. She concluded that the cultural orientation of native Spanish speakers requires that they express their personal points of view in a 'flexible', 'artistic' manner and that longer sentences and a greater tendency to sentential elaboration characterised the Spanish corpus. Further, L1 Spanish writers in L2 English used more relative clauses than English native speakers, and there was also a greater use of passives although not a significant one. In an earlier study, Strei (1971) had drawn similar conclusions from an analysis of thirty essays written in English by native Spanish speakers. Twenty-six

of the writers exhibited 'digression' and 'subjectivity', features associated with a typical Spanish approach. Smith (1992) also claimed that the English language is much more 'linear' in structure than Spanish. English, he suggests, values logic and precision, clarity and brevity, while Spanish, like other romance languages, places emphasis on the style and beauty of the language and its presentation, digressing from one idea to another.

In another study, Montaño-Harmon (1988, 1991) examined writing variation among different groups, including native Spanish speakers writing in English and in Spanish. She also found, as did Strei, Ostler, and Smith, a pattern of high digression in the Spanish corpus, with Spanish writers using long sentences and a high proportion of one and two sentence paragraphs. This, she attributes to a preference for 'flowery' expression in Spanish prose. This 'elaborated style' is also reflected in greater use of coordinating structures. Montaño-Harmon also noted that Spanish writers utilise a more flexible rhetorical order; rather than beginning a topic abruptly, the Spanish essay often has an anticipation stage before the topic is presented. Ostler's results indicated that Spanish L1 writers used more synonyms, more personal pronouns, and more explicative conjunctions to provide more reasons. Moreover, Spanish students made significantly greater use of additive organisation whereas Anglo students made much greater use of enumerative organisation. Spanish students writing in English had significantly more deviations from the main theme and signalled these deviations. They used more repetition, more elaborated word phrasing and a much wider range of word orders.

One of the strengths of the above set of studies is that the research subjects were similar. All were academically oriented, relatively advanced in their ESL status, and Spanish speakers adult/adolescents. Taking all these studies together, some general points can be extracted with respect to Spanish L1 transfer effects that can help to predict difficulties in the writing of English as an L2. As Connor (1996: 14-15) explained:

> *Contrastive rhetoric, like contrastive analysis, began as an effort to improve [L2 writing] pedagogy, and its adherents believed that*

> *interference from L1 was the biggest problem in L2 acquisition. It was initially founded on error analysis; 'errors' in beginning-level students' paragraph organization were examined and reasons for them were hypothesized based on the language background from which the student came.*

Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that even if, as seen in this section, each language has different rhetorical conventions unique to it, and even if Spanish rhetorical conventions are transferred when writers write in English L2 previous research suggests that L1 writing expertise and L2 proficiency also play significant roles in L2 writing (Cumming, 1989; Kubota, 1992; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996), thus not all the problems experienced in L2 writing are due to L1 rhetorical conventions.

Because my pedagogical resource will focus on addressing specific sentence-level errors (see chapter 6), CR will not play a significant role in this thesis; however, it is important to highlight that the analysis of Spanish students' written assignments confirmed some of the characteristic patterns of Spanish L1 writers, for example, they write too long sentences (see section 5.3.5 in this chapter) and tend to digress from the topic of the investigation, finding it hard to find in some of the assignments, a direct line of thought; this point was also highlighted as a problematic area by Spanish students themselves during the focus group interviews (see 5.3.5 below).

5.2.2 Error analysis

After empirical evidence had proven that similarities and differences between two languages were not the sole cause of problems for the learners (see section 5.2.1 above), an alternative approach in which contrastive analysis was to be assigned an exploratory role came to be offered. This approach is Error Analysis, sometimes referred to as *the weak hypothesis of contrastive analysis* (Byram, 2004: 142):

> *Error Analysis (EA) differs from CA by proposing that learner errors are not just mistakes due to interference or transfer from the first language but evidence of underlying, universal learner strategies* (Byram, 2004: 198)

EA as an approach for studying learners' language has traditionally been used for three different purposes: firstly, in L2 acquisition studies where the interlanguage of

learners is examined for errors; secondly, as evidence of cross-linguistic influence from L1 on the L2; and finally, as an approach used for pedagogical reasons, to point out problematic areas to be focused on in teaching (Olsen, 1999: 191).

Behaviourist accounts claim that the direct cause of errors is transfer, whereas from a cognitive perspective, transfer is seen as a resource that the learner actively draws upon in interlanguage development (Selinker, 1972); in other words, the L1 can have a direct effect on interlanguage development by influencing the hypotheses that learners construct (Ellis, 1994: 342). The term interlanguage (IL), introduced by Selinker is conceptualized as a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages (Brown 1994: 203). It was Nemser (1974: 55) who stated clearly the assumptions underlying IL theory, although he referred to interlanguage as an *approximative system*. According to him, this language has elements from L1 as well as L2; in addition it may include elements from neither.. It is an intermediary system of rules as the learner develops the new language. A study of interlanguage can indicate the level of proficiency reached by the learner in relation to L2 norms with respect to lexical richness or linguistic structures.

Ellis (1997: 15-20) and Hubbard et al. (1996: 135-141) gave practical advice and provided clear examples of how to identify and analyse learners' errors. The initial step requires the selection of a corpus of language followed by the identification of errors by making a distinction between mistakes or lapses, similar to those committed by native speakers or writers, and genuine errors of competence characterized by any deviation from the norm in the language system. The next step demands an explanation of different types of errors that correspond to different processes. Selinker (1974: 35) reported five such processes central to second language learning: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralisation. In the literature, the studies relating to the process of language transfer, which is the use of previous knowledge in another context, avoidance of structures not known in L1 to L2 production, language loss and rate of learning, e.g. meaning a shorter learning

time when L1 is similar to L2, have received considerable attention. Swan and Smith (2001) have given a detailed account of errors made by speakers of nineteen different L1 backgrounds – including Spanish – in relation to their native languages and on their associated difficulties. Their work will be taken into account in the current investigation, and their findings, contrasted with mine whenever possible.

EA for pedagogical reasons is aimed at giving pedagogical advice on how to deal with different types of errors in learners' language (Gass & Selinker, 1994). Corder (1967) maintains that errors are significant in three ways: firstly they can give information to the teacher as to how far the learner has progressed; secondly, they provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learnt, and thirdly; the learner learns by making errors. Thus, the making of errors reflects a strategy used by the learner to test hypotheses about the target language (TL), with the native language (NL) as the reference frame against which the new system is tested. This view opposes the CAH, which regarded errors as undesirable. Now errors are viewed as natural and important part of learning because they can yield information about a student's progress in learning, which may be very useful to the instructor. This positive attitude towards errors is especially important in the wake of the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching[2] in the 1980's, which devised pair-work and group-work activities so that the students could test out their hypotheses in the classroom (Cook 1993: 22).

> *The most significant contribution of Error Analysis, apart from the role it played in the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis, lies in its success in elevating the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner workings of the language learning process. As a result of interlanguage theory and the evidence accumulated from Error Analysis, errors were no longer seen as 'unwanted forms' (George, 1972), but as evidence of the learner's active contribution to Second Language Acquisition* (Ellis, 1986: 53).

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[2] Nunan (1991: 279) lists five basic characteristics of Communicative Language Teaching:
  (1) an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language;
  (2) the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation;
  (3) the provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on the language but also on the learning process itself;
  (4) an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements for classroom learning;
  (5) an attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

However, rekindling interest in the area of error analysis and error treatment is a timely move for several reasons. First, due to the increase in the number of students from different language backgrounds, the evaluation of students' assignments is becoming increasingly demanding. Language errors in written work may distract from assessing the development of discipline content knowledge and indeed, in some cases, may impede legibility. The reaction of subject academic staff is varied, but as student numbers overall increase, they are often under pressures of time which may prevent them from providing detailed feedback on language performance for each international students. Even those who do attempt to provide feedback on language performance, because generally they are not ESL experts, may not be signalling these errors in an optimum manner so that it pays off in terms of student improvement. Not only that, but, following process-focused writing approaches (see section 5.4.2 in this chapter), it may be considered that it is not worth the tutors' time and effort to provide detailed feedback on sentence level grammar and syntax, since improvement can be gained by writing practice alone (Rob, Ross & Shortreed, 1986). According to Myles (2002), practice alone may improve fluency but if errors are not pointed out and corrected, they can become ingrained and fossilised in student writing. Survey reports in L2 writing have indicated that students both attend to and appreciate their teachers' pointing out of grammar problems (Brice, 1995; Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Radecki & Swales, 1988).

Another reason in favour of error treatment is that students who make errors, may suffer the consequences of linguistic discrimination. That teachers draw conclusions about intellectual ability on the basis of structural grammatical problems has been well documented (Sternglass, 1997; Zamel, 1998). Thus, although error treatment and correction may have been rejected in some contexts, the provision of techniques to help students eradicate or at least reduce the number of errors they make, is as necessary as ever.

In the current investigation, error analysis of written academic English produced by Spanish students in UK higher education institutions will be carried out as a way to

assess part of the difficulties these students (see below section 5.3). I should state that despite its assistance to the formulation of explanations of SLA as well as its contribution to the refinement of teacher methodologies, EA has its limitations. For example, as pointed out by Byram (2004: 199), an overriding concern with errors also means insufficient attention to what learners do correctly.

To sum up this section, a number of issues were raised by the early researchers concerning the relationship of the L1 to the L2 (interference, transfer), the nature of the L2 learner's grammar (interlanguage, phrase structure), the type of learning theory relevant to L2 learning (habit formation, hypothesis-testing), and the methodology of research (Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis). I can also state that much of this work in SLA was pedagogically motivated. That is, researchers conducted studies of L2 learning with the express intention of addressing pedagogic issues. The studies of learner errors, for example, were used to address issues concerning teachers' attitude to errors, what errors should be corrected, and how learner progress could be evaluated.

5.3 THE DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY SPANISH STUDENTS WHEN WRITING ACADEMIC ENGLISH

The aim of this part of the current study is to identify the specific and common most frequent language problems that Spanish students have when writing academic English. In order to do so, two different techniques have been combined. The first, assuming that errors are reliable indicators of the learning problems of particular groups, consisted of an analysis of errors of a sample of assignments written by Spanish university students in the UK. Corder's view (see above section 5.2.2) is the background for the present analysis; however it is not an extensive error analysis in which all errors have been specified in detail. In the current study only the most frequent surface level errors in a sample of written assignments have been considered and classified into one of the following linguistic areas:

- Orthography (wrong spelling of words)
- Lexis (wrong words)

- ▪ Morphology (grammatical errors on word level)
- ▪ Syntax (word order and sentence structure)

The second technique used to discover the difficulties encountered by Spanish students in English academic writing was through focus group interviewing. Students were asked to reflect on the challenges they had to face in this area and they were given the chance to discuss these challenges in groups. During the discussions, students identified difficulties related to the discourse level of language use.

5.3.1 Orthographical difficulties

The corpus of assignments suggests that Spanish students encounter particular problems in relation to English spelling. These problems are likely to have their origin in the fact that Spanish, unlike English, has a high sound-spelling correspondence (Swan & Smith 2001: 94). A frequent spelling error found in the fifteen assignments was the reduction of double consonants to single ones. This can be attributed to negative transfer since the former are almost nonexistent in the Spanish language. Furthermore, a number of cognates that are spelled similarly in both languages differ only in use of the double consonant, e.g. *diferente* for the English *different* or *suficiente* for *sufficient*. Another common spelling difficulty attributable to L1 transfer seemed to arise from words which are similar in spelling in both languages: *j* was replaced by *y* in, for example, words like *project* (spelled *proyect*) probably reflecting a pronunciation difficulty of the sound represented here by *j* in English (dʒ), or the replacement of the letter *b* with a *v* as in *movile* instead of *mobile* since the pronunciation of the letters *b* and *v* is not distinguished in Spanish and the corresponding Spanish word is spelled with *v*.

Regarding punctuation, Spanish conventions are generally similar to English, and the corpus of essays did not suggest any particular difficulties here, except in the absence of initial capital letters for the days of the week, names of months and national adjectives, so frequent errors were, e.g. *thursday*, *january*, and *english*.

Several interviews suggest that the Spanish students were aware of the challenge of English spelling and used spell checkers in word processors to reduce spelling errors in their written work:

> –The software I always use is Office. I would be lost without it, as it offers me the possibility of checking my spelling mistakes and corrects them automatically. (FG3)

> –Computers make the task of writing much easier; for example the spell checker is an incredibly useful tool. (FG1)

Despite – or perhaps even because of - computer-based tools, these students felt that their spelling problems still persisted.

> –When I write an assignment on the computer it is great because the spell checker corrects all my mistakes automatically, but what is going to happen in the exam when I have to handwrite a 1000 word essay? (FG3)

> –I definitely can't spell English; when I type, most words appear underlined in red. I'm glad spell checkers exist. On the other hand, as they get corrected automatically I never learn; I feel I will never be able to spell properly in English. (FG1).

5.3.2 Difficulties with lexis

Spanish students have problems with false cognates or 'false friends', words that are similar in form or sound in the two languages, but which in fact have different meanings. In the sample of assignments analysed, errors such as using *actual* when meaning *current*, *assist* (from Spanish *asistir*) when meaning *attend*, *lecture* (from Spanish *lectura*) when meaning *reading matter*, and others.

Difficulties also arose particularly where one expression in Spanish had more than one equivalent in English: for example, in Spanish the word *cientifico* is both noun (profession) and adjective, while English distinguishes *scientific* (adjective) from the noun *scientist*. Students produced errors such as **Einstein was a famous scientific*. Similarly, while the English *try* can be used to express some of the meaning covered by the Spanish *tratar,* it distinguishes a number of other verbs such as *to treat, to handle, to deal with, to be about*. Students were not able to distinguish these usages, producing errors such as **This essay tries with the problems of*, or **In business you have to try with people*. A similar example was the mistaken use of the word '*hard*'

in the sentence, *The war prisoners got hard treatment.* This error is attributable to transfer from the Spanish word *duro* which covers '*hard'*, '*harsh'* and '*cruel'*. In the assignments there were also many examples of confusion with prepositions '*of'* and '*from'*. The equivalent Spanish preposition *de* means both '*of'* and '*from'*. '*Like'* and '*as'* were also often confused and again, this could be explained by the fact that the Spanish equivalent *como* is used for both.

Again, students were aware of experiencing difficulties at the lexical level:

> –*For the same meaning there are many different words that can be used and that is really complicated for me when I am writing an assignment.*(FG1)

> –*In my essays I repeat the same words over and over again because I don't know enough synonyms.*
> –*The first time I was told to write an essay of 8,000 words I thought that I didn't know so many words in English so that was going to be a harsh task.*
> –*For me it is the same problem, I don't have enough vocabulary in English to develop an idea properly.* (FG2)

They also commented on the technical vocabulary relating to their discipline:

> –*Although I might know more technical vocabulary even than English students, as it all comes from Latin, I have problems using it. I can recognise the words if I see them written down but producing them myself is something else. I need help in this area.*
> –*It is difficult to know the vocabulary specific to your discipline.*
> –*For me, technical vocabulary is only a minor problem because as you read books and articles in your area you come across a lot of words, then you learn them.* (FG4)

As in the area of spelling, students acknowledged the usefulness of the 'Thesaurus' option in word processing software to help them expand their range of active vocabulary. This offers a list of synonyms and one antonym for a given highlighted word. As the following quotation shows, there seems to be a preference for online materials than printed materials.

> –*I use the thesaurus option in Word a lot, when I am stuck, or when I repeat a word far too many times. The thesaurus is more convenient, faster and easier to use than a dictionary.* (FG3)

5.3.3 Morphological difficulties

The use of articles differs markedly between Spanish and English (Swan & Smith, 2001: 104). The definite article is used in Spanish with mass nouns and plural countable nouns that are used with a general meaning, whereas in English, a zero article is used in this context. Typical errors from the corpus were: ***The** aspects of **the** life in Britain.* or ****The** coffee and tea are the most common...***The** fox hunting is the....* In some expressions, singular nouns in Spanish need no indefinite article, while in English they do. Thus, errors such as, **He was engineer* were encountered.

In Spanish, the morpheme marking plurality is similar to English (normally -s ending), but the ending is used with articles, adjectives and possessives as well as nouns. On many occasions in the written assignments, students made adjectives agree with nouns as in: **the two most importants groups*, **The computers are more profitables,*smalls networks.* Because of this feature of making adjectives plural, Spanish speakers often get confused with other and others. One student wrote, for example: **They offer others advantages.*

5.3.4 Syntactic difficulties

Among errors in the corpus of assignments that could be attributable to Spanish-to-English transfer, a significant number were made at the syntactical level. These were often a function of the different sentence structures in the two languages. Writers often appeared to translate word for word from Spanish when they were unsure of a structure in English, making word order one of the most common grammatical errors. The order of linguistic elements is much freer in a Spanish sentence than in English due to it being a more inflected language (Swan & Smith 2001: 98). In Spanish, the subject of the sentence may appear in the middle or at the end of a sentence. In English it must always be placed before the verb – except in interrogative and certain other constructions – and preferably at the beginning of the sentence. In the assignments errors were found such as: **after was discovered the electricity.* Examples of questions without inversion were also found in the written samples, e.g. **They are intelligent or not?* The typical position for adjectives differs between English and Spanish, with Spanish adjectives normally post-modifying head nouns.

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Errors attributable to this structure included examples such as: **Computers intelligent* rather than *intelligent computers.* Furthermore, Spanish allows for subject pronouns to be dropped; its rich system of verb inflections unambiguously indicates the person and the number of the subject (Swan & Smith 2001: 98). This could explain errors such as the absence of the subject *it* in the main clause of the following sentence: **If you have a job, is difficult to go to the university.*

Again, there was evidence of students being aware of the structural differences between the two languages and of the problems that this posed:

> *–I write essays in Spanish and then I try to translate them into English; it is a terrible process, and the result is never good; but at this stage it is the only way I can do it; I have not enough proficiency in English to write an essay in this language.* (FG1)

> *–I use Spanish structures, I know these structures cannot be literally translated into English, but I do translate directly and leave it like that, even knowing that it's not right.*
> *–It is difficult to translate Spanish structures into English; they cannot be translated directly because both languages work in a different way. It is difficult and you get stuck.*
> *–I always try to translate Spanish sentences into English but then I realise that it doesn't make any sense. There are certain structures in Spanish that don't work when translated into English.*
> *–It is better not to write in Spanish and then translate into English because you waste a lot of time; it takes double time and double effort. I'd rather write an essay straight into English.* (FG4)

In the case of grammar, however, students were more sceptical about the value of computer-based tools. Grammar checkers, for example, were seen as not only missing most of the serious problems, but also giving ineffective advice.

> *–The spell-checker is quite useful, unlike the grammar checker which sometimes underlines long sentences and that's about all it does.*
> *–I think it will be years and years until computers will be able to correct the grammar of any language.* (FG3)

5.3.5 Discourse difficulties

Most writing assignments involve the use of reading materials as a basis for producing written text and include some kind of argumentation, persuasion, review, or exposition. In order to be successful in composition, it is important that the student

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identifies and develops the specific characteristics of a particular rhetorical task. For example, if students are asked to write an argumentative essay, they should be able to give reasons in an argumentative way and develop these reasons appropriately, according to the topic. For example, in one of the essays from the corpus analysed, a first year Travel Management Spanish student attempted to describe and discuss the topic 'Organisational Culture'. Although he used clear exposition, and presented a good research base with adequate examples, he had misunderstood the rhetorical purpose of the task. The essay was written, on the whole, in a report style, including a lot of bullet points, as if it was going to be presented orally.

Results from focus group interviews also showed that Spanish students suffered from a misunderstanding of what was required from them at a process level. They were sometimes unable to identify the rhetorical task to be achieved and, even when they did find it, they encountered difficulties in developing it in the right manner. Comments from focus group interviews included:

> –In Spain we are not used to writing essays in the way they do here. In my case, I had to learn how to write a proper essay over here.
> –I find that developing an argument is more difficult in English than in Spanish. In English I get lost easily in the reasoning I am trying to present.
> –For me the difficulty is understanding the topic question. In most cases I do not know what I am supposed to do.
> –Just like me, I never know what I am asked to do until I start researching in the area.
> –I have learned here that an essay is not a summary of the related literature; you must show your own knowledge and reflections in your field or area of study. (FG2)

As noted in chapter 2 (section 2.4.2), educational structures and systems differ internationally. Spanish students are exposed to learning methods that do not encourage critical or analytical thinking. Students in Spain have achieved success in their assessments by just "reproducing" either from set textbooks or lectures. Now, while studying in a UK university, Spanish students must learn to read critically and identify the material that is relevant to their needs. As suggested by Bloor and Bloor (1991: 2), students have to read academic papers reporting key experiments, and write evaluative essays discussing methodology and applications, and commenting on

how to interpret the results. The 'facts' although necessary for inclusion in assignments, are presented as 'given' information (the topic of discussion) but not the essence of the communicative event. The students who merely reiterate what they have read in a textbook are likely to underachieve.

Thus, if Spanish students have studied in a context where factual knowledge is the important factor in gaining academic success, they may fall into the trap of unintentional plagiarism. What usually occurs is that a student who is trying to use reference materials, and who has read, perhaps widely, on the subject in hand, fails to acknowledge the sources of his or her ideas. As pointed out by Schmitt (2005: 66), understanding the content and significance of what has been read and how to integrate this from information from other sources and one's own point of view is challenging enough for developing first-language writers. It can be doubly challenging for second language writers who bring fewer language resources to the task.

Some of the Spanish students interviewed were unclear of the meaning of plagiarism. One of the students commented:

> –The concept of plagiarism is relative. How do they distinguish what is a reference and what is plagiarism? (FG1)

According to Schmitt (2005: 67) copying with the intent to deceive is clearly plagiarism, but it is less clear that borrowing the words of others in an attempt to find one's own voice in a new language should implicate one in a criminal act. In fact, lack of their own words to express their ideas is the most common reason students give for their reliance on the language of their texts in their writing. They mistakenly believed that they would get better marks if they avoided constructing their own sentences in English, and thus they duplicated passages from books in their own assignments.

> –I tend to copy, at the end of the day I just want to get a good mark
> –Sometimes I copy because I know that if I paraphrase in English it will come out really bad; and the book explains it so well that it is very tempting to use the same words. (FG3)

Spanish students make organisational errors when including incorrect structural devices to express relations within the written discourse. Within this type of errors are included the general patterns of organisation of a piece of academic writing, its structure and cohesion, the way in which the different parts are linked together.

As previously mentioned (see section 5.2.1 above), English rhetoric is characterised by a direct manner of development, with little tolerance for digression, or repetition. Spanish writers, however, although they begin initially by developing their thoughts and ideas in a sequence of sentence types that produce an organisational structure which starts off as being linear, may suddenly break into a system which permits tangential material to be introduced into the discourse.

> *–I cannot answer the question because I keep digressing from one idea to another, ending up writing things that are not so relevant.* (FG4)

> *–I could explain something by writing four lines about it. However I like to go around that idea, and to develop it properly by inserting other ideas that seem relevant to me; probably in most cases they are not even relevant, but it is worth including them.* (FG3)

> *–I have a free style when writing. I like to divert from the main idea.* (FG3)

Spanish students tended to use long sentences, with an elaboration of ideas that, as mentioned before, detract from the central idea of the discourse. The tendency of Spanish students to write long sentences increases the likelihood of mistakes, and it is always more difficult to understand and read long sentences than shorter ones. Essays in English normally contain more full stops and fewer commas than in Spanish. An example of a long sentence taken from one of the assignments reads:

> *Although it is necessary to consider that the authors have limited themselves only to use sources on projects in the industrial environment, and not in the research environment, those where the end users and developers was different companies and in those where the use of prototyping have been explicitly provided for in the project planning, from this it would be possible to be extracted that the subjectivity has been reduced but the conclusion applicability range have been reduced to this environment.*

One of the Spanish students in the focus group interview commented:

–I've got a tendency to write many subordinates and complex sentences as we do in Spanish, then the reader does not know where the subject is or even the logic of the sentence. I must try writing shorter sentences as they do in English in order to express my ideas, but I find that very difficult. (FG2)

This section has attempted to highlight typical areas of difficulty for Spanish students, based on an analysis of fifteen written assignments and on findings emerging from the interviews and focus groups. In what follows, I will review key aspects of the literature on how the development of second language writing skills can be supported.

