

Considerations on the Use of Skills Centred Course Design in ESP Classes at Higher Education Level

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Abstract: An appropriately designed course of ESP at higher education level might prove to be a valuable resource in the process of training future professionals, regardless of their specialization. From among the different types of approaches that may be used in designing a course at higher education level, we believe that the skills-centred one offers outstanding advantages to the trainees and effective teaching tools to the trainer. The present paper discusses the advantages as well as shortcomings of the skills centred course design in relationship to the other course design approaches as well as in relationship to the specialized types of discourse to be taught.

Key words: skills-centred course design, ESP, language-centred course design, learning-centred course design, learner-centred course design, competence, performance.

1. Introduction

Although it is only a complementary subject in non-philological departments of most Romanian higher education institutions, English plays a key role in their curriculum, as it facilitates the students' access to the latest research and information in their field of interest. At the same time, English is most often the vehicle for transmitting knowledge and ideas to the international professional community.

„In a multilingual Europe, the teaching and learning of foreign languages represent an absolute priority, a strategic factor for the development of a knowledge based Europe in the 21st century. ...the knowledge of more foreign languages is essential for the

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mobility of individuals, for the circulation of information and for uniting people". (Chirimbu 2013:47)

An appropriately designed course of ESP at higher education level might prove to be a valuable resource in the process of training future professionals, regardless of their specialization. From among the different types of approaches that may be used in designing a course at higher education level, we believe that the skills-centred one offers outstanding advantages to the trainees and effective teaching tools to the trainer.

2. Course Design in ESP Classes

Within the educational process, course design is a second important step, following training needs analysis. It is that component by which the information about learning needs of the students is understood and interpreted in order to produce teaching / course materials depending on syllabus, then to develop methodology for teaching and not ultimately to establish certain evaluation procedures, all these sub0components being meant to lead the learner to reach the required competence and knowledge in a field.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987:65) identify three main approaches to ESP course design: language-centred, learning-centred and skills-centred.

Language-centred courses are characterized by a direct connection between the target situation and the content of the ESP course. It usually starts from the identification of the linguistic features of the target situation in order to describe the trainees' needs and to create a syllabus and evaluation procedures after the course materials are designed.

Without declining the obvious positive aspects of the language-centred approach to course design, such as the thorough linguistic description of the target situation, it has important shortcomings:

- The only aspect in relationship to which the learner is taken into consideration is the identification of the target situation;
- The assumption that the systematic analysis and presentation of linguistic data characterizing a certain type of specialized discourse will produce systematic learning in the learner. (Bastrurkmen, 2010:59)
- The language centred analysis of target situation data is only at the surface level. It reveals very little about the competence that underlies the performance.

The learning-centred approach starts from the assumption that the learner is the most important factor in the learning process, or to put it differently, it is based on the principle that learning is totally determined by the learner who uses his knowledge and

skills to make sense of new information. This type of approach takes into account more complex factors, such as the principle that learning is not just a mental process, but a process of negotiation between individuals and society, a negotiation process in which both the target situation and the learner's level of linguistic competence influence the features of the syllabus.

We believe it is important to discuss Hutchinson and Waters (1987:72)' distinction between the learning-centred and learner-centred approaches. They prefer the concept of learning-centred course design in order to suggest that this type of approach is focused on maximizing learning, while the learner-centred course designed starts from the premises that the learning experience is entirely determined by the learner, based on his or her motivation and previous knowledge.

The skills-centred approach to course design focuses on the development of skills and strategies that should remain active after the ESP course, by making learners better processors of information.

The skills-centred approach to course design is based on the theoretical hypothesis that underlying any language behaviour there are certain skills and strategies, which the learner uses in order to produce or comprehend discourse (Creswell, 2003:124).

Besides, there is a pragmatic basis for the skills-centred approach derived from an important distinction made by Widdowson (1981: 257) between goal-oriented courses and process-oriented courses.

The skills-centred approach to course design views language in terms of how the mind of the learner processes it rather than as an entity in itself and approaches the learner as a user of language rather than as a learner of language.

This is why we have used elements of the skills-centred approach in the design of an ESP course for first and second year students of Architecture in the *Spiru Haret* University.

It was not a difficult approach as students of Architecture are used to viewing their performance in terms of acquired skills, due to the very nature of the field they prepare for. It is skills that they focus on developing in most of the practical activities that make up their academic timetable, therefore the approach of their RSP course in terms of skills to be acquired was not a surprising or inadequate choice.

The main skills that needed to be acquired during the ESP classes were identified as follows: building new specialized vocabulary, interacting within teams, reading specialized materials.

In a similar way with other curricula developers (Dejica-Cartis, D & A. Dejica-Cartis 2011), we started our 'adventure' of writing an ESP course for students of Architecture from the analysis of the target situation, with special focus on the attitudes

of the learners towards it. A detailed description of the procedures for gathering information are beyond the scope of this paper.

We have mainly focused on the following aspects for describing the target situation:

1. Why is the language needed? For study / work / both / other purpose (e.g. examination)

2. How will the language be used?

Medium: speaking, writing, reading, etc.

Channel: telephone, face to face

Types of text or discourse: academic texts, lectures, informal conversation, technical manuals, catalogues

3. What is the level of the learner?

4. Who will the learner use the language with?

Native speakers or non-native

Level of knowledge of receiver: expert, non-expert

Relationship: colleague, teacher, customer, superior, subordinate

5. Where will the language be used?

Physical setting: office, lecture theatre, hotel, workshop, library

Human context: alone, meeting, demonstrations, presentations

6. When will the language be used? Concurrently with the ESP course or subsequently; frequently, seldom, in small amounts, in large chunks.

Following this analysis we have obtained the following average profile of the learner: language needed for study and work, all the four main skills involved, upper intermediate users, involved in using the language with both native and non-native speakers, in offices, meetings or in written and oral communication with the beneficiary of his / her work. In the future the use of reading skills may be predominant (understanding specialized materials) while speaking and listening skills might be used sometimes.

Based on this analysis we were able to state the general objective (performance level) of the course: the student will be able to handle specialized discourse in oral and written contexts.

Specific objectives (competence level) mentioned in the course introduction were the following: the student will be able to extract the gist of a specialized text by skimming through it and extract relevant specialized information from it. Secondly, the student will be able to communicate orally and in writing in a professional environment.

We also considered it important to take into account Holme's remark (1996) that in ESP the main problem is usually one of time available and student experience.

An issue of importance that we had to consider was that the aims of the course were defined in terms of what is desirable, for example to be able to read in the literature of the students' field of interest, but there may not be enough time to reach this aim during the period of the course. A second less positive aspect that influenced the choice of the raw materials for the course was that the students were in their first years of studies and therefore with little experience of the specialized literature.

We have based our decision to use a skills – centred approach for generating a course of English for students of Architecture because, as Wallace (1998: 121) puts it:

- Firstly it provides a basis for discovering the underlying competence that enables people to perform in the target situation.
- Secondly, it enables the course designer to discover the potential knowledge and abilities that the learners bring to the ESP classroom.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of a skills-centred approach in the design of an ESP course is a valuable tool as it considers linguistic facts in terms of how the mind of the learner processes them and not as given, unchangeable information, it manages to generate content based on the positive factors that the learners bring to the course, rather than just on the negative idea of “lacks” and not ultimately it frames its objectives in open-ended terms, so enabling learners not only to achieve progress but to easily become aware of it, making the lectures a rewarding experience for them.

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