

Developing intercultural awareness in English for specific purposes and translation curriculums*

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Abstract

In line with the increasing intercultural communication all over the world, development of cultural understanding becomes crucial for learners of English for specific purposes. Irreparable consequences which can result from lack of such understanding especially in case of EAP (English for Academic Purposes), EMP (English for Medical Purposes) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) necessitate careful considerations. In this study, we offer how developing cultural competence can be incorporated within an ESP curriculum based on Tabal-Tyler's cyclic 4-stage model of curriculum development. It indicates how cultural competence can be included in statement of course objectives, content specification, learning experiences, evaluation and reformulation of objectives and implementation. It also reveals its implications for the translation curriculum.

Key terms: cultural competence, cultural awareness, ESP, EAP, EOP, EMP

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1. Introduction

1.1. ESP in the world

The past 50 years have witnessed the considerable evolution of English for Specific Purposes as a field of applied linguistics. What came next was the impact of this evolution in the area of ESP materials development. There are aspects of ESP course design, material development and application that are broadly accepted; however, there are some aspects that have generated debate. One area of debate focuses on needs assessment and how identified needs are addressed through the materials used. Attention has been drawn to socio-cultural, educational and methodological concerns about the needs analysis process. The belief is that neither language nor pedagogy (including materials) is neutral; they occur in and are influenced by social, cultural, and political contexts. The many players in any ESP situation operate in contexts where power is unequal – between students and teachers, teachers and administrators, students and the wider social and cultural context (Upton, 1998). Attention to these issues in the realm of ESP today is of great significance, and the main aim of this paper is in the same direction.

When speaking about ESP courses we need to always have the main features of such courses in mind. Strevens (1988) distinguish between four absolute and two variable characteristics (cited in Gatehouse, 2001):

- 1) ESP courses are designed to meet specified needs of the learner;
 - 2) They are related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;
 - 3) They are centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse;
 - 4) They are in contrast with General English.
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- 1) ESP may be restricted to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only);
 - 2) ESP may not be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

1.2. ESP curriculum

Dudley Evans and St. John (1998) identify five key roles for the ESP practitioner: teacher, curriculum designer and material provider, collaborator, researcher and evaluator. This paper addresses the role of ESP practitioner as course designer and materials provider and we see the *teacher* as the major curriculum developer as stated by Nunan (1987).

Widdowson (1983) makes a distinction between EGP (English for General Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in terms of the place of aims in each type of course (cited in White, 1988). In this view, specification of objectives is equivalent to aims in ESP courses which are primarily *objective-oriented* and *behavior-based*. By ‘objectives’ he means the pedagogic intentions of a specific course to be achieved during that course and is measurable by some

assessment device at the end of the course. By 'aims' he refers to the purposes which learning will be put after the end of the course.

My impression is that the best model of curriculum design for these courses is the objective model (Means and Ends) represented by Taba-Tyler in a 4-stage cyclic sequence beginning with the clear specification of goals. This model distinguishes between 'goals' as general and broad, 'aims' as more specific and long-term, and 'objectives' as short to medium-term goals (White, 1988).

1.3. Purpose of study

Now the purpose of this paper is to see how we can incorporate cultural awareness issues in an ESP course's *objectives* to begin with. Moreover, what considerations should be made in *needs diagnosis, content selection* and *evaluation* with this regard?

To begin with, we can take a look back at a body of research concerning the inclusion of cultural issues in ESP courses which is presented as the following.

2. Review of Literature

The related literature on socio-cultural aspects of ESP is scarce. Less than 10 percent of ESP research is devoted to such issues. These few studies deal with the question of how language teachers should assist learners to understand the relationship between culture, intercultural identity construction and language production to enable them to function in the new language/workplace setting without compromising their personal and cultural identities.

Yates (2004) argues for the explicit teaching of English pragmatic and linguistic conventions to English language learners so that they are able to effectively interact in the English-speaking community. However, she warns against the dangers of teachers interpreting cultural norms 'naively or prescriptively' and of seeing culture as static and monolithic rather than dynamic and evolving. Scarino et al. (2007), in their exploration of an intercultural off-shore delivery communication skills learning context, found that language and culture play a mediating role in shaping the teaching process itself, in particular how teachers from both international (western) and local (off-shore country) backgrounds perceive and operationalize their roles. They concluded that for a learning process which delivers knowledge from one cultural context to another to be effective, it should be viewed and implemented as a collaborative self-exploratory effort by teachers and learners and one which recognizes and addresses their own linguistic and cultural influences on teaching and learning at every stage of the delivery process.

One of the most recent of such studies on the advantage of developing learners' cultural awareness and intercultural communication is carried out by Hamilton & Woodward-Kron(2010). They aimed to indicate how this kind of awareness can be enhanced through teaching that develops reflectiveness as practice for analyzing and understanding the

interrelationship of language, communication and culture. Their ESP learning context was undergraduate medical and health sciences education. In their study they used simulated interactions of ESP in clinical settings. It was found to provide triggers for classroom discussion, build reflective practice skills, and develop the requisite language competence and clinical communication skills (Hamilton & Woodward-Kron, 2010).