5.4 L2 WRITING PEDAGOGY

Recent authors (Nunan, 1999; Jordan 1997) in second language writing pedagogy distinguish two major paradigms: the product-focused approach and the process-oriented approach. The former approach focuses on the end product of the writing process, with major emphasis on analysis of surface-level errors. The latter concentrates on how the product is produced, with its major concern on content and discourse as a whole.

5.4.1 The product approach

The product approach to developing writing skills emphasises the finished product. Particular attention is given to linguistic development, focusing primarily on formal accuracy and correctness. One of the most explicit descriptions of product approaches is provided by Pincas (1982a). She sees writing as being primarily about linguistic knowledge, with attention focused on the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax, and cohesive devices (Pincas, 1982b). Its primary goal is an error-free coherent text, while process writing allows for the fact that no text can be perfect, but that a writer will get closer to perfection by producing, reflecting on, discussing and reworking successive drafts of a text (Nunan, 1999).

Thus, whereas the process approach focuses on the steps involved in creating a piece of work (see below section 5.4.2), the product approach focuses on writing tasks in

which the learner imitates, copies and transforms teacher supplied models. However, the uses of models for writing instruction have been controversial (Master, 1997). For example, Watson (1982) found some positive aspects in the use of models, but he also believed that models can lead to artificial products (texts). Escholz (1980) claims that models are usually too long, too remote from students' own writing problems, and too likely to promote reading comprehension and rhetorical analysis rather than writing. He saw the imitation of models as *inhibiting writers rather than empowering or liberating them* (Escholz, 1980:24). Raimes argues that models encourage students to think that form comes first, as a *predetermined mould into which they pour their content* (1983: 126-7). Silva (1990: 13) a key detractor of the product approach to writing instruction claims that:

> *The writer is simply a manipulator of previously learned language structures; the reader is the ESL teacher in the role of editor or proofreader, not especially interested in quality of ideas or expression but primarily concerned with formal linguistic features. The text becomes a collection of sentence patterns and vocabulary items- a linguistic artifact, a vehicle for language practice.*

It is argued, then, that the product approach, while allowing for a certain amount of revision, seriously underestimates the importance of rewriting in the creation of effective written communication. For example, Raimes (1985) claims that the product approach subtly suggests to learners that writing is a linear, rather than a recursive process.

However, despite this criticism, new approaches to writing instruction still use elements of the product approach. This is the case of genre approaches to writing instruction (Swales, 1990), which similarly regard writing as predominantly linguistic, but also emphasize that writing varies with the social context in which it is produced (Badger & White, 2000: 155). Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 154) identify three stages in genre approaches to writing. First, a model of a particular genre is introduced and analysed. Learners then carry out exercises which manipulate relevant language forms and, finally, produce a short text. This idea of using a model parallels product approaches very closely. The fact that the model is analysed suggests that learning is not only a question of imitating but also a matter of

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understanding. In short, Badger and White (2000: 156) describe genre-based approaches as *essentially concerned with knowledge of language, and as being tied closely to a social purpose. The development of writing is largely viewed as the analysis and imitation of input in the form of texts provided by the teacher.*

5.4.2 The process approach

As implicit in the above review, the process approach to writing, developed as practitioners and theorists identified the limitations of product pedagogy focused primarily on the text and began to refocus attention onto writers themselves and on the processes they use to construct texts. Badger and White (2000) claim that writing in process approaches involves pre-writing activities such as brainstorming, planning and drafting, and there is much less emphasis on linguistic knowledge, such as knowledge about grammar and text structure.

There are different views on the stages that writers go through in producing a piece of writing, but a typical model identifies four stages: prewriting; composing/drafting; revising; and editing (Tribble, 1996: 39). This is a cyclical process in which learners may return to pre-writing activities, for example, after doing some editing or revising. In fact, this composition theory attempts to enable students to make clear decisions about the direction of their writing (Jordan, 1997: 168). As Zamel (1983: 165) suggests:

> One of the assumptions of this approach is that the composing process is seen as a non-linear, exploratory: a generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning.

Despite its value in highlighting the skills involved in writing and in recognizing that what learners bring to the writing classroom contributes to the development of writing ability, the process approach has received strong criticism. Critics have perceived theoretical and practical problems as well as omissions. For example, Silva (1990: 16) suggested that a process writing approach placed too much emphasis on text generation from the writer's point of view rather than considering text from the reader's perspective. According to Badger and White (2000), the process approach

has also been criticized because by focusing on the processes of the individual writer, the role that social context plays in composing and constructing knowledge and meaning is ignored.

> *Social systems shape and control writers, who should understand that they are part of a larger discourse community whose dictates they follow.* (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006: 199).

For writers to mature, especially in a particular field, they need to work with others who have expertise in that particular discourse community. Indeed, writing *should not be viewed solely as an individually-oriented, inner-directed cognitive process, but as much as an acquired response to the discourse conventions . . . within particular communities*" (Swales, 1990: 4). This view is based on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which states that everything is learned through two levels: social interaction with others, then integrated into the individual's mental structure.

Another practical problem of the process approach has been pointed out by Badger and White (2000) who argue that the process approach to writing instruction offers learners insufficient input to write successfully, particularly in terms of linguistic knowledge. As Myles (2002) points out:

> *Although the process approach to instruction, characterized by practice, collaboration, and the opportunity for revision, may be suitable for most English L1 writers, it is apparent that many L2 writers do not have the necessary linguistic ability to reap the benefits of the approach.*

In fact, following the popularity of the process approach in L1 and L2 writing instruction in the 1970's and 1980's, concerns about the neglect of accuracy and its effects particularly for ESL writers have arisen. The early work of Eskey (1983) concludes that the ability to correct errors is crucial in many settings and that students' accuracy will not improve all by itself without explicit intervention. Horowitz (1986) also pointed out the limitations of the process approach for ESL writers functioning in real academic settings. He believes that overuse of peer evaluation may leave students with an unrealistic view of their abilities, claiming that this approach gives students a false impression of how university writing will be

evaluated. Others (Raimes, 1987; Silva, 1993; Widdowson, 1983) have linked similar criticisms to the fact that the process approach had its foundation in observations and interventions with L1 writers and its application with L2 writers may obscure important differences between the two groups. As mentioned above, non native speakers make errors related both to negative transfer from their L1 and to incomplete acquisition of the L2. Because non native writers, in addition to being developing writers, are still in the process of acquiring the L2 lexicon and morphological and syntactic systems, they arguably need distinct and additional intervention to make up for these deficits.

Myers (1997), for example, writing about international students in higher education in the United States, claims that such students are placed in ESL composition classes not because they cannot generate meaning, but because they do not have enough control of English vocabulary or syntax to write fluidly. In fact, from her research in the US context, she argues very strongly that international students may often be both psychologically and socially more mature than their L1 counterparts and often have plenty to say; their difficulty is knowing how to express their ideas in English. This is reflected in Leki's (1991) survey of 100 ESL students in the United States who were predominately concerned with producing error-free writing. Leki and Carson's (1994) survey of students' perceptions of EAP writing instruction and writing needs also found that the largest percentage of responses to the question of what students would like to have learned or learned better in their writing classes was "…*more language skills*." The most frequently expressed specific needs were to develop a more extensive vocabulary and more accurate grammatical usage.

A UK based survey of 247 elementary second language (English) writers responses to feedback on written work (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994) highlights *a strong concern for formal text features, such as lexical and grammatical accuracy*. Also in the UK, Casanave and Hubbard (1992) researched the writing problems of native and non-native doctoral students. Their results predictably show that non-native speakers have more problems than native students on most features of writing. The significant

finding was that these differences were the greatest in the areas of correctness of punctuation/spelling, accuracy of grammar and appropriateness of vocabulary and least at the discourse level. Wyllie (2000: 112), in a study of the composing strategies of native and non-native academic writers, concludes that the latter typically spend a great deal of time and put strong emphasis on low level revision such as spelling, grammar and punctuation and that in order to alleviate the process of academic writing, there is a need to eliminate these superficial errors.

To sum up, the process approach has been criticised for intentionally postponing language issues (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics) to the very end of the composing process. According to Ferris (2002: xii), what this often means, in practice, is that grammar and editing issues are almost never addressed in the ESL writing classroom. And yet, students' language problems are not disappearing as a result of a more enlightened process and view of writing. L2 writers may become, as mentioned before, frustrated by their linguistic deficit and demand teacher intervention. While not underestimating the need for teaching the more sophisticated levels of discourse addressed in the process approach, it appears that for L2 writers it is important to develop some degree of automaticity in the use of articles, verb tenses, subject/verb agreement, spelling and other surface features (Myers, 1997).

5.5 THE ROLE OF FORM FOCUSED INSTRUCTION

As it has been seen in section 5.3 of the current chapter, part of the problems that Spanish students face when writing academic English are due to L1 influence, specifically, the majority of these problems are encountered at sentence-level. Since my idea is to provide support for Spanish students which targets their very specific needs, it is important that I attempt to address these particular difficulties.

Before I go into the details of designing the pedagogical resource, it is pertinent to review the role of form focused instruction[3] or explicit grammar instruction (EGI) and to check its effectiveness to improve accuracy and alleviate structural sentence-level problems. As it has been seen in previous sections, current approaches to teaching writing skills seem to emphasise process rather than product, and fluency rather than accuracy. However, this does not seem to be the complete answer to L2 students problems who are still struggling to improve their accuracy in their academic writing skills.

Despite this, Ellis et al. (2002: 419) state that the teaching of linguistic forms, especially grammar, continues to occupy a major place in language pedagogy. Among the researchers who have recognised the benefits in form-focused instruction are Brown (1994), Celce-Murcia (1992), Ellis (1990), Hall (1998), Hyland (2003), Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991), Lightbown & Spada (1993), Norris & Ortega (2000), Torlaković & Deugo (2004).

Ellis (1997) cites much research to conclude that [t]*here is sufficient evidence to show that form-focused instruction can result in definite gains in accuracy*, although it is recognised that explicit learning may benefit some linguistic areas more than others. Both, Ellis' (1997) and Norris & Ortega's (2000) reviews confirm that the effects of EGI are durable, assuming that learners are provided with repeated opportunities to use the acquired forms communicatively.

Terrell (1991) proposed that EGI can affect the acquisition process in three different ways: (1) as an advance organiser of information, (2) as a meaning-form focuser, and (3) as monitoring. The advance organiser will give learner information about target language forms and structures that will aid comprehending and segmenting input. The meaning-form focuser will aid learners in comprehending a meaning-form relationship for morphologically complex forms; that is, for example by becoming

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[3] Form-focused instruction (FFI) refers to *any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form* (Ellis, 2001: 1–2).

aware of redundant grammatical meaning-forms relationships. Lastly, monitoring may help learners produce more accurate and complete utterances.

Similarly, Hall (1998: 44-45) claims that EGI is important for several reasons including that: (1) it can serve as a monitor to learner rules; (2) it counterbalances the weaknesses of implicit instruction by describing the fine details of L2 rules; (3) it exposes the learners to a metalanguage, aiding them to understand reference books and maybe become professionals in the fields of language teaching, translation or interpreting; (4) and it serves as a motivational tool for learners who gain satisfaction from it.

Norris and Ortega (2000) found that FFI in general results in large proficiency gains, and that its effects are durable. More specifically, their study shows that explicit instruction is more effective than implicit instruction. Furthermore, there is value in teaching explicit grammar in that some difficult grammar structures that are not easily acquired naturalistically need to be taught in order to raise awareness in the learner (see below 5.5.1).

Other recent authors who advocate for EGI are for example Torlaković and Deugo (2004). They identified that:

- There is a need for explicit grammar instruction in order to ease and speed up L2 acquisition.
- Form-focussed instruction provokes consciousness-raising in L2 learners and they become more aware of grammatical structure in their L2.
- Grammar instruction should be applied as input based and production based form-focussed instruction that contains both positive and negative evidence.
- Grammar instruction should be followed by feedback which provides a way for learners to test their hypotheses.

The hypothesis that form-focussed instruction provokes consciousness-raising has recently received much attention in second language acquisition research and

grammar instruction. The following subsection will review part of the debate about consciousness raising and noticing as elements of second language acquisition.

5.5.1 Consciousness-raising and the noticing hypothesis

The term consciousness-raising refers to the drawing of learners' attention to the formal properties of language (Rutherford & Sharwood-Smith, 1985). Significantly, as mentioned above, Ellis (1994, 1997) points out that consciousness raising is only directed at explicit knowledge, with no expectation that learners will use right away in communicative output a particular feature that has been brought to their attention through formal instruction, but with the aim that they will notice this particular linguistic feature in subsequent input. Overall, Ellis (1997) claims that conscious learning seems to contribute to successful L2 development in enhancing unconscious acquisition.

Schmidt (1990) identifies three aspects of consciousness involved in language learning: awareness, intention and knowledge. The first sense, consciousness as awareness, embraces noticing. According to Schmidt (1995: 20), *the noticing hypothesis states that what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning*. Schmidt's noticing hypothesis and its role in language acquisition has attracted some support as well as criticism. Ellis (1994, 1997), Lewis (1993) and Skehan (1998) in particular agree with the view that noticing accounts for the way in which input becomes intake prior to processing and availability for integration into a learner's developing interlanguage system. Moreover, Gass (1988) asserts that noticing is the first stage of language acquisition, Batstone (1994: 100) refers to the importance of noticing by describing it as *the gateway to subsequent learning*, and Lynch (2001) states that noticing is an important component of successful language learning. Among the criticism, Truscott (1998) claims that the necessity of noticing has been overstated; in his view, it is only a helpful tool and only when dealing with the acquisition of metalinguistic knowledge (manipulating words, completing gap-fills, manipulating sentences, and stating grammar rules).

While such theoretical assertions are useful for offering insights into L2 acquisition, it is only through empirical research that they are validated or negated. According to Hegelheimer and Chapelle (2000) one possible method to do research on noticing is to construct conditions for noticing in instructional or experimental materials by highlighting particular linguistic features. Learners who use those materials are then assumed to have noticed the target points. Using this method, Doughty (1991) found that learners who used materials with relative clauses highlighted outperformed another group whose materials had not been highlighted. Similarly, White (1998) found that students exposed to enhanced input to learn possessive determiners made more developmental progress in their use than students who were not exposed to enhanced input.

Research on noticing has employed two other approaches (Hegelheimer & Chapelle, 2000): the first asks learners to retrospectively report what they had noticed during task completion; the second consists in inferring noticing from observable interactions such as negotiation of meaning during task completion. Schmidt and Frota (1986) compared these two sources of data: first, a diary in which Schmidt kept records of his observations while learning Portuguese in immersion conditions in Brazil; second, recordings of his interactions with native speakers. Schmidt reported being unable to sustain communicative contact with native speakers during the period in which he did not attend any formal instruction. However, the information he received on his first day of class immediately increased his comprehension and gave him the information he needed to meet basic communicative goals. Schmidt and Frota (1986) report that the classroom context helped focus language learning outside of the classroom by directing Schmidt's conscious attention to particular features of the unstructured input. Schmidt (1990: 141) claims this is *strong evidence for a close connection between noticing and emergence in production.* One interesting and relevant conclusion from this study is that formal instruction is important during study abroad. Interestingly, Schmidt and Frota (1986) also found that interaction with native speakers, while providing the necessary input for language learning, was also

not sufficient in and of itself for language learning in that it does not guarantee grammaticality or idiomaticity.

5.5.2 The role of FFI in study abroad contexts

The conclusion of the study by Schmidt and Frota (1986) that informal instruction is important during study abroad has been tested by other researchers in other study abroad contexts. Miller and Ginsberg (1995), who analysed language learning process and methods in the Russian study abroad setting, reached the conclusion that students perceive language as a fixed system in which words and syntax are the primary elements, with a unified system of set rules and meaning that is carried by the words alone. Moreover, students believed that success in Russian means producing grammatically correct utterances. However, while Miller and Ginsberg (1995) reported that students were very concerned with forming grammatically correct utterances and praised grammar instruction in the classroom, other studies, such as Lennon's (1989) and Robinson's (1995) found that their participants perceived themselves as more focused on communication than on accuracy. There may be different reasons for this discrepancy, but individual learner differences among the studies' participants could be playing an important role. Moreover, according to Pellegrino (1998), students' experiences of foreign language classrooms in their home culture may influence how they perceive the target language and language learning in the study abroad environment.

It has been reported (for example Pellegrino, 1998) that during their period of study abroad, participants often reject the language classroom and see classwork as less productive than socializing with native speakers (see also chapter 2 section 2.4.3.3 and results from the current investigation section 4.3.3). This negative attitude towards formal instruction while living and studying abroad can lead students to reject the opportunities offered to them (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). However, there is some research which suggests that students do not find classes *per se* to be valueless, but rather in need of improvement (Brecht & Robinson, 1995). Brecht and Robinson analysed L2 use events learners reported taking place outside the classroom

concluding that classwork positively influenced out-of-class L2 use in three ways. First, classes helped learners focus their out-of-class language practice by setting goals for language use and providing a neatly packaged vocabulary and grammar by which to achieve those goals. Second, class interactions helped learners activate information and language skills previously known only passively. Third, learners reported that formal instruction augmented their comprehension by helping them access nuances of vocabulary and form that learners might otherwise miss in natural input.

5.5.3 FonF and FonFs

Within the term form focused instruction, Long (1991) has distinguished two different pedagogical treatments: focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFs). The former refers to drawing students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication (Long, 1991). The latter is equated with the traditional teaching of discrete points of grammar in separate lessons; in FonFs, the main principle of curriculum design is division of the language according to lexis, structures, notions or functions, which are selected and sequenced for students to learn in a uniform and incremental way (Long, 1991). Thus, while FonFs involves taking individual linguistic items out of context and isolating them for separate study, in a FonF approach it is a primary communicative need, identified as part of meaning-based interaction, that draws the learner's attention to a formal aspect of the language, often as a result of a mismatch between input and output that induces 'noticing' (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Schmidt, 1990).

Sheen (2005) highlights the fundamental difference in terms of theoretical underpinning between FonF and FonFs. According to him, FonF originates from an assumed association between first and second language acquisition, positing that the two processes are both based on an exposure to comprehensible input arising from natural interaction. At the same time, there is an awareness of a fundamental difference between first and second language acquisition which is that exposure is

insufficient to enable learners to acquire much of the second-language grammar, consequently focusing learners' attention to grammatical features is essential. On the other hand, Sheen (2005: 303) states that *FonFs is based on the assumption that classroom foreign or second language learning derives from general cognitive processes, and thus entails the learning of a skill –hence its being characterised as a 'skills-learning approach'*. Sheen distinguishes three stages in the FonFs approach:

(1) providing understanding of the grammar by a variety of means (including explanation in the L1, pointing out differences between the L1 and L2).

(2) exercises entailing using grammar in a variety of activities.

(3) providing frequent opportunities for communicative use of the grammar to promote automated, accurate use.

Studies of the effectiveness of both FonF and FonFs, particularly of the former, have proliferated in recent years. Spada (1997) reviews classroom research and laboratory studies and points to the benefits of a wide range of FFI instructional types, suggesting the effectiveness of both FonFs and FonF. Also, Norris and Ortega (2000) found that both FonFs- and FonF-type interventions were highly effective. Klapper and Rees (2003) carried out an investigation of foreign language teaching in a majority L1 setting in order to measure the linguistic progress of one group exposed to essentially a FonF approach and another exposed to more specific FonFs instruction. Their findings suggest that there is still a substantial need for a FonFs approach to language instruction. Their results show that foreign languages are taught more efficiently and effectively when meaning-based classroom interaction in L2 is linked to FonFs, rather than (just) FonF instruction.

To conclude this section, it can be argued that terms like EGI, noticing and the FonF and FonFs distinction have played an important role in research carried out in the last decades, particularly in a study abroad context. There has been a number of studies which have pointed out the benefits of FFI in the development of second language proficiency, and despite claims such as Doughty's that the case for explicit instruction has been overstated (2003: 274), it has been demonstrated that instruction is an important means of learning (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991; Long 1983) and that

explicit FFI would probably do more good than harm. Nevertheless, despite the positive effects of EGI that have been verified by research, there are a few limitations. Tsai-Yu-Chen (1995) points out that many aspects of the target language do not have rules that can be clearly formulated and easily taught or learned. Krashen (1992: 409) shares this view saying that only a small portion of the total grammatical properties of a language can be consciously learned. A second limitation is the insufficiency of EGI to develop pragmatic competence. Sorace (1985: 250-52) studied a group of non-beginners learning Italian with explicit focus on grammar in acquisition-poor environments. The results show that there was *highly significant correlation between knowledge and use*, but learners could only produce *a limited range* of communicative functions and *their communicative competence was restricted.*

There are also other limitations of EGI. For example, particularly at an advanced level, L2 learners have a tendency to *feel that only "new" material is interesting and relevant* (Fried-Booth, 1982: 98), hence with increasingly fewer new items to be introduced in class, the learner may perceive EGI unappealing in its conventional form. Moreover, contrary to claims by Donmall (1996) and Hall (1998), the conventional mode of L2 instruction seems to lack appeal to a new generation of L2 learners. As Brumen (2000: 10) pointed out, few younger learners are motivated to acquire language for its own sake. Despite theoretical merits addressed by Hall (1998), EGI in a foreign language course requires an approach designed to generate enthusiasm among today's young individuals. It is here that computers and CALL have an important role to play.

5.6 <u>SUMMARY</u>

The writing problems experienced by Spanish speakers studying in the UK may be due to a multiplicity of factors, including the effects of transfer and interference from the Spanish language, and cultural norms. After having reviewed these concepts, this chapter concludes by giving an indication of what areas are particularly problematic and specific to Spanish students when writing academic English. I have supported my

claims by showing the results of a limited error analysis on 15 academic assignments written by a group of Spanish university students, together with quotations from four focus group discussions in which students commented on their perceived weaknesses and difficulties when writing their assignments.

Since I am envisaging support for this particular group of students, the second part of this chapter has focused on existing pedagogical approaches. It has been seen in this chapter that broadly there are two main ways to address writing problems, one which focuses mainly on the text as the final product and the other which focuses mainly on the processes involved in creating the text. Nowadays, process approaches to writing dominate the second language classroom. Arguably, a process approach –particularly one updated to emphasise the social context of academic writing – would seem to be appropriate for helping students adapt their writing to appropriate discourse conventions. Nevertheless, the limitations of this approach to developing writing skills in an L2 context seem to be its assumption that writers are proficient enough in the language to implement revision strategies and its lack of emphasis on addressing surface-level linguistic errors. As it has been seen, surface-level errors, particularly those influenced by a student's L1, are perennial in international students' written work and it is to their treatment that I now turn.

In a study abroad context, the teaching of formal structures reassures students and positively influences L2 use in the outside environment. The return to grammar teaching in later years has been predicated on it being 'born again' as Pedagogical Grammar, meaning that it is tailored to the needs of the learner (Goodfellow & Metcalfe, 1997). It is motivated by the limited time available to students and by the dangers of fossilisation of incorrect forms. This key notion of the adaptability of Pedagogical Grammar was taken up by Swan (1994: 53), who claimed that effective grammar teaching focuses on the specific problems of specific learners, which *will necessarily mean giving a somewhat fragmented and partial account ... rather than working through a 'complete' grammar syllabus giving 'complete' rules. ...*

The support intervention envisaged for Spanish students in the current investigation aims to address sentence-level structural problems, in order to help Spanish students to write as close to error-free as possible. McBride and Seago (1997) claim that unlike most other components of communicative competence such as pragmatic, textual or socio-linguistic competence, grammatical competence can be taught separately. In fact, as pointed out by Beaudoin (1998), it may be best if grammatical competence is learned individually on a computer since the computer can adapt to the learners wide ranging needs. CALL also fits very well with the idea that grammar should be set apart from the rest of the learning material (Dulay et al., 1982). By asking learners to individually study grammar in their own time at their own pace, classroom time can be devoted to communication skills rather than to explanation of grammar rules. The learners can study only the rules they need, which is difficult in a classroom context where there are other students with different needs or even with a linear medium such as the textbook

The following chapter will present the principles that will guide the design of the web-based intervention for Spanish students. This intervention is envisaged to provide concise explanations on specific structural aspects and a number of interactive activities aimed to lessen the presence of errors in Spanish students academic writing in English. In this chapter, it has been established that while Spanish students in the UK might get exposure to the English language for the natural language acquisition processes, these processes are not sufficient on their own to deal with specific problems. Results from the evaluation of the implementation will also be presented in next chapter.

DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF A WEB-BASED MODULE SPECIFIC TO SPANISH STUDENT IN UK HE

6.0 <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

In the previous chapter an overview of the different approaches for the teaching of writing skills was provided. It was established that ESL writers expect and appreciate assistance in improving their language accuracy. In the initial analysis presented in chapter 4, Spanish students expressed their opinion that by being more accurate in their writing, their confidence would grow and their assignments would show more fluency (see chapter 4, section 4.3.3). Hence, the provision of materials designed to tackle sentence-level errors in academic writing would not only be valuable for students as learners, but also for their tutors in the particular discipline, who would then be able to search for deeper meaning and development in a written project without disruption from surface-level errors.

The current chapter is a presentation and evaluation of a web-based resource providing concise explanations of specific structural points and a number of quizz pages using the web-based managed learning environment (MLE) *Blackboard*. Its aim is to provide Spanish students with instruction which targets some of their greatest areas of weaknesses and difficulties when writing academic English due to L1 interference as identified in chapter 5 (see section 5.3).

In the design of this resource, I recognise the potential value of explicit formal instruction as a means of dealing with academic writing errors. I believe that while Spanish students in the UK might get exposure to the English language for the natural (inductive) language acquisition processes, these processes are not sufficient on their own to deal with specific problems (see chapter 5, section 5.5.2). Some form of proactive focus-on-form instruction may be beneficial. The web-based resource proposed here enables Spanish students to check and enhance their written English by referring to sentence-level aspects of the language (spelling, vocabulary, and grammar), where they frequently and typically experience problems.

According to Garcia Calvo (2000: 77), surface-level errors, such as grammar and vocabulary are easier to eradicate than content problems such as organisation of discourse, particularly if the use of interactive software programs is envisaged. Garrett (1988) argues that in order to free time in the classroom for authentic spontaneous interaction in the target language, since the current philosophy of language teaching in the classroom places heavy emphasis on the communication of meaning rather than on form, computers can be used to address the more 'mechanical' and the 'non-communicative' language learning activities. It also makes sense to delegate to the computer tailor-made materials for the needs of specific groups when the classroom is composed of students from different L1 backgrounds.

The first section of the present chapter will review the literature on current practices and research on support for language learning in a digital environment, particularly in the context of increasing use of managed learning environments (MLEs) in UK higher education. The second part will describe the development of the learning resource: the principles of the design and its organisation and the incorporation of one of the most popular applications of the MLEs - quizzes or interactive drills. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the project by a sample of targeted population (Spanish students) which addresses research question 3.ii presented in chapter 1 (section 1.3): *would self-access web-based material consisting of explanations and quizzes, be efficient and effective in helping Spanish students address these specific linguistic problems?*

6.1 HISTORY OF CALL AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORIES

The speed with which technology has developed since the invention of the computer has been surprisingly sustained. The rapid and continuing introduction of new learning technologies has typically outpaced the ability to evaluate their pedagogic potential in depth; this is as true for CALL (Computer-assisted language learning) as it is for other areas of learning. As Levy (1997: 1) points out,

no sooner do we come to terms with one machine and develop some CALL materials for it, than another machine arrives to replace it. Scholars such as Chapelle (2001) and Kern and Warschauer (2000), have distinguished three stages in the development of CALL which they define with reference to distinct theories within the psychology of learning (see table 6.1 below), theories which have already been mentioned in chapter 5 of the current study.

THEORIES WITHIN PSYCHOLOGY OF LEARNING	CALL APPROACHES	ROLE OF COMPUTERS
Behaviourism	Structural	To provide unlimited drill, practice, tutorial, explanation, and corrective feedback
Cognitivism	Cognitive	To provide language input and analytical and inferential tasks.
Socioconstructivism Interactional approach	Sociocognitive	To provide alternative contexts for social interaction: to facilitate access to existing discourse communities and the creation of new ones.

Table 6.1 – Based on the relationship between CALL developmental stages (Warschauer & Kern, 2000: 13) and the psychology of learning.

6.1.1 Structural CALL

As can be observed in table 6.1 above, a behaviourist approach to learning (see chapter 5 section 5.2.1) informed a structural approach to CALL. The earliest CALL programs (e.g. PLATO, Storyboard), consisting of grammar and vocabulary tutorials, drill and practice programs, and language testing instruments were designed to provide immediate positive or negative feedback to learners on the formal accuracy of their responses (Kern & Warschauer, 2000). This is certainly in keeping with the theories of behaviorism: good habits are strengthened and bad habits (i.e., incorrect use of language) are discouraged through feedback. The unit of analysis in such programs is typically at the sentence level, or even at the word level in the case of many of the verb conjugation exercises, and often the syllabus is very clearly structured into linguistic categories.

Although behaviourist theories have fallen from favour since the early eighties, the same cannot be said for structural CALL. Examples of CALL drill and practice

material abound; many are now available via the internet (The *ESL Cyber Listening Lab* and *Interesting Things for ESL Students* are examples of valuable instructional resources on the Web that use drill and practice exercises). These learning packages allow learners to work autonomously, as long as they know how to control their own learning process, for example to identify their own learning needs. As Warschauer (1996) points out, the rationale behind drill and practice is not totally spurious as it is built on the following justifications:

- Repeated exposure to the same material is beneficial or even essential to learning.

- A computer is ideal for carrying out repeated drills, since the machine does not get bored with presenting the same material and since it can provide immediate non-judgmental feedback.

- A computer can present such material on an individualized basis, allowing students to proceed at their own pace and freeing up class time for other activities.

6.1.2 Cognitive CALL

Cognitivist developments, as we have seen (see chapter 5.2.2), placed great emphasis on organisational mental processes. Language knowledge came to be understood not as conditioned response but as an active process of generating and transforming knowledge. Cognitivist approaches to language learning (such as cooperative problem-solving) de-emphasized the role of habit formation and encouraged learners to consciously think about and discuss how the new language operates based on the samples they are exposed to. Making mistakes was seen as an important part of learning, as they help learners to test hypotheses and thus contribute eventually to rule formation. Consequently, CALL packages designed on cognitive premises exploit the computer as a tool to explore language in order to help learners understand how it works. A typical example is *Storyboard*, a text-reconstruction program where the aim is to reconstruct a text, word by word, using textual clues such as the title, introductory material, and textual clues within the text. A more sophisticated example in this tradition is the multimedia videodisc

program *A la rencontre de Philippe* (Furstenberg et al. 1993) which through video, sound, graphics and text, simulates a walk through Paris. The learner becomes the central character in the story which branches out in different ways, depending upon what the learner does, which in turn depends on what they understand. However, although programs such as this put the learner in an active role and provide an illusion of communicative interaction, Kern and Warschauer (2000: 10) point out that the learner works within a closed system, and does not engage in genuine negotiation of meaning. As in the case of Behaviourism, it is difficult to find now any language learning-teaching method exclusively based upon a cognitive approach.

6.1.3 Sociocognitive CALL

Sociocognitive approaches to CALL are based on the socioconstructivist ideas promulgated by Vygotsky (1978) who claimed that all human learning, including language learning, is attained through interaction with other people (see chapter 5, section 5.4.2). A sociocognitive approach to CALL has been enabled by the development of computer networking, which allows the computer to be used as a vehicle for interactive human communication (Kern & Warschauer, 2000: 11). As Kern and Warschauer (2000: 11) claim, sociocognitive approaches to CALL shift the dynamic from learners' interaction with computers to interaction with other human beings via the computer. The explosion of computer mediated communication (CMC) in the 1980's with the widespread use of e-mail and synchronous communication in the form of chats, and forums, as well as the use of learning environments such as Moodle or MOOs[1] has opened up the world of authentic communication for the second language learner, enabling collaboration, cooperation and teamwork among different cultural groups at a distance. Cummins and Sayers (1995: 32-33) have even suggested that the frequently asynchronous nature of CMC is a positive advantage for second language learners:

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[1] *A MOO is a telnet-accessible text-virtual environment in which synchronous communication takes place between 'players' logged on at the same time. MOO stands for 'MUD object oriented'. An MUD is a multiple-user domain* (Turbee, 1995-233)

> *The inevitable cultural differences that exist between distant groups require clarity of written communication in disclosing local realities…asynchronicity allows second language learners the extra time they need to elaborate and polish written texts based on 'models' of native speakers of the target language, while seeking and relying heavily upon assistance from their local language and cultural resources in the form of teachers, peers and community members.*

Hence, from the point of view of language learning, the benefit of sociocognitive CALL approaches is that they allow learners to engage in a process of negotiation of meaning to carry out a particular task. In this sense, learners have to make decisions about the materials, learners to work with, and how to approach the task among others. Making these decisions involves thinking about the learning process. Sociocognitive CALL thus refers to the use of computers to facilitate the communication exchange process.

The history of CALL, then, suggests that the computer can serve a variety of uses in promoting language learning. It can be a tutor which offers language drills or skill practice, it can provide structured opportunities for hypothesis generation or a facilitative environment for interaction. The effectiveness of CALL clearly does not reside in the medium itself but only in how it is put to use. Each of the approaches reviewed above has something different to offer but none of them can address all the language learner's needs. As pointed out by Garrett (1991: 75), *the use of the computer does not constitute a method*, rather it is a *medium in which a variety of methods, approaches, and pedagogical philosophies may be implemented*.

The resource for Spanish students in UK universities proposed here will take a structural approach consisting of multiple-choice questions, gap-filling exercises, and other forms of 'drill and practice'. As Hall points out (1998: 48), these features are associated with explicit grammar teaching and have come in for criticism from those who argue that proficiency in a second language builds up implicitly and is only weakly influenced by explicit learning (this debate has been reviewed in chapter 5 section 5.5) and strengthened by the increasing recognition

of the value of explicit instruction. The idea is to provide instruction which gives explicit attention to language form as a supplement to meaning focused tuition already imparted at universities in the UK and to the opportunities of interaction already present in the context of study abroad. As mentioned in chapter 5 (section 5.6), it has been recognised that the exclusive use of meaning-focused tasks may lead to fossilisation of erroneous language forms. Additionally, my proposal focuses on English forms which, I have argued, are likely to be problematic given a Spanish L1 background, and which appear not to be easily acquired from positive evidence of meaning-focused L2 use (see Harley & Swain, 1984; Lyster, 1994; White, 1991) since they were all forms that students with several years of instruction and over months of immersion in an English-speaking academic environment had some difficulty in producing correctly.

6.2 BENEFITS OF CALL AND LANGUAGE LEARNING ONLINE

Literature and research reporting on the use of online language learning activities highlight features that make them an effective and successful method in the language learning and teaching environment. In this section, I will review the arguments for providing explicit language instruction on-line. The obvious argument for web-based learning activities is that students will have access to information at any time and in any place convenient to them and thus *students can spend more time outside of class practising the skills they've learned in the class* (Bell, 1998: 8). Research confirms that students increasingly want materials that they can use independently (i.e. that do not require expert explanation from the lecturer) and that they can access flexibly (Coleman, 1991; Lafford & Lafford, 1997; Bickerton, 2000; Weinberg, 2002).

It could thus be argued that online learning activities support a more student-centred learning environment and thus contribute to promoting greater learner autonomy. A student centred environment is said to be one where students choose what to learn, when to learn, and in what ways to learn (Race, 2001; Rowntree, 1994) and in recent years, the benefits of students becoming more active

participants in the educational process have been stressed (Fanany, 2005). Student centredness has been identified as an important theme in online learning (Kearsley, 2000), which tends to be less structured than traditional classes and relies more on independent learning in which the responsibility for seeking improvement rests on the shoulders of the students. It has been suggested that, when students are required to take responsibility for their own learning, they are likely to be more successful and the learning process to be more meaningful to them. In online learning activities, not only do students have the flexibility of doing exercises whenever and wherever they choose to, additional exercises and other online resources also allow students to focus on specific areas in which they are weak (Godwin-Jones, 1996), controlling the degree of difficulty, and deciding whether and how often to repeat an exercise. Research has shown that web-based activities help in promoting independent learning. For example, in Morrall's (1999) study, results revealed that 72% of his respondents agreed that learning English on the internet had made them more independent learners. Nevertheless, it needs to be said that this empirical justification is not an absolute one. There are reports of more negative evaluations by students (see Sneddon & Kremer, cited in Broady, 1996). Broady (1996: 216) points out that the ambivalence students may feel towards this self-direction reflects the dual nature of responsibility:

> *On the one hand, taking responsibility makes heavy psychological demands since it requires us to confront our weaknesses and recognise our failures; on the other, it allows us a sense of control over our circumstances, which favours self-esteem and confidence.*

A third characteristic that makes CALL materials such a useful approach is their ability to provide immediate feedback. As Hall (1998: 47) states, if students do not fully understand traditional pencil-and-paper exercises, they can repeat the same mistake over and over again, and only recognise what has gone wrong when their work is marked by the teacher. Because the computer reacts to each individual answer, it can prevent this from happening.

Another feature of online learning that make it so attractive is its seductive nature. Bell (1998) claims that the web has some of the same seductive characteristics as

television—with the potential to be much more useful as an educational tool—and entices students into using the web for beneficial activities (Bell, 1998). Also Hall (1998: 47) argues that students find computers stimulating and enjoyable tools and that they are motivated to use the computer for all types of activity.

6.3 LIMITATIONS OF COMPUTER LANGUAGE LEARNING

As seen above, learning and teaching language with computers can be beneficial in several ways; however, in order to get the maximum effectiveness from CALL, it is important that we are aware of its limitations. One of them is that, unfortunately, not many teachers today have enough technological training to guide their students exploring assisted language learning programs. Also, no student can use a computer if he or she lacks training in the uses of computer technology. Therefore, the benefits of computer technology for those students or teachers who are not familiar with computers are minimal (Roblyer, 2003).

Second, the software of CALL programs is still imperfect. Current computer technology mainly deals with reading, listening, and writing skills. Even though some speaking programs have been developed recently, their functions are still limited. Warschauer (2004) pointed out that a program should ideally be able to understand a user's "*spoken*" input and evaluate it not just for correctness but also for "*appropriateness*". It should be able to diagnose a student's problems with pronunciation, syntax, or usage and then intelligently decide among a range of options.

Third, due to the limitations of computers' artificial intelligence, computer technology is unable to deal with learners' unexpected learning problems and respond to learners' questions immediately as teachers do. The reasons for the computer's inability to interact effectively can be traced back to a fundamental difference in the way humans and computers utilize information (Dent, 2001). Blin (1994) also pointed out that computer technology with that degree of intelligence does not exist, and is not expected to exist for quite a long time. In a word, today's

computer technology and its attached language learning programs are not yet intelligent enough to be truly interactive. People still need to put effort into developing and improving computer technology in order to assist second language learners.

Last, an important limitation is the lack of human contact, which impacts greatly on learning. Web-based instruction is better than CD-ROM learning in this regard. Students can use their Web connection to e-mail other students, post comments on message boards, or use chat rooms and videoconference links to communicate live. While this type of interaction is helpful, and an improvement over CD-ROM learning, it still does not have the impact of a face-to-face lesson.

6.4 CALL APPLICATIONS FOR FFI

As already seen in chapter 5 (section 5.5), FFI can play a significant role in L2 acquisition. The question remains, however, how the learned knowledge of the structure of the target language can be best achieved. This is particularly pertinent in the context of higher education, which is increasingly operating in a context of diminishing resources, and where formal language teaching may be affected by cuts in contact hours (McBride & Seago, 1997: 19). Alternatives to traditional classroom-based ways of providing form instruction are currently being investigated in order to free class time for other aspects of the language practice, such as communicative interaction. In this respect, CALL, and particularly web-based materials have an important role to play, as they offer several advantages, among them good possibilities for independent study and an attractive environment.

There have been attempts to provide formal teaching instruction in various languages using CALL materials. According to McBride and Seago (1997: 10), most materials are primarily exercises which provide immediate feedback and can be used for self-assessment or formal testing. More recently packages have included grammar support and explanations. There is some evidence to support the

validity of such materials. For example, Torlaković and Deugo (2004) examined whether, and the extent to which, CALL grammar instruction, compared with face-to-face instruction, contributed significantly to improving intermediate ESL learners' performance and confidence in positioning adverbs. Their study showed more significant gains among those engaged in computer-based grammar instruction. Further, the participants in the study favoured this type of grammar instruction, for it allowed them to have more control over their learning path, gave them immediate feedback, and released them from experiencing the negative psychological effect that may follow face-to-face negative feedback. Torlaković and Deugo (2004) concluded by recommending CALL systems as instructional tools for L2 learning and for the teaching of complex areas of grammar where learners typically have difficulty. They also claim that this type of instruction considerably increases learners' confidence, which may positively influence learning.

Nagata's studies (1996, 1998) also found the computer to be an effective tool in teaching and learning grammar. In a study with students of Japanese, Nagata (1996) compared the effectiveness of computer-based instruction with traditional workbook instruction and concluded that computer feedback was more effective for developing learners' grammatical skill in producing Japanese particles and sentences. Her questionnaire results also revealed that students in the CALL group were more enthusiastic about the exercises than those in the workbook group, suggesting that CALL was more attractive with its interactive features than the traditional workbook exercises.

6. 5 THE USE OF MANAGED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In recent years, the provision of Managed Learning Environments (MLEs) to support web-based learning has increased across HE institutions in the UK and other countries, as developers have created easy-to-use applications. One important use of such applications is the online provision of course materials to

supplement traditional classroom-based learning with unlimited '24/7' access (Jefferis et al. 2004).

The functions offered in the various commercial online learning environment applications such as *WebCT*, *Moodle* or *Blackboard* are very similar (Henly & Reid, 2001; Morss, 1999). Using a password to access the site from the Internet, or the university intranet through a Web browser, students can access a web-delivered course from any location allowing them to undertake independent learning at their own pace and time. Several communication tools, such as e-mail, bulletin boards, and chat rooms provide interaction between and among students and faculty. Various tools exist for faculty to create and post course content and learning aids, for example, a glossary, quizzes and self-tests, references, and a wide variety of content materials such as guided outlines or lecture visuals (Morgan, 2003: 4).

Research has shown that the tools are attractive to students because they increase interactivity (Henly & Reid, 2001; Morss 1999) and provide useful support for learning (Henly & Reid, 2001). Morss's (1999) empirical study found that the availability of course materials on a MLE helped some students focused on the topic and learn more quickly. Henly and Reid (2001), examining student use of web-based course support and performance in class, found that use of the web-based course support varied widely among students, but that those who used the site more frequently scored higher for all class tests. Students' feedback about the site was very positive with the majority of students reporting that the course materials and assessment items that were available, were useful to their learning. Likewise, Strickland (2003) in his survey of student use of an MLE concluded that student respondents viewed the MLE as a valuable additional service: the vast majority of students evaluated the web-based support to their courses positively and indicated that they wanted their lecturers to use a wider variety of features (tools) within the MLE. Rossiter's (2004) of first-year engineering students also found that student response was very positive on the whole. Students felt they got

better support, could make use of the resources any time, were assessed in a less stressful manner and most importantly gained confidence in their own progress over the module. Burgess (2003), researching technology students in the US, highlighted how students' interest in an MLE may be tempered by initial experiences of frustration with technology; uploading assignments, using bulletin board features, or checking for new postings on a regular basis was perceived to be time consuming and/or challenging by some. Meanwhile, Eyitayo's (2005) study with students at the University of Botswana found that students responded well to the use of an MLE to deliver part of a course alongside traditional classroom delivery; in particular, they reported navigation within the environment to be user-friendly. Eyitayo concluded that while eLearning is no substitute for face-to-face lectures, it does provide a useful support tool; particular advantages were the greater flexibility of time and place for learning and the easier provision of feedback.

Clearly, student confidence with technology and simplicity of use of applications are key factors in the success of MLEs (Brown, 2002; Burgess, 2003). In the current investigation I will examine Spanish students' perceptions of web learning environments designed specifically to alleviate part of their academic writing problems by focusing on trying to reduce the number of surface-level errors. Considering the importance highlighted in the studies reviewed of user-friendly features, perceived ease of use of materials as well as perceived usefulness will be investigated.

6.6 THE DESIGN OF THE RESOURCE TO ADDRESS THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF SPANISH STUDENTS

This section overviews the design of the language learning web-based resource that has been envisaged to support Spanish students in UK universities improve their academic writing skills by reducing the frequency of linguistic errors appearing in their academic assignments. Originally, this support strategy was created with a piece of software (*Hot Potatoes*) that allows the construction of

quizzes with automated feedback. However, shortly after this first step was completed, the University of Brighton adopted, as part of its e-learning strategy and to support educators' and students' needs, the MLE *Blackboard*. It was believed that *Blackboard* would be a more appropriate platform than a self-standing CD to carry the designed materials; thus, the *Hot Potatoes* drills were modified to fit the *Blackboard* platform. It must be mentioned that initially, the authoring package *Hot Potatoes* provided me with valuable experience in designing the sort of activities deemed necessary for this project. Illustrations of the *Hot Potatoes* pilot activities are presented in Appendix J.

The advantage of using *Blackboard* for the delivery of language learning materials was the opportunity to develop an interactive programme as opposed to the more traditional media. Interactivity by individuals with the content can be navigational or functional. Navigational interactivity is promoted primarily by the possibility of non-linear navigation using hypertext. Non-linear presentation refers to a syllabus of materials that is offered to students like a menu from which they can choose in accordance with their personal tastes and inclinations. As Fanany (2005: 40) puts it, the term itself is frequently used in the field of information technology to refer to pathways that allow users to choose from a series of options set out in a branching or other orientation. In a non-linear course or unit, the experience of each student will be different, although the ultimate result will be comparable. In other words, students will choose from a range of materials and activities that will lead them to the achievement of specific outcomes in terms of mastery or creation of knowledge. It is the most basic form of interactivity with the hypertext operating merely as an electronic page turner (Garrett 1995: 346).

The existence of MLEs, such as *Blackboard*, facilitates the design and development of units using non-linear presentation. It is not necessary for instructors/designers to know much about HTML and they can develop and maintain their own non-linear presentation with a moderate amount of training. Using *Blackboard*, there are several ways in which material can be developed and

presented in a non-linear manner. According to Fanany (2005), the most appropriate method will depend on the material to be covered, the aims of the unit, the type of learning desired (individual vs. collaborative, etc), and the pedagogical approach adopted by the instructor.

For the design of the current materials, I have taken into account that the students would work autonomously. Therefore the organisation of content, navigational features and layout of the materials has been kept simple with information clearly presented. Since complex graphics could slow the process of downloading and consequently the materials may become irritating and frustrating for students, they have been avoided. Backgrounds were designed to increase readability and to be easily printable. It was sought to make navigation clear and consistent with a facility to return to the homepage without scrolling down.

Considering that the materials were aimed at Spanish students from any discipline, high linguistic competence was not assumed. Consequently detailed knowledge of grammatical terms was not required. The metalanguage used for the presentation of content was Spanish, in order to avoid ambiguities which might affect performance, in particular, of lower ability students.

