

A NEW PROPOSAL FOR AN ESP SYLLABUS: TOWARDS A MORE COMMUNICATIVE
APPROACH

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Lately, there has been a growing demand for English courses to provide both undergraduate and postgraduate students with the kind of skills they require in order to pursue their studies to reach a more advanced level of performance. As much of the material they have to study is published only in English, the students need to achieve a reasonable level of reading competence in this language.

An increased number of courses appropriate for each professional group of students has been commercially produced, but I feel that such courses are necessarily aimed at too wide an audience in the interests of large sales, and are therefore unsuitable to the particular learning needs of students at the Federal University of Paraiba. The whole idea of ESP is that the materials be prepared with a particular set of circumstances in mind, and obviously, commercial materials must be more general than that. I also feel that if teachers prepared their own materials, they would produce something especially appropriate to their own teaching needs; in addition, the production of such materials would be, in itself, an excellent form of class preparation.

Our ESP teachers at the Federal University of Paraiba are, of course, already doing this. We have been producing course units for a number of years, and a good deal of energy and dedication has gone into this time-consuming work. However, recent research suggests that some of our efforts might have been misguided, and that better results might be achieved through changes in methodology. There will probably never be a perfect way to teach, but efforts towards improvement, however small, are surely worthwhile. It is as J. Elliman well points out:

...Every methodology must serve the three absolutes which are generally agreed upon in the language learning theory: first, that there must be exposure to the target language; second, that there must be opportunity to make use of the target language; and third, that the students are motivated to make use of the target language. All discussion in language teaching is about different approaches to achieve these three conditions.¹

Careful reading of the scholarship available suggests that if we could only find a method of assessing the real needs of our students, we would then be in a better position for the preparation of appropriate teaching materials. Munby, for instance, propose an eight-point Communication Needs Processor (CNP), which takes into account the type of student, the place where he will need to use the language, the people with whom he will need to communicate, the degree of tolerance of error, and the degree of formality he will need to employ, among other points. His model

is a well thought out and scientific attempt to discover as much about the student and his linguistic needs as possible.²

Subsequent reading, however, revealed that there were a number of important considerations that Munby failed to take into account. Writers such as Swales, Drobnic, Littlewood,³ among others, point out that Munby ignored such items as class size, availability of funds, suitability of classrooms, time, teachers, as well as the support of the local administration. The CNP model, it seemed, would be very useful in an ideal situation, but situations are not always ideal.

Moreover, discussions and workshop sessions here as part of the M.A. programme, besides local and regional ESP seminars organised as part of the National ESP Project in conjunction with the British Council, indicated that there were other requirements to think about. Certainly, we need to know as much about the students we are going to teach as possible, and, to this extent, Munby's paper is extremely useful, but we also want to be aware of the day-to-day teaching/learning situation.

We should, therefore, examine theories and suggestions of writers such as Candlin, Hutchinson, Scott, Holmes, Bamber, Johns⁴ and other British Council ESP experts; we should also try to estimate how much of their experience is relevant and applicable to our own teaching situation. In addition, there is still Machay's idea of using questionnaires and structured interviews with both students and their main discipline teachers in order to establish the extent to which English is either necessary or desirable.⁵

The examination of all these papers leads us to the following conclusions:

1. Highly specific texts are not necessary. It is impossible to cater for every branch of medicine, for instance, and even if it were possible in the short time we have, we would run the risk of pleasing some students and boring others. Moreover, the English teacher as a non-specialist would be unable to discuss anything outside the well-prepared text. More important than this, however, is the question of what it is that we are really trying to do. Our real aim is to develop the underlying competence of the students to deal with ANY kind of text, not just texts dealt with in a semester's time. Thus we should concentrate on the teaching of reading-strategies, not on deciphering a limited number of highly-specialised texts. The texts we select should, of course, be relevant to the main discipline in some way, but the emphasis must be on HOW to read, not WHAT to read.
2. Individuals learn at different rates and in different ways. Our syllabus, imposed on a student from the outside, may not be the same as his internal syllabus. Our activities in the classroom must not be the same as his internal syllabus. Our activities in the classroom must allow a certain freedom of choice and variety in order to cater for this need of the student.
3. An English lesson should not be simply an academic exercise which involves only the linguistic part of the

students' minds. Students are human beings with interests, emotions, and non-linguistic abilities of their own.