More specifically in the realm of curriculum development, Jacob (1987) carried out an ethnographic study based on a progressive college community in a semi-urban context. It was observed that the process of interaction in the undergraduate science curriculum determines a restrictive communicative experience whereby the learner's cultural competence is limited to communicative acts at a non-participatory level. It is therefore concluded that the learner's communicative experience needs to be elaborated through a language curriculum in which there is provision for meaning negotiation in participatory, culturally appropriate and academically challenging communicative situations.

The findings of this body of research are used in the present study to shed light on the structure of an ESP course which *does* take into account cultural and communicative issues. In the proceedings, we will observe how awareness of cultural issues can be incorporated in an ESP course curriculum.

3. ESP curriculum: Socio-cultural issues included

In this paper, it is intended to see how we can incorporate socio-cultural and issues in an ESP curriculum based on Taba-Tyler's curriculum development model. The initial step in their model is specification of general goals followed by needs analysis which sets for the formulation of course objectives. As discussed previously, according to Widdowson (1987) when it comes to ESP, as the name itself ratifies, the main goal is to develop a restricted competence hence regarding aims and objectives as equivalent. This makes us believe that the initial step is to determine learners' needs and expectations. This, according to Taba-Tyler's model precedes any attempts at content and learning events specification which in turn are followed by the final evaluation.

3.1. Course objectives

As Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) maintain ESP has always retained its emphasis on practical goals which is based on needs analysis, text analysis and preparing learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their study or work situation.

One important factor in the success of interaction is the impact of language and culture particularly in intercultural communications. A very revealing instance of such is in English for Medical Purposes which is expected to prepare learners to communicate effectively with patients from a variety of cultural backgrounds. As Hamilton and Woodward-Kron (2010) showed if language learners are not previously equipped with the required cultural awareness, this will

have serious implications for health outcomes and patient safety.

Another prevalent type of ESP courses is English for Occupational Purposes. A significant aspect of learners' needs would be to get an adequate amount of intercultural awareness if they aim to become internationally well-known in the business world. Now, if this crucial matter is overlooked in specification of goals in the curriculum the implications will be irrevocable.

The necessity of sensitizing the curriculum to sociocultural issues becomes stronger in EAP courses held for immigrant university students. In this case, as described by Benesch (1999), a better substitute for needs analysis is 'right analysis' which examines how power is exercised and resisted in various aspects of an academic situation, including the pedagogy and the curriculum. Here, social, cultural and political issues get entangled. These all lead us to acknowledge the essentiality of promoting cultural awareness as at least one of the main objectives of an ESP course.

3.2. Content specification

After designating the objectives of the ESP course based on learners' needs and expectation, the role of ESP practitioner shifts towards the materials provider. This role, as described by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) include selecting or adapting published materials and writing new ones if required. As one important characteristic of an ESP course, Carter (1983) identifies the use of authentic materials. As Lin (2004) puts it, from 1980s the importance of teaching authentic texts inculturally authentic contexts rather than texts designed pedagogically has been emphasized by communicative approaches.

The main content of an ESP course consists of *texts* and *tasks*. As for the tasks we tend to deal with them in the next phase of curriculum design i.e. 'learning experiences'. Concerning texts, however, all through the literature on ESP courses, there has been emphasis on using authentic texts. Haley and Austin (2004) and Velazquez (2007) encourage the use of authentic texts so that such texts can provide a connection between the students on one hand and the target language and culture on the other hand. Mishan (2005) introduces the concept of 3Cs by which she means culture, currency, and challenge in order to explain the advantages of authentic materials. Referring to culture she states that authentic materials can represent the target language culture.

Karpova (1999) discusses the criteria which need to be considered when using authentic materials. Among these criteria are the need for the materials to reflect social values and also to further learners' cultural, sociolinguistic and paralinguistic awareness. Employment of texts that are well indicative of culturally-distinct situations, accompanying them with pictorial manifestations of those situations and finally the use of multimedia tools in ESP courses help best to raise that kind of awareness required.

One of the more effective sources of information available in print or electronic form is the corporate annual report. The variety of topics available in annual reports allows instructors to