6.6.1 Organisation of the linguistic content

The resource is structured around four basic units with a fixed structure which includes theory and practice. The error analysis that took place during the initial investigation (see chapter 5, section 5.3) identified a list of errors made by Spanish students in their academic written assignments. The elements on the list fell into one of the five following linguistic levels: orthographic, lexical, morphological, syntactical and general academic writing issues, including pragmatic and sociolinguistic errors. These same elements have been adopted and adapted to create the structure for the resource, resulting in four different units:

- spelling (orthographic errors)
- vocabulary (lexical errors)

- grammar (morphological and syntactic errors)
- discourse (pragmatic and sociolinguistic errors)

The process of accurate writing demands achievement in all four areas and the proposition is that Spanish students would gain confidence by realising that the prevention of mistakes in each of these areas would result in a reasonable improvement in their written assignments, as they will become more accurate and therefore communication with their tutors will be more efficient.

An example of the most frequent errors occurring in each of the four linguistic areas from the list assembled were selected to be included in the resource :

from the spelling area   ⟶   double consonants

from the vocabulary area   ⟶   false friends

from the grammar area   ⟶   word order

from the general academic writing area ⟶ proper quoting

A content structure chart was used to organise the content (see figure 6.2). This chart is presented as a box diagram, with different colours for each of the units or zones. The elements are arranged in levels of hierarchy with links to provide a sense of how the final resource would work.

CONTENT CHART
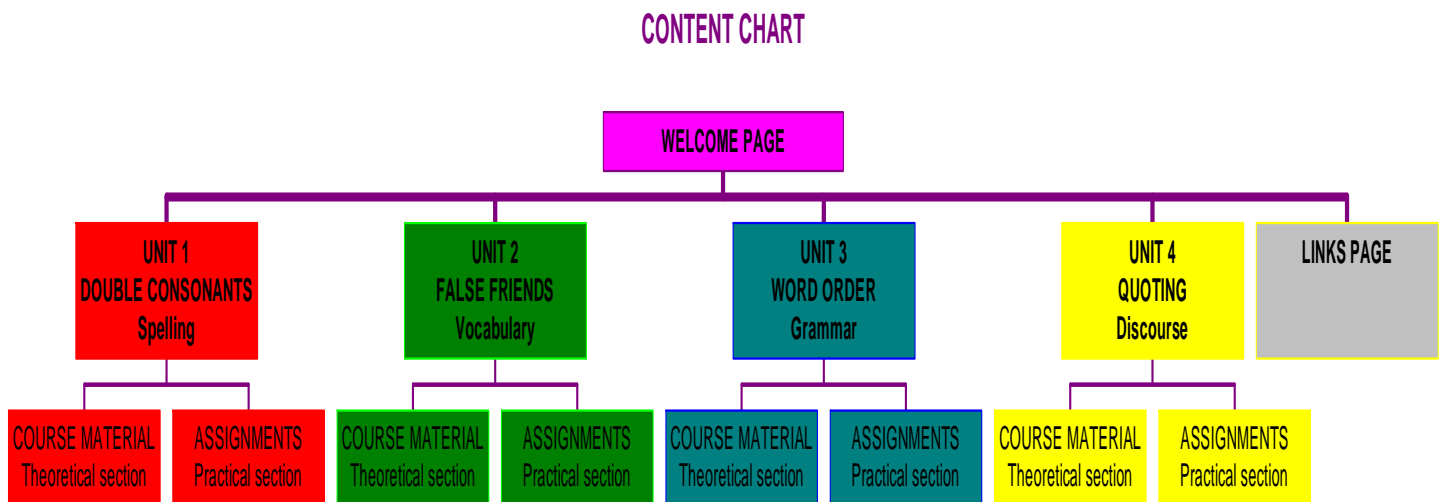
Figure 6.2 – Content structure

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There is a home page (welcome page), four different units – colour-coded – and a links page. Each unit is structured into two sections: course material (theory) and assignments (practice). The theoretical section called 'course material' includes a description of the error dealt with, examples and illustrations of correct and incorrect usage, and some hints on how to avoid committing that particular error. The practical section called 'assignments' consists of quizzes or activities designed to reinforce patterns and principles of language usage which have previously been explained and rehearsed in the theoretical section.

6.6.2 The Welcome page

The Welcome page is a very important section. As well as providing access to the main units, it gives students instructions on how to progress through the materials and suggests a proposed navigational path to follow. Moreover it allows the designer to control all the aspects of the *Blackboard* course page.

Figure 6.3– The Welcome page

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As can be seen in figure 6.3 in the previous page, along the left hand side of the screen a frame containing buttons, for navigating through the resource, is permanently available. These buttons are: 'announcements' (Welcome page), 'content material' and 'assignments' and by clicking on them, students are taken to the corresponding page. These buttons remain on the student's screen in every page, providing students with a consistent navigation tool. There are no pop-up windows. They have been consciously omitted since, as pointed out by Storey et al. (2002: 3), *pop-up windows tend to be very confusing for the users.*

The central frame of the Welcome page is all written in Spanish. It contains the title of the program at the top, a welcome message with a content outline, usage instructions and a photograph of me with a contact electronic address that can be accessed with just a click. Although students can navigate their way around the materials freely, they are given a suggested route to follow in order to maximise learning outcomes. However, it is made clear that students are free to choose what items they want to see, what activities to do, and in what order.

6.6.3 Course material: the theoretical section

Within one page that can be scrolled down, students are presented with the necessary information about the error dealt with in each unit. In each of these pages the structure is very similar. Firstly, there is an opening box which briefly introduces students to the error and that box is followed by relevant rules and/or examples to assist students in completing the quizzes. One of the most striking outcomes of the new configurations of information fostered by the medium of the computer is the opportunity for fresh associations between theoretical presentations and revision activities. The activities in the resource can be accessed either from the links that appear at the most appropriate points in this page – they are signalled with the symbol of a nail – or from the button in the menu on the right-hand side. Students themselves are the ones who decide at what point in the program they want to access the activities.

The course material is basically supported by an icon system, using pictorial representations and text. Most of the icons used in the materials are universal in their meaning and require no further explanations. The picture of an eye represents ideas and concepts to be aware of because they tend to be problematic for Spanish students. Green ticks correspond to examples of correct concepts or sentences, while red crosses stand for examples of incorrect sentences. The nail icon appears at any point on the site where students have the option to access a quiz. Although this symbol is not universal, it is quite repetitive on the site and therefore it is straightforward to deduce its meaning.

The use of colour in the icons and graphics supported the study environment to help students identify rapidly in which section of the program they were positioned. Care was taken in the aesthetics of the design, that the use of colour in the interface did not distract the user from his or her primary objective: learning.

When the units were composed, the length of the texts was taken into account to avoid them being too dense and optimal use of blank space was made. Blank space permits the separation or unification of ideas, giving "breathing room" to the page, and producing a sensation of cleanliness and order.

6.6.3.1 Double consonants: the spelling unit

As previously mentioned (see chapter 5, section 5.3.1), in Spanish there are fewer words spelled with double consonants than in English and this can be a cause of particular difficulty. The main aim of the spelling unit was to make students aware of the problem and present to them some rules that could help them remember in which cases a word should be spelled with a double consonant (see figure 6.4 next page).
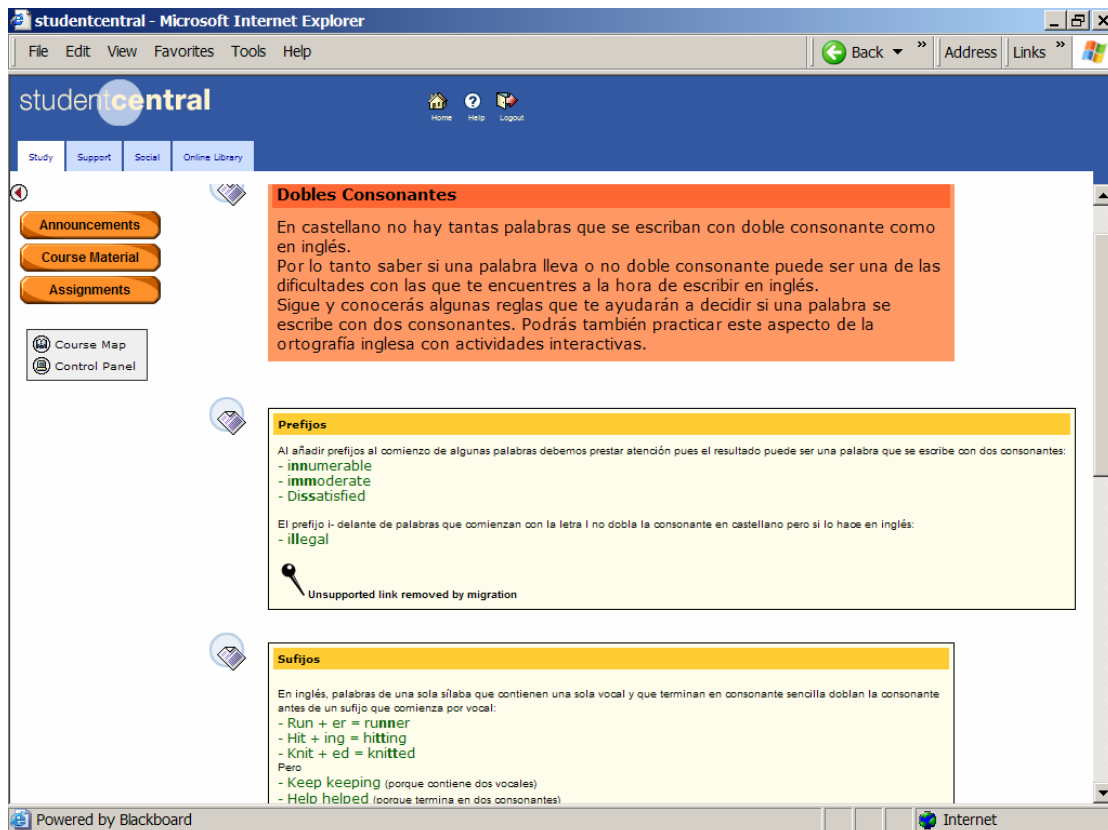
Figure 6.4 – Double consonants

Students were presented with some rules on how to add prefixes and suffixes to words in English. There is a mention of words that finish with the letter l and a section with a list of words frequently misspelled by Spanish students. There are seven quizzes to be accomplished in this unit.

6.6.3.2 False friends: the vocabulary unit

There are some words that although similar in form in Spanish and English, have different meanings in each of the languages. These words are called cognates or false friends. They can be particularly misleading and confusing for learners.

Figure 6.5 – False friends

The unit starts with a definition of the concept of false friends. A list of relevant false friends is provided, a total of 24 false friends that are prone to occur in an academic context. It is not an enumerative list which students are likely to forget, but a list in which the word whose meaning is to be learned appears in context. For every false friend presented there is a sentence in which the word appears correctly used, and also an example of a typical mistake. The sentences are translated into Spanish. In this unit students may have access to five different quizzes, which between them include all of the 24 false friends.

6.6.3.3 Word order: the grammar unit

Word order is one of the aspects of grammar which, mainly due to the significant differences between the two languages, proves difficult for Spanish learners (see chapter 5, section 5.3.4).

Figure 6.6– Word order

In the unit shown in figure 6.6 above, Spanish students have the chance to learn the rules to be able to order the different linguistic elements to create correct grammatical sentences in English. The position of subject, direct and indirect object, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions are illustrated.

6.6.3.4 Proper quoting: avoiding plagiarism

As seen in chapter 5 (section 5.3.5), students may fall into the trap of unintentional plagiarism when even if they have read intensively into the area that they are to write about, they fail to acknowledge the sources of their ideas. In order to make students aware of the issue, this unit (see figure 6.7 next page) explored how to quote and reference other authors' ideas. It contains examples of good and bad ways of referencing from original texts.
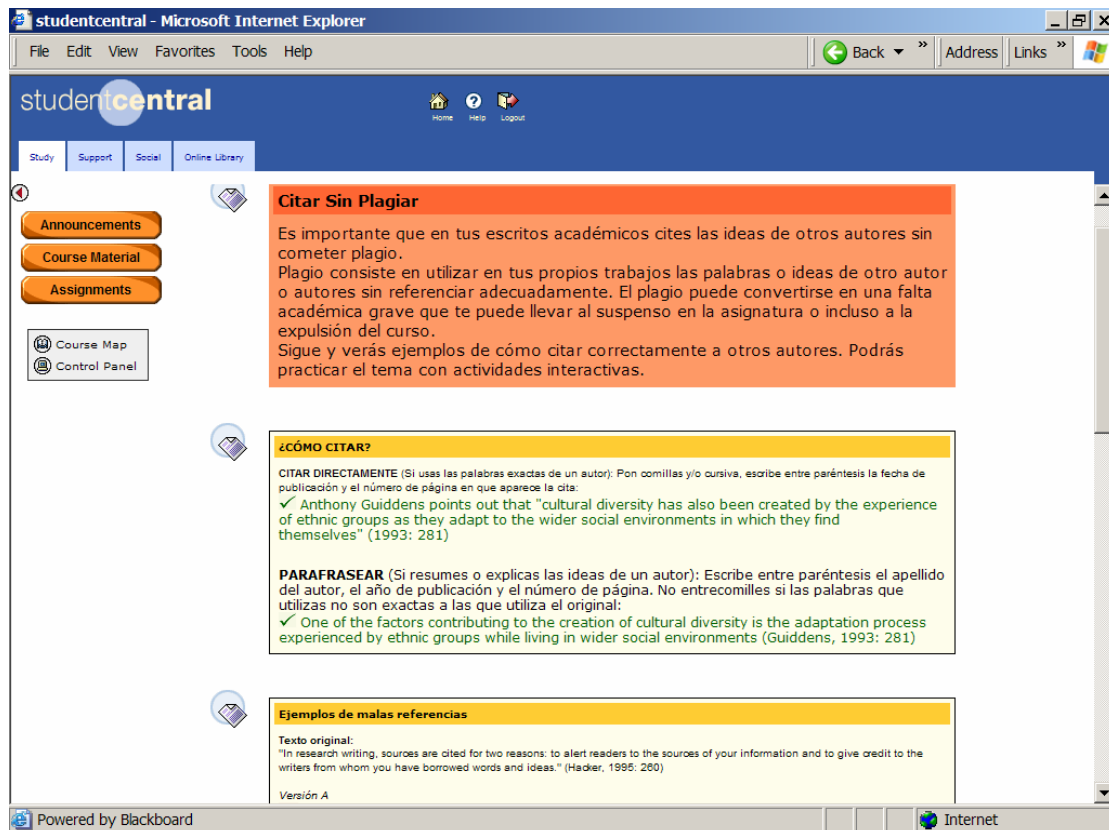
Figure 6.7 – Proper quoting

6.6.4 The assignments: quizzes

Few people dispute the value of some form of drilling when a student is operating in a truly foreign-language-learning environment, that is, when he or she must find a substitute for the constant auditory reinforcement and the normative influence provided by the community of speakers surrounding the learner who has the privilege of studying or of living and studying in a country in which the target language is spoken. McCarthy (1995: 33)

The computer format has added a new dimension to the genre of drills. One of the most valuable functions of the MLEs is their ability to offer interactive exercises and tests to enhance student mastery and as assessment. Unlike with printed materials, with a computer, students can neatly erase an incorrect answer and re-commence; they can see how an answer looks without being committed to it; they can come back one hour, one day or one month later and re-do the item much more easily than if they were going back to it on a pre-used page in a textbook.

When it comes to providing feedback, computers are genuinely interactive where printed materials are not. Textbooks can provide answers, but these do not tell students whether they are right or wrong. Students must deduce this for themselves by comparing their answers with the ones supplied. There is no way of controlling whether they can do this before or after attempting to answer, and there is no way that textbooks can analyse the nature of errors and provide relevant comments on them.

Online quizzes have been associated with positive learning outcomes including increased student achievement and confidence (Ruscio, 2001; Wilder et al., 2001). Frequent quizzing reportedly maintains student study effort and promotes course engagement (Smith et al., 2000; Sporer, 2001). Itoh and Hannoh (2002: 552) state that online quizzes designed to reinforce language skills are well suited to the needs of today's students with their active schedules and attitudes towards learning. The results of their study on the effects of online quizzes on learning Japanese are very positive. Overall, their student subjects' average for the grammar portions of the midterm and final examination increased. Looking at individual scores, they found that the students who scored poorly on the midterm achieved higher scores on the final examination only if they had accessed the online quizzes. The average score increased even more, and it was observed that many students made fewer simple grammatical mistakes in compositions. According to Itoh and Hannoh (2002), it is very likely that the improvement was a result of practice with online grammar exercises. They also found that many students used newly introduced vocabulary more frequently, and with correct spelling. Moreover, the practice quizzes reduced students' anxiety allowing them to review more efficiently. Not only that, but the immediate results and the feedback provided in the online quizzes engaged students and improved their learning from their own errors.

Derouza and Fleming (2003) also reported that students who took online practice tests academically outperformed students who took the same tests in pencil-and-

paper format. According to them, immediate feedback may account for the learning advantage of students who used the automated quizzes. However, it may also be that student attention increased in response to the interface of online quizzes, which are typically more visually stimulating than pencil-and-paper formats (EdTech, 2005). Further, students may be more motivated to take online quizzes rather than traditional quizzes because young people today associate digital formats with leisure and recreation (Rotermann, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2004).

6.6.4.1 The creation of the quizzes

The creation of on-line quizzes using *Blackboard* is a relatively easy to use process which presents only a few more steps than the actual typing of the quiz. Once logged on to *Blackboard*, the first step is to locate the Control Panel at the lower left hand corner of the Welcome page as shown in figure 6.3. The Control Panel is only available to the designer of the course. By accessing the Control Panel, the designer controls all the aspects of the Blackboard course page. Once the Control Panel is opened, the Assessment Manager leads to the notation "Add Quizz/Exam". The on-line quiz is ready to be written after the completion of three preliminary steps: First, the quiz must be named (or numbered); second, a description of the assessment must be given. The third step involves providing the student with instructions for completing the quiz. After these preliminary steps are accomplished the designer has to consider what type of question to write. *Blackboard* provides significant scope since the platform allows for seven question types (six of which are self-correcting). Most of these types were useful in the current language course. The Fill-in-the-Blank option turned out to be much more than the simple placing of one correct word in a blank since multiple words can be placed in one blank, as long as each word is separated by a space. The Multiple Choice option allows for the testing of all sorts of materials and the designer has the option of providing up to 20 possible choices. Since it was important that the quizzes be self-correcting, the Short Answer/Short Essay format which must be graded by hand was not used in the current project. This option, however, could be

profitably used for compositions and other exercises requiring longer and more personalised answers.

To sum up, the activities designed for this resource did not require students to compose complete passages, but to work in the target language developing an awareness of syntax, spelling rules, vocabulary items and other features needed to write accurate academic English. Repetitive tasks were introduced to help students understand and to attempt to eradicate those typical errors described in chapter 5 (section 5.3). After submitting their quiz answers, students received a score and feedback for all the items. This feedback was deemed important to ensure students understood when and why errors were made. The problems with drills requiring long strings of text to be answered would have been the difficulty of incorporating programmed checking, as a prediction of permutations and combinations of grammar and typing errors becomes virtually impossible.

6.6.4.2 Matching-type drills

The matching-type drills consist of matching elements of one column to another. This type of exercise was particularly useful in the vocabulary unit false friends. In the activity shown in figure 6.8 (next page), students are required to match the items of vocabulary in Spanish on the right with their correct English translation on the left. Among the left-hand column items, there are several false friends which make the task more demanding and interesting. The 'check' button can be clicked at any time, although it was recommended that students clicked it after they had completed the exercise, so they could check how many of their answers were correct.
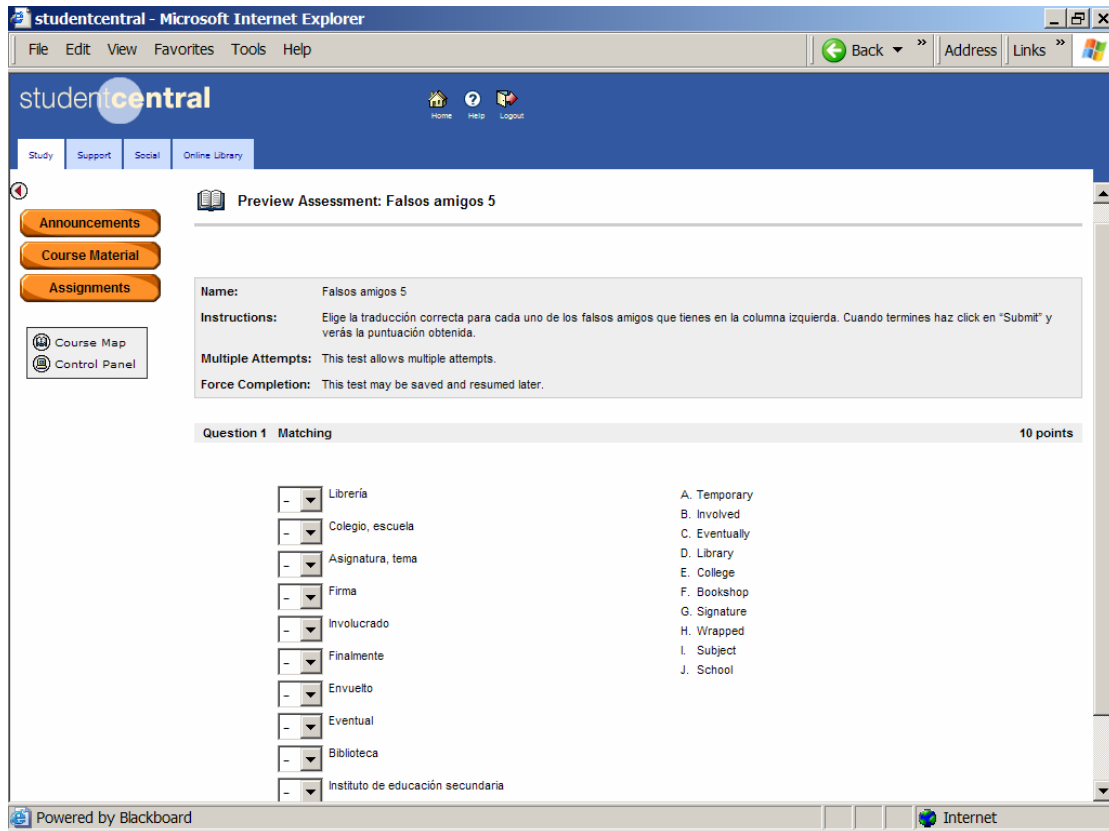
Figure 6.8 – Matching-type, False friends unit

6.6.4.3 Multiple-choice-type drills

This activity is a multiple choice answer quiz of the sort that should be immediately recognisable to students. An example of multiple-choice made with the *Blackboard* facilities is shown in figure 6.9 in the next page. Students are given a word in Spanish and four different possible spellings in English. They have to select by clicking on what they believe is the correctly spelt word.
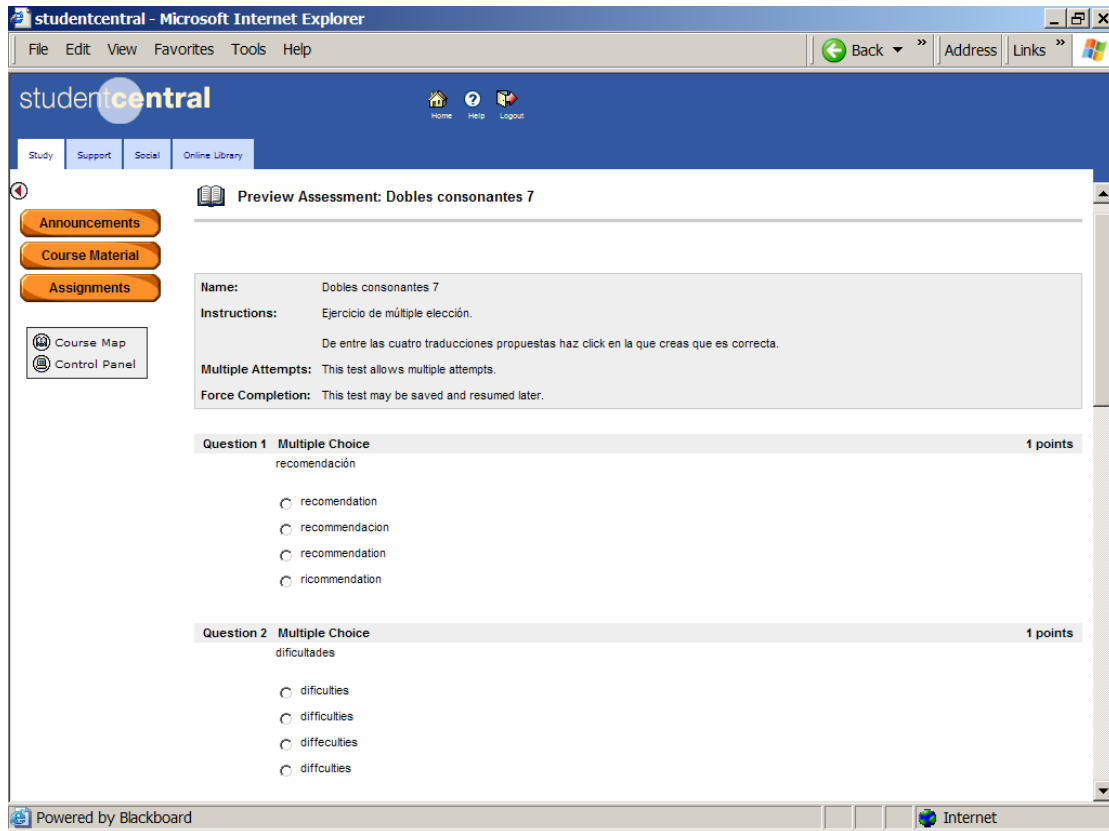
Figure 6.9 – Multiple choice, Double consonants unit

