

ESP TEACHING FOR LEARNERS IN THE HEALTH SCIENCES FIELD.

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ABTRAST

The university courses recognise the importance of learners achieving spoken and written competence in English. Due to the specific nature of the courses, mainly in the Faculty of Health Sciences, English language teachers try to develop syllabi based on learners' future professional needs. This paper considers the difficulties encountered in implementing needs analysis and developing ESP programmes in which language objectives resulting from learners' needs are included in the syllabus together with authentic materials and tasks which demonstrate and practise the language.

RESUMO

Os cursos desta universidade reconhecem a importância do conhecimento falado e escrito da língua inglesa. Devido à natureza específica dos cursos, nomeadamente da Faculdade de Ciências da Saúde, os professores de inglês tentam elaborar programas baseados nas futuras necessidades profissionais dos alunos. Este artigo considera as dificuldades em implementar análise de necessidades e desenvolver programas de ESP (Inglês para Fins Específicos) em que os objectivos linguísticos resultantes das necessidades dos alunos são incluídos no programa juntamente com material didáctico e tarefas autênticos na língua.

The ability and the need to understand and communicate with each other have become increasingly important due to the international exchange of ideas on many different topics. Foreign language teaching has adapted to this new reality and attempts to meet the specific academic and professional communication needs of learners who seek to improve their language skills.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) reflects learners' specific purpose in learning the target language, being a response to learners' needs and the acquisition of language relevant to communication outside the classroom, especially in their studies and future careers. It examines the tasks that students require to perform professionally in English, and can lead to the implementation of syllabus changes.

1. THE ORIGINS OF ESP

According to Hutchinson & Waters (1987), the emergence of ESP can be attributed to three main reasons: first, the end of the Second World War resulted in new scientific, technical and economic demands in which English became the international language, due to the economic role of the United States in this period. In addition, during the oil crisis of the early 1970s, Western money and knowledge flowed into the oil-producing countries. As this knowledge used English, language teachers were pressured to meet the demands of people outside the teaching profession.

The second reason was a dramatic change in linguistics. These linguists, unlike traditional linguists who described features of language, focused on the ways language is used in real communications settings, and the differences in spoken and written English. As language varies according to the context or setting in which it is being used, linguists realised that language teaching had to meet learners' needs in specific contexts.

The third reason was that teaching became more learner-centred and focused on the ways in which language is acquired and on the learners' ability to communicate in the target language in real situations. (Knight, 2001). Thus, specific courses had to be designed to

36 meet learners' needs and develop communicative competence in a specific field, such as medicine, business, finance or technology.

2. NEEDS ANALYSIS

Needs analysis identifies a particular learner's or group of learners' communicative needs and their learning styles and preferences. It assists the teacher in identifying the learners' future target tasks and, if necessary, changing the syllabus, adapting it to the learners' specific needs, what learners know and what they need to learn in order to address these needs (Graves, 2001).

Learning a foreign language involves several factors including age, aptitude, motivation and personality. Motivation depends on learners' communication needs. Although undergraduates in the Faculty of Health Sciences have no pressing need to use English as Portugal is a monolingual country, competence in the language is essential due to the importance of English in their studies (most of the books in the health field are in English), future careers (congresses and journals are also in English) and leisure time. Music, the Internet and films (these have subtitles and are usually only dubbed for young children) are in English. Thus, learners' motivation to learn the target language comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics.

Learners have 'multiple identities' and bring into a foreign language classroom 'their own experience of learning and of life ... and their own particular needs that they hope to see satisfied' (Allwright and Bailey, 1994, p.18), in addition to their own cultural knowledge with which to make sense of the new language. In carrying out linguistic tasks, they 'embody different voices on different occasions' (Bakhtin, cited in Van Lier, 2001, p. 104) and populate the language with their own intentions. However, as these have partly been created in the environment of another language and culture, their ability to say what they intend is limited by their existing competence in the target language. Neo-Vygotskian theories consider that through interaction and scaffolding, the help given by the teacher to enable learners to do something collaboratively that they could not do on their own, learners reach a higher level of understanding and the teacher can adjust 'their contribution as learners become increasingly independent' (Butt *et al.*, 2000, p. 260).