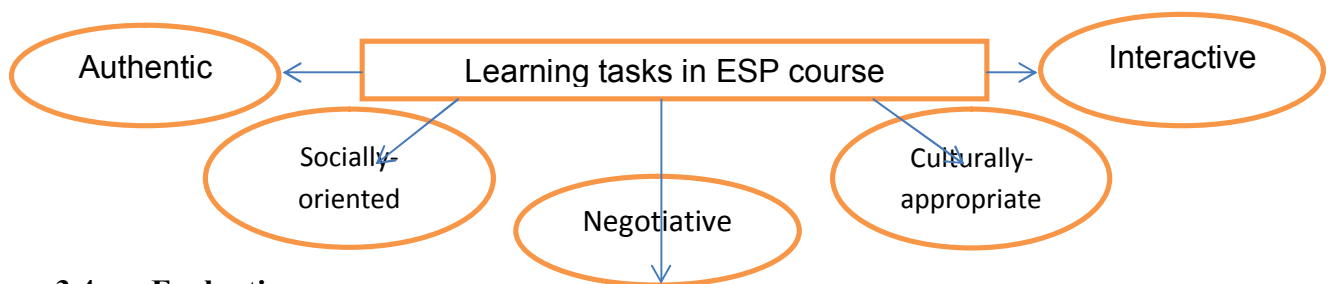
address a multitude of language skills in a context that contains relevant business terminology and is developed around meaningful business concepts. Allowing the trainees to work with unified bodies of information also lends cohesiveness to training and the overall skill-building process (Dumitrescu, 2000).

3.3. Learning experiences

The main purpose of ESP is to produce competent members of society and language is a part of a unified theory of social action. The fact is that language is not acquired without culture. Therefore, socialization through language should be an important factor in ESP. According to Barron (1994) the major source for engaging learners in this socialization process in an ESP course is authentic tasks. These are characterized as having long-term aims (compared to *activities*), being socially constructed, and holding the purpose of initiating novices into the culture through their participation in joint tasks. Each educational task may consist of several activities. The main purpose is not the completion of those tasks, but the maintenance of the culture. Barron (1994) emphasizes on the use of interactive, socially-oriented, negotiative tasks in ESP courses.

Jacob (1987) believes that if EAP learners are expected to actively and efficiently participate in the transaction of knowledge and social values in the community, they need to be equipped with the required cultural competence. She proposes that the curriculum should provide for meaning negotiation in participatory, culturally appropriate and academically challenging communicative situations. This way, the learners' communicative experience can become elaborated.

Here are the characteristics of ESP learners' learning experiences illustrated as:



3.4. Evaluation

The fourth role that Dudley-evans and St John (1998) attribute to the ESP practitioner is as an evaluator. This includes both the testing of students and the evaluation of courses and teaching materials. As for the latter, evaluation should be done dynamically while the course is being taught. As for the learners, tests are used to assess whether they have the requisite language and skills to undertake a particular academic course or career. This is more commonly done at the end of the course but needs to be informed by discussion and ongoing needs analysis to adapt the syllabus (Dudley-evans and St. John, 1998).

Concerning cultural competence, evaluation can be either done separately or integratively depending on the form of inclusion of cultural competence in the curriculum. If there is a separate training for cultural competence in the course, as is the case for Medical sciences, there is usually an independent measure or instrument to check for the development of this competence in the learners involved. An example of such is Thom's et al. (2006) attempt at developing and evaluating a cultural competency training curriculum for physicians in the University of California. The instrument employed in this study was the Patient-Reported Physician Cultural Competence (PRPCC).

In case it is aimed that developing cultural competence be incorporated within the same ESP curriculum, depending on the types of tasks and learning events designed within the course, evaluation is designated. An instance of such is Hamilton and Woodward-Kron (2010), previously mentioned, who developed a multimedia tool to enhance understanding of the interrelationship of language, communication and culture within an ESP course for medical students. The package developed and implemented in this study is currently being evaluated by a project team in terms of its value as a learning tool in a classroom-based teaching intervention for final year pediatrics students.

3.5. Evaluation forward

In Taba-Tyler's model, if the evaluation phase is satisfactory, then you move on to formulation of detailed procedures and their implementation. However, if the evaluation result is not satisfactory, you have to move backwards to formulation of objectives. I tend to believe that in ESP courses where the needs of learners are already well established and pre-identified, in case the evaluation results are not satisfactory, it is better to reexamine content and learning activities rather than reformulate the objectives.

In the limited body of literature on the inclusion of cultural competence in ESP courses, little has been said about what proceedings to be ensued in case a learner fails to develop the satisfactory degree of cultural competence. My suggestion is a prolonged opportunity provided for the learner especially in practice to interact more with people of other cultures. As part of a remedial course, more interculturally-oriented tasks can be designed and assigned to these learners and their development should be evaluated meanwhile more carefully. This can be accompanied by private consultation sessions which can clarify to the learners why developing cultural awareness is so crucial in their career or major and inform them of actual cases where typical misunderstandings have led to irreparable consequences.

4. Conclusion

Interrelationship of language, communication and culture has implications for language teaching in an ESP context. It requires recognition of the powerful effects of the latter two spheres on

language use and the subsequent need to broaden the debate about what constitutes an ESP curriculum in terms of philosophical approach, content and methodology. The idea of ‘interculturality’ as a pedagogical approach has relevance and salience for both teachers and learners of additional languages as it recognizes and values the notion of cultural plurality. The framework described above represents one attempt to merge these three spheres of language, communication and culture in an ‘interculturally’ principled ESP curriculum process which enables learners to incorporate their own identities into communication acts in their chosen fields. This framework may be applied for the translation curriculums in which cultural awareness is an inseparable and unavoidable part.

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