6.6.4.4 Jumbled-type drills

Jumbled-type drills were particularly useful in the word order unit. The type of jumbled-activity designed with the *Blackboard* facilities (see figure 6.10 next page) is visually less attractive and interactively less successful than its counterpart made with *Hot Potatoes* (see Appendix K). Students are required to arrange all the elements of a sentence in the correct order by assigning a number to the order that each of the words has in the sentence.
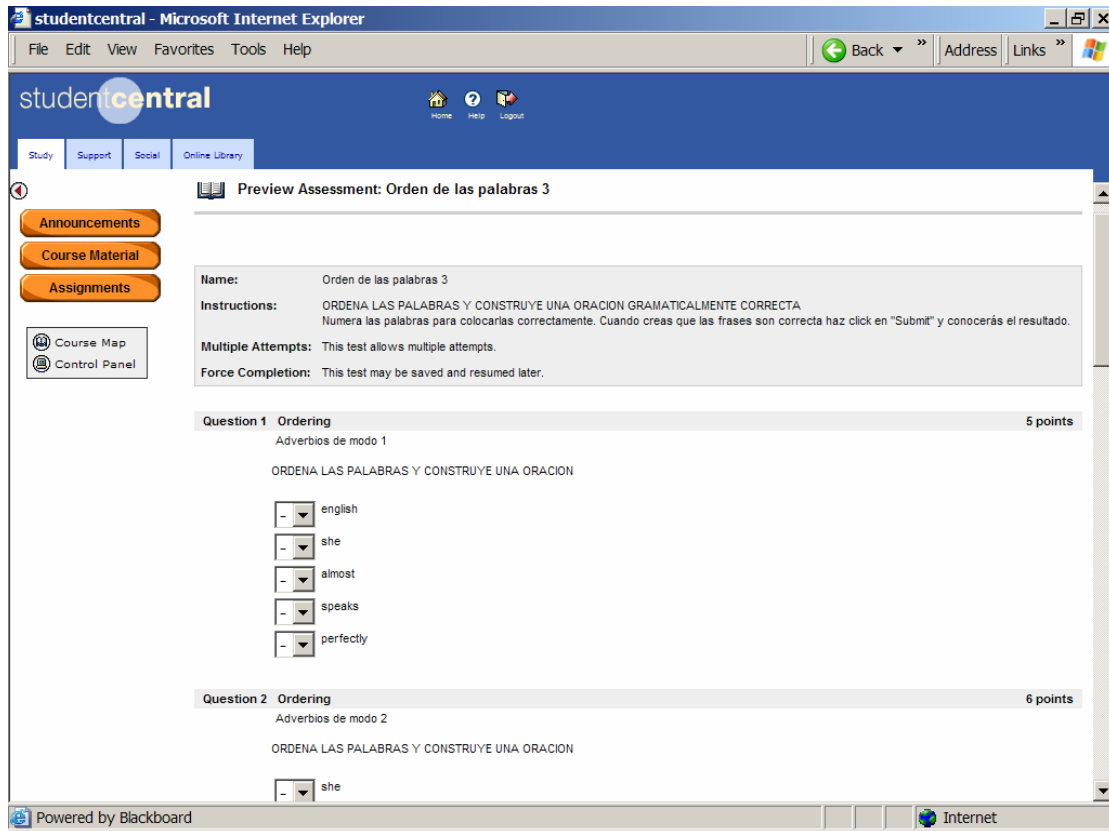
Figure 6.10 – Ordering-type, Word order unit

<u>6.6.4.5 Fill-in the-blank drills</u>

The fill-in the-blank type of activity has been used on several occasions in this resource. Figure 6.11 in next page is an example of an activity in which students have to re-type the words given in the blank adding the suffix –ing; for each correct answer one point is given. The idea is that students practise spelling some words that can lead to confusion. The next example in figure 6.12 (next page) is another gap-filling type of drill. Students are required to translate the given Spanish words into English and type them in the box provided. The words selected for this activity are those that normally present a problem.
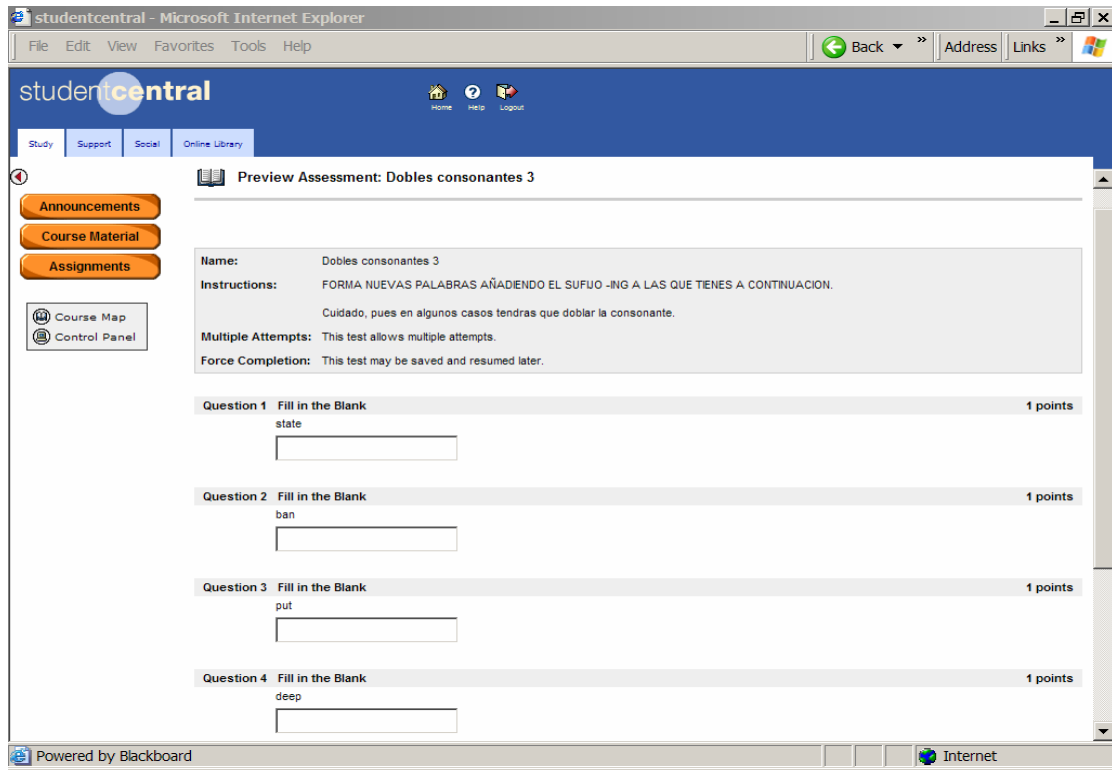
Figure 6.11 – Fill-in the-blank, Double consonants unit
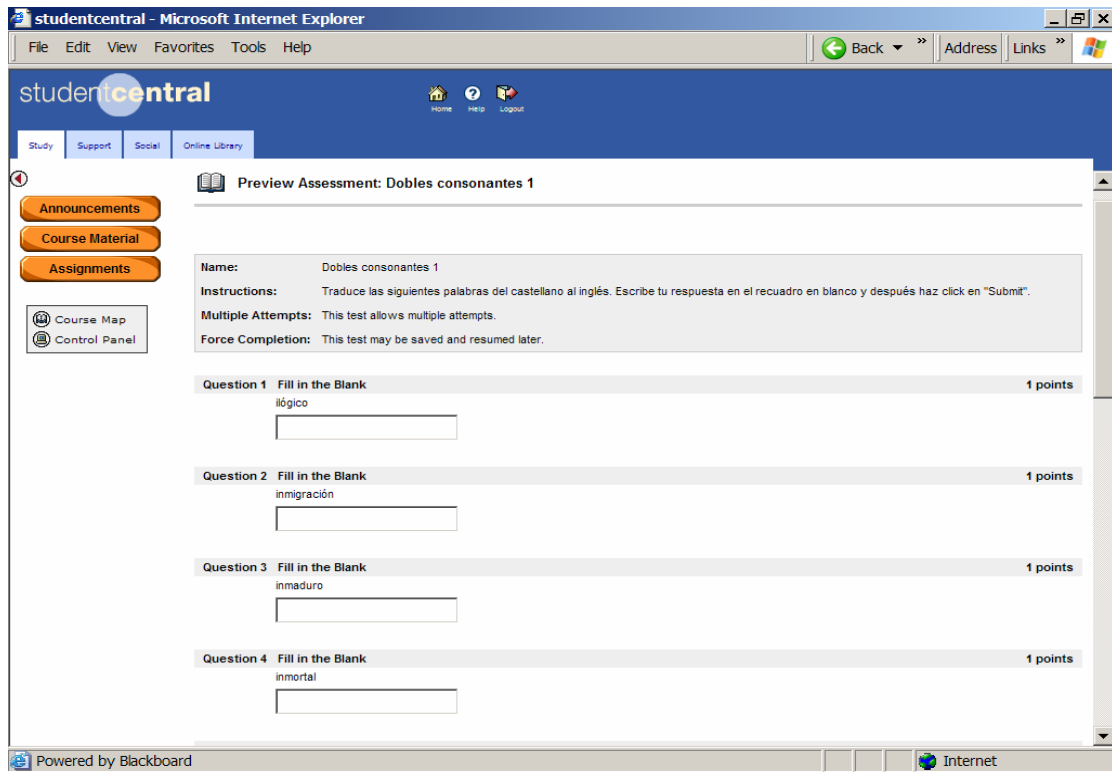
Figure 6.12 – Fill-in the-blank 2, Double consonants unit

<u>6.6.4.6 The final step: saving and making available</u>

Before students can take the quiz that has been written, it must be "saved and made available", in other words, "put on line". This process is begun by clicking on the aptly named "Save and Make Available" button which always appears at the end of each quiz. A new page will appear asking the instructor if they want to make the assessment available. This will generate an announcement informing the students of the presence of a new quiz. Since the announcement appears on the course's Welcome Page and invites students to take the quiz, it is a very useful device.

One of the great benefits of the *Blackboard* system is that the quiz can be put on a "timer" and programmed to go on and off-line. It will always be available to the instructor, however. Other worthwhile options to be checked on the Save and Make Available Page include "Show Detailed Results" and "Reveal Correct Answer" which allow students to see the correct answer after finishing the quiz – this is a great learning tool. The button "Feedback Enabled" allows the instructor to provide explanatory comments for the incorrectness of an answer given or praise for a correct one. Thus, another benefits of web-based drills which makes them a pedagogically positive instructional tool, is that students can correct their own work based on the clues and feedback set up in advance. This raises the level of the quizzes to a tutorial rather than a simple assessment. The use of "hints" ensures that the students' cognitive processes are engaged more than if a simple right/wrong interface were used. The instant feedback that can be programmed for wrong answers allows students to see why they are making a mistake, and, hopefully, come to understand how to correct it. The last option on the Save and Make available page allows the instructor to set a time limit for the quiz. However, in the current resource, it did not feel appropriate to limit the time allotted for each assessment.

6.6.5 The Links page

In the Links page (see figure 6.13 below), students have access to current

information not only on educational and academic matters but also other sites relevant to Spanish students who live and study in the UK. The links were divided into categories. Some were useful as an extension of the content included in the materials, giving students the chance to explore and further practise areas of vocabulary, spelling, grammar and general academic writing. Other links were related to the bureaucratic side of studying abroad, giving access to educational organisations which provide information about funding and grants, as well as links to the Spanish consulate and embassy in London. There were other links to sites where Spanish students had the possibility of contacting former students of English universities, and practical, useful links that took students to websites where they could find suitable accommodation.

Figure 6.13 – The Links page

6.7 THE TEN CASE STUDIES EVALUATION: PRESENTATION OF QUANTITATIVE INFORMATION

To evaluate the effectiveness, ease of use of the resource, and students' responses to the mode of learning and the specific resource an evaluation was conducted in which ten students participated (see chapter 3, section 3.4.1.). The evaluation was carried out in three different phases. During a first group meeting, the students completed a pre-test of their knowledge of the target forms (see Appendix H), and had the chance to familiarise themselves with the materials for a period of twenty minutes during which time the interviewer observed their interaction with the resource (see 6.7.1). They were then asked to express their initial reactions in a focus group interview. During the second stage, the students were invited to work on the materials at their own time; they were asked to try to complete all the quizzes for each of the units in a period of one week and their scores were electronically recorded (results presented in 6.7.2).The third stage took place at the end of the week-long trial. Each student completed a post-test identical to the pre-test, and was interviewed individually on their experiences with the resource.

6.7.1 Observation of initial student-computer interaction

This observation was undertaken in order to gauge students' first reactions to the web-based materials. Facial movements and expressions, as well as students' use of the keyboard or mouse, and their verbal communication, addressing questions to either me or to other students in the group, were noted using a structured plan (see Appendix G). The motivation and interest of the students, as well as any problems encountered were all monitored during the twenty minute initial trial. This observation confirmed the students' high level of familiarity with computers in general, and with the log-on system at the university in particular. None of the students showed any discomfort or disorientation during the first minutes of the observation; all logged on to the resource successfully. During the rest of the observation, the students were for the most part concentrating on the task in hand. For the first five minutes, students were typically passively reading instructions from the screen, but afterwards they started using the keyboard and mouse,

interacting actively with the machine. Students' facial expressions showed greater enjoyment while interacting – that is having to use mouse or keyboard – than when passively reading from the screen.

6.7.2 Tracking records

A facility in *Blackboard* allowed me to obtain quantitative data on students' performance in the quizzes built into the web-based materials. Although these tracking records did not provide any indication of learning gain, they did highlight those items that seemed to be causing more or less difficulty, as well as providing some insight into students' individual proficiency in these areas. The most pertinent features of this analysis are presented in the figure below. The resource integrated 24 interactive quizzes, divided into the four different units. Results have been shown in raw numbers as well as percentages.

Table 6.14 - Unit 1: Double consonants

	Quiz No.	Possible points	Nuria	Manu	Oscar	Paloma	Ruth	Raul	Sonia	Tirso	Ainoa	Raquel	Class average
Double	1	14	9	6	11	5	11	5	4	11	9	4	7.5
		100%	64%	43%	79%	36%	79%	36%	29%	79%	64%	29%	53.57%
consonants	2	6	6	6	6	6	2	6	6	6	6	5	5.5
		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	33%	100%	100%	100%	100%	83%	91.6%
	3	6	6	6	6	5	5	5	6	6	6	5	5.6
		100%	100%	100%	100%	83%	83%	83%	100%	100%	100%	83%	93.2%
	4	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	5	5	4	5	3	4	3	4	3	3	2	4	3.5
		100%	80%	100%	60%	80%	60%	80%	60%	60%	40%	80%	70%
	6	5	3	5	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	-	4.4
		100%	60%	100%	100%	100%	80%	80%	100%	80%	100%	-	88.8%
	7	8	8	5	6	6	7	8	5	8	6	4	6.3
		100%	63%	75%	75%	88%	100%	63%	100%	75%	50%	78.9%	
total points		50	42	39	43	37	38	38	35	44	40	28	
Overall %		100%	84%	78%	86%	74%	76%	76%	70%	88%	80%	62%	77.5%

Table 6.15 Unit 2: False Friends

	Quiz No.	Possible points	Nuria	Manu	Oscar	Paloma	Ruth	Raul	Sonia	Tirso	Ainoa	Raquel	Class average
False	1	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	5.9
		100%	83%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	98.3%
Friends	2	12	10	11	12	10	12	12	10	12	10	10	9
		100%	83%	92%	100%	83%	100%	100%	83%	100%	83%	83%	90.7%
	3	12	12	10	11	10	11	11	12	12	10	12	11.1
		100%	100%	83%	92%	83%	92%	92%	100%	100%	83%	100%	92.5%
	4	10	9	9	9	5	9	7	9	-	9	7	8.1
		100%	90%	90%	90%	50%	90%	70%	90%	-	90%	70%	91.1%
	5	10	10	10	10	9	10	10	10	10	10	-	9.8
		100%	100%	100%	100%	90%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	-	98.8%
total points		50	46	46	48	40	48	46	47	40	45	35	
Overall %		100	92%	92%	96%	80%	96%	92%	94%	100%	90%	88	91.8%

Table 6.16 Unit 3: Word Order

	Quiz No.	Possible points	Nuria	Manu	Oscar	Paloma	Ruth	Raul	Sonia	Tirso	Ainoa	Raquel	Class average
Word	1	54	54	43	48	54	42	48	38	43	52	-	46.8
		100%	100%	80%	89%	100%	78%	89%	70%	80%	96%	-	86.8%
Order	2	82	72	71	77	-	10	48	73	-	75	-	57.4
		100%	88%	87%	94%		12%	59%	89%	-	91%		74.2%
	3	40	28	28	32	-	29	34	36	32	33	30	31.3
		100%	70%	70%	80%	-	73%	85%	90%	80%	83%	75%	78.4%
	4	10	7	4	6	-	7	5	7	6	-	6	6
		100%	70%	40%	60%	-	70%	50%	70%	60%	-	60%	60%
	5	83	-	68	78	-	50	33	54	-	70	2	50.7
		100%	-	82%	94%	-	60%	40%	65%	-	84%	2%	61%
	6	5	-	4	0	-	0	4	5	5	5	-	3.2
		100%	-	80%	0	-	0	80%	100%	100%	100%	-	65.7%
total points		274	161	218	241	54	138	172	213	86	235	38	
Overall %		100%	84%	80%	88%	100%	50%	63%	78%	79%	89%	29%	73.53%

Table 6.17 Unit 4: Proper quoting

		Possible points	Nuria	Manu	Oscar	Paloma	Ruth	Raul	Sonia	Tirso	Ainoa	Raquel	Class average
	Quiz No.												
Proper	1	3	2	3	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	1.8
		100%	67%	100%	67%	67%	67%	33%	67%	67%	33%	33%	60.1%
quoting	2	2	1	2	1	-	2	2	1	-	0	1	1.2
		100%	50%	100%	50%	-	100%	100%	50%	-	0	50%	62.5%
	3	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	-	0	-	1.6
		100%	100%	100%	100%	50%	100%	100%	100%	-	0	-	81.2%
	4	2	2	2	2	-	2	2	2	-	0	0	1.5
		100%	100%	100%	100%	-	100%	100%	100%	-	0	0	75%
	5	2	2	2	2	-	2	2	2	-	2	1	1.8
		100%	100%	100%	100%	-	100%	100%	100%	-	100%	50	93.7%
	6	2	2	2	2	-	2	1	2	-	2	2	1.6
		100%	100%	100%	100%	-	100%	50%	100%	-	100%	100%	81.2%
total points		13	11	13	11	3	12	9	11	2	5	5	
Overall %		100%	85%	100%	85%	60%	92%	69%	85%	67%	38%	45%	74.5

Table 6.18 - General Total:

	Possible points	Nuria	Manu	Oscar	Paloma	Ruth	Raul	Sonia	Tirso	Ainoa	Raquel
total points	387	260	316	341	134	236	266	306	172	325	106
Overall %	100%	87%	82%	89%	82%	61%	68%	79%	85%	86%	46%

Five out of the ten students completed all twenty-four quizzes. Nuria, Paloma, Tirso, Ainoa and Raquel failed to complete two, twelve, eight, one and six quizzes respectively (see Appendix I). The five students who completed all the quizzes – Manu, Oscar, Ruth, Raul and Sonia - achieved an average score of 76%. The overall scores given above represent the percentage of correct responses only on the quizzes completed. They are therefore difficult to compare and interpret, given differences in the number of quizzes completed. Those who did not complete all the quizzes may have avoided them because they found them difficult or alternatively because they found them too easy; avoidance could equally well have been because of lack of time. This represents a serious limitation of this data that should be borne in mind in what follows.

Unit 1: Double consonants

One student (Raquel) failed to complete one of the quizzes (Q6). It seems that the most demanding quiz was Q1 for which four out of the ten students scored under 50% and the average was of only 53.5% compared with average scores above 70% for Qs 2, 3, 4 and 5. However, it should be noted that this quiz contained around twice as many items as the other quizzes and so offered greater opportunities for error. Further, students may still have been familiarising themselves with the software. The overall average score in this area was 77.5%, suggesting that the majority did not experience difficulty here.

Unit 2: False friends

Two students (Tirso and Raquel) failed to complete one of the quizzes each (Q4 and Q5 respectively). Based on quizzes completed, the average score was 91.8%, which suggests that the students had little difficulty here.

Unit 3: Word order

Five students (Nuria, Paloma, Tirso, Ainoa and Raquel) failed to complete a total of thirteen quizzes between them. No one quiz was completed by all students: three students failed to complete Q2, Q5 and Q6, two students failed to complete Q4 and one student in each case failed to complete Q1 and Q3. Given the number of uncompleted quizzes and the fact that the quizzes in this unit comprised a significantly higher number of items than the two previous units (274 as agaist 50 for both units 1 and 2), it is unwise to interpret the overall average of 73.5% against those of units 1 and 2.

Unit 4: Proper quoting

Three students (Paloma, Tirso and Raquel) failed to complete a total of ten quizzes in this unit; Tirso only completed one quiz, Paoloma completed only two while Raquel missed one and Ainoa gained 0 marks for five of the quizzes. Again because of this and the fact that the total number of items in this unit was only 13, it is not possible to draw any conclusions from the overall average.

6.7.3 Data obtained from pre- and post-tests

As mentioned in chapter 3 (section 3.4.3.2), a pre-test post-test design was used to try to assess whether use of the resource would lead to learning gains in any of the four areas targeted. However, in retrospective analysis of the research design and the test instrument used, a number of serious limitations have come to light which limit the interpretability and validity of the data generated.

Firstly, the interval between the pre-test and the post-test was only one week (the period of trialling the resource). While it can be argued that the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores represents *immediate* learning gains, it is usually important to assess longer-term learning gains in order to establish the effectiveness of a learning resource. However, since the resource does not purport to impact on long-term learning, but rather seeks to support students in the revision of texts, demonstration of short-term impact may be seen to be sufficient. The resource is designed to be available to reinforce learning every time a student feels the need to consult it.

A more serious limitation, however, is represented by the fact that the pre-test and the post-test were identical. This, together with the short interval between pre-test and post-test, could allow learners to retain the questions from the pre-test and intentionally or unintentionally, attend to possible answers without these fading from memory at the time of the post-test. In other words, any learning gains demonstrated at post-test could be attributable to the priming effect of the pre-test rather than to the learning resource itself (Anastasi, 1988). The solution to this is to pilot-test a range of equivalent test items and use half on pre-test and half on post-test. At the very least, the ordering and the presentation of the test items should have been varied between pre-test and post-test to mitigate such memory effects.

