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ESP Syllabus Design A Theoretical Framework

A Theoretical Framework

English language has been adopted as a means of communication between partners whose native languages are different from each other's. It seems to be the language adopted for international communication, since more and more people are required to learn English. The fact that the English language has gained great importance in today's world has resulted in its teaching at all educational levels from elementary to tertiary level. Hence governments are introducing mass education programmes to encourage the teaching of English as a first or second foreign language. The aim of such an implementation is to satisfy the increasing needs of a variety of learners hoping to find a place in different economic and educational institutions. The urgent need for a specific proficiency in English has given birth to new approaches, methods and techniques. As a matter of fact, the teaching of English has witnessed the development of ESP to cater for specific needs of the learners .These needs are then translated into linguistic and pedagogic terms for the production of an effective course. Moreover ESP can but is not necessarily concerned with a specific discipline, nor does it have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range Dudley-Evans (1997).

ESP should be seen as an approach to teaching whose content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning (Hutchinson and Waters 1987).These learners have to reach the intended language level in a shorter time and in a better way through the practice of content-based English language teaching namely ESP. It becomes evident to say that an ESP initiative involves three spheres of knowledge: the core of the language, pedagogy and the content of the students'

specialities; the major difficulty would be then to compare them to 'General English' and to draw the attention to the differences between the two, which arise at all the levels of language

In this vein Robinson (1980) points out:

> *the general with which we are contrasting the specific is that of general education for life, culture and literature oriented language course in which the language itself is the subject matte rand the purpose of the course. The student of ESP, however, is learning English en route to the acquisition of some quite different body of knowledge and set of skills.*

(Robinson 1980: 6)

In providing general English courses the sole priority of the teacher is to widen the general educational programme. In other words, learners are taught the elements of the language essential to any programme (Broughton 1981). The aim behind such a process is, generally, to prepare learners to pass examinations and tests whether they are sufficiently fluent in the English language or not, since general English courses do not cater for the learner's immediate operational needs as opposed to ESP. These courses are known to be language-centred, i.e. teachers are more concerned with transmitting their message than satisfying their learners' needs and expectations.

Nevertheless, it is agreed by the whole that the aims of ESP courses are to prepare the learners in accordance with the specific skills and vocabulary needed in their own field in order to be able to integrate not only language learning but also content learning. To achieve the set aims, the pedagogic staff involved in an ESP teaching operation need to be aware of a number of variables. Markee (1984) summarises these variables in what follows:

a- The identification of needs.

b- The production of materials.

c- Teaching.

d- Testing.

In this paper, we will try to put emphasis on general terms needs assessment, which is a systematic exploration of the way things are and the way they should be (Stout, 1995). However, as far as language is concerned, needs assessment is the process of identifying the students' reasons for studying a language. analysing the specific needs of a particular group of learners serves as the prelude to an ESP course design, because it determines the 'what' and the 'how' of the ESP course. Yong (2006) also reached the conclusion that ESP materials designers should explore the learners' potential needs and hence decide about the process of learning and learning skills needed to be taken into account (Dudley-Evans and St Johns, 1998).

The needs of the learners can be divided into two major types: the target needs which are simply the needs of the target situation, it follows that the target needs can be classified into three main types, these are: necessities lacks and wants. Necessities consist of the requirements of the target situation. They represent the needed level of language proficiency of the students to achieve either academic or occupational purposes; the lacks are determined by **t**he course designer has to analyse the learners' present background in order to be able to identify what the language lacks are when compared to the needed background (necessities). It is these lacks that will determine the course content. It is, in other words, to define the items that have to be taught; wants refer to the learner's own feelings towards his most important needs.

Learning Needs seek information about the learning situation which includes information about the aims of the course, the type of the course, the type of

learners, their learning styles, the available materials and resources, the type of setting, and finally the time load.