Therefore, the activities we use in the classroom should appeal to these interests. They should be interesting as non-linguistic activities, with the language to be learned arising naturally out to the need to communicate ideas as opinions for other purposes.

4. Our students' main need is to be able to read English texts in their own discipline. We must, therefore, teach reading strategies. We do not always need to read at the same level of comprehension, for example. We may merely need to scan a passage for a specific item of information, or skim over an article to see if it can be useful to our particular area of research, or, better still we may need more detailed information from a passage that we have already skimmed. It therefore seems appropriate to teach three levels of comprehension in all.
5. We do not normally start any activity "cold". We usually warm up in some way or other. This is also true of English learning. To confront a class with a new text in a foreign language is to ask our students to do something they would not do in their own language. We can avoid this by preliminary discussion of the general topic, by asking pre-questions, by looking for clues in the title, the author, date of publication, the type of publication, whether this is a specialist journal, a standard textbook, a learned paper or a popular magazine. We can also direct

the students' attention to cognate forms. It is often easy to guess unknown words if they have a Latin base, as many English words have. In fact, we have seen examples of the so-called "simplified texts" where the simplified version was more difficult for Brazilian students than the original one, because the writer had taken out all the long, but recognizable, Latin-based words, and replaced them with shorter, but unknown, Anglo-Saxon ones.

6. Students often are required to interpret charts, graphs, and various types of diagrams in their work. It therefore seems sensible to provide them with exercises of the Information-Transfer variety, in which they are asked to transfer information from one medium to another. An added advantage here is that students normally enjoy this form of activity, and this is, in itself, highly motivating.

Motivation is, no doubt, an important aspect in the teaching/learning process, and as N. Chitravely well points out:

...The student has to be motivated to learn and this means that the course must not only be useful and interesting but also seem to be useful and interesting. The surrender value of what we teach must be immediate and demonstrable.⁶

And finally, Chitravely comments about the change in the teacher/student relationship. The teacher's role is very important he says, but in a different way. He then concludes that:

...The teacher, like the material, is essential only in the same way as infrastructure is necessary for economic development. The basic role of the teacher is to interpret and adapt the material so as to maximize individual and group learning. This generally implies that the teacher acts as a catalyst, a guide into how to do the exercises, an explainer of the purpose of the lessons, an arbitrator when deadlocks in argument occur, a stimulant when an activity refuses to take off the ground, a reviewer of the student success, and, most important of all, a friend.⁷

These are basic principles, not only for the purposes of English teaching, but for general teaching as well. The teaching process has, as its base, the everlasting duality – student/teacher.

NOTES

¹Jonathan Elliman, "Summary" from a lecture given to Kuwait University Language Centre by Cristopher Brumfit, "Directions in Communicative Language Teaching." AL. MANAKS. (Kuwait: Language Centre Journal University of Kuwait, 5, No 2, August 1981), 121.

²John Munby, Communicative Syllabus Design. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

³John Swales, "The Educational Environment and its Relevance to ESP Programme Design. ELT Documents Special, the British Council (Birmingham: University of Aston, 1980); Karl Drobnic, "Mistakes and Modification in Course Design: An EST Case History. English for Specific Purposes: Science and Technology. (Oregon: Oregon State University, 1978); William T. Littlewood, referring to Communicative Syllabus Design, by J. Munby. IRAL, 18 (May 1980).

⁴C.N. Candlin, et al. "Study Skills in English: Theoretical Issues and Practical Problems," English for Specific Purposes eds., R. Mackay and A. Mountford (London: Longman Group, 1978); Tom Hutchinson et al., "An English Language Curriculum for Technical Students," Practical Papers in English Language Education, 2 (Lancaster: University of Lancaster, 1979); Michael Scott, "Reading Comprehension in English for Academic Purposes (EAP)," The ESpecialist, 3 (1981); John Holmes, "Needs Analysis: A Rationale for Course Design," The ESpecialist, 3 (1981); Brian Bamber, ESP Course ministered at UFPb, April-June, 1981; Tim Johns, English for Overseas Students's Unit. University of Birmingham. Local Seminar at UFPb in August 1982.

⁵Ronald Mackay, "Identifying the Nature of the Learner's Needs," in English for Specific Purposes, ed. R. Mackay and A.J. Mountford (London: Longman, 1978).

⁶Nesamalar Chitravelly, "Strategies for Reading." The University of Malaya English for Special Purposes Project. ELT Documents, 107. (The British Council), p. 17.

⁷Chitravelly, p. 25.