Languages for Specific Purposes
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Globalization of the world economy requires professionals and specialists in various areas to communicate effectively in foreign languages. The success is conditional on their ability to manage language and cultural barriers, i.e. on the language skills and competences with respect to their professional areas.

The most of the book has concentrated on teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) rather than other languages. This clearly shows today’s dominant position of English in the area of teaching foreign languages. The number of people using English for international communication is increasing, and English is often referred to as lingua franca or global language (Crystal, 1997). Based on Widdowson (1997) we may assume that English, being used this way, is always the language for specific purposes.

The study of languages for specific purposes represents a synthesis of linguistics and methodology of teaching foreign languages (L2) and includes the aspects of lexicology, terminology, translation and discourse analysis. In this book we therefore attempt to put together the theory and practice of languages for specific purposes, showing the procedures and relating course designs to learner’s specific needs in learning foreign languages for academic, occupational or business purposes.

The authors tried to find solutions to the needs of learning LSP drawing on their experience with respect to the specificity of their learners’ mother tongues (L1). We hope that it will be accessible to language teachers and LSP specialists, as well as graduate and postgraduate students majoring in foreign language teaching.
CHAPTER I:

TEACHING LANGUAGES
FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES
Teaching foreign languages to non-linguist students is a difficult but challenging task. There is hardly any branch where students would not need foreign languages (L2) for understanding of professional texts and where they would do without the skills to communicate effectively in the tasks connected with their study or work situations. The study of languages for specific purposes (LSP) is highly students-centred, focused on learners’ professional linguistic needs, as well as teaching materials production. In general, it puts great emphasis on the practical outputs of language learning. LSP have to deal with a number of “sub-languages”, i.e. language of business, science and technology, humanities etc., which makes it complicated to outline a methodology that would apply to all disciplines and professional activities the learners are involved in. As a result, the LSP methodology always integrates the language learning and subject learning approaches.

The origin of LSP is closely connected with recognizing the communicative role of languages and their functional styles. In the 1920s the Prague linguistic circle and the related works defined the functional language, which enabled description of different categories referring to the use in different disciplines and situations. This made it clear that in every language there are specific elements typical of different areas. In 1930s the German linguistics introduced the concept of Fachsprachen, and in the beginning of 1950s Savory published The Language of Science. Its Growth, Character and Usage (1953), which laid the foundations for the theory of languages for special purposes, later referred to as languages for specific purposes. Since the 1970s the linguists have agreed that LSP serve for the needs of individual fields of science, technology, economics, management, medicine, law, media, etc. In other words, the number of languages for specific purposes, in contrast to languages for general purposes (LGP), is relatively high.

With respect to English, there are different definitions of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), but probably the clearest one is Hutchison’s and Waters’s (1987, 1994) who see ESP as an approach rather than a product. This definition however suggests that ESP does not involve a particular
kind of language or methodology. Here, the authors see the specificity in
the specific end product the language teaching is aiming to achieve, i.e. to
provide the learners with the language according to their learning context.
Hence, ESP is defined by the needs and reasons for which the student is
learning L2. The concept of languages for specific purposes shall always
be related to the content; be based on the needs analysis and centred on
language appropriate to particular disciplines and activities in syntax,
lexis, discourse, semantics etc. (cf. Strevens, 1988, Robinson, 1991,
Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998).

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) date the origin of ESP study back in
1960s when it gained a well-established position as a component of
applied linguistic research. Throughout its development, similarly to LSP,
it has involved a close relationship between the theory and practice and
has been influenced by the developments in education, business and
computer technology.

Chapter I seeks to provide an overview of different approaches, issues,
aspects, and practices in teaching LSP. The authors hope that readers will
find the collection of papers a useful resource for understanding of current
practices in teaching of languages for specific purposes.
DECISION-MAKING AND THE INTEGRATION
OF THE FOUR SKILLS WITH LARGE,
MIXED-ABILITY ESP GROUPS

ISABEL BALTEIRO

Introduction: the problems of teaching a large heterogeneous ESP University group

If the process of teaching a foreign language is quite complex in itself, it is even more complicated when we teach a language for specific purposes (English for Business, in this case), especially if the learners constitute a large and badly-defined (mixed-ability) group.