The profile data will determine   the content of the teaching materials and the language programme that will meet these needs (Munby, 1978). On the other hand, Hutchinson and Waters (1984) consider materials writing as one of the most characteristic features of ESP practice. They advise the practitioner to:

> **1-** *Design the materials in such a way that the learner is involved fully in both the content and the language topics.*
> **2-** *Determine the language points of the materials on the bases of what might be needed for the successful solution of a communication problem limited to the content.*

> (Hutchinson and Waters 1984:112)

The authors consider that an appropriate content of materials will encompass issues such as students' lacks wants then a piece of real world language which is by definition authentic. Learners' exposure to this language should occur as extensively as possible (Johns, 1995). Authentic language, students lacks and expectations will engender the production of a suitable type of content.

Yet, since language is complex rule based system, it cannot be taught at the same time. It needs to be organised according to given priorities determined by the results of data collected during NIA. In this context Allen (1984) says:

> *Since language is highly complex, and cannot be taught at the same time, successful teaching requires that there should be a selection of material depending on the prior definition of objectives, proficiency level and duration of the course. This selection takes place at the syllabus planning stage.*
> (Allen 1984, p.65)

The objectives and the students' actual knowledge are the outcome of Needs Analysis. In the same line of thought van Ek (1975) lists the following necessary mechanisms that need to be taken into consideration in establishing any type of language syllabus:

1- *The situations in which the foreign language will be used, including the topics which will be dealt with;*

2- *The language activities in which the learner will engage;*

3- *The language functions which the learner will fulfil;*

4- *What the learner will be able to do with respect to each topic;*

5- *The general notion which the learner will be able to handle.*

6- *The specific (topic-related) notions which the learner will be able to handle.*

7- *The language forms which the learner will able to use; the degree of skill which the learner will able to perform.*

van Ek (1975: 8-9)

In fact, van Ek subscribes a broad view of syllabus design since it is fairly clear that the listed components go further than the direct objectives of the courses planned, i.e. beyond the scope of syllabus design since he takes into consideration what the learner will have to do with the foreign language in the target situations. It is true that the syllabus planning process should take into consideration the required proficiency level, but its role is to specify what units and elements of a language will be taught in order to reach this target level.

The organisation of the content of the syllabus will, also, depend on the duration of the language course that is to say, the syllabus designer need to organize activities taking into consideration the time allocated for the language courses in association with the necessary proficiency level

Other methodological considerations have to be considered namely the pedagogical approach and the learning styles (Brumfit 1984), since the designer should have a clear idea of how his theories and beliefs about learning can be translated into appropriate activities. Harmer (2001) determines a number of principles in syllabus design. These have to be taken into consideration together in a balance when making decisions in a planning process. The determined criteria are listed below:

a-Learnability: determine language content that are at the reach of the learners, starting with the easier items.

b- Frequency: include items that are more frequent in the target language, rather than items that are occasionally used even by native speakers.

c- Coverage: include words and structures that have greater coverage in the language.

d- Usefulness: introduce words, structures and skills that are useful in the context of what learners are linguistically able to talk about (Harmer, 2001)

In gross, one can say that the syllabus is an overall plan of the learning process (Corder, 1975). It is a map of the different language levels and tasks that have to be taught in a given language learning situation. These language items are selected according to the students' needs and aims, which are the outcome of a Needs Analysis step

It is becoming now evident that the design of the syllabus is essentially influenced by a number of constraints. These are:

a- The language setting which concerns the role of the language in the community.

b- The areas of language use in society (how and where it is used)

c- The role of the language in the political life taking into account the country's economy and technology (Ashworth,1985)

d- The attitudes of groups and individuals towards the language. This is determined by the degree of their awareness of the language (Van Lier, 1995).

