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HOW UNORTHODOX SHOULD AN ESP COURSE BE

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RESUMO

*Proposta de curso não-ortodoxo levando-se em conta a grande afluência de alunos das mais diversas áreas para cursos de ESP no âmbito universitário.*

*A proposta é justificada a partir da crescente demanda de tais turmas, da motivação intrínseca dos alunos, da possibilidade de interação e do uso de uma variedade maior de estratégias de leitura.*

*O artigo sugere o uso de alguns textos já experimentados em sala de aula.*

When we decided to discuss unorthodoxy we had in mind that in the recent past years a great number of heterogeneous classes have been interested in learning English for some specific purpose while text selection has many times failed to fulfill the needs presented by the diversity of such groups of students.

We should point here that unorthodoxy is understood as any teaching trend a situation in accord with standardized a conventional methods or opinions.

Our suggestion is that an ESP course should not only provide with a variety of

subject matter but also account for such diversity.

We have observed that although extremely relevant, students' individual traits have been neglected by many syllabuses design which offer a repetitive pattern of text structure or text selection leading to a never-ending exploration of pre-established strategies.

On this basis Hutchinson's statement is still valid. "New developments in educational psychology also contributed to the use of ESP, by emphasizing the central importance of the learners and their attitudes to learning (e.g. Rodgers, 1969). Learners were seen to have different needs and interests, which would have an important influence on their motivation to learn and therefore on the effectiveness of their learning. This lent support to the development of courses in which "relevance" to the learners' needs and interests was paramount.

The standard way of achieving this was to take texts from the learners' specialist area - texts about Biology for Biology students etc. The assumption underlying this approach was that the clear relevance of the English course to their needs would improve the learners' motivating and thereby make learning better and faster." (Hutchinson, p.8).

He adds: "The growth of ESP, then, was through about by a combination of three important factors: the expansion of demand for English to suit particular needs and developments in the fields of linguistics and educational psychology. All three factors

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seemed to point towards the need for increased specialization in language learning" (Hutchinson, p. 8).

It may seem controversial that we mention specialization while proposing unorthodoxy in terms of a class basically made up of students with different technical interests. However, the constant need to face student groups of this sort forced us to try a solution to the problem. One should remember that being student centered, ESP cannot avoid facing individuality. So, why not face it in an unorthodox class? At the same time ESP accounts for such individual interests it develops strategies which lead inevitably to some kind of "wholiness."

Our suggestion is based on three reasons:

1. Our experience as ESP teachers for about ten years with both orthodox and unorthodox classes.
2. The interest of students from different technical and professional areas aiming to achieve reading ability in English, or as Nuttal puts it "to read without help unfamiliar authentic texts, at appropriate speed, silently and with adequate understanding." (Nuttal, p. 21). While having to attend classes in which classmates come from such varied areas.
3. The effective demand for unorthodox classes as we are more and more convinced that ESP should not be confined to one-area classes.

Experience has shown that sometimes background knowledge of a specific subject may allow for some comprehension of a text

but at the same time lessen any interest for the learning of ESP strategies or language matters. It is Fransson who says that intrinsic motivation "is a state where the relevance for the learner of a context of the learning material is the main reason for learning." (Fransson, 1984). In this case we are led to understand that content should not be taken merely as the meaningful matter of a text but also as the means through which one would achieve comprehension of such learning materials. Fransson adds: "There is no reason to expect disruptive effects of intense intrinsic motivation." (Fransson, 1984). We should somehow disagree as some disruption may eventually occur due to background knowledge as mentioned earlier.

On the other hand the presence of students who are not involved in the same professional/technical area may be used as a tool to exert extrinsic motivation.

"Extrinsic motivation for learning is a state where the reasons for the learning effort have nothing to do with the content of the learning material. A good learner performance serves merely as a means for achieving some desired end result." (Fransson, 1984).

More precisely competition, together with some interest and the subject matter of different specific areas may prove - and we must say it effectively does - to be a very useful tool in making the student want to show progress in learning.