In this paper, we deal with ESP at University level, which apparently implies that we will face a well-defined intermediate group of mature students with a similar and acceptable background linguistic knowledge, acquired throughout the years spent at secondary school. However, unlike other countries, the reality of the teaching-learning process is not so idyllic in Spain as the ideal teaching environment with highly-motivated intermediate-level students is far from reality. We claim that only a very reduced number of Spanish students finish their secondary studies without a good command of English. Indeed, despite the fact that they have been learning English for at least eight years, their level is, in general, not higher than elementary. This would not be so dangerous if these two “types” of students did not meet in a University classroom. However, as we shall see below, University classes do not still group their students according to their levels. Obviously, this has important negative consequences for the teaching, for two main reasons: first, University teachers expect students with at least an intermediate level and prepare their materials accordingly, and, secondly, University teachers and their lessons are conditioned by students’ deficiencies and variety of levels (and their consequences) and hence they are obliged to make drastic and difficult decisions to adapt their teaching to both the students’ and the student’s needs. To give an example, they have to decide whether to make a revision of or teach the basic general language skills and then attempt to
continue with the expected syllabus and at the expected level or, rather, disregard such facts and teach what they were expected to. Of course, choosing one or the other option has serious implications for the learner’s language development. Note, however, that, as Rinvoluci (1986: 29) argues ‘the problem of mixed abilities in the same room seems absolutely natural, and it is the idea of teaching a unitary lesson that seems odd’.

In addition to the aforementioned difficulties regarding mixed-abilities and students’ lack of the basic language knowledge, there are some others which also deserve our attention. That is the case of the large number of students that may be found in a classroom. ESP courses at Spanish Universities are usually offered as free-choice subjects, which means that any student may enrol as, surprisingly enough, there are no pre-requisites that may be used as filters to obtain quite homogeneous groups facilitating both the teaching and the learning processes. Therefore, unlike other ESP courses which are usually addressed to a very specific and reduced (apparently ‘homogeneous’) group of individuals (as the group composition is established beforehand), ESP courses offered as free-choice subjects at University are a kind of jack-in-the-box or even, we could say, a dumping ground. The expression may sound exaggerated but it is not. Let us explain why. Offering ESP courses as free-choice subjects means diminishing the importance of ESP and makes it a ‘rubbish bin’ for several reasons: firstly, free-choice subjects in the Spanish educational system are those in which students usually enrol for no specific reason beyond the number of credits they need to complete the academic year; secondly, students from any degree may enrol, even if not interested or if unrelated to their studies; thirdly, students of very different ages and different courses may be found in the classroom; fourthly, the best and the worst students may enrol; fifth, not only students but also professionals who have enrolled at University may meet in the ESP classroom. Therefore, it seems that there is room, literally, for everybody and for everything. Needless to say, as already mentioned, this enormous heterogeneity has serious negative consequences for the teaching-learning process, which is affected in all its components: from the selection of contents, materials, and the teachers’ role to the situation of the better-motivated and more advanced students.

Apart from that, for economic and institutional reasons and despite the new European guidelines, the idea of creating both reduced and separate groups of learners, based mainly on their levels, is still far from feasible in Spain.

So far we have defined ESP courses at Spanish Universities and we have mentioned a series of actual problems that derive from the Spanish
educational system, University study programmes, and, more particularly, from the offer of ESP as free-choice subjects which mainly means facing large and mixed-ability classes. We have also briefly mentioned the negative implications that these have for the teaching-learning process. Then, in an attempt to overcome such a problematic state, we should begin by reflecting on the fact that the complexity involving the teaching of ESP at University is mainly a consequence of classroom heterogeneity.

The heterogeneity found in the ESP Spanish University classrooms is a consequence of three main factors: the University as the institution that regulates the enrolment and the students’ distribution in groups, the classroom as the place where the different learners meet, and the individuals themselves with their daily subjective needs and attitudes.