The fourth point allows the assessment of the learners' degree of acquisition, the objectives of the course and the syllabus itself. Since the relation between the studied factors is cyclical (Miliani 1984) it can be interpreted in the following diagram:
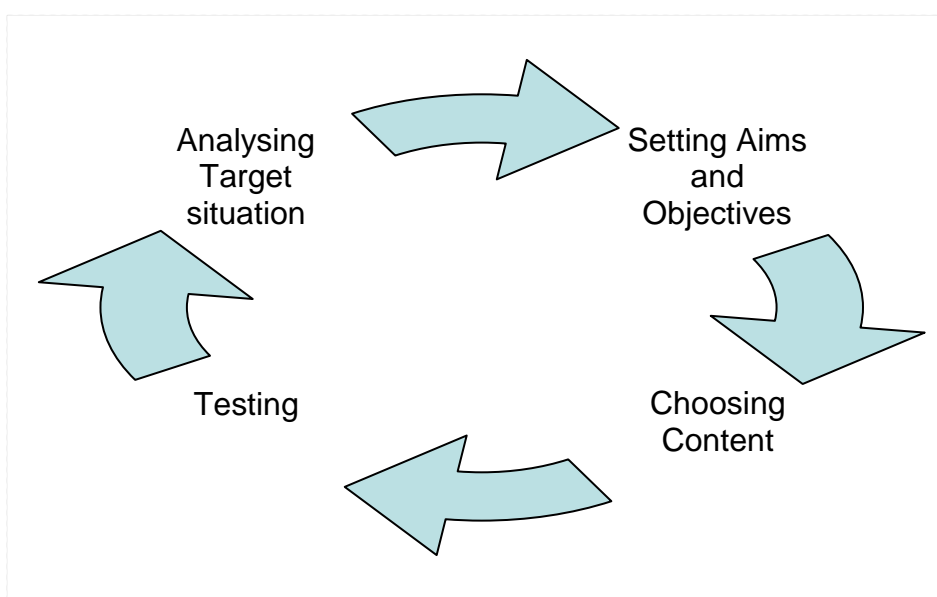

Diagram 1. The Process of Syllabus Design (Miliani 1984)

A failure in the designed programme means that a deficiency has occurred somewhere in the four mentioned parameters: (situation analysis; setting aims and objectives; choosing content; testing and evaluation). To summarize what has previously been stated, one can maintain that the drafting of the syllabus requires

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the syllabus designer to go through the following steps: defining the objectives and selecting and grading content.

In addition to listing what should be learnt, the syllabus must also state the order it is to be learnt (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). This means that the content selected to meet course objectives has to be organised in a gradual manner in order to be more efficient. A syllabus which fails in grading and sequencing language items can hardly claim to be a syllabus at all (Nunan 1988).

Besides, in generating syllabus content one need to create a balance of Skills Vs grammar and vocabulary contained in the syllabus taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of the group and their aims in studying. Besides, the designer needs to ensure the balance between the input and the revisions, i.e. relying on the previous language knowledge of the learners, taking into consideration the final outcomes of the syllabus planning process either in terms of selection of language levels or language skills that one need to introduce in the provided courses, and leaving some blank spaces to cater for individual teacher and leaner styles and needs.

In ESP, Robinson (1991) advocates a careful NIA as a first step in designing a syllabus. She maintains that: **'***as a result of needs analysis we should be able to draw up our objectives of the ESP course***' (Robinson 1991: 17).** In the same vein Munby (1978) states:

> *Syllabus specification in ESP can only take*
>   *Place after the prior and necessary work has*
>   *been done on Needs***.**
>   **(Munby 1978:40)**

For this sake, Munby proposes what is known as the Communicative Needs Processor (henceforth CNP). It is considered as the basis of any NIA process (Hutchinson and Waters 1987; Nunan 1988; West 1993). The aim of the CNP is to

examine the parameters that may affect the learners' needs. These are the type of language and communication required by the target situation, the participants and the setting of the language learning. NIA will generate the type of content and the organisation of the syllabus. The aim is to select the suitable content for a group of learners within the specific context (Johns and Dudley Evans, 1991).

The content is, hence, extracted from real life situations. The chosen texts and functions are those which serve within the specific discourse community (Swales, 1990). Yet, the requirements of the target situation do not compel the syllabus designer to choose exclusively its language (language of the target situation). It is necessary to introduce what is known as common-core language (Miliani, 1984) selected according to the students own needs. For this reason, it is necessary to combine the types of content offered by the different genres of syllabuses (Kennedy and Bolitho 1984; Hutchinson and Waters 1987; Robinson 1991). Yalden suggests in this vein:

> *One might begin with grammar and pronunciation only, as one does in a structural approach, but introduce work in the language functions and discourse skills fairly early, and in time increase the components of the course.*

*(*Yalden 1987: 94)

Making use of the fact that no syllabus can have satisfactory results it is thus necessary to combine various types of syllabuses, it will become, thus necessary to use a principled eclectic approach (Cohen, Kishler and Wexler 2001) so as to enable the learners to be effective participants in the target situation.

