

## Teaching ESP in an Algerian Context: A Model Based on the Task-Based Syllabus

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### Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to shed lights on the importance of the task-based syllabus in the planning of an ESP programme in ESP. When students can communicate in real-life, we can deduce that they have acquired communicative competencies since communication is conventional. This signifies that communication consists of the use of language in conventional ways. In fact, communication is conventional, appropriate and interactional. Appropriate, in the sense that it depends on factors such as, age, sex and the role of the speaker in a specific setting. On the other hand, it is interactional since discourse is built up of words which indicate how what will be said can be related to what has been said before. Moreover, it is necessary to think about activities and tasks that should be linked to real contexts. In the classroom, spoken and written texts should not be dissociated from their contexts of production. Therefore, the aim of the task-based syllabus is to stimulate language in use and create a suitable environment for learning. Basically, this model can be very interesting if we concentrate more on the productive skills such as speaking and writing without of course neglecting grammar as such. It is very important if we modify, delete or add other factors in order to make the syllabus more effective. In the following, we will tackle some of the principles of applying a syllabus in English for Specific Purposes, and more particularly English for Science and technology, being aware that this can works in ESP, since students rely on statistics, tables and numbers. Usually, we ask the students to transfer diagrams and charts into written texts, and these are tasks. Tasks refer to the work we are supposed to do. They can be the activities performed by the students in the classroom. In the Algerian classroom, we have as teachers to ask the following question: Is it possible to bring the real world in a non native speaking community?

**Key words:** ESP, authenticity, task-based approach, methodology, teaching, syllabus

الملخص

عندما يتمكن الطلاب من التواصل في الحياة الواقعية، يمكننا أن نستنتج أنهم اكتسبوا كفاءات التواصل لأن الاتصال أمر تقليدي. هذا يدل على أن الاتصال يتكون من استخدام اللغة بالطرق التقليدية. في الواقع، التواصل تقليدي، مناسب وتفاعلي. مناسب، بمعنى أنه يعتمد على عوامل مثل العمر والجنس ودور المتكلم في بيئة محددة. من ناحية أخرى، هو تفاعلي بما أن الخطاب مبني على كلمات تشير إلى كيف يمكن أن يقال ما يمكن أن يقال عن ما قيل من قبل. علاوة على ذلك، من الضروري

التفكير في الأنشطة والمهام التي يجب ربطها بالسياقات الحقيقية. في الفصول الدراسية ، يجب عدم فصل النصوص المنطوقة والمكتوبة عن سياقات الإنتاج الخاصة بها. ولذلك ، فإن الهدف من المنهج القائم على المهام هو تحفيز اللغة المستخدمة وخلق بيئة مناسبة للتعليم. في الأساس ، يمكن أن يكون هذا النموذج مثيراً للاهتمام إذا ركزنا أكثر على المهارات الإنتاجية مثل التحدث والكتابة دون إهمال القواعد بالطبع. من المهم جداً إذا قمنا بتعديل أو حذف أو إضافة عوامل أخرى لجعل المنهج أكثر فاعلية. في ما يلي ، سنقوم بمعالجة بعض مبادئ تطبيق المنهج في اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض معينة ، وبالأخص الإنجليزية للعلوم والتكنولوجيا ، مع العلم أن هذا يمكن أن يعمل في ، حيث يعتمد الطلاب على الإحصاءات والجداول والأرقام. عادة ، نطلب من الطلاب نقل الرسوم البيانية والرسوم البيانية إلى نصوص مكتوبة ، وهذه هي المهام. تشير المهام إلى العمل الذي من المفترض القيام به. يمكن أن تكون الأنشطة التي يقوم بها الطلاب في الفصل الدراسي الجزائري ، لدينا معلمين لسؤال السؤال التالي: هل من الممكن إحضار العالم الحقيقي في مجتمع غير أصلي يتحدث؟

## 1. Introduction

In ESP, the authentic world must be brought to the learners, and they must learn to communicate in the language spoken or written. There are various textbooks for ESP courses; however no textbook can fulfill the demands of a specific situation. The teacher must rely on his/her own knowledge when assessing the relevance of the material to be used. Materials proposed in ESP should contain authentic texts, interesting tasks and activities. The role of the teacher has changed. Moreover, teachers may present the students authentic tasks and activities to improve their writing skill without neglecting the oral skill that can be presented through authentic materials such as video, debates in the classroom and role- plays. In addition testing language required for ESP is an aspect of ESP. In the field of Medical English or Computer Science English, several test developments have been suggested. They aim at assessing appropriate language skills for tasks and activities. The use of authentic tasks, authentic materials, and communicative activities are features that promote learning; therefore, in the planning of an ESP programme, it is crucial to rely on the task-based syllabus.

