

IMPLEMENTING AN INDIVIDUALIZED COURSE AT UFSC 1981-1982
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The attempt to cope with problems in ESP courses at UFSC, problems such as inadequate classrooms, very heterogeneous groups and excessive class hours led a group of teachers towards an attempt to individualize ESP teaching with, at first, one group. The dentistry group was chosen as being reasonably representative, being average in size (50 students) and typically heterogeneous in level of knowledge of English. What we decided to produce, in view of the above, was a course which would try to make ESP as individualized as possible. The main characteristics of the course were: self-pacing, responsibility placed on the students' shoulders, choice of what texts to study, choice of texts for tests, freedom for the student to study where and when he or she wished.

Three teachers volunteered for the experiment, initially, to be joined by two more. One thought up a series of questions, which were to be applied to all texts chosen by students. This was to be called the 'standard exercise' (exercício padrão), comprising a set of 13 questions, which included prediction, guessing unknown key-words, rhetorical functions, summary of ideas, text structure analysis (in terms of introduction and conclusion), and some questions to evaluate critical reading. The final questions asked for a subjective evaluation of the degree of text comprehension (in terms of percentage), difficulties (grammar, vocabulary, strategies) and degree of interest in the text.

The first stage of the work consisted of writing exercises, selecting texts from periodicals and encyclopaedia, numbering and organizing the

selected texts in plastic folders to be safely and easily manipulated by the students. Then enough photocopies were taken of all these texts to supply the students' first needs - 10 copies of the one-page texts. These photocopies were kept in numbered boxes: thus the first box contained texts 1 to 31. These numbers were written on each box cover and again inside. The additional exercises were kept in envelopes, as they were to be given to students whenever it was judged necessary. We thought it necessary to provide the students with a kind of manual, containing the course objectives, how evaluation was to be done and instructions on the work students were expected to be doing at each stage of the course. It also contained the basic principles of reading through strategies, with explanation about the three levels of comprehension, how to approach any text in a foreign language and critical reading. Together with these materials went a list of the texts available for selection (containing the text number, its title and source). the 'standard exercise' and a list of the 650 most frequent words in English numbered by groups of ten. This list was to be used in the diagnostic test.

The diagnostic test for the beginning of term contained seven sections, the first of which consisted of word recognition using the frequency list. Students were to mark the ten-word group at which their vocabulary recognition began to fail. The second section was a cloze test, where both open and closed class items were to be supplied; the third asked for translation of noun+noun groups and some full sentences; the fourth was a guessing exercise; the fifth asked for recognition of odd information in three short paragraphs and the sixth and seventh asked questions of general comprehension and main points about a three-page text. The other four texts to be done by each student during the semester consisted of reading and applying the 'standard exercise' to a text (chosen from four). The scores on the diagnostic and other tests were registered

on the students' Personal Reading Records.

This was a record sheet designed to record each student's selection of texts results (with date and title of text chosen for the test), a space for teacher's suggestions and comments on the student's performance. This instrument was modified in the second semester of application to include the degree of interest in each text. Also there was a space to record the exercises done by each student; each student had to do a minimum of four. The total number of texts to be read at each stage of the course was reduced after the first semester from the initial twenty, to sixteen.

In the first semester of application, students were entirely free to choose the time for completion of each stage, which included the reading of 5 texts and then doing a test. During the first month, once a week, each of the teachers involved in the project gave a class on reading strategies, the first of which consisted of working through a text with the 'standard exercise', to demonstrate to the students what they were expected to do with each text chosen, including tests. This training was intended also to impart confidence and clear up the students' main doubts about the course. But even with this training and the individualized assistance, a few students were still not confident of their capacity to do the tasks or were not willing, and one or two even refused to complete all the stages in the course, therefore failing. To avoid this in the second semester we decided to set dates for tests - the first test was to be done at most by the middle of the second month, and so on.

The students evaluated their own progress in the course, with the help of a questionnaire, applied at the end of each semester. The results of this self-evaluation, though very subjective, were highly positive. The questionnaire asked which difficulties the students had at the beginning of the semester and which still

remained at the end. The student had also to place himself on a scale from 0 to 9 (where 0 = very bad) at the beginning and at the end of the course. As a consequence of this evaluation some corrections were made which smoothed out some organizational problems and improved the students' performance from then on.

At the end of the second semester an evaluation of the interest in texts was carried out. Data were collected from the evaluation each student had made of each text (tests included), by making their degree of interest on the appropriate space provided in the Personal Reading Record. The results of this evaluation are roughly as follows: texts on the students' subject area were thought more interesting and were also more frequently chosen. But the highest mean level of interest was achieved by a two-page text on freedom ('I have a dream' by Martin Luther King) perhaps because this theme is highly appealing to adolescents. The choice and degree of interest for texts did not vary significantly according to sex, but there was a significant correlation between the student's final grade and his/her interest in texts selected.

As a result of this work we were able to submit an article on the 'standard exercise', which has been accepted for publication in the ELT journal. A positive point to the work was the training of the teachers involved. Another was the material prepared, which is now going to be better organized as a bank of texts with exercises, classified on cards, for a readier and easier transfer of expertise. A negative point to be raised is that thorough individual assistance is not possible with one teacher only, in a group of 50 or more. What has been done to solve this problem is to help each student at the beginning of his/her work and free him/her from personal or direct assistance as soon as he/she feels confident and able to continue alone.

In short, the method revealed itself applicable to average groups of freshmen at UFSC. The materials are now tested, texts classified by order of interest and frequency of selection, and the exercises - though still insufficient to cover each student's needs are also available on request. From the teacher's point of view the experience was enriching in several ways: what they lacked in the exercise of group management and control and in expository classes (as in traditional classes), they gained in personal contact, in person-to-person interaction, which creates and develops a more stimulating environment for learning. The students' interest in the course also motivated the teachers. From the students' point of view, the freedom they are given in several aspects of the course is very positive, and the results got with very poor students in English (who knew practically nothing of the language and who, at the end of the course, could summarize the main ideas of any text chosen) were very rewarding for teachers and students alike.

This report was written in the hope that the work done by a group of teachers at UFSC can be developed by other teachers in other Brazilian universities. More details are available at the Resource Centre, PUC - SP or at DLLE, UFSC - Fpólis.

References

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