However, the designer would be wise to enable the learning of the language by doing or acting, this is done by the performance of tasks (Prabhu, 1987). In the same vein Wilson maintains that:

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> *The tasks which constitute the enabling objectives*
> *reflect the structure of the terminal objectives*
> *which in turn reflect the communicative needs*
> *of the student.*
> **(**Wilson 1986 : 10-11)

In other words, it is the target situation which requires the ability to perform specific communicative tasks (Robinson, 1991). It is this ability which should be the final outcome of the ESP course. Through his eclectic approach, Cohen (2001) suggested an integrated methodological approach which combined aspects of content-based instruction with cognitive learning and task based leaning (Stoller, 1999) the framework of the syllabus may develop around this integration .

The cognitive theory allows the ESP learners to be active processors of knowledge; therefore the activities should be structured in the early stages to enable learners to be active participants (Biggs & Moore, 1993; Woolfolk, 1993), it also focuses on the use of prior knowledge and developing an ESP programme implies equipping students with a repertoire of strategies and brainstorming. The activities need to be organised so as to require the use of the cognitive strategies such as accessing background and knowledge, predicting, comparing and inferencing (Gaskins & Elliot, 1991). Learners will then be able to control their learning and accomplish the required tasks. The macro skills (reading listening speaking and writing) in an ESP design process increase in conceptual and cognitive difficulty from unit to unit. Therefore, developing an ESP syllabus implies equipping students with a repertoire of strategies to become independent and autonomous learners.

Content- Based instruction broadly aims at integrating language knowledge with the content of specialism knowledge, i.e. provide a meaningful context for English language learning on the one hand and to support specific content learning with language instruction on the other (Mohan, 1986). Hutchinson and Waters

(1987) have proposed the theme-based model where texts and activities are selected around central themes, in which learning takes place, in a motivating context. Language is medium for content learning and content is a resource for learning language so in this way a bridge is provided for discipline-based study. This allows the syllabus designer to situate language learning in a meaningful, motivating, and stimulating engagement with the target language. Through the syllabus, the designers will try to maintain a balance between language learning and content learning, i.e. common core language and the specific content (Miliani, 1994).

In language learning, tasks are-goal oriented activities that require learners to achieve real outcomes (Hutchinson and Waters 1987). Tasks should then be meaningful and contextualized and provide exposure to the language of the target situation (Robinson, 1991). Some specific tasks are related to the practice of specific skills areas and include writing tasks such as essays and reports, reading tasks such as text analysis and concept mapping, listening tasks such as note taking and summarizing, and speaking tasks such as presentations and seminars simulations. Other tasks may require the ESP learners to integrate all the skills background together as in comprehension, decision making, implementation, preparation, performance and reflection. Tasks have advantages in terms of authenticity and meaning, and encouraging learners to perform real life tasks and become self directed and autonomous.

The design framework integrates the key elements of the approaches to organisation of course contents based around a very detailed skills and strategies structured in an explicit syllabus. Texts and activities are chosen from a detailed set of themes; the selected themes need to provide the learners with a simulation of target contexts through the different designed units and texts and tasks planning. Units are designed according to cognitive theory to encourage students to review

their linguistic knowledge during a first step, then, reinforce it in the second step (cyclical progression) by processing authentic academic texts and promoting authentic task performance (Bax 2003). Therefore, the content of the ESP course is not only limited to the provision of a specific jargon but rather the provision of a language knowledge.