## 2. Progress in ESP

The great demands for English to fit specific needs and the development of linguistics have given rise to the growth of ESP. What is important is to find out the procedures appropriate for ESP learners such as needs analysis, materials and methodology. Years ago, ESP teaching focused on teaching the system of language, and teaching vocabulary in a particular context; whereas, the focus today, is on how to apply the knowledge of the system of the language in real situations for effective communications. The tasks and activities presented in the classroom are based on authentic materials, updated topics, and vocabulary is taught through demonstrations. Therefore, the quality of teaching materials has its impacts on the learning outcomes. We cannot deny the fact that grammar is necessary, but what is important is to teach

the grammatical structures in use. In this case, knowing a language implies knowing the rules, and how to apply them in context.

Generally, learners learn a set of grammatical structures; a list of vocabulary items, but when it comes to practice, they fail. Therefore, it is very important to master the rules of language, and how to apply them in concrete situations. Another approach in the field of ESP is the analysis of ESP texts. Various approaches were elaborated: text analysis, register analysis and the most grammatical elements of the scientific register. We can refer here to the work of Trimble (1985). Text analysis has its implications with the specific characteristics of a text in a particular register (Medicine, Biology, Computer Science and Economy). For example, rhetorical analysis shows that they are some grammatical elements that are necessary in the scientific text such as the use of the passive voice, the conditional and the models. In addition, Swales (1990) focused on the research article. The Research Space Model which influenced the teaching of Academic writing in ESP. Moreover, the importance of needs analysis and the evaluation of ESP materials are of paramount importance in ESP. As teachers, we should be aware first that learning a language implies to learn the structures that build the language and how they are used in context. Mastery of language is not enough for learning a language effectively. Competence must be achieved through learning the system of the language and how it is realized in real-life. In what follows, we will discuss the role of needs analysis in ESP teaching before the planning of an ESP syllabus.

### 3. Needs Analysis

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), needs analysis begins in the field of ESP; however, it should not be concerned only within the field of ESP. Even in the planning of General English, needs analysis may be essential. Hutchinson and Waters (1987:23) state the following:

*'It is always possible to specify needs, even if it is only the need to pass the exam at the end of the school year'.*

Moreover, he says that *'There is always an identifiable need of some sort'.*

Needs analysis should be the starting point for the design of syllabuses, courses and the selection of materials. It may include Target Situation Analysis; Present Situation Analysis; Deficiency Analysis; Strategy Analysis and Means Analysis. On the other hand, needs include necessities, demands, wants, likes, lacks, deficiencies, aims and objectives.

The starting point is to ask some questions for the type of analysis and data. The following questions can be asked:

- Whose needs are to be analyzed?
- Who decides what the language needs are? (Teacher, student, researcher)
- What is to be analyzed? (Target situation or present situation, deficiency necessities and lacks)
- How should the analysis be conducted? (Tests, questionnaires, interviews)

In addition, the main objectives of NA are to discern the characteristics of the students in order to design more interesting lessons. According to Brown (1995), the objectives should focus on achieving goals. As a rule, needs signifies what the learners need to know. It is a set of procedures for the identification of the main parameters of a course of study. These parameters include the criteria and rationale for the selection and sequencing of course content methodology, course length and duration.

#### 4. The role of authenticity:

Authenticity is related to validity, genuineness and reliability. It is also a main feature of syllabus design and Communicative Language Teaching. Materials development have been produced for purposeful objectives rather than teaching linguistic features. It is very important to think about the identification of authentic materials in ESP teaching and this should include the quality and appropriateness of the pedagogical sources. Syllabus designers should think about what is meant by authenticity. In the process of teaching and learning, the authentication of data is not only the concern of ESP, but we should think too about 'authenticating the teachers', in the sense that the role of the teacher is central since he/she is involved with the presentation of the authentic material in the classroom; in other words, it is the teacher who helps and guides the learners in the negotiation of meaning in a hard context which is the artificial setting (the classroom). According to (Nunan, 1988:99), authentic materials have been defined as '*those which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language*'.