Shortcomings also became evident in the design of the test items themselves. Firstly, very different test types were used for testing the knowledge covered by the different units. For example, while items relating to double consonants, false

friends and word order were tested through closed questions that only allowed for objective right or wrong answers, the question for the unit on plagiarism was in an open format, requiring from the students to write in a few lines what they thought plagiarism was. Further, the tests for the different units comprised different numbers of items; the tests on units 1 and 2 (double consonants and false friends respectively) contained 21 and 20 items respectively, while the test on unit 3 (word order) contained only 5 items and the single question on plagiarism was assessed as either true or false, rather than numerically. These differences – in test type and in number of items - thus limit the comparability of the test data on the different units, making it impossible, for example, to sum together scores from units 1, 2 and 3 to give a representative overall score, since unit 1 and 2 scores would have much greater weighting than those from unit 3.

Given the fact that the trial data for units 3 and 4 could not be compared to that for units 1 and 2, it was decided to exclude data from units 3 and 4 from quantitative review. Using just the data for units 1 and 2, the overall pattern of the results shows that all students but one made learning gains between the pre-test and post-test scores (see Table 10 in Appendix J for rank order) with an average gain of 5.9 out of a total of 41. The spread of results went from 11 to -4, with eight students falling in the above average category. Despite the serious limitations identified above, these data are indicative of some validity for the proposed resource.

6.8 <u>THE TEN CASE STUDIES</u>

In order to explore whether distinctive profiles might emerge in how individual students used and benefited the resource, I have presented the quantitative data for units 1 and 2 in a series of ranked tables (see Appendix J), highlighting the rank order of the ten students involved in the study on the various measurements. In this way, I have tried to highlight where the different students fell into above average and below average categories on the different measurements taken (e.g. pre-test scores, trials, post-test scores and learning gains). I comment on these data below,

together with qualitative data from the individual interviews conducted with the students on their general orientation to the resource.

6.8.1 Case study 1: NURIA

Female student
4th year Biomedical Sciences
English qualifications: First Certificate, IGCSE
Computers: no qualifications, good computer skills

Nuria's pre-test scores were below average overall (Table 1: 25 / 41 against an average of 28.3) with an average unit 1 score (Table 2: 18 against 17.4 out of 21) but the lowest unit 2 score (Table 3: 7 against 10.9 out of 20). In line with this, her post-test scores were the lowest overall (Table 7: 29 against average 34.2 out of 41); although her unit 1 post-test score was above average (Table 8), her unit 2 post-test was again lowest of the group (Table 9: 9 against an average of 15.8). Clearly, Nuria experienced particular difficulty with the 'False friends' vocabulary. However, her trial scores were third best overall (Table 4: 88% against an average of 84.7%) with an average score even on the 'False friends' unit 2 (Table 6: 92%). The data suggest, however, that Nuria benefited only in a limited way from the resource: her learning gains were below average overall (Table 10: 4 against an average of 5.9).

Nevertheless, in the individual interview, Nuria was positive in her orientation towards computer-based learning support. She emphasised its convenience:

> *As I am used to being in front of a computer. I quite like this mode of learning. The computer, you can use it whenever you want. A computer is the only thing you need. Although I don't have a computer at home, I come here to the university to use it and I don't have any problem.*

She also indicated a preference for computer-based language quizzes of the sort of presented in the prototype, over doing exercises in a classroom:

> *I was at the Escuela Oficial de Idiomas for four years and we used to do in class the same type of activities that are presented in this program, only in a different, more traditional format. Regarding whether you like the electronic format or not, doing the activities from this program is always going to be more interactive and entertaining.*

She was positive about the design of the resource, finding navigation easy and the layout simple, clear and sufficient:

> *It was easy to go from one place to another within the site. To find your way around wasn't any problem.*

> *I liked the design because there are not many things. I don't like websites that take too long to download and are slow. What I like to see in a web page is the text and not much more. In this program you have what is needed and the right colours to make it clear; perfect, that's all that is needed.*

Nuria, then, did not appear to lack motivation for using the resource, although in unit 3, she failed to complete two quizzes out of six. Rather, her limited learning gains may have something to do with her below-average starting point. While she was also to give accurate responses when working on her own with the resource, she appears not to have been able to mobilise this knowledge fully when answering test questions.

6.8.2 Case study 2: MANU

Male student
1st year Computer Studies
English: No qualifications (2nd year Escuela Oficial de Idiomas), considers his English to be average.

Manu's scores on most measures are at or narrowly above the group average. His only below average score was on the unit 2 pre-test (Table 3: 9 against 10.9 out of 20), while his unit 1 pre-test score is the highest of the group (Table 2: 21 against 17.4 out of 21). His trial scores for both units overall and each individual unit are average (Tables 4 to 6). His post-test score overall is above average (Table 7: 36 out of 41 against an average of 34.2). Although he scored one point lower (Table 11) on the unit 1 post-test than on the pre-test moving from 21/21 to 20, he made above average gains on unit 2 (Table 12: 7 points against an average of 4.9). This would suggest that Manu was able to benefit from the resource in the area of false friends; with a 100% score on the unit 1 pre-test, he could hardly be expected to make learning gains in the area of double consonants.

Manu's orientation to using computers for learning was generally positive, which is perhaps unsurprising since he was a student of computing and was very aware of the advantages of digital learning environments:

> *A website can be accessed by anyone, at any time, and from anywhere in the world, providing that there is an Internet connection.*

> *One of the advantages of using a computer for learning is that it is much faster than other modes.*

> *Because I'm studying IT I know that one of the most important advantages of online materials is that they can be easily updated.*

He was positively oriented to the resource because of its simplicity, believing that distracting elements would divert the learner's attention from its main focus of learning.

> *The program is not very crowded and that's the way I like it. If the program was graphically a little bit more crowded, then you wouldn't focus on what you really have to do.*

He commented, nevertheless, that the activities trialled lacked authenticity and suggested the integration of opportunities to submit writing for assessment.

> *This program focuses on spelling and grammar but it doesn't give you the opportunity of really writing and getting whatever you write graded.*

However, he was also quite clear about the limitations of computer-based support:

> *As a supplement it is a good tool, but in order to learn you need personal contact with a teacher and other learners.*

6.8.3 Case study 3: Student OSCAR

Male student
2nd year PhD in Mechanical Engineering
Computers: No qualifications, good computer skills.
English: No qualifications. Considers his English to be average.

Based on the range of measures, Oscar appears to be the student with the most consistent above-average scores in the areas tested by unit 1 and 2. The only measure where his scores were below average was on the learning gains made on unit 1 (Table 11: 0 against an average of 1). His overall post-test scores were the

highest (Table 7: 38 against an average of 34.2 out of 41), with the third highest overall learning gain (Table 10: 8 against an average of 5.9). He completed all the quizzes during the trial and his trial scores rank second highest overall (Table 4: 91% against an average of 84.7%). Despite his own evaluation of his English skills as 'average', his pre-test scores were third highest (Table 1: 30 against an average of 28.3). He appears to have benefited from the resource.

Oscar appears to have had a positive orientation to the resource and based on the limited data available, benefited from his interaction. This positive orientation may be linked to his prior experience of using similar software to learn English and his evident enjoyment of the 'game-like' nature of the quizzes:

> *I once followed a course to learn English. It had a series of exercises very similar to these ones and I loved them because they were very easy to use.*

> *To learn with a computer is like a game; I see it as a very motivating thing; I love it.*

Oscar seems to have had a clear idea of the usefulness of the resource as a simple revision tool and seems to have been able to benefit from it*:*

> *It is a very good program to keep your English always fresh because if you don't use and practise English you forget it.*

6.8.4 Case study 4: Student PALOMA

Female student
1ˢᵗ year in English Language with Linguistics
Computers: no qualifications, average computer skills
English: IELTS (7.5)

Paloma had the second highest pre-test score overall (Table 1: 31 against an average of 28.3 out of 41). This was contributed mainly by her high score on unit 2 (Table 3: 16 against an average of 10.9 out of 20), while she shared the lowest unit 1 score with three other students (Table 2: 15 against an average of 17.4 out of 21). On trials she consistently scored below average overall and on both units 1 and 2 (Tables 4, 5 and 6) yet her post-test scores overall were second to highest (Table 7: 37 against 34.2 out of 41) with her unit 1 post-test score being just below

average (Table 8: 18 against 18.4 out of 21). Overall, she made learning gains in line with the average (Table 10: 6 against 5.9) with above average gains coming in unit 1 (Table 11: 3 against an average of 1) where she had started with a relatively weak score, and below average gains (Table 12: 3 against 4.9) coming on unit 2 where she had started with a relatively strong score. These scores appear to suggest that Paloma benefited from the resource. However, her relatively low trial scores and the fact that she did not complete five out of six unit 3 trial exercises and four out of six unit 4 trial exercises suggests that she may have engaged in a limited fashion with the resource.

This speculation may be elucidated by her characterisation of her own learning orientation. She sees computers as a convenient mode of learning in particular for people who have already attained a lot of competence through English lessons and who maybe just need to improve some aspects of the language, maintain the knowledge, and avoid making errors. For her, the resource was a revision tool, rather than a learning tool.

> *I have attended so many English lessons in my life that I have had enough of them. Obviously I don't know it all, and I still make mistakes, but I refuse to attend more lessons. For people like me this mode of learning is pretty useful. You can use it as a resource when you need to practise one particular area. You can revise what you don't know without having to join another English course.*

In this light, she commended the simplicity of the resource; in particular, its layout and the ease of checking answers through immediate provision of feedback:

> *The design is simple and clear, nothing from out of this world. It gets to the point and that's all we need.*

> *I haven't found any difficulty. It seemed to me a very easy site to navigate. It was very clear: look at the theory, do the activity, correct it, and go back to the material for a new topic.*

> *It's very easy to correct the exercises .One can see the solutions very quickly. This is very positive; it is not like a book in which you have to go to the back of it to see the key answers. I think this can be the future. It doesn't mean that books can be replaced but a good computer program like this site can be a good aid.*

It is possible, then, that Paloma's low trial scores could be interpreted as part of a trial-and-error strategy. She used the resource to get quick feedback on her immediate knowledge quickly and it is possible that this in itself promoted her learning.

6.8.5 Case study 5: Student RUTH

Female student
3rd year English Language with Linguistics
Computer: no qualifications, average computer skills

Ruth achieved a slightly below average pre-test score overall (Table 1: 27 against an average of 28.3 / 41) sharing the lowest score on unit 1 (Table 2: 15 against an average of 17.4 out of 21) but with a slightly above average score on unit 2 (Table 3: 12 against an average of 10.9). She then achieved an above average post-test score (Table 7: 36 /41 against an average of 34.2) with the second highest post-test score on unit 2 (Table 9: 18 against an average of 15.8 out of 20) and a slightly below average score on unit 1 (Table 8: 18 against an average of 18.4). Her overall learning gain score of 9 points was the second highest (Table 10), with gains on both unit 1 and unit 2 (Tables 11 and 12). This would suggest, then, that her interaction with the resource was beneficial. Her trial scores overall were above average at 86% against 84.7% and she completed all quizzes.

It is therefore surprising that Ruth did not express a very positive view overall about learning with computers and would prefer more traditional methods such as learning with printed materials. She found computer exercises boring and difficult to get focused on her learning.

> *I had the experience of learning English with a computer when I was in Spain and I didn't like it at all. I thought it was quite boring, looking at the screen and click, click, click, and I couldn't concentrate on what I was doing.*

> *To me it's more entertaining to use a book than the computer as a learning tool and it's definitely more useful for my concentration.*

She also noted that the design of the resource did not enhance her motivation:

> *It would have been more entertaining with more graphics or pictures or a less plain design.*

However, despite her negative orientation to computer-based exercises, Ruth recognized that the activities in the unit on vocabulary had been particularly helpful to her. Her comment suggests that the resource may have worked because it refocused her attention on an area she knew to be problematic:

> *I have already been here for a couple of years but I still get confused with false friends so the activities in this unit have seemed to me really helpful. Additionally they were very entertaining to do.*

6.8.6 Case study 6: RAUL

Male student
3rd year English Language with Linguistics
English: Cambridge Advanced
Computers: CLAIT, Amadeus, Photoshop

Raul's scores on most measures placed him either just above or just below average. His overall pre-test score was 29 (Table 1 – against an average of 28.3). His trial scores are on or slightly below average (Tables 4 to 6) while his post-test scores are just above average (Tables 7 to 9) as is his overall learning gain score (Table 10: 6 against an average of 5.9). He gained above average on unit 1 (Table 11: 3 against an average of 1) but below average on unit 2 (Table 12: 3 against an average of 4.9). It could be argued that he benefited from the resource.

Raul was generally positive about the resource:

> *In general it is a very well designed program and I haven't found any difficulty while working with it.*

He was a confident user of English but found that the resource focused his attention on
the specific areas targeted:

> *I thought that some of the activities were extremely easy to complete but then when submitting my results, I found had made lots of mistakes. I have realised that things are not as easy as they seem.*

In particular, he had not paid much attention to the problem of double consonants and had relied on automatic spell-checking. However, the resource encouraged him to clarify his knowledge in this area:

> *I always get confused with the double consonants, and as I don't normally practise this aspect of the language because Word corrects the spelling automatically, then I don't normally make an effort to learn it. On this site I have been able to learn a few rules and practise this aspect.*

6.8.7 Case study 7: SONIA

Female student
4th year of Computer Studies
English qualifications in Spain equivalent to first certificate

Sonia had the lowest overall pre-test score (Table 1: 23 against an average of 28.3 out of 41) with below average scores on both units 1 and 2 (Tables 2 and 3). Her trial scores were also below average overall (Table 4: 82% against an average of 84.7%) although above average on unit 2 (Table 6: 94% against an average of 92%). Her post-test scores are also below average overall and on both units 1 and 2 (Tables 7 to 9), but she did make above average learning gains overall (Table 10: 7 against an average of 5.9) and on unit 2 (Table 12: 6 against 4.9). It could be argued that this student benefited from the resource.

Unsurprisingly, given her degree, Sonia had awareness of the practical advantages of computers as learning environments:

The advantages of using a computer is that you can use it at any time, you don't have to physically move to a classroom on certain days of the week, you can work on it at your own pace; maybe one day you can use it for two hours and another day you can use it six

However, she also viewed the computer learning environment as limited and for languages, not the ideal learning environment:

> *I use the computer nowadays because there is no choice, but I try to use it for as little as I can. Computers help but I am not keen on spending lots of time in front of them. I prefer the benefits you get from meeting new people and talking to them.*

She also mentioned that she felt the resource needed to offer different learning opportunities for learners at different levels:

It would have been good to have different levels, as this resource is just good for first year students.

I would improve the program dividing it into different levels and to do it monolingual for more advanced levels.

6.8.8 Case study 8: TIRSO

Male student
1st year English Spanish with linguistics
English qualifications: FCE and IELTS
Computers: no qualifications, average computer skills

Tirso was the student who made the highest learning gains on units 1 and 2, with a learning gain of 8 against an average of 4.9 on unit 1. His score on the unit 1 pre-test, in particular, was well below average (8 against 10.9). This score, however, is not matched by a below average score on the unit 1 trial quizzes; on the contrary, Tirso's score was the highest overall (88% against an average of 77.4). The above average learning gain on unit 1 might thus be accounted for by an atypically low pre-test score on unit 1. Tirso appeared confident of his English abilities, possessing two formal qualifications. He also had prior experience of using CALL software of this kind:

> *Before I came to England I used the Wall Street Institute system for five months. I enrolled to get prepared for my visit to this country. There was a CD-ROM complementing the lessons with the teacher. It was OK.*

His trial use of the resource suggests a possible fall-off of motivation. He was one of two students who failed to complete one of the trial quizzes in unit 2 and he went on to miss seven further quizzes in units 3 and 4. Certainly, in his post-trial interview, he highlighted two areas which could be improved to sustain student motivation: the provision of graded exercises and progressive navigation:

> *I would like the program divided into basic level, intermediate, upper intermediate, advanced and the equivalent to proficiency; that would be quite interesting. It is important not to lose students' interest – even if it is not a very difficult thing, something that gives the students a challenge, some motivation. If I don't have a challenge I don't get motivated.*

> *Every time you want to go from one activity to the next you have to go first to the home page; that's boring.*

Yet at the same time, he acknowledged that the fairly unsophisticated design was acceptable for university students:

> *The design is good for a university student; maybe it could have been made more attractive if it was intended for younger students, not for us. For university students it is a good design.*

Tirso's orientation to the resource seemed to be fairly neutral. It could be that the resource triggered noticing in unit 1 which allowed for an improved performance on the post-test. It is difficult, however, given the limitations and anomalies of the data to draw any reliable conclusions.

6.8.9 Case study 9: AINOA

Female student
3rd year European Nursing
English qualifications: TOEFL (590)
Computers: no qualifications but good computing skills

Ainoa was the student who started out with the highest scores overall on the pre-test (Table 1: 36 out of 41 against an average of 28.3); yet she made the least learning gains overall (Table 10: -4 against an average of 5.9) and in relation to both units 1 and 2, appearing to regress in the accuracy of her knowledge on unit 2 (Table 12: -5 against an average of 1, moving from her pre-test score of 20 to a post-test score of 15). Her scores on the trial quizzes overall were only average (Table 4: 85% against an average of 84.7%). On the basis of these limited data, it appears that Ainoa did not benefit from the resource; indeed, she was the only student whose post-test score was lower than her pre-test score at 32 against 36.

It seems curious, therefore, that Ainoa had a very positive view of learning with computers:

> *It is easier to study with a computer than with a book because it is a much faster way of finding out information.*

and further had a very positive reaction towards the materials, praising their simplicity, organisation, clarity and the way in which students can work with them without needing further instructions from the tutor.

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I haven't found any difficulty. I think that everything was very clear and easy to understand.

This program is very focused and very clever.

It's so easy to follow that I don't think you need a teacher to help you.

The indications are good; I didn't get lost.

6.8.10 Case study 10: RAQUEL

Female student
3rd year European Nursing
English qualifications: Advanced Cambridge English Certificate
No computer qualifications but good computer skills

Raquel had below average pre-test scores overall (26/41 against 28.8), with 9 against the average of 10.9 on unit 1 and 17 against 17.4 on unit 2. She then scored consistently lowest on the trial quizzes (75% against 84.7%) and failed to complete one quiz in both unit 1 and unit 2. If her overall trial score was adjusted to give 0 for uncompleted tests, her overall score reduces to 63%. Yet her overall learning gains were average at 6 points against an average of 5.9.

Raquel nevertheless had very positive reactions towards the materials. She praised them for their clarity and usefulness. She is also pleased by the fact that one can work autonomously without further instructions.

> *It's a very explicit program. The activities are very useful. With such an intelligible and clear program you don't need anybody sitting next to you and explaining anything. It is all crystal clear.*

She also found rewarding the fact that the program could provide her with rapid and correct automatic feedback. She found this facility very motivating.

> *Do, check, submit and voilà, you see the right responses: fast and good. This is one of the factors that makes you keep on going.*

Another advantage that she found useful was that by working online one has access to all different resources that can help the learning process by speeding it and making it easier to find appropriate supplements to the materials.

> *When you are online you have access to all kinds of materials to aid you with the learning process. If you don't understand a word you can go to a dictionary; if you want to find more about the topic you do a search and get thousands of sites to explore the topic further. That is amazing!!!*

Even from a detailed examination of individual data, it is difficult to identify any clear patterns of factors explaining above average or below average outcomes from use of the proposed resource. For example, the student who gained the most between pre-test and post-test was Tirso. Yet, in his interview, he did not appear to be particularly enthusiastic about using the resource (he also failed to complete a number of trial exercises). Of course, Tirso's learning gain score may have been inflated by an atypically low pre-score on unit 2 (8 out of 20), since his unit 2 trial score was 100%. Conversely, the student who gained the least was Ainoa. Yet she seemed to be very positively oriented to the resource. Further, it could not be argued that Ainoa's lack of gain might have been accounted for by her low starting point, since Ainoa started with the highest pre-test score. However, a lower level of proficiency may have been a factor in Nuria's lower than average learning gains. The limitations of the evaluation study highlighted above make it difficult to untangle factors, such as initial level of proficiency or orientation to computer learning environments, which may play a role in influencing how effectively individual students learn from a resource such as this one. Clearly, most robust research than was possible here is required.

Nevertheless, the evaluation study as a whole provided some evidence to confirm the validity of the proposed resource, with learning gains for all but one student and in general a positive qualitative evaluation for the resource. In what follows, I identify the key qualitative points to emerge from the students as a group.

6.9 GROUP EVALUATION

The information provided by qualitative and quantitative tools in this study seem to indicate that within the higher education context the use of web-based materials to improve the English language accuracy of Spanish students is a viable and

welcomed approach. However, whether or not it is efficient and whether students write in English more accurately as a result of using these materials is still a matter open to question and suggested for further research.

6.9.1 Students' views about the mode of learning

For seven out of the ten students, learning English with a computer was a completely new experience. There were only three students that had already used similar materials to the ones to be appraised in the current investigation. The range of opinions about the mode of learning is already made patent by their comments about those initial experiences with other programs. The most enthusiastic of the three students was Oscar (case study 3) who pointed out that ease of use is one praised feature. On the other side of the spectrum is Ruth (case study 5) who claimed that computers for learning are boring and distracting tools. As well as Ruth, there were two more students who had a less radical, but also a negative view about using computers for learning (Manu, case study 2 and Sonia, case study 7). This is rather surprising, since both these students are undergraduates of Computing Sciences. Sonia's reservations about learning with computers related to the fact that they do not provide with proper face-to-face interaction. She was also concerned by the idea that computers these days are an imposition in an educational environment rather than a choice as a method for learning. Nevertheless, the general attitude towards the mode of learning was positive among the majority of students taking part in the evaluation.

Reactions obtained from the focus group discussions also showed this disparity of opinions towards the mode of learning, with a majority of students for it rather than against it. Debates were initiated in which students in favour of having online materials to improve their academic writing skills put forward the advantages of the mode of learning and the few students against stated some of the disadvantages. The youngest male student who took part in the evaluation (Manu, case study 2), who was in his final year of a degree in IT, spontaneously opened

the debate of the first focus group session by, surprisingly, due to the nature of his degree, commenting:

> –*Personally, I don't like this mode of learning at all. I have to admit that, for others, it might be a good way of learning, but I don't like spending my time in front of a computer.*

Others commented:

> –*In my case, I like computers a lot. I find many advantages in the use of new technologies for learning.*
> –*A computer is a good tool, but spending too many hours in front of a computer, actually in front of a bad monitor, makes your eyes tired, that's the only disadvantage I find.*
> –*I think that learning through web-based materials is a good way of learning; one learns more and faster and it's an extremely motivating way of learning.*

As can be seen from the extracts from the first focus group session, students not only started by stating their personal views on the issue, but they began, straight away, to enumerate the various benefits and shortcomings of the mode of learning. One of the first was that of convenience. For university students who have many conflicting demands on their time, computers can be a viable alternative or at least a supplement to EAP taught courses. Additionally, by learning with a computer, students can target their own deficiencies in a more personalised way, addressing their own weaknesses, while in group lessons students have to accommodate their needs to the needs of the rest of the students in the group. Moreover, online web-based materials enable more choice over the time, place and pace of study. In the focus groups, comments such as the following were recorded:

> –*The advantage is that you can use it whenever you want, you don't have to depend on anybody.*
> –*In my opinion English lessons are not that useful. A computer is much more convenient and practical, as you can focus on what you really need, when you have time for it, not at a specific time. You can also work from home.*

As intimated, for example by Owston (1997), flexibility of learning is a key to understanding the possible contributions of technology in L2 learning. Technology can offer greater flexibility and variety in terms of scheduling of classes, pacing of

individual learners, choice of activities to match different learning styles, and selection of content. As was seen in chapter 4 (section 4.3.3) one of the reasons given by Spanish students for poor or nil attendance at the English support lessons offered by the universities was the inconvenience due to timetable clashes with other subjects. Therefore this flexibility of web-based materials seems to be a key factor for students wanting to take advantage of computers as a learning tool. In fact, students that have shown a negative predisposition towards learning with computers, like Sonia, have, nevertheless, being able to see the advantages that this tool has over others.