It becomes evident an ESP syllabus design process requires both language levels and language skills as two integral components of courses layout. The learners need to be taught a certain vocabulary, specific forms and functions, and how these functions interrelate to produce coherent texts (Kennedy and Bolitho, 1984). To be effective participants in the target situation the learners often find difficulties in terms of basic language knowledge, i.e. language levels

Grammar is often regarded as the rules of language that shows the ways in which words are formed and then combined into sentences. Woods (1995) defines grammar as:

> *That science whish teaches the proper use of letters, syllables, words, and sentences; or which treats the principles and rules of spoken and written language. The objects of English grammar is to teach those who use the English language to express their thoughts correctly, either in speaking or in writing*

Woods (1995:1)

Grammar teaching should not be considered as outside the concern of the ESP course. When grammatical difficulties interfere with the skills and task performance it would become necessary to allocate time to concentrate on the difficulties and teach both form and use (Dudley Evans and St. Johns, 1998); key grammatical forms include tenses, voices, modals, articles, nominalization and logical connectors (Dudley Evans and St. Johns, 1998). Nunan (1989) states that

grammar is an essential resource in using language communicatively. In the same vein Close (1981) maintains that:

> *Effective communication depends very largely on*
> *a complex set of conventions which both speaker*
> *and hearer, writer and reader have to follow and*
> *understand. ....If communication is our aim ... then*
> *the fact remains that communication can generally*
> *be achieved most efficiently by means of a grammatical*
> *sentence or by a series of such sentences logically related*

Close (1981: 14)

Grammar has an important role in helping the learners to convey their messages. It is important to make them aware, for example, of the difference in use between the definite and indefinite articles; the difference in focus between the description of events in the active or the passive voice; or even the importance of the choice of tenses in describing an event in time.

As for the approaches, they may vary as situation changes. In some situations, teachers may deal directly and explicitly with   grammatical points while with others a more communicative approach may be applied and still in others students may be allowed to move towards it using their own competencies by providing them with self-study materials (Dudley Evans and St Johns, 1998). No matter what approaches are used, the ESP syllabus need to contain grammar that is beyond the sentence level in various contexts.

In this vein Hutchison and Waters (1987) focus also on teaching structures through discourse analysis. They maintain that learners become efficient readers or writers, by raising their awareness of the underlying structure of a text and the way in which language is organised to construct this structure (language awareness). Focus may also be put on the distinguishing regularities of the different text types.

It can help the learners build a repertoire of the organisation and the relevant language forms of different genres.

In ESP situation, it is evident that each subject speciality has its own vocabulary, often highly specialised or technical. What can cause problems for the learners is the set of semi-technical words which often change their 'normal' meaning when put in specialised context (Kennedy and Bolitho, 1984). These difficulties may occur at the semantic level or the morphological level. The vocabulary extracted from general English may also be a source of problems for the learners (Lyons 1981).

Harmer (2001) points out that the least problematic issue of vocabulary is meaning. The same word may have different meanings depending on the context and purpose of the user. Words may also have synonyms which the learners need to be aware of and be able to extract on the basis of given context and setting; in addition to the variety of ways of words' coining through affixation and words combination (morphology). It is all these areas of language use that may create problems of comprehension for the ESP learner when dealing with the designed authentic material.

Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) have classified the type of vocabulary encountered by the ESP learner into asset of categories. These can be summarized as follows:

1- technical abbreviations

2- symbols and formulae

3- highly technical vocabulary

4- sub technical vocabulary

They add that the teaching of the different types of vocabulary can be done through the different methods employed in ELT situation. They stress especially on the study of word formation and word relationships. As far as word formation is

concerned two essential areas can be mentioned; these are the role and meaning of affixes as in the typifying of words with scientific affixes such as 'anti' 'poly' and '-valent'… and the identification of word classes as in making the learners aware of the fact that whether a word is a modifier, a noun or a verb when deducing the meaning of a text (Van Lier, 1995).

Likewise learners need to be aware of the fact that words do not exist in isolation; there exists a number of relation between them which make up the semantic structure of any language: **"*words should not be taught in isolation but exercises should be devised to try to exploit their relationships with other words.*"** (Kennedy and Bolitho 1984:62). Hence, it is necessary to draw students' attention to systems in vocabulary, enabling them to classify words and to make intelligent guesses at meanings. This implies some assistance with the study skill of noting and ordering vocabulary for future reference and with decisions about the priorities of different items presentations in texts.

On the other hand, while speaking words and phrases are built with individual sounds, pronunciation and stress are also important to convey different meanings (supra-segmental features). This does not mean that the pronunciation of the taught vocabulary should be as perfect as that of a native speaker. What needs to be achieved on the part of the ESP learner is to be always understood (Harmer, 2001). This implies that the final output of the planned activities should be at least an intelligible pronunciation.