What we intend to say is that the

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student should not be satisfied with his early comprehension of a text because he has some background knowledge, but that it is the teacher's task to push him towards learning more and more how to go deep into a text. The target should not be basic comprehension of specific vocabulary or the observation of the language structure. We have learned that the use of language structure by itself as a means to achieve text comprehension as a whole frustrates the teacher and limits the scope of ESP.

Another argument in favor of this kind of unorthodoxy is again given by Hutchinson who says that "a lesson is a communicative event which is created by the interaction of a number of forces." (Hutchinson, 1987) and by Di Pietro (1987), who proposes interaction as the bases for any kind of language learning. We stress the idea of interaction explored by both as well as Di Pietro's unexpected element which reinforces the need to actually follow and understand a text. This unexpected element - or texts belonging to unknown technical fields in the present case - together with a real need for interaction certainly become highly motivating while definitely challenging.

One argument against unorthodox classes may be that the excessive variety of interests could lead to nowhere. We go back to Fransson's ideas about motivation to prove the opposite as far as the group of students is concerned. In relation to teaching materials Hutchinson's principles support that the quality of

materials is paramount. Nowhere does the mention that reading materials should be taken from one specific area.

Anyway the teacher's task is to gather students' needs and wants making use of adequate texts to allow for adequate learning. It seems obvious that classes in which students belong to the same technical field make it easier for the teacher to select reading passages which may "seem" to be very close to the students' interests. Routine and repetition, as mentioned earlier, tend however to enhance demotivation.

It will certainly be the case, however, that students from different areas show non-conflicting interests as it could be previewed. In fact we have been coping with such situation in our daily teaching task.

In more recent years the applicability of ESP reading strategies has proved possible as well as desirable for heterogeneous groups of students coming from several areas within the university. Their main goal, that is, to achieve reading comprehension may very well be accomplished by means of specific passages of different technical areas.

Such is ultimately our concept of unorthodoxy. The combination of heterogeneous groups of students plus a text selection which can provide with a variety of topics not accounting for any special technical or professional area leading to the use of a number of reading strategies and communicative approaches. On defining unorthodoxy our main focus was on the group of students. Text selection, variety and the

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applicability of ESP reading strategies will only add to that definition.

Finally an important point to be considered in proposing such unorthodox classes is the students challenge of facing classmates coming from distinct fields of work. As teachers we know that challenge together with interest plus a high level of motivation has always been a favorable tool.

The target becomes then not only the learning and understanding of specific vocabulary or of the language structure which changes those words but also the learning of the text structure, discourse patterns and functions. As we understand it, this is the actual function of ESP teaching as through the years ESP has shown more and more its holistic concern. Any attempts to slice such a concern have proved disastrous. The final target defined in terms of the students' needs and wants can only point to a positive result.

"... a need does not exist independent of a person. It's people who build their images of their needs on the basis of data relating to themselves and their environment." (Richterich, 1984).

ESP should be praised for putting together specificity supported by a holistic basis.

In practice we have been attempting to cover students' needs by mixing up reading passages on a variety of general interest subjects (although some specificity may come

out of these texts).

For this purpose, our text selection includes:

1. "Cruzado Enthroned," dealing with economics and politics.
2. "Terminals Among the Stacks," which refers to the use of computers in libraries.
3. "Scientists Must Not Play God" discussing Genetic Engineering as related to Religion.
4. "Hit Software from an Alien Entrepreneur" describing some technological advances in computer science.
5. "Advantages and Limitations of Sampling" questioning the use of statistic sampling.
6. "Ladies: Why Not Creative Cussin'" and "Sex in the Kremlin's Shadow" dealing with customs.
7. "Dreams" - a literaty text by Priestley.

These materials are intended for an unconventional ESP course. The text units deal with reading strategies, text comprehension, vocabulary recognition and grammar use. Instructions are given in Portuguese and the exercises are based on authentic up-to-date text selection.

### *Course Description*

The course aims to provide students with an opportunity to make use of a good variety of clues and strategies to achieve reading comprehension. Skimming and scanning although by means of "bits" provide a holistic view of the passage; vocabulary opposition and similarity help make conclusion on what is

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meaningful and what is not in a reading passage; word and phrase perception are meant to move the reader's attention from unimportant lexical items to essential units of meaning; grammar is used only as a tool to improve detailed comprehension.

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