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ARGUMENTATION AS A PATH TO FOSTER CRITICAL THINKING IN LEGAL ENGLISH COURSES

Learning a foreign language implies the development of a wide range of communicative skills which somehow make the individual capable of managing different daily situations in diverse foreign language contexts. However, interaction and communication also comprise vital processes related to critical thinking, argumentation and subsequently, problem-solving. Daily life presupposes problematic situations mainly pervaded by something beyond features such as vocabulary, pronunciation or accuracy.

In regard to argumentation, Nuñez & Tellez (2012: 17) assert that "developing students' argumentative competence will enable them to become active, reflective and critical agents in the development of their societies". Thus, the inner relationship between language learning and teaching practices, criticism, reflection and creativity arises as a must to overcome teaching methodologies which do not derive in meaningful and lifelong learning experiences.

At Universidad Santo Tomás in Villavicencio, Colombia, argumentation in Legal English courses has become a key element to enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills which are also conceived as pillars of the See, Judge and Act

Method by Saint Thomas Aquinas (Universidad Santo Tomás [USTA], 2015a). This method focuses mainly on the observation of the reality, in other words, the problematic situations, and is aimed at fostering the generation of perceptions, stances and viewpoints that could emerge from solutions to problematic scenarios.

As a result, Legal English courses are likely to turn into more dynamic learning encounters in which students are not only devoted to improving their language skills, but also to applying their legal background knowledge while they are arguing about law-related subject matters, events or issues. In this way, English learning and law branches merge with the main purpose of broadening minds and educating citizens who are aware of their surrounding reality and the contributions they may have over its betterment.

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AN OLD PERSPECTIVE OF LEGAL ENGLISH COURSES

Even though dealing with legal terminology and achieving its accurate domain is something rather relevant for a law student who plans to make an incursion in the international stage of law affairs, there are still certain aspects which deserve to be prioritized when designing a Legal English syllabus or course plan. For many years, at Universidad Santo Tomás Legal English courses have been mainly centered on acquiring a good command of terminology. Consequently, they have aimed at developing comprehension skills of oral and written juridic texts and gaining some communicative skills to express their minds using 'legalese'.

A RENEWED PERSPECTIVE OF LEGAL ENGLISH COURSES

In order to overcome this approach to Legal English and to foster argumentation, critical thinking and problem-solving while enhancing students' communicative skills in a foreign language, Legal English syllabi are being constantly revised and updated. As a result, topics such as law branches, law as a professional career, the court system and so forth are re-dimensioned to promote students' position-taking in regard to controversial and current issues in which law plays a significant role. Then, more dynamic, inclusive and extensive pedagogical strategies are proposed to engender self-involvement and awareness as key features for lawyers, but also for any



However, this approach seems rather contradictory if the core of education at Universidad Santo Tomás lays on integrality. In accordance with this perspective, "reality is susceptible to be problematized in order to figure out solutions under creative, critical and ethical grounds" (USTA, 2015b: 37) (translated by author).

common citizen who wants to be enrolled actively within specific contexts.

Thus, the former narrow and rote perspective regarding Legal English courses made way for revising and reconsidering what Legal English should provide the students with. Hence, to encourage innovation and a teaching shift new Legal syllabi are focused on

the development of argumentation. To do so, they are founded on some guiding questions which mostly refer to the expression of viewpoints, stances and arguments with respect to problematic situations closely related to their field of study. However, argumentation is not nurtured by itself merely; it is just the goal behind the design and implementation of previously selected pedagogical strategies. In this case, debate constitutes the major tool to guide students to a more complex and meaningful performance in Legal English courses. Allison (as cited in Kennedy, 2007: 188) declares that "Debating is the ultimate multi-task school activity since it involves research, writing, speaking, listening, and teamwork".