This idea of intelligibility suggests that students need to be aware of the fact that some features require more attention than others (Van Lier, 1995). Some words have to be pronounced correctly if the student wants to get his message across (Crystal, 1994) as in 'singing' and 'signing'; the distinction between /ð/ and /θ/ as in 'them' and 'theme' ; the difference between short and long vowels

as in 'leave' and 'live'; in addition to stress shift in the distinction of word classes as in 'im'port' (verb) and ''import' (noun).

The main skills in any ELT enterprise remain reading, writing, listening and speaking. Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) promote the idea a sample unit may consist of:

> a- *Priming of the reading topic by discussion*
> b- *Reading of the text with a task clearly defined*
> c- *A transfer exercise with relevant information extracted from the text and written up in tabular form*
> d- *Discussion of individual group results, and*
> e- *Final version written up in full rather than note, form.*

Kennedy and Bolitho (1984:69)

In sum, the proposed model evokes a set of tasks on the basis of input provided by the practice of the reading skill. Since tasks are goal-oriented activities that require learners to achieve real outcomes. The proposed tasks are related to the practice of the four skills. These include the writing tasks such as the essays and reports; the reading tasks such as text analysis and concept mapping; listening tasks such as note taking and summarizing and speaking tasks such as presentations and seminar simulations (Jordan, 1997)

Dudley Evans and St Johns, (1998) agree on the fact that reading is the first skill to be presented. The text in an ESP situation is no more considered as a linguistic object but a vehicle of information. Students have to be encouraged to focus on the macro-structure of the text and extracting information from it instead of a simple linguistic analysis (Kennedy and Bolitho, 1984; Dudley-Evans and St Johns, 1998).

Students are exposed to an authentic language that can be studied through the practice of text analysis present in the different designed activities and tasks. The presentation of vocabulary and relevant grammatical structures help the learners to

develop the micro-skills such as predicting, skimming, scanning and deducing un known words (Dudley-Evans and St. Johns, 1998)

The second macro skill is academic writing since it involves an awareness of readership and an understanding of the expectations of the discourse community. Reading provides the comprehensible presentation of subject matter in the Target language since it provides a large amount of meaningful, interesting and structured input material; therefore it increases vocabulary acquisition, improves grammatical development and writing style   (Krashen 1989). To reach such an aim two approaches are often applied:

a-The product approach which involves the presentation of a model text which is analysed and form a basis of a task that requires the students to write a parallel text (Kennedy and Bolitho, 1984; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

b-The process approach which emphasizes the composing processes which involves planning, drafting, getting feedback and revising (Jordan 1997; Ourghi, 2002). This approach can promote autonomous learning since it encourages individuals to take more responsibilities for their own learning (Oster, 1987).

On the other hand listening to lectures is the third macro skill that the ESP learner is required to develop. Through the comprehension of the listening passages students have to cope with the phonological patterns (Kennedy and Bolitho, 1984). They need to cope with the speed of delivery of the piece of information provided orally and be able to write quickly and clearly important data for future use (Dudley-Evans and St. Johns, 1998). The designed activities need to help them identify the purpose and the topic of the lecture, styles and structures. Listening comprehension reinforces the type of input already presented in the reading text, and help the learners to produce a suitable output (practice of the productive skills)

Finally, Speaking is a productive macro-skill that involves the ESP learners into the performance of such tasks like asking questions, participating in seminars,

making oral presentations and verbalizing of data (Jordan, 1997). Speaking tasks should be planned in courses to engage learners in interactions in various situations for various purposes, i.e. academic situations or simulations of occupational ones.

To sum up this paper, it is evident that the components of an ESP course comprise different elements which can be summarised as follows: a process of needs identification and analysis whose results determine the content of the designed materials, the teacher know-how in transmitting the different language structures and technical language found in the materials, testing which allows the assessment of both the learners and the worth of the course. However it is necessary to mention that the designed materials have to be structured into a syllabus. The structure and the outcome of the designed syllabus must suit the ESP teaching situation.

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