> *The advantages of using a computer is that you can use it at any time, you don't have to physically move to a classroom on certain days of the week, you can work on it at your own pace; maybe one day you can use it for two hours and another day you can use it six. (Sonia)*

Two students, Manu (case study 2) and Raul (case study 6) had concerns about potential isolation and lack of personal support. They saw the materials as a good support for other approaches for learning but not as the unique method.

> *As a supplement it is a good tool, but in order to learn you need personal contact with a teacher and other learners. (Manu)*

> *A discussion board is a good idea as other teachers and students can assist with your own learning process. It becomes a more interactive way. (Raul)*

These two comments above, extracted from the individual interviews, emphasised the need for Spanish students to communicate, not only with native speakers of English, but also with other non-native students. However, while the first comment implied that it is not possible to have this kind of communication learning through computers as you need personal contact with a teacher and other learners, the second quotation suggested a solution to overcome isolation while still working on this mode of learning, namely, an electronic support network, such as discussion boards that can have similar effects to face-to-face communication in a classroom.

During the focus groups it seemed to be the general opinion that web-based materials are good as supporting other more traditional modes of study, in particular taught lessons. As the quotation below show, students understand that

computers cannot replace human interaction, but they can offer support and provide with multitude of materials and resources:

> *–Computers make me feel isolated, and I don't think they are as useful; when you are with a teacher you can form questions as they come to your mind and I preferred that.*
> *–A teacher would be able to explain to you the same thing in very many different ways until you get it, and a computer cannot do that.*

Another benefit of using web-based materials pointed out by students was the efficiency of time that happens in the learning process because time is not wasted on things such as looking for pen and paper, or browsing in books and articles for specific topics. With the computer, and especially with online materials, students just have to type in one or two words, then click, and straight away they are in the right place to work on the topic. Hence, all students taking part in the evaluation agreed that a computer was the fastest and most efficient tool to use.

One more advantage mentioned by students for using web-based materials to improve their English was the increase in their own motivation for learning. This was due to many factors, but one of them mentioned frequently was the novelty of the mode. For young students, it is perhaps more entertaining to use a new tool for learning than a more traditional one. Learning becomes a more engaging and enjoyable process. Students also commented on the positive effect that receiving immediate feedback on their actions had on their motivation.

The two students of IT who participated in the investigation (Manu, case study 2 and Sonia, case study 7) mentioned as one of the most significant advantages for using web-based materials is their capacity for alteration. That is, new resources and topics can be added, ensuring that students have at all times updated information. Also the direct access that can be offered to other sites that can be dictionaries, glossaries, grammatical explanations, or even appropriate information about the cultural environment, provided students with a more complete tool to learn or improve a language.

> *Because I'm studying IT I know that one of the most important advantages of online materials is that they can be easily updated.* (Manu)

It can be argued that despite the normal discomfort and anxiety perceived by some of the students who were more conservative about their learning habits, the reactions to this mode of study have been generally positive with all students mentioning at some point some of the advantages of this mode of learning against other more traditional methods.

6.9.2 Students' views about the specific resource

Despite the fact that students had only twenty minutes to sample the materials before the focus group discussion, most of the issues significantly relevant to this study were already mentioned during this first stage of the investigation. It was, however, only during the individual interviews that took place in the third stage of the evaluation that all the issues were reiterated and expanded. This was done after students had been able to work on the materials and verify for themselves aspects that had been highlighted by some other students during the focus group sessions. Hence, one could say that the focus group sessions, as well as providing the research with useful information on initial reactions to a new mode of study and to the materials presented, also provided additional guidance to students who could reflect about the issues mentioned during the week that they were given to trial the materials. The materials were highly praised by the Spanish students taking part in the evaluation. In general, they regarded the program as a useful resource to improve their academic writing skills in English. Students were particularly satisfied by the simplicity of navigational features and layout design. They commented on how easy it was to find their way around the resource, pointing to clear navigational signals and easy pathways to move from one page to another. However, although the students reported having no difficulties in following the indications and claimed to have found their way around the program quickly and easily, there was one aspect that some students considered frustrating. They complained that, after each activity, they were automatically taken to the home page rather than to the activities menu. This example, though isolated, shows how

important it is to design a learning program with a clear and direct navigational system in order to avoid frustration and dissatisfaction among the student-users.

> *The navigation seems to me clear; the only thing that I don't like is that if you leave an exercise unfinished to go and check something in the grammar section for instance, you cannot go back to it – you have to start that exercise all over again.* (Raquel)

> *Every time you want to go from one activity to the next you have to go first to the home page; that's boring.* (Tirso)

Regarding the layout design of the resource, eight out of the ten students thought that it was adequate and again commented on its simplicity. In fact, the use of graphics or animation to make the materials more attractive could, according to them, just slow down the program and therefore the learning process, as well as distracting them from the task. Only Ruth (case study 5) and Ainoa (case study 9) would have preferred some kind of more sophisticated layout, thinking that it could make the resource more entertaining and fun to use.

Students not only thought that navigational clues and layout design were straightforward, but also found the content easy to follow with clear explanations, illustrations and activities. The structure of content seemed appropriate to students who thought that having little presentations of the theory and plenty of quizzes to practise the topics was a good way of learning. This might be due to the fact that the particular features offered by the new mode of learning made it more appropriate for practical work. Working on practical activities where one gets immediate corrective feedback to input was welcomed. Generally students commented that the balance between theory and practice was adequate.

> *I very much like the way in which theory and practice have been inserted in the resource. I like it that the theory is not a huge part of the materials – there is just enough theory to be able to do the activities without problems.* (Nuria)

For students who thought that learning through web based materials lacked personal support, ease of use seemed to be a decisive factor in their finding the resource helpful and useful. They stated that they had not missed the support. It

seems that the frustration and apprehension that could originate from being confronted with a new mode of learning, tends to disappear when interacting with a program that is clear and easy to use.

> *It's so easy to follow that I don't think you need a teacher to help you.* (Ainoa)

The metalanguage used in most sections of the resource was Spanish; that is, theoretical explanations and instructions for activities were all written in Spanish. In this way, students could work on their own, without the presence of a tutor, and not encounter a barrier in the English language. Several students would not have minded having English as the metalanguage, especially those who were not in their first year of study in England. Nevertheless, most recognised that, as it was a program designed specifically for Spanish students, having Spanish as the metalanguage was relevant and it made them feel less isolated in the task of writing academic English. They were, in this way, able to perceive more clearly that they were not the only ones who encounter problems when trying to write their assignments in English and that there were other Spanish students facing the same difficulties. This sense of commonality made students perceive Spanish as the logical language for introducing the materials.

All students regarded the quizzes as the most useful and important part of the resource. Having the opportunity to practise frequently and in various ways with exercises on the topics covered in the theory was appreciated. The activities were perceived as useful and relevant to the topics presented in each of the units. They also found this format to be more entertaining and fun to use than print-based activities.

Regarding the level of difficulty, some activities were perceived as easier than others (see above sections 6.7 and 6.8), although the general feeling among students was that even the most difficult drill could easily be accomplished because all they needed to know was clearly explained in the preceding theoretical background for each unit. Students preferred some types of activities to others, but

this seemed to relate more to personal inclination and ability than other factors. There did not appear to be any general kind of proclivity towards a particular type of activity. Although six out of the ten students expressed a negative predisposition towards the activities in the unit on proper quoting, this was mainly due to the fact that these exercises were the only ones that involved reading long texts in English, and students found this activity boring and in some cases difficult.

Although, as seen above, students carrying out the evaluation were generally positive in their comments towards the resource, there were aspects that students thought could be improved. One of the aspects reiterated more frequently during the focus groups and individual interviews was that of requesting additional support with pronunciation one aspect that was left out in this resource since the aim of the program was to improve accuracy in academic writing.

> –I would have liked a pronunciation section to know how some words are said in English – it would have been useful.
> –I agree in Spain we are used to reading and grammar, but when we start talking no one can understand us. The pronunciation is very important and in Spain no one gives enough importance to it.

During the individual interviews, eight out of the ten students said that they would have benefited from a pronunciation section. In chapter 4 (see 4.3.3) we had already seen Spanish students' concern about their oral abilities. It is not surprising that having decided to develop in this resource only writing skills, Spanish students still feel they require extra help with their speaking ability, particularly with pronunciation. However, as stated by Herron et al. (1999), existing foreign language courseware is still ineffective as far as the oral capabilities development is concerned. This is mainly due to two different reasons: on the one hand, the limited availability of computers with enough computational power and with satisfactory multimedia capabilities, and on the other, the unsatisfactory performance of the speech recognition systems especially as far as foreign speakers are concerned. It is probably true that the ideal foreign language course should gradually lead the student to become autonomously able to communicate in the four fundamental linguistic skills: listening, reading, talking and writing. It

should also offer some understanding about culture and civilisation of the country concerned. However, the objectives of this investigation were limited in scope, and a support strategy focusing on only one particular problem was designed.

Another concern among the case studies was the lack of specification of the materials. The idea of including in the resource different sections for the different disciplines was mentioned by four out of the ten students. They would have liked a section with subject-specific vocabulary, as well as examples of assignments for Sciences on the one hand and for Arts on the other. Further, three students thought that it would be useful to develop the resource with different levels of English from basic to advanced. One of the lessons learned from the design of this resource is that the more the materials adapt to the learner and their individual needs, the higher the learners' motivation. In this case students objected to the lack of language proficiency levels, and topical interest, but other aspects such as computer proficiency and learning style should be factors to be taken into account if we want to make the most of the computers' capabilities to enhance learners' motivation.

Another frequently recurring suggestion for improving the resource was that of increasing the number of content units. Students suggested, in particular, other grammatical aspects of the language in which they tended to make mistakes such as prepositions, phrasal verbs, passive constructions and irregular verbs.

> *In this program I would include more spelling and grammar rules as well as a list of irregular verbs, some comparisons with the Spanish language and some adverbs so it becomes clear to me how to use them in English* (Manu).

Other students would have welcomed the opportunity of free writing. Just working on small units and producing limited input was frustrating for some of the students who would have also liked to write long passages. Bear in mind, however, that while quizzes can be marked automatically by computers, answers where the input is not constrained are considerably more problematic since students' answers to even the simplest of free-text questions can be enormously variable.

To sum up, regardless of the efficiency or lack thereof, the results of this study seem to indicate that computer-assisted language learning designed to improve accuracy in Spanish students' academic writing could work well as a complement to other approaches that focus on more communicative aspects of the language, and its development should be pursued. Indicative quantitative results show that students taking part in the case studies improved their knowledge in the areas presented in the resource after having used it for a limited period of time. Not only that, but when one looks at the qualitative findings of the current investigation, it is apparent that Spanish students like to use computerised instruction. The implication is that if they like it, they will use it. And that, after all, is the goal. Thus, as one looks at students' attitudes toward learning from computerised instruction in combination with the fact that computerised instruction works, it would seem that educational institutions could benefit by increasing the availability of web-based materials to support specific purposes such as improving accuracy in academic writing.

Lessons have been learned from the results of this investigation. The first is that for students to be satisfied with web-based materials and take the maximum benefit out of them, they need to be simple: navigation features must be easy to follow, the layout design needs to be uncluttered and if possible colour-coded, and the content needs to be clear. In this way students will be able to benefit from independent learning. Not only that, but in order to keep students' motivation high, the learning CALL materials must address individual specific needs as much as possible, aspects such as levels of difficulty, as well as subject specific interest needs to be considered. In the current investigation, mixed ability in the English language or specific discipline aspects were not considered when designing the resource, and students remarked on these issues when commenting on aspects to be improved. Students also thought the resource should grow and increase the number of areas in which they have difficulty, as well as providing a pronunciation section envisaged to improve the production of sounds that are particularly difficult to Spanish students due to L1 influence. Nevertheless, it must be said that this resource was limited in scope and it was designed to address a very particular

aspect of difficulty. This resource is not the panacea for all the difficulties of Spanish students, nor it is envisaged to replace other forms of instruction, as mistakenly understood by some of the students.

A consideration needs to be raised here about the limitations of the current investigation regarding the number of students that participated in the study and the time frame. The findings may have been different and perhaps more reliable if a bigger number of students had participated and/or if the resource developed had been used for a longer period of time and perhaps integrated as a check tool into the task of revising written assignments. However, the use of CALL online materials for form-focused instruction remains an interesting proposal and they are recommended as supplemental, although not alternative, tools to other means and types of instruction.

To sum up, the results presented in previous sections show that *Blackboard* appears to offer a successful platform on which to post web-based materials to teach specific points of ESL to Spanish students. It has some advantages over in-class form-focused instruction and these advantages have been pointed out by students themselves, particularly those of flexibility and convenience. The quiz facility also provides a number of advantages: they can be easily marked/scored by the computer, which means that scoring can be both accurate and objective, and that no marking time is required from the tutor. However, there are also problems associated with quizzes for L2 learning. For example, creativity cannot easily be tested; that is why these types of materials are particularly suitable for FonFs where the focus is on formal accuracy rather than meaning. Although some students wanted to have some free writing activities, where they would be able to write longer passages rather than producing limited input, that would require much more sophisticated software due to the variety of possible answers.

6.10 <u>SUMMARY</u>

In the first part of the chapter a review of the literature on CALL and online language learning, in particular on the advantages they offer over traditional FFI has been presented. The second part sought to describe the process of design of a web-based resource which aims to address the specific difficulties of Spanish students as reported in chapter 5. In the third part of this chapter, the resource has been evaluated using a case study investigation with ten students. The results from the appraisal have been presented. They report that the students generally responded positively to the mode of learning and the particular materials. Alongside the broadly enthusiastic reception to the approach, many useful suggestions were generated to inform future design and to avoid possible pitfalls.

Despite the limitations of the current investigation presented above in section (6.7.3) the results presented in this chapter show that *Blackboard* appears to offer a successful platform in which to post web-based materials to teach specific points of ESL to Spanish students. In particular, the quiz facility can provide a number of advantages: they can be easily marked/scored by the computer, which means that scoring can be both accurate and objective, and that no marking time is required from the tutor. However, there are also problems associated with quizzes for L2 learning. For example, creativity cannot easily be tested; that is why these types of materials are particularly suitable for FonFs where the focus is on formal accuracy rather than meaning.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

7.0 <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

This study has sought to evaluate the nature and extent of the challenges facing Spanish students when they come to study at UK universities and assess the distinctiveness of their experience against other European national groups, as reported in the literature reviewed in chapter 2. Of all the language difficulties faced by Spanish students, this investigation focused on the challenge of academic writing. A review of typical error patterns in the written work of Spanish students was undertaken to identify any specific difficulties. Given the widespread availability of electronic information delivery and the increasing evidence for the potential of computer-supported learning, this study then examined how a web-based resource, designed specifically to target some of the linguistic difficulties experienced by this group of students, might contribute to promoting accuracy in written academic English. An evaluation of the proposed resource was carried out which went some way to confirming the validity of the approach. As a result, it has proved possible to make a number of recommendations, which could form the basis of new strategies for working with international students in general.

7.1 <u>OVERVIEW OF STUDY AND MAIN FINDINGS</u>

The present study tested the following hypotheses:

1. The broad experiences of Spanish students when studying in UK higher education, are distinctive to those of other international students.

2. Spanish students experience academic writing problems in English that are attributable to L1 influence.

3. Self-access web-based materials, consisting of explanations and quizzes, are efficient and effective in helping Spanish students address specific linguistic problems.

Each part of the study described in the following subsections attempted to test each of these three hypotheses respectively.

7.1.1 The student experience analysis

Although results from the student experience analysis show that many of the problems that Spanish students experience are common to other international student groups – European and non-European – it also emerged that educational and cultural background play an important part in the nature and severity of initial difficulties experienced. Hence, on one level, the first hypothesis stating that *the broad experiences of Spanish students when studying in UK higher education, are distinctive to those of other international students* was not confirmed. On another, this study has highlighted how specific educational, cultural and linguistic background may impact on the success of a student's period of study abroad.

The sample of Spanish students that participated in this investigation perceived their educational and cultural background (see chapter 4, section 4.3.2) as fitting into Hofstede's classification (together with France, Greece, Portugal and Italy) of a Latin country, characterised by large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance (see chapter 2, section 2.4.2); they believe that the Spanish educational system prioritises acquisition of facts and accumulation of knowledge over critical analysis and personal development. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the UK, placed by Hofstede into the Anglo-Saxon group of countries, characterised by their small power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance. In itself, this difference does not seem to pose a significant challenge since the findings (see chapter 4, section 4.3.2) suggest that Spanish students reject their previous learning environment and orientate positively towards the educational system in the UK with its greater personalisation and emphasis on students' active involvement, notwithstanding, of course, reports from a number of participants that they lacked confidence in the typical learning tasks of the UK academic system, such as giving oral presentations, participating in seminar discussions and writing academic essays (see chapter 4, section 4.3.2).

Despite the fact that initial adaptation problems appear to be overcome relatively early during their stay, Spanish students, like other European students (see Katsara, 2004; The International Student Mobility report, 2004)

felt they would have benefited from more pre-arrival information in order to lessen the effects of culture shock and to enable a more rapid adaptation. Their most salient obstacles had to do with the more expensive cost of living in the UK; adjusting to new time-schedules, food and weather conditions also appeared to be a cause of discontent during the adaptation phase. Additionally, they reported initial difficulties in making friends from the host country. In this respect, Spanish students face similar obstacles to those of any young international student who, for the first time, is living independently in a foreign country, far away from relatives, friends and the known environment.

It could be argued that in comparison to the Northern European cohorts studied by e.g. Wiers-Jenssen (2003), Spanish students encounter particular challenges relating to their English language skills. This study highlights Spanish students' apparent confidence in their language skills when asked to self-assess (although this may have been a false result skewed by limitations of the research instrument), but acknowledgement of difficulties when reporting their experiences of undertaking specific learning tasks such as presentations, engaging in seminar discussions and writing essays. They partly trace the limitations in their competence to inadequacies in approaches to English language teaching in Spain (see chapter 2 section 2.4.3.4 and chapter 4 section 4.3.3). Certainly, English teaching in secondary Spanish schools has traditionally been focused on the specific requirements of the University Entrance Exam rather than on developing functional competence to enable study in English. A detailed analysis of the status of English and English language teaching within the Spanish educational system and wider society was obviously beyond the scope of this study. However, the fact that there is little tradition thus far in Spain of educational institutions, such as high schools and universities, employing English as the medium of instruction, while this is increasingly a feature of at least higher education in the Scandinavian countries and in the Netherlands, arguably impacts on Spanish students' ability to adapt quickly to the linguistic demands of study in the UK.

Retrospecting on their experience, participants in this investigation felt that they had been inadequately prepared in English language prior to arrival and

they felt they needed English language support during their stay. Paradoxically, however, few attended the English lessons offered by the university where they were enrolled. Reasons given to explain this absenteeism were high demands on students' time, and the belief that socialising with native speakers was the most advantageous (and apparently the only) way to improve their English. Those who did attend the courses thought that, although good to promote interaction with other international students, they were not useful in improving their language skills, largely because the needs of the individuals within the classes were quite diverse (see chapter 4 section 4.3.3). These findings highlighted the need to investigate more flexible and targeted ways of providing linguistic support for this student group.

7.1.2 The language needs analysis

The next part of this investigation thus sought to identify linguistic needs that might be specific to Spanish students. It was decided to focus on written language skills since these could arguably be more easily addressed in a web-based resource which would could be used flexibly. My review of the literature on the role of the first language in the development of second language proficiency and limited error analysis based on Spanish students' academic writing suggests that the second hypothesis stating that *Spanish students experience academic writing problems in English that are attributable to L1 influence* can be supported, while recognising that L1 influence is quite clearly not the sole, and frequently not the most significant, factor in the academic writing challenges experienced by Spanish students.

7.1.3 The design of the web-based resource

Having attempted to identify frequent and common difficulties for Spanish students when writing academic English, this investigation set out to explore how these could be addressed in some form of flexible provision through a review of the literature on current approaches to academic writing. The product approach and the process approach were reviewed. Without denying its value in developing skills and confidence in writing, this review suggested that the process approach may be less effective in addressing surface-level linguistic

errors which, in the context of academic writing, can be frustrating for students and discipline tutors alike.

> *Though students may be much better at invention, organisation, and revision than they were before, too many written products are still riddled with grammatical and lexical inaccuracies. No matter how interesting or original a student's ideas are, an excess of sentence- and discourse-level errors may distract and frustrate instructors and other readers.* (Ferris, 1995)

A number of authors (Beaudoin, 1998; Hall, 1998; McBride & Seago, 1997; Torlakovic & Deugo, 2004) have pointed out that the computer may be well-suited to helping students overcome deficits in mastering structural forms in a second language. In our particular context, it was argued that such a resource, focused on simple explanation and exercises relating to specific language forms, could release attention for more complex difficulties in academic writing such as those identified in chapter 5. Moreover, computers exhibit some advantages over other more traditional teaching methods, among them the flexibility of time and place of study, something which would appear to be valued by the Spanish students surveyed who claimed to have strong demands of time preventing them from regularly attending the language support lessons offered by universities (see chapter 4 section 4.3.3). With these considerations in mind, a web-based support resource, posted in the MLE *Blackboard*, was designed and evaluated. It should be recalled that the status of this resource was that of an 'exemplar' that could test the general strategy and some specific delivery ideas. Clearly no attempt was made to provide a comprehensive course nor to claim that the content and delivery mechanism provided the only solution for Spanish students to improve their academic writing skills.

7.1.4 Evaluation of the resource

In order to test the third hypothesis stating that *self-access web-based materials, consisting of explanations and quizzes, are efficient and effective in helping Spanish students address specific linguistic problems*, an evaluation in which ten university Spanish students took part, was carried out (see chapter 6).

Quantitative results from this evaluation suggest on the surface that, following the period of time spent using the resource, Spanish students improved their knowledge of the areas presented. Taking the areas where the majority of student evaluators completed most of the trial exercises, i.e. unit 1 on doubling consonants and unit 2 on false friends vocabulary, post-test results revealed an average learning gain of 5.9 points out of a total of 41, with only one student failing to improve their post-test scores. Qualitative evaluation data also supported the validity of the resource, with the majority of the student evaluators responding positively to the mode of learning and to the specific materials alike. They appreciated the convenience and the flexibility of the medium as well as its ability to provide immediate feedback. Regarding the specific materials, the student evaluators appreciated the simplicity of navigational features and design, as well as the balance and structure of the presentation of theoretical content and activities.

Thus, the evidence available goes in the direction of supporting the third research hypothesis. Using an electronic environment to deliver form-focused instruction and practice on specific areas of linguistic difficulty appears to have some merit in supporting specific student needs. However, as noted in chapter 6 and below, the quantitative evidence gathered as part of the evaluation needs to be seen as highly limited in validity and cannot be said to demonstrate anything other than very short-term learning gains in a restricted test environment.

7.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The significance of this study is three-fold. First, it is significant in furthering our understanding of how a specific national background may affect the challenges faced by international students. For example, students do not necessarily reject the values of a different academic culture; rather they may espouse them if they are critical of their home academic system. This however does not minimize the challenges which students may experience in adapting to the new academic culture that they appreciate. This said, this study does

confirm that the major challenges faced by Spanish students are also shared by students from other national backgrounds.

Secondly, this study should be of particular interest to Faculty and University Student Support Services, including those involved in the provision of English for Academic Purposes support. It highlights again the challenges experienced by international students, but what this study adds to the existing literature is its proposal for a web-based resource that can easily be targeted at the specific needs – in this case, linguistic needs – of a given national cohort of students. Such a resource is flexible in providing access to key information and opportunities for learning at times when demands on time may make attending classes or briefing sessions difficult. Furthermore, the broadly positive evaluation of the pilot resource by a sample of Spanish students suggests that a simple, form-focused resource, targeted specifically on language difficulties traceable to L1 transfer, can have a potentially useful role in the panoply of learning resources designed to develop effective academic writing skills in English.