As these learners have no previous medical knowledge in the target language, their ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) is similar. However, some knowledge on health themes, in Portuguese, was acquired through the study of biology in secondary school. Thus, teachers must consider what the learners know and can do in communicative tasks with the first language and not assume that the learners' ignorance of the target language implies that they are naive communicators. Although I have no knowledge of the area, research and careful planning have allowed me to overcome this drawback. As their knowledge is in their mother tongue, Portuguese, and mine is in the target language, English, knowledge is shared with learning occurring on both sides: teacher and learners. Learners contribute prior knowledge and abilities in the first language and the teacher contributes knowledge in the foreign language in a communicative process involving all the participants in the learning.

Communicative Language Teaching views language learning as learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, introduction of authentic texts, language learning process, personal experience and language activities outside classroom. Thus, teachers are active facilitators of their students' learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The teacher sets up the exercise, but because the students' performance is the goal, the teacher steps back and observes, often acting as referee or monitor and students are more responsible managers of their own learning.

3. PRACTICAL CASE

The curricula of the degrees in the Faculty of Health Sciences, that is, Dentistry, Nursing, Pharmacy, Clinical Analysis and Public Health, Physiotherapy and Speech Therapy, include two semesters of English in the first year. The syllabi try to address the learners' needs. In the first semester, learners are introduced to general health topics such as the human body, illnesses and complaints, addictions, doctor-patient dialogues, in addition to general communication skills including telephoning, greetings and introductions. Thus, the language teaching begins with general English, which is required to communicate at congresses and symposiums, and then deals with an area that meets the students' needs. This is further developed in the second semester, in which further themes are developed, such as infectious diseases, eating disorders, and a section specific to each of the degrees.

A study was carried out at the university with first-year Dentistry learners, whom I taught from October to June, consisting of thirty-five learners aged 18-19, whose level of English ranges from 3 to 8 years at school. It looked at English II, that is the second semester of the first year. A questionnaire was conducted attempting to answer the question: Will needs analysis lead to modification of the syllabus?

As needs analysis identifies a particular learner's or group of learners' communicative needs and their learning styles and preferences, by conducting a questionnaire on the learners' needs, the teacher is able to identify the learners' future target tasks and, if necessary, change the syllabus, adapting it to the learners' specific needs.

This questionnaire aimed to study and analyse whether learners' needs had been effectively addressed in the syllabus. As the university values learners' opinions, they evaluate teachers and materials at the end of each semester. Some of the questions in the university questionnaires include *appropriateness of the syllabus to the course*, *articulation with other subjects*, *level of difficulty*, and *interest of the themes*, which were included in the questionnaire (see Figure 1) administered in this study. These summative evaluations have often led the teachers to modifying the syllabus to make it more appropriate to the learners' needs.

Learner-centeredness enables learners and teachers to negotiate the syllabus. Although stakeholders play a role in curriculum creation, the teacher, considering learners' needs, determines the syllabus, based on the curriculum. The results of the questionnaires (see Figure 1) showed that last year's syllabus and materials were favourably rated and commented on by these learners. Although most learners think the materials were too easy (Question 10), it is not possible to adopt very difficult texts due to the different levels of English. About 70% disagree with two contradictory questions: 10 - The material covered was too difficult for this course, and 11 - Exercises were too easy. The exercises were based on the material; thus, the learners either misunderstood or misread questions. Thus, materials may be substituted to address the learners' needs but the syllabus is in agreement with learners' needs.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The study materials and syllabus were appropriate to my needs.	4	30	1	0	0
2. The material tied in well with the other aspects of the course.	1	26	7	1	0
3. The study materials were organised to ensure maximum learning.	8	23	4	0	0
4. The study materials gave a clear guide to the contents of the course.	7	22	5	1	0
5. The different sections of the course were well-integrated.	4	19	11	1	0
6. The themes or topics were developed logically.	5	28	2	0	0
7. The study materials were well suited to my skills and interest.	3	23	8	1	0
8. The study materials stimulated my interest in the subject.	6	15	12	2	0
9. The study materials were sufficiently detailed.	6	20	8	1	0
10. The material covered was too difficult for this course.	0	6	8	18	3
11. Exercises were too easy.	0	1	8	24	2
12. The exercises helped me to consolidate the teaching.	9	23	2	1	0
13. Exercises and student presentations were a useful practical experience..	5	15	8	7	0
14. The use of audiovisuals was helpful.	3	20	11	0	1