Widdowson, 1979:50 asserts that:

*'Language materials have in the past been largely derived from the products of theoretical sentence grammars. We need materials which derive from a description of discourse: materials which will affect the transfer from grammatical competence to what has been called communicative competence.'*

In this context, we should be aware as teachers that authenticity, which is part of the Communicative Approach, is a fundamental construct of syllabus design and methodology. Using authentic texts, materials and tasks in Foreign Language Education is a must today. The integration of these materials in an EFL classroom satisfies both the teachers and the learners, in the sense that it enhances learning, and motivates the students in learning the language. As teachers, we should bear in mind that authenticity is central in Communicative Language Teaching, and may depend on both the teachers and the students. It is obvious that the materials brought into the classroom may not be sufficient for the process of learning, but it is the role of both the teachers and the students to encourage such engagement; in other words, students may develop their abilities when they perform other activities outside the classroom such as watching TV and listening to music. (Breen, 1985:61) suggests four types of authenticity:

- Authenticity of texts used as input data
- Authenticity of the learners' interpretation of the texts
- Authenticity of tasks
- Authenticity of the actual social situation of the classroom

The following discussion will be on issues in teaching ESP, syllabus design and methodology.

## 5. Syllabus design and methodology

Many courses have been based on a grammatical syllabus; others have grouped their teaching items in sequences of topics (the weather, the travel, sport...). Functional syllabuses have listed functions such as inviting, and situational syllabuses have been based on situations (the bank, the restaurant, and the office). Other syllabuses are based on different tasks that can be performed in the classroom such as role-plays. Furthermore, a language teaching syllabus involves a combination of the subject matter (what to teach) and linguistic matter (how to teach). In fact, syllabuses deal with theories of linguistics and learning, and how they are used in the classroom. What is important in the teaching process is the way to determine the main elements in choosing a syllabus. In ESP, it is of paramount importance to ask ourselves the following question: 'what type of syllabus we can present to our ESP students? Can we neglect the grammatical syllabus as such? Can we think about a multi-dimensional syllabus?

In the context of language program in the ESP context, it is crucial to take the needs of the learners into consideration, and the context in which the language program is to be implemented.

## 6. The Task-based Syllabus/ the procedural approach

The procedural approach is associated with the work of Prabhu (1987). He organized

in Bangalore a programme named 'procedural syllabuses'. According to him, the best way of teaching grammatical structures is to focus on the meaning or the message rather than the structures themselves. The focus is on what is being said rather than on how it is said, or to pretend asking about the message when you are interested in form. This process analytic syllabus is based on tasks, information gap and reasoning. In the classroom, the focus is on the performance of tasks such as the interpretation of timetables, map readings and the translation of charts and tables. This can work in ESP, and more particularly in Computing Science since students rely on statistics, tables and numbers. Usually, we ask the students to transfer diagrams and charts into written texts, and these are tasks. Tasks refer to the work we are supposed to do. They can be the activities performed by the students in the classroom.

*'Tasks are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists.'* (Long 1985:89)

Furthermore, this type of syllabus does not refer to what the syllabus designer does, but to the operations required of the learner. In this case, we are basing our approach on the learner's analytic capabilities. That type of syllabus relies on the learner's assumed ability to induce rules and the innate linguistic knowledge. In addition, activities are general frameworks in the classroom such as 'look at the text; discuss; write down'. On the other hand, tasks are specific works that students are asked to do such as discuss in pairs; make notes; compare and contrast; summarize. Such tasks require the students to practice specific skills of thinking and reasoning, and this process is very important for the students since it allows them to react naturally. Moreover, tasks are simply a work that allows learners to comprehend, handle, produce and interact in the language without focusing on grammar in order to be able to express meaning and to negotiate it. Since we have chosen the task-based syllabus, it is crucial to follow the principles below:

- The role of the learners/teachers
- The importance of authenticity
- Tasks that engage the students in oral interactions
- Tasks and activities that require the learners to arrive at outcomes from given information through the process of thought

## 7. Research Design

This study aims at investigating the English language needs of Computer Science students on the basis of their perceptions. The design of the study was based on Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) target needs

approach to NA. It is crucial to note too that among the variables that NA of ESP will identify a list of relevant skills that learners must master in order to accomplish the specific academic purposes for which they need specialized training. In addition, in order to investigate Computer Science students' English necessities, we tried to find out their perceptions of the frequency of their use of the English language skills and the importance of these skills to them. Thus, the research project was conducted by designing the questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. A questionnaire was proposed: the students' questionnaire. A pilot study was conducted among Computer Science students at the department of Computer Science within the LMD system. The participants were Master 1 students. The questionnaire was delivered to assess the usefulness of various activities in English and learners' perceptions of their performance and achievements in these activities. Moreover, a placement test was proposed for assessing the level of the students at the four skills.

