Speaking Out! Developing, evaluating, and piloting learning outcomes
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Introduction
As a result of the political objectives set in the Bologna Declaration of 1999 to the higher education sector, all European universities are in process of reforming their Curricular before 2010 since the new European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) will be established by this year. This means that the Engineering degrees will adopt a two-cycle scheme of 4 + 2 years and that the university teachers are contemplating the introduction of competencies and learning outcomes, which theoretically should cause a major change of focus in higher education from teaching to learning.

As a response to this, the Research Group DYSCIT within the UPM and according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment is developing an Academic and Professional English Portfolio focussing on the linguistic descriptors related to the categories and the skills created in accordance with the professional and academic needs of engineers and architects. This ELP, which is a pedagogic tool to help learners to carry out self-assessment, to plan their learning and to report their ability to communicate in languages (Council of Europe, 2001), is based on two important pillars which are relevant to establish the basis of conscious and reflexive learning: the concept of genre (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993) and the notion of ESP (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Belcher, 2006) being both often identified with ESP itself (Cheng, 2006). Although many versions of the ELP have been developed, a repeated complaint among university instructors is that the existing versions do not take into account the special aspects of language learning and use in the university context.

Background
According to the Bologna Declaration of 1999, all European universities are in process of reforming their Curricular. In the case of Spain, conferences, symposiums, projects have been carried out in order to debate and to implement the new education system. For the UPM (Polytechnic University at Madrid), these reforms mean the development of programmes which are commensurate with new outcome approaches that use levels, levels descriptors, qualifications descriptors, learning outcomes and can more fairly consider the totality of student workload in terms of credits.

An illustration of the complex relationship between credits and learning outcomes is the Common European Framework of References for Languages whose framework distinguishes levels from A1 (very basic) to C2 (near native). These levels are described in learning outcomes expressed in terms of competences. In this line, the Research Group DYSCIT according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment is developing an Academic and Professional English Portfolio focussing on the linguistic descriptors related to categories and skills -Listening, Reading, Spoken Interaction, Spoken Production and Writing. Following Little (2005), who claims that “the ELP supports reflective learning in which goal setting and self-assessment play a central role”, our research group has developed a version of the ELP which takes into account the specific needs of our engineering and architecture students at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid.

The aim is to implement this ELP for Engineering and Architecture in the English language courses, either being compulsory or optional, which have been given in all 20 engineering schools of this University for more than two decades. The students of these engineering degrees have completed several general English subjects at secondary school with varied levels of attainment. The majority have obtained a pre-intermediate or intermediate level of English (A2, B1, B2) according to the results provided by the Oxford Placement Test.

In our opinion, the ELP is a valuable document to encourage learners, on the one hand, to become autonomous, recording and reflecting on their language learning and cultural experiences and on the other, to be life-long language learners. As Little (2005) points out “a capacity for accurate self-assessment is an essential part of the toolkit that allows learners to turn occasions of target language use into opportunities for further explicit language learning”. The ELP has two fundamental functions: the first one is to motivate, to guide and to support the student in the process of learning, and the other is to record proficiency language levels.

It reflects what learners learn, what they have to learn for their professional goals and how they learn it in the ESP genre-based framework. This responds to Cheng’s (2006) claim who points out the necessity for intensive efforts to study learners and learning in the ESP genre-based approach. One way of doing it is by implementing Language Awareness approach, which according to the same author relies on the learners paying conscious attention to instances of language in an attempt to discover and articulate patterns of language use.

Speech genres (Belcher, 2006: 147), which are the focus of this study and which are important for our learners’ professional future, have significant roles to play inside and outside of academia. Our students need instructional practices of oral speech for various reasons: First, because the transactional function of oral language is of extreme importance for the development of their careers, both as engineers and as executives; secondly, because of the complexity of
learning to speak in another language, since it is necessary to attend simultaneously to content, morphosyntax and lexis, discourse and information structuring, the sound and prosody, as well as to appropriate register and pragmalinguistic features (Hinkel, 2006) and finally because not even native speakers acquire the transactional function of the language automatically.

Methodology
The research group is made up of English teaching staff and researchers from the following degree programmes: Architecture, Civil Engineering, Mining Engineering, and Agricultural engineering and Aeronautical Engineering. This wide range of teaching content areas motivated us to develop a bank of learning competencies instead of a set list since different language programmes at different schools emphasize different competencies in their course objectives. The competence bank can serve two major pedagogical purposes. Primarily, a detailed list of language competencies to be used for student self-assessment: to guide them through the learning process, to identify and set goals and to assess their learning progressively inside and outside the educational framework by promoting self-directed learning. A second rationale for developing the bank would be to provide an interface between language learning, teaching and assessment. Learning outcomes will be a pedagogical resource for teachers to determine the key purposes of the course set and a practical tool for students to take control of their learning processes under the teacher’s guidance. Students do not become self directed learners instantaneously. They need opportunities as well as clear directions and careful planning in many instances (Bary and Rees, 2006, Little, 2005).

Another function of the detailed descriptions of language competencies is their use in reporting language level proficiency for other educational contexts or future employers, thus, promoting mobility throughout Europe and internationally. This should be done in the context of external reference points (qualification descriptors, level descriptors, and benchmark statements). The Common European Framework of languages (Council of Europe 2001) was chosen as our external reference point. The CEF provides a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive learning stages and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. It is divided into 6 levels clustering into 3 bands: A1-A2 (basic user), B1-B2 (independent user), and C1-C2 (proficient user).

Two studies were carried out at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. One of them involved EAP/EST instructors and the other, students enrolled in two different engineering university schools. The main objective of these two studies was to analyze different aspects of the speaking outcomes created for the inclusion in the European Language Portfolio for Engineering students. In particular, we were interested in studying if the descriptions of the learning outcomes were clear enough to be understood by the students, if they were calibrated appropriately for the level where they had been included and finally, if they were meaningful for the students. Additionally, we tried to determine which factors are involved in a well written, well calibrated or in unsuccessful learning outcomes.

References