Figure 1: Table representing the results of the needs analysis questionnaire

4. DIFFICULTIES IN ESTABLISHING AN ESP SYLLABUS

Several difficulties have been encountered in establishing an ESP based syllabus at the university: first, widely disparate abilities exist because learners reach this stage with three, five, seven or eight years of English at school, depending upon whether it was their first or second foreign language, and whether they specialised in it in their final year at school. In addition, some learners have attended an English institute having passed the First Certificate in English or Cambridge Advanced English examinations. Teaching has to be adapted to meet all the learners' needs and it is necessarily easy for the more advanced learners, who need to be stimulated to participate actively in the lessons while allowing the weaker learners to contribute to the task. Thus, variations in language level and prior education can only be accommodated to a certain extent.

A second difficulty is the fact that the teachers have no contact with the learners before lectures begin. This implies a lack of information of the students' level and the inability to adapt the syllabus to their language level. Although changes may be made to the syllabus, they are always based on the previous year's learners – their interests and needs – because the syllabus is prepared before the school year starts.

A third aspect hindering the development of an ESP syllabus is the limited number of materials available. Some books on ESP for Medicine have recently been published; however, their target audience is usually medical students and even doctors. As our learners are not studying medicine, these books are often inappropriate except for a few

extracts or listening activities. Materials have to be pieced together for each of the courses because there is no textbook for dentistry, pharmacy, clinical analysis, physiotherapy or speech therapy. Thus, materials are collected from other sources and adapted to suit the needs and language level of the learners because teaching materials are “tools that can be figuratively cut up into component pieces and then rearranged to suite the needs, abilities, and interests of the students in the course”(Graves K., 1996, p. 27). Resources include authentic materials form journal articles, EFL materials, and the Internet. There is a great drawback in the use of resources from the Internet since they may not be reliable. Language teachers, who are not specialists in the health field, may be misled by resources from the Internet. This could lead to inappropriate materials or materials which are inaccurate. There should, thus, be more interaction between the language teachers and the teachers of the more specific disciplines in the curricula. Despite this drawback, the Internet can be a rich source of information for any ESP course.

The fourth difficulty encountered in implementing an accurate ESP based syllabus is the number of learners in each class. Classes should have a maximum of twenty-five learners as it would allow all the participants to be active members of the learning process. Faced with more than thirty learners, motivation and language acquisition is limited and lessons tend to be less practical and functional.

5. CONCLUSIONS

During the present university year, changes have been introduced to the Nursing syllabus for the second semester by introducing themes on human anatomy, medical disorders, medical and nursing specialties, the history of nursing and medical terminology in order to adapt the syllabus to the rest of the curriculum. These changes have been well accepted by the learners because they are able to learn in English some of the themes developed in Portuguese for other disciplines. Although the learners' needs have been met in this new syllabus, the teacher sometimes had to adjust the syllabus when the learners were faced with terminology which is still unknown to them in their L1.

This new syllabus has given them a starting-point, which will permit the understanding and interpretation of authentic texts of the other disciplines which are often in English. Despite not becoming fluent speakers (no one can become fluent in a foreign language after having three hours a week for two semesters), they have acquired knowledge which will enable them to engage in successful spoken and written exchanges in their future studies and careers.

Research and personal experience have shown that teaching a foreign language focusing on the learners' needs helps to motivate the participants in the ESP learning process because the content being taught is of interest of their careers. ESP teachers face many challenges in developing a new syllabus which addresses learners' needs and often have to be knowledgeable in a variety of fields when they have to teach several courses which require specific language. How feasible is it to propose similar changes (as the nursing syllabus) to the other courses if teachers who attempt to make their syllabus and materials more appropriate to their learners' needs, don't teach the same course the following year? Teachers also need to be flexible and open to making changes to the syllabus and to the teaching so that they will reflect their learners' needs in real life situations.

40 REFERENCES

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