Firstly, as its name indicates “university” denotes heterogeneity, but here more than in other cases, as this is increased by both the offer of ESP as free-choice subjects and one peculiar characteristic of Spanish University classrooms, that is, large classes. Thus, we find learners from different degrees, from different nationalities and/or mother tongue (Socrates), from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (students vs. students who are also professionals, for example), from different courses (from the first to the last year), with different ages (and degree of maturity), interests, purposes, etc. Secondly, university in Spain also implies large classes and therefore heterogeneity as regards number of learners or individuals, who bring with them an important diversity or variety of interests, purposes, motivations and attitude to language, their personalities, ages, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, both language and world knowledge, learning style, and even self-discipline. As Rinvolucr (1986: 29) states, “we do not teach a group but thirty separate people”. Then, the larger the class, the more difficult and/or problematic it becomes. Thirdly, heterogeneity is also present at individual level since learners’ involvement and motivation is different each day depending on diverse circumstances. In other words, we may say that each learner has an individual range of levels. Finally, we cannot forget that there are also other important discrepancies which may also be included within “heterogeneity”, such as the differences between the learners’ needs and their wants or wishes as regards the fulfilment of classroom activities. Students’ needs and wants are sometimes hard to reconcile. Then there arises the question of whether we should make them happy by doing only what they wish or, rather, force them to do what they actually need. We think that there may be an intermediate point that allows teachers to adapt those activities the students are reluctant to do, so that they make them feel happier.
Needless to say, large and heterogeneous (mixed-ability) ESP groups, as just outlined, involve a series of difficulties and decision-making processes and, more importantly, are extremely difficult to teach. Hence it is really important to identify the group characteristics and the main problems that these may present (by means of a needs analysis) as well as look for practical ideas that can help and contribute to effective solutions, as explained below.

The solution to many of the problems (for both teachers and learners) posed by such large heterogeneous ESP free-choice University classes seems to be in (1) trying to vary topics and contents so that students are more likely to feel interested, (2) setting open-ended tasks so that learners may complete them according to their own levels, (3) providing activities with varying degrees of difficulty so that sometimes even more advanced students find them a challenge (which also will help to increase their motivation) or even giving them more difficult tasks, (4) using pair and group work so that one may help the other, (5) grouping them according to their levels so that no one may feel ashamed of his or her performance, (6) attending to particular individual difficulties (and advanced students), (7) providing additional material to those who may need it, etc. Obviously, the best solution would be to attend to individualised learning but this is nowadays still impossible at Spanish University as classes continue to be large, although some hope seems to lie ahead.

The preceding as well as other similar suggestions are found and explained in the following section, in which a practical example of teaching English for Business Purposes at a Spanish University is provided.

**Pre-teaching considerations: an analysis of needs and attitudes towards the foreign language**

Given the problematic nature of ESP subjects in Spanish Universities, it seems that a “solution” is urgently needed so as to be able to attend to the students’ need as much as possible, specially if we consider that the most common and recommended teaching approach nowadays is learner-centred (see, Johns and Price-Machado, 200; Nunan, 1987; and, for a critique of it, Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Our experience teaching a Business English course (a free-choice subject) at University level may provide the reader with some suggestions on how we may attend to mixed-abilities, diversity, heterogeneity and also to large number of students/learners.
It seems that the first best thing to do when facing a course with these or similar characteristics is to make a **needs analysis**. A needs analysis means obtaining “a picture” of our learners, as regards their needs and expectations, that is, objective needs such as their previous knowledge, what they know and the problems they have, their difficulties in learning, but also “subjective” needs such as passing the exam, working or studying abroad, etc., and ranking of preferences, that is, what they would like to learn and how they wish to study it, mainly concerning content and language skills. Knowing this will help and allow us to orient our decisions as regards classroom management, syllabus design, and, more particularly, the students’ individual needs and, in general, their diversity or heterogeneity of levels. Accordingly, on the first day, students were given a questionnaire aimed at identifying the learners’ needs, lacks, shortcomings, and competences, as well as their interests and purposes for the future. This made also evident and, consequently, made us conscious, from the very first moment, of the great heterogeneity of the group. The heterogeneity did not only concern the different levels or the mixed-ability in the class (some students had not had any contact with the English language for years, while others came directly from secondary school and apparently remembered some English), different purposes, etc. but, most importantly, students from very different and varied areas (from Economics, Business Administration and Management, Computer Engineering, English Studies, and a B.A. in English Translation), on the one hand, as well as students from very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (besides the Spanish students, there were quite a few Socrates students, namely, twelve from France and three Russians). Special attention was devoted to the variety of interests and wishes that the learners put forward. Accordingly, some students wished to learn (general) English and had enrolled in this course only because they had no other opportunity to take English at University; others wanted to learn English related to the business world while others, the least, those from English Studies and Translation, intended to improve their knowledge in the field of Business English and were specially interested in learning vocabulary. Unlike these, the three Computer Engineering students cannot be disregarded as they are a good example of the demotivation in free-choice subjects classrooms, in particular, and, more generally, in present day classrooms. They were simply interested in “the credits needed to complete the required subjects for the academic year” and manifested that they had chosen Business English because it was suitable for their CVs and because the subject had been easy to pass in previous years (as grading was based only on class attendance). Note that they were not
problematic in the sense of how to engage or motivate them, for several reasons: one did not attend lectures because he was working as a computer technician, a second one was completely demotivated and nothing could be done to help him, and the third attended and his level was above the average.