Thirdly, this study is of potential interest to international students themselves. It may raise awareness of the challenges they are likely to face in studying abroad, and potentially lead to better preparation before departure, but perhaps more importantly, this study highlights that many challenges appear to be an inherent part of the experience of being an international student and are shared by other international students.

7.3 <u>LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY</u>

There are certain limitations in the scope and methodology that need to be mentioned in order to contextualise the research outcomes. Firstly, there are limitations due to the amount of time which has elapsed between the investigation being carried out and final submission. Within this time there have been two important changes. First, continuous growth and structural reforms have defined in recent years the development of HE in Spain, which may impact on how Spanish students perceive their educational and cultural

backgrounds, and their needs as students. Among these reforms, increased financial investment, the slow-down of the increase in student numbers, the introduction of quality assurance programmes and the proliferation of private universities may play an important role in changing Spanish students' educational background. Second, learning technologies continue to develop rapidly and recent uses to support and enhance learning, such as podcasting or wikis, have not been considered in this investigation.

Secondly, there are limitations in the scope of the current study. This study was based on a limited sample of Spanish students studying at universities all located in the same geographical area of the UK (South-East coast of England). It cannot be claimed that the results are statistically representative of the whole population of Spanish students in the UK. They have thus been interpreted as indicative and cross-checked against findings arising from other published studies. Further, the web-based materials designed specifically for Spanish students only focused on a very limited sub-set of their potential needs. It would have been useful to have developed and evaluated strategies for addressing the wide range of areas in which students reported difficulty, including acclimatisation issues and oral practice (specifically skills for oral seminars). Additionally, whilst the format of the resource units seems to have been well-received by students, it would have been interesting to have been able to introduce a broader range of activities to compare the effectiveness of different approaches. As acknowledged in chapter 6, section 6.6, the development of the project suffered from software difficulties, partly due to the forced move from *Hot Potatoes* to *Blackboard*, which resulted in losing a wider variety of quizzes.

Thirdly, there are limitations resulting from the implementation of the research design. Limitations in the student experience analysis questionnaire (see Appendix C) include the fact that the impact of a number of independent variables i.e. questions 1-5 and 9 (relating to gender, origin, mode of study, course, and reasons for studying abroad), could not be explored, since there were only a small number of respondents for each category. Further, students' self-assessments of English language proficiency were weakened in two

specific cases. In question 14, students were asked to retrospect back about their level of English prior to arrival. This context of retrospection inevitably weakened the reliability of self-evaluation and furthermore, student participants were retrospecting over different periods of time. In question 21, the wording of closed response categories 'not very able' and 'unable' may have skewed student response. These limitations in the student experience questionnaire may be seen as mitigated somewhat by triangulation, with data from the questionnaire cross-checked against data collected by other means such as interviews and focus groups.

Limitations in the design of the evaluation were more significant, as noted in chapter 6 (section 6.7) and above. These included the size of the sample which was too small in order to ensure reliable quantitative analysis. Additionally, the participants were diverse in their backgrounds, studying different degrees, in different years of study, with different periods of time spent in the UK and different levels of proficiency in English. A larger but more homogeneous group of evaluators would have been preferable, if difficult to achieve. Given the diversity of the evaluator group, a case study approach was taken in order to scrutinise the available data in detail, but it was not possible to discern any patterning amongst the diverse variables. Another limitation concerns the short-term effects of the instructional treatments. In retrospect, it would have been better to make use of a delayed post-test in order to determine whether students' gains had been retained some time after the instructional period took place. Furthermore, learning gains were only tested in the limited context of the quizzes themselves, rather than in the target context of students' academic writing. Additionally, the pre- and post- tests themselves were not well-balanced in their coverage of spelling, vocabulary and grammatical items, since the spelling and vocabulary tests were allocated four times the weighting of the grammar test. It may also have been that research rigour was compromised here by my necessity to be involved in an overlapping designer/researcher role and by the respondents knowing that their work was being carefully scrutinised.

7.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has sought to examine the experiences of Spanish students in UK universities and to suggest ways in which difficulties, in particular those relating to language, can be alleviated. It has become clear during the investigation that this is a complex area and that there are a number of further studies which could profitably be undertaken in the future to deepen and expand our understanding.

Given the findings of the present study, further research could be undertaken in several directions. This study could be replicated after improving aspects related to the limitations mentioned above (i.e. using a larger number of cases, allowing more time between pre- and post- tests, exploring further the potential offered by IT nowadays). In fact, given the growth of the World Wide Web, the development of web-based language provision is sure to continue to be an exciting, expanding field, so recommendations can be made for large-scale research to be conducted in this area.

The study deliberately examined only the experiences of Spanish university students and brought to light how experience of the home educational culture coloured orientation towards the host educational culture. Other studies might be conducted investigating the experiences of other groups of international students with different educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds; for example, it would be interesting to investigate how groups from educational cultures characterised differently by Hoftstede (1986, 1991 and 1996) fared in a given educational culture. These future studies might expose differences in international students' experiences at university in the UK, thereby leading to ways of creating better programs to ease their adjustment process.

This study argues for the development of web-based resources to meet the specific linguistic needs of particular cohorts of international students. During the study the different needs of students in different disciplines were noted. It is difficult to know how far to drill down into a comparison of subjects and levels, but it may be that at least some broad categories could be established

and supplementary materials could be designed to reflect these categories. However, as pointed out in chapter 6, it should be recalled that my study did not allow me to establish that use of these form focused materials actually helped Spanish students improve the accuracy of their academic writing. A more comprehensive longitudinal study would be needed in order to identify whether such explicit form-focused support can in fact lead to improved accuracy on the target writing tasks and how international students use such resources in the preparation of their academic writing. Specifically, the value, or otherwise, of flexible form-focused instructional packages delivered electronically deserves further research, particularly in the light of stronger research evidence to support form-focused instruction.

7.5 <u>CONCLUSIONS</u>

It is inevitable that as European integration increases and as education takes on an ever more global identity, more students will be spending at least a portion of their formative years studying in countries other than their own. There is a clear responsibility for the host countries, in particular, to ensure that systems are in place to provide a comprehensive support system for these young people. In the UK, which welcomes tens of thousands of new students every year, there is already recognition of the need to investigate and understand the needs of international students, but, clearly there are limits as to the range and specificity of the services that can be provided. It is hoped that this study will make a modest contribution to our understanding of the degree to which any national cohort of students may experience a specific set of needs to be addressed, and demonstrates how such needs (in particular, L1 influenced linguistic needs) might be addressed through a flexible, web-based resource.

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ESTUDIANTES ESPAÑOLES EN INGLATERRA

INFORMACIÓN GENERAL

1. Sexo   hombre   ☐   mujer   ☐

2. Edad   21 ó menos   ☐   más de 21   ☐

3. Lugar de residencia habitual....................................**provincia de**..............................

4. Eres: estudiante de carrera   ☐

            postgraduado   ☐

            otro (especifica)   ....

5. Estudiante de letras   ☐   ciencias   ☐

6. ¿Cuánto tiempo llevas estudiando en Inglaterra?

menos de 1 año☐entre 1 y 3 años☐más de 3 años☐

7. ¿En qué tipo de alojamiento vives en estos momentos?

alojamiento de la universidad en el campus	☐	en una casa/piso yo solo/a	☐
alojamiento de la universidad fuera del campus	☐	en casa de familiares/amigos	☐
con una familia	☐	otra......................	☐
comparto casa/piso con otros estudiantes	☐		☐

8. En general, con tu alojamiento te encuentras:

muy satisfecho/a☐   satisfecho/a☐   poco satisfecho/a☐   nada satisfecho/a☐

PRE LLEGADA

9. ¿Qué razones tuvieron importancia en tu decisión de estudiar en este país? (Marca todas las casillas relevantes)

mejorar mi currículum	☐	haber conseguido una beca	☐
aprender/mejorar el inglés	☐	la calidad del programa de estudios	☐
conocer otro país/gente	☐	no existía este curso en España	☐
el deseo de mi familia	☐	otra (especifica)..	☐

10. Antes de tu llegada a Inglaterra, ¿recibiste información sobre hábitos y costumbres inglesas?

sí☐   no☐

Fuente de información: (Marca todas las casillas relevantes)

familia y/o amigos	☐	universidad inglesa	☐
universidad en España	☐	British council	☐

otra (especifica).........................

11. Antes de tu llegada a Inglaterra, ¿recibiste información sobre el sistema educativo inglés?

sí☐   no☐

Fuente de información: (Marca todas las casillas relevantes)

familia y/o amigos	☐	universidad inglesa	☐
universidad en España	☐	British council	☐

otra (especifica).........................

12. Antes de tu llegada a Inglaterra, ¿recibiste información sobre tu curso?

sí☐   no☐

Fuente de información: (Marca todas las casillas relevantes)

familia y/o amigos	☐	universidad inglesa	☐
universidad en España	☐	British council	☐

otra (especifica).........................

13. Si recibiste información en alguno de los aspectos mencionados en las preguntas 10 a 12, encontraste esta información:

muy útil☐   útil☐   nada útil☐

14. ¿Cómo considerabas tu nivel de inglés antes de venir a Inglaterra?

muy bueno☐   bueno☐   normal☐   malo☐   muy malo☐

15. ¿Cómo evaluarías las siguientes estrategias de apoyo para ser utilizadas antes de venir a Inglaterra?

	Muy útil	Útil	No muy útil	Totalmente ineficaz
un sitio web informativo	☐	☐	☐	☐
curso intensivo de inglés académico	☐	☐	☐	☐
curso intensivo de conversación en inglés	☐	☐	☐	☐
información escrita sobre costumbres inglesas y el sistema de educación en este país	☐	☐	☐	☐
diario de experiencias de otros estudiantes españoles que hayan estudiado en el Reino Unido	☐	☐	☐	☐

ADAPTACIÓN ACADÉMICA

16. Señala en cuál de los dos sistemas educativos se pone más énfasis a los siguientes métodos:

	Más énfasis en universidades españolas	Igual énfasis en universidades españolas que inglesas	Menos énfasis en universidades españolas
control sobre el progreso del estudiante	☐	☐	☐
profesor como la mayor fuente de información	☐	☐	☐
presentaciones orales	☐	☐	☐
participación en seminarios	☐	☐	☐
tomar y memorizar apuntes	☐	☐	☐
escribir ensayos	☐	☐	☐
trabajo práctico	☐	☐	☐
libertad para organizar tu propio estudio	☐	☐	☐

17. ¿Cómo evalúas la idea de tener un tutor personal? buena☐   regular☐ mala☐

18. ¿Cómo evalúas la relación entre tu tutor personal y tú?
buena☐   regular☐ mala☐   no hay relación☐

19. ¿Cómo evaluarías el apoyo obtenido de la universidad en este país en las siguientes áreas?

	Mucho apoyo	Algún apoyo	Ningún apoyo
proceso de matriculación	☐	☐	☐
alojamiento	☐	☐	☐
cuestiones académicas	☐	☐	☐
inglés	☐	☐	☐
cuestiones personales	☐	☐	☐
biblioteca	☐	☐	☐
informática	☐	☐	☐
actividades culturales, deportivas y de entretenimiento	☐	☐	☐

20. Si tienes algún comentario sobre el proceso de adaptación académica, escríbelo a continuación_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

IDIOMA

21. Evalúa tu capacidad de realizar las siguientes actividades en inglés:

	Muy capaz	Capaz	No muy capaz	Incapaz
participar en conversaciones con nativos	☐	☐	☐	☐
participar en seminarios	☐	☐	☐	☐
leer y comprender artículos/libros sobre mi curso	☐	☐	☐	☐
comprender a los profesores en clase	☐	☐	☐	☐
escribir ensayos	☐	☐	☐	☐

22. Si tienes algún comentario sobre el idioma, escríbelo a continuación

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

ADAPTACIÓN SOCIO-CULTURAL		

23. ¿Qué aspectos de la vida en este país encuentras más difíciles? (Marca todas las casillas relevantes)

ausencia de familiares/amigos	☐	el clima	☐
conocimiento insuficiente del idioma	☐	la comida	☐
progreso académico insatisfactorio	☐	los horarios	☐
el costo de la vida	☐	vivir por mi cuenta	☐
el comportamiento de la gente	☐	el sistema académico	☐
añoranza de España	☐	otro (especifica)	☐

24. ¿De qué nacionalidades son tus amigos en este país? (marca todas las casillas relevantes)

españoles☐　　　ingleses☐　　　de otras nacionalidades☐

25.¿Has tenido dificultad en hacer amigos ingleses? sí☐　　　no☐

26.La razón ha sido: (marca todas las casillas relevantes)

no he puesto el esfuerzo necesario	☐	tenemos diferentes maneras de ver la vida	☐
no han puesto el esfuerzo necesario	☐	no he tenido tiempo/ocasión todavía	☐
no tengo interés	☐	otra (especifica)..	☐

27. ¿Cómo evaluarías las siguientes estrategias de apoyo para ser utilizadas en tu llegada a Inglaterra?

	Muy útil	Útil	No muy útil	Totalmente ineficaz
un estudiante inglés que te apadrine	☐	☐	☐	☐
un servicio de email que responda a tus preguntas	☐	☐	☐	☐
un curso de orientación	☐	☐	☐	☐
curso de inglés intensivo con elementos culturales	☐	☐	☐	☐

28. ¿Te sientes integrado en la cultura y vida académica inglesas?

completamente integrado ☐　　　parcialmente integrado☐　　　nada integrado☐

29. Si tuvieras un amigo que quisiera venir a estudiar al Reino Unido ¿qué le aconsejarías?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Gracias por rellenar este cuestionario, si estás interesad@ en ampliar tus opiniones, escribe tus datos a continuación:

Nombre_____

Email_____**Tel.**_____

STUDENT EXPERIENCE INTERVIEW GUIDELINESS

Pre arrival

1. How long have you been in this country?

2. What are you studying?

3. Reasons for coming to study in England

4. Previous educational experience in Spain

5. Information received about England (country and people) before arrival. Through which media?

6. Information received about Brighton. Through which media?

7. Information received about the university. Through which media?

8. Information received about the programme of studies. Through which media?

9. Familiarity with England: previous trips or any other contact

10. Familiarity with the English educational system

11. Knowledge of the English language before coming. How long? In what ways?

12. Kind of preparation before coming

13. Expectations about England (country and people)

14. Expectations about the university

On arrival

15. First impressions

16. Any orientation or induction course? Evaluation of it

After arrival

17. In the light of overall experiences; point out the most significant differences between lifestyle (for young people) in Spain and England

18. Language problems: ability to converse, ability to succeed with studies

19. The most significant differences between the academic environment in Spain and England. Focus on:

  a. Learning resources: library, computing facilities, laboratories…

  b. Instructional/learning modes: lectures, seminars, group study, individual study, regular class attendance, writing/communications skills, teachers as main information source, teachers regularly monitor students, adherence to deadlines, class discussions, presentations, independent study…

  c. Assessment: overall emphasis on grades, oral examinations, written essay examinations, multiple choice tests, evaluation of written papers…

20. Relationships with tutors, academic staff, course mates

21. Degree of satisfaction with social life (people's behaviour, friendships…)

22. Degree of satisfaction with university (learning resources, instructional/learning modes, assesment)

23. Level of integration into the country

24. Level of integration into the academic life

25. Suggestions; innovations that could be done to improve your stay

26. Would you recommend the experience of studying here to anyone? Why?

27. Questions about personal information: age, place of birth

28. Duration of the interview

29. Respondent's overall willingness during the interview: formal and distant vs. informal and relax

SE BUSCAN

ESTUDIANTES ESPAÑOLES

Para formar parte de un proyecto de gran interés para ellos: "la evaluación de un nuevo sitio web diseñado para ayudarles a escribir inglés académico sin errores". Este sitio web, que será puesto en el studentcentral de la universidad de brighton próximamente, servirá como trampolín de aprendizaje de aspectos claves de la lengua inglesa escrita. Dejarás de cometer errores y mejorarás tus escritos académicos divirtiéndote y sin sufrimiento de ninguna clase. ¡No dejes pasar esta oportunidad!. para obtener más detalles ponte en contacto lo antes posible con:

Mari Carmen Gil Ortega
PhD Student
The School of Languages
Falmer (T Block)
Mcg9@bton.ac.uk

RECOMPENSA

A todos aquellos que puedan ofrecernos algo de su tiempo se les entregarán £20 en vales para gastar en Blackwells y la posibilidad de mejorar su inglés sin esfuerzo, y de paso, y por qué no, ampliar su círculo de amistades en este país.

<div style="border:1px solid black;">

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

Get qualitative data about:

- Content of the site
- Design
- Navigation
- Mode of learning
- Suggestions for the future

</div>

CONTENT

General
1. ¿has aprendido algo que no supieras utilizando este programa? ¿El qué?
2. ¿te ha parecido un programa útil para mejorar tu manera de escribir trabajos en inglés?
3. ¿algo que en tu opinión ha faltado? ¿sobrado?
4. ¿la balanza entre teoría y práctica te ha parecido adecuada o por el contrario hubieras incluido más teoría y menos práctica o al revés?

Activities
5. ¿qué te han parecido las actividades? ¿Útiles, inútiles, relevantes, irrelevantes, fáciles, difíciles, demasiadas, escasas?
6. ¿cuál ha sido la que más te ha gustado? ¿y la que menos?
7. ¿algún tipo de actividad que te hubiera gustado ver y no has visto?

Ejemplos
8. ¿qué te han parecido los ejemplos ¿útiles, inútiles, irrelevantes, relevantes, demasiados, escasos?

Enlaces
9. ¿qué te han parecido las secciones de enlaces qué se te dan?¿útiles, inútiles, relevantes, irrelevantes, demasiados, escasos?
10. ¿algo que haya faltado o que bajo tu punto de vista sobre en esta página?

Página de inicio
11. ¿qué te ha parecido la página de inicio? ¿clara, confusa, aburrida, entretenida, relevante, irrelevante? ¿algo que cambiarías? ¿el qué?

DISEÑO

1. ¿qué te ha parecido el diseño del sitio? ¿atractivo, repulsivo, entretenido, aburrido? ¿algo que cambiarías? ¿el qué?
2. ¿te parece adecuado el uso de los colores?
3. ¿hubieras preferido que el sitio estuviera escrito completamente en inglés? ¿por qué?
4. ¿hubieras preferido que hubiera sonido incluido? ¿en que partes del programa? ¿para que?

NAVEGACIÓN

1. ¿qué te ha parecido la navegación dentro del sitio? ¿confusa, clara? ¿faltan botones? ¿sobran botones? ¿malas indicaciones?
2. ¿te has perdido en el sitio alguna vez?
3. ¿te hubieran gustado más indicaciones? ¿De qué tipo?

MODO DE APRENDIZAJE

1. ¿qué te parece este modo de aprendizaje? Ventajas e inconvenientes
2. ¿hubieras preferido trabajar en los mismos temas de algún otro modo, i.e. en formato impreso?

SUGERENCIAS PARA EL FUTURO

1. ¿qué es lo que te ha gustado más del programa? ¿y menos?
2. en tu opinión, ¿cómo se podría mejorar este programa?
3. ¿cuántas horas a la semana estarías dispuesto a invertir en este programa, o en otro parecido, a la semana?

OBSERVATION CHECKLIST
Students name:

	0-5 min.	5-10 min.	10-15	15-20
Mainly working:	with mouse ☐ with keyboard ☐ just reading ☐ Not on computer ☐	with mouse ☐ with keyboard ☐ just reading ☐ Not on computer ☐	with mouse ☐ with keyboard ☐ just reading ☐ Not on computer ☐	with mouse ☐ with keyboard ☐ just reading ☐ Not on computer ☐
Follows easily?	Yes ☐ No ☐	Yes ☐ No ☐	Yes ☐ No ☐	Yes ☐ No ☐
His/her expression is	Stressed ☐ Excited ☐ Surprised ☐ Bored ☐ Thoughtful ☐ Amused ☐ Confused ☐ Other_____	Stressed ☐ Excited ☐ Surprised ☐ Bored ☐ Thoughtful ☐ Amused Confused ☐ Other_____	Stressed ☐ Excited ☐ Surprised ☐ Bored ☐ Thoughtful ☐ Amused Confused ☐ Other_____	Stressed ☐ Excited ☐ Surprised ☐ Bored ☐ Thoughtful ☐ Amused Confused ☐ Other_____
Speaks to any of the others?	Yes ☐ no ☐			
Ask any question?	yes ☐ no ☐			
When time is over seems	Relieved ☐ Disappointed ☐ No reaction ☐ Other_____			
Other comments:				

PRUEBA

Nombre: _____**Curso:** _____

Año:1 2 3 4 5

1. **Mi conocimiento del uso del ordenador es:**

Bueno ☐   **Regular** ☐   **Malo** ☐

2. **¿Tienes alguna titulación que te acredite en el campo de tus conocimientos informáticos? ¿Cuál?**

_____

3. **Mi conocimiento general de la lengua inglesa escrita es:**

Bueno ☐   **Regular** ☐   **Malo** ☐

4. **¿Tienes alguna titulación que te acredite en cuanto a tus conocimientos de inglés? ¿Cuál?**

_____

5. **Traduce las siguientes palabras del inglés al castellano:**

Notice	_____	To realise	_____
Actually	_____	Argument	_____
To suspend	_____	To presume	_____
Sensible	_____	To assist	_____
Idiom	_____	To pretend	_____
Facilities	_____	Topic	_____
To advertise	_____	Eventually	_____
Professor	_____	To involve	_____
To approve	_____	Library	_____
Agenda	_____	Lecture	_____

6. **Añade –ed al final de las siguientes palabras. Cuidado, en algunos casos tendrás que doblar la consonante:**

Stop	_____	ask	_____
regret	_____	prefer	_____
earn	_____	care	_____

7. Añade –ing al final de las siguientes palabras. Cuidado, en algunos casos tendrás que doblar la consonante:

Cut   _____   develop   _____
plan   _____   state   _____
cancel   _____   permit   _____

8. Añade –er al final de las siguientes palabras. Cuidado, en algunos casos tendrás que doblar la consonante:

Thin   _____   travel   _____
big   _____   deck   _____
Loud   _____   deep   _____

9. Haz un círculo alrededor de la palabra escrita correctamente:

unnecesary   unnecessary   unnecesary   unneccessary

ocassion   occassion   occasion   ocasion

ocupation   occupation   ocuppation   ocupación

10. Ordena las siguientes palabras de manera que formen una oración correcta en inglés:

me/showed/photographs/holiday/she/her _____

is/studying/London/a/college/in/at/he _____

he /almost/perfectly/English/speaks/ _____

hardly/Tirso/sees/personal/ever/tutor/his _____

yellow/sat/chairs/on/we/small/horrible/plastic _____

11. ¿Sabes lo que es plagio y cómo evitarlo? Explícalo en estas líneas

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Students who did not complete quizzes

Nuria	2	3,5
		3,6
Paloma	9	3,2
		3,3
		3,4
		3,5
		3,6
		4,2
		4,4
		4,5
		4,6
Tirso	8	2,4
		3,2
		3,5
		4,2
		4,3
		4,4
		4,5
		4,6
Ainoa	1	3,4
Raquel	6	1,6
		2,5
		3,1
		3,2
		3,6
		4,3

APPENDIX K

Matching-type activities

Multiple-choice-type activities

Multiple-choice-type activities

Jumbled-type activities

Gap-filling-type activities

RELLENA LOS HUECOS
EJERCICIO 4

advertise   approve   involved   pass   pretend   quote   realise   warn   wrap

1. The students did not [____] [?] on the new educational policies
2. If I want to [____] [?] from other authors I will have to give full references in the bibliography section of the essay
3. I was deeply [____] [?] in my work so I didn't go out partying during the last semester of the course
4. I came to [____] [?] in the end why this must be done
5. Do not [____] [?] you listened to me when I said you had to finish the project by Tuesday
6. In order to sell the computer quickly, you must [____] [?] it in the local newspaper

Crossword-type of activities

CRUCIGRAMA
EJERCICIO 2