

SECTION I - THEORETICAL ISSUES

WHAT ABOUT THE STUDENT?

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Taking a glance at the ESP literature available in Brazil and at some reference collections elsewhere, we have noticed that much has been written on course design, materials preparation, reading skills, testing, etc., but not very much has been said about the role of the ESP student in these components of an ESP programme.

Having in mind some of the principles of learning suggested by Rogers*

1. Human beings have a natural potentiality for learning.
2. Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance for his own purposes.
3. When threat to the self is low, experience can be perceived in differentiated fashion and learning can proceed.
4. Much significant learning is acquired through doing.
5. Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.
6. Self-initiated learning which involves the whole person of the learner - feelings as well as intellect - is the most lasting and pervasive

*Rogers, Freedom to Learn, part III, ch. 7, pp.157/163

7. The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into oneself of the process of change;

we will try to devise ways of engaging more meaningfully the student in the main stages of an ESP programme.

1. COURSE DESIGN

Apparently much more has been done on "needs analysis" than on "wants analysis". It may be that needs analysis is central to the design of any ESP course, however, neglecting the latter reflects an over-concentration on the learning process rather than on the learner. It is common, when we notice that students are somehow dissatisfied, to check or re-evaluate all the teaching steps, though we sometimes forget to ask ourselves - and the student? - are we giving room to his wants? What is needed, we feel, is some interaction - ESP teacher/student - prior to the course.

Let's thus contrive a few activities to include the student in the course design.

1.1 Open meetings

Students could meet the ESP coordinator and teachers and talk openly about their needs and wants (a subject teacher could be present at this meeting).

The (expected) result would be a course design as a compromise between the two.

1.2 Interviews

Interviews could be used to discuss with the students their needs, wants and their reading habits. Privately they might feel more at ease to expose their specific problems, frustrations, idiosyncrasies and their more intimate feelings about learning/language learning.

2. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

It is our belief that an ESP course offers more opportunity of students' participation than GE courses, since when the expertise is negotiated new, more authentic roles take place. On the other hand, reading classes run the risk of becoming passive and uninteresting, as the activities tend to be very limited and repetitious. ESP is potentially interactional, notwithstanding the fact that this interaction is not often realized in the classroom. Here we intend to give some suggestions as a way of maximizing the students' participation in the classroom activities.

2.1 Classroom management planning

Students can have a share in the planning of what will be taught as well as in how to teach. In fact, their participation can be done either at the course design stage or during the course (when they could have had some kind of "teaching sample"). We have a tendency to underestimate the students' capacity of reasonable thinking as to the manner instruction is conducted, yet their intuitions and insights as learners/language learners may be of great help.

2.2 Activities

It is possible to think of some activities that have teaching and interactional values, such as

2.2.1 Seminars

Students would be given different texts on the same theme and would be asked to work them out in groups. Some time would be allowed them to work on the texts. After the discussion, each group would nominate a colleague to report orally in Portuguese on the content of the text, on their reading problems, their feelings and criticism to it. Then all the groups would discuss together. We could also hand over identical texts to the different groups to see their response.

2.2.2 Visiting specialist

There is a good number of scientific work (papers, articles, dissertations, research) produced by Brazilian university teachers and some of this work has been published in English in well-known journals. Incidentally, this work is often ignored by the university community, the ESP students and teachers. Nevertheless we think that those papers can furnish an excellent source of reading materials, as they can be used in some ways "foreign" materials would never give us the chance to. For instance, provide the students with one of those scientific papers, discuss it in class - student/student, student/ESP teacher - and then have the subject specialist - in this case, the author (who could accidentally be one of their professors) for a further discussion.

There are two other aspects that we think should not come as alternatives in an ESP reading class, but as necessary components.

2.2.3 Reading awareness

Students should be able to discuss their failures and achievements in reading a text. They should also be aware of what they are doing and be able to express

why they are doing it. There is excellent material produced by the University of Uberlândia, with well-designed self-evaluation activities and the self-access project by the Federal University of Santa Catarina, which also emphasizes reading awareness. We think this aspect is pedagogically very important because on arousing the students' awareness to an ESP text, we are also arousing their awareness to the people around them and to the world at large.

We think that students should be encouraged to talk freely about their reading problems, though we are quite conscious that inhibition may impair it. Besides self-evaluation activities, we can also have students interviewing one another about the difficulties they had on a given text or on a text they themselves selected.

2.2.4 Critical reading

Though not common in language courses thinking skills are fundamental to significant learning in reading courses and offer a place for authentic interaction in a classroom environment. Emphasis on critical reading is then crucial to enhance students' participation. The choice of texts plays an important role in the critical reading approach as it is a means to awake and develop

the critical spirit of the student.

3. TESTING

Last but not least, let's consider how to include the student in this very challenging component of the ESP programme: testing.

At the beginning courses, we felt very reluctant to give our students too many tests as they are looked as instruments of measure rather than evaluation tools. Since students came to us on a voluntary basis, we wondered whether, through grades, we could classify them. As a result, we tried to disguise our tests by giving them other names, such as "evaluation exercises", for example. Afterwards we felt that, though not enjoying it thoroughly, students wanted to be evaluated for they needed to know how they were doing to apply for examinations elsewhere. As a matter of fact, this realization made us very happy for we also needed to know whether/how well students were learning how to read. At present we even dare suggesting that tests should be given at the end of every activity and they can be welcome.

One activity we have been using and we feel is very motivating is to ask students to go to the library, select a text and summarize it.

Dr. Alderson suggests that we could set up a model for a test by preparing it together with the students.

On handing back the tests to the students, an open discussion of all the items should take place. It is our belief that tests can be used as well to exercise the critical spirit of the students.

CONCLUSION

On writing this paper it was our intention to share our preoccupation about the actual role of the student in an ESP programme with other teachers. We don't claim that ours is an exhaustive study or that our suggestions are all valid. Nonetheless it can be a door to further and deeper studies in this rather unexplored area of ESP: the student.

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