A SAMPLE OF A LEGAL ENGLISH LESSON UNDER A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Below is an example of a unit from the Legal English 1 course intended for eighth semester law students at Universidad Santo Tomás, in which argumentation has been set as the learning goal. The methodological cycle proposed to guide students into more critical

and argumentative speaking scenarios is made up by different stages described as follows:

Warming up: Students are presented with a problematic situation, or the main aspects regarding a current controversial situation (unionism). Then, as a way to broaden and nurture their perceptions about it, they watch a video which refers to the history of unionism in England. The video is used as a pretext for them to learn vocabulary related to the topic, to participate collaboratively in the reconstruction of historical events around unionism in England by highlighting its milestones in a time line, and to provide them with relevant input for the upcoming reflection on unionism in Colombia.

While: Afterwards, students reconstruct the history of unionism in Colombia on their own. At this stage, it is relevant for them to apply the background knowledge they have already acquired and internalized as law students, while they use and broaden the English vocabulary related to this topic. Based on the key facts they register in their timelines, another class



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is devoted to socialize the historical events they consider as the most relevant, and collaboratively they start to bring the most notable happenings together to finally create a general and agreed timeline.

Progressively students are asked to make decisions, confront ideas, analyze events and ponder the various sides of a particular issue which also may be subject to an inner appraisal under legal grounds. As they are law students, the next step deals with cases regarding unionism. It implies they carry out some research to find out real cases on this issue. In this stage, they are expected to select a case they want to share with the whole class and apply some basic guidelines to distill information from it. The selection of a case is usually attached to a piece of news which displays its most relevant facts, and serves students as the starting point to conduct further research in order to get involved in higher-order thinking activities as roundtables and debates. Concerning news analysis, Van Dijk (1988: 142) refers to some major steps to comprehend news which bring together aspects such as perception and attention; decoding and interpretation; the formation, uses, and updating of situation models; and the uses and changes of general,

social knowledge and beliefs (frames, scripts, attitudes, ideologies).

Post: Students take an active role in a round table on the cases they have previously scrutinized on their own. This round table stands out as a preparatory phase for them to be able to participate in a debate on unionism which entails skills such as: position-taking, decision-making, problem-solving, arguing and counter-arguing.

As mentioned before, the lesson plan intends to engage students in activities aimed at nurturing language learning (specific legal vocabulary), strengthening communicative skills in foreign language (English), and enlightening aspects correlated to the integral



education of critical thinkers. It is noteworthy to highlight that despite the fact that the lesson plan is structured in different stages, all the proposed activities for each stage are characterized for being multipurpose. In other words, they are designed to contribute the simultaneous development of specific vocabulary, communicative and critical thinking skills.

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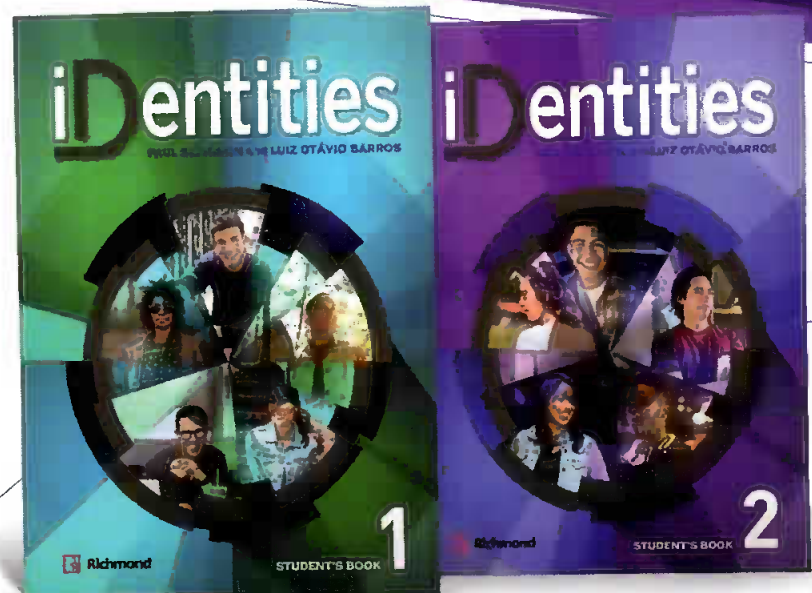
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