## 8. Respondents and Research Methods

The respondents were students (Master 1) who study Computer Science. There were 60 participants altogether. The subjects were both males and females at an intermediate level. The sample refers to the year 2010. Research employed two questionnaires as we have mentioned before: the teachers' questionnaire and the students' questionnaire. The students' questionnaire employed for the students was used to analyze the needs and assessments of the usefulness of various activities, and learners' reflections on their performance in various tasks as well as their perceptions on teaching materials. Based on the feedback received from the pilot group, we put together a final version of the questionnaire which is presented in the appendix. The students submitted signed replies.

After the administration of the questionnaire, item analysis was conducted. The length of time to complete the questionnaire did not exceed 15 minutes. Questionnaire return rate of both the students and the teachers was good—all sheets were returned. After the participants had completed the questionnaire, we asked them to take a placement test (appendix) for the sake of reliability. We asked the students to take the test in the classroom. According to Creswell and Clark (2007:3), *'a combination of both forms of data can provide the most complete analysis of the problems.'* In addition, it is crucial to note that from the responses to the questionnaire, we were able to notice the following differences among the subjects: the participants are spanning a range of variety in age and linguistic competence, and we have assumed that they have received the same type of instruction, and in general terms the same kind of exposure to English in the classes.

## 9. The Interpretation of the Students' Questionnaire

According to Boshier and Smalkowski,( 2002); Chaudron, Doughty, Long, Rivers and Urano (2005), needs analysis can best be implemented in curriculum development.

Chaudron& all, (2005) conducted a task-based needs analysis for Korean students as a foreign language program at university of Hawai. They focused on target needs to develop authentic tasks. As we have seen in the previously, needs analysis in language program and curriculum development is very important. One of the most important phenomena of language learning/teaching process is to make students reach the intended level in a shorter time. In order to be able to achieve this goal, programmes should be designed with great care. Considering the importance of programme design and development, evaluation has received much attention in research. In addition, needs analysis is a means that may help the evaluator. Basturkmen (1996) carried out a study to evaluate the communicative language needs of the students. Basically, questionnaires that were incorporated to collect data revealed that there was a difference between students'and teachers' perceptions concerning the importance and difficulty level of the basic language skills. Hutchinson and Waters' approach to NA offers a useful classification of needs. They provide a suitable framework for analyzing the target situation and also a framework for analyzing learning needs.

## 10. Findings and Discussions

The results of the present study serve as a main guide for evaluating and redesigning the current courses presented to Computer Science students during the previous years, and to suggest our own syllabus, based on the needs of the learners, and our experience in teaching English for Computer Science. The concept of a language syllabus has been fundamental in the development of language teaching practices according to Richards(2001). Hutchinson and Waters (1987:80) claim that a syllabus is *'a document which says what will be learnt.'*

Moreover, considering the students' learning needs identified by teachers and students on the perceptions in terms of the importance of the four skills, the important language teaching methodologies based on the concept of authenticity defined elsewhere in this research work, the following suggestions should be taken into consideration:

- \*The reading and writing activities should be based on tasks that can be performed by the students
- \*Authentic tasks should emphasize on developing students' accuracy and fluency in English
- \*The students should be involved in research (projects) and interactive tasks

Moreover, the findings have important implications for English teaching at the department of Computer Science. First, it is important to take into account the target learners' level of proficiency in English before starting to design the ESP program. This significantly helps in determining the study needs of the



students; second the selection of the language materials should be relevant to their future work and to further research. The inclusion of materials from the subject matter of the students will motivate them to learn English effectively. The results showed that language materials should be in line with the discourse of Computer Science, and should have content suitable to their level and their target situations of English use. The rationale behind the models proposed, is a focus on oral communication since it fulfills a great number of pedagogical functions. Learning to speak is an important goal. It equips students with a set of skills such as making arguments, transmitting information and expressing themselves in future places. This can be possible with the application of the task-based approach that enhances oral communication in Academic settings. According to Prabhu (1987) a task is a device for organizing the content and methodology of language teaching. Skehan (1998:268) comes up with the following criteria of task-based approach:

- Meaning is primary
- There is a real-world relationship

## 11. Conclusion

What is essential is to practice really these tasks in the classroom, and to use up to date materials such the overhead projectors, the internet if possible, the laboratories, podcasts. As a rule, we have to focus on authentic materials and tasks. Moreover, the time allocated to the English courses should be four hours a week. The students should be divided in groups of no more than 30 students in a classroom. The semester is ended with a two-hour exam which consists with a text, followed by questions of comprehension, a grammatical exercise, vocabulary and a translation exercise. It is crucial to set up a suitable syllabus for Computer Science students in order to promote learning, encourage and motivate the students to learn English. Our main focus within this syllabus is to facilitate the task of learning, and enable them to gain access to the work at all levels. This may be possible if we can design a syllabus based on their expectations, and on authenticity, a concept we have defined elsewhere.

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