Apart from the questionnaire, they were asked to write a brief composition about their previous weekend. These revealed a good number of both lexical and grammatical problems. To give some basic examples and to make the reader conscious of the remarkable linguistic difficulties that we had to face and overcome, there appeared cases like the non-capitalization of the first person pronoun (*i*), the use of the third person singular of verbs without --s, or the misuse of prepositions like *in home.*

Given such a variety of interests, needs, and levels, and also considering motivation as well as style and speed in learning, some decisions were to be taken, mainly what to teach (and to whom), how to teach, and materials to be used. In addition to all this, there were other important decisions regarding the use of both the use of the L1 and the L2, the restriction to Business English teaching (without dealing with other relevant or basic issues related to general English), the teaching of the four skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, etc.

**Decision-making and the teaching itself: Suggestions for an effective teaching in attempting the students to be competent in the four skills**

Making decisions on what to teach and how to do it with such a large number of mixed-ability students is a real challenge for any teacher. However, the degree of difficulty to succeed is increasingly more complex when we deal with foreign language learners and even more with ESP. As Hemingway (1986: 18) notes, teachers face a range of problems such as (1) how to plan a lesson to meet the different needs of all the students; (2) how to give all students equal attention, preventing the more advanced learners from feeling bored and the less able feeling lost or left out (on this, see also Nolasco and Arthur, 1988: 108); and (3) how to work through a given syllabus or textbook, but still allow for individual differences, among others. We think that the learners should be aware of the problematic situation and so they should be told about the importance of communication between learner and teacher and vice versa. Thus, the learners may also contribute and help the teacher in decision-making, although sometimes, of course, this will be done by using mere intuition.
Under the aforementioned circumstances, and with the aim of caring for learners’ shortcomings in general English (note that only seven out of one hundred and eighty did not have important problems in relation to the basic language skills or competence), it seemed that alternating between Spanish and English was appropriate, despite the fact that there were Socrates students whose L1 was obviously not Spanish (but they were expected to have a good command of Spanish as they had been selected for the Socrates programme and lived in Spain). English was used most of the time, while Spanish was resorted to for relatively more complicated explanations or even for reinforcement. Nolasco and Arthur, however, consider the use of the L1 useful only if everything else fails. Moreover, they believe that the use of the mother tongue for instructions, for example,

“removes the greatest single source of genuine communication in the language classroom and students can learn a lot by being asked to listen and do (oral instructions) or read and do (written instructions)”.

(Nolasco and Arthur, 1988: 32)

Instead, they emphasize the importance of using the target language for classroom management.

The first two weeks of the course (six hours) were devoted to revision of basic aspects of grammar. Moreover, a book with basic grammar exercises and grammar summaries (Walker and Elsworth, 1986) was either provided or recommended so that they could reach the expected intermediate level or at least a lower intermediate one. This book was to be used at home and students should work with it at their own pace. Solutions to all those tasks were provided to the students once they had completed the exercises. Given all these measures, we focused on the teaching of “the” English for specific purposes with special reference to the general business world, banking, and companies or firms (as these topics attended to both the students’ interests and purposes), as our main objective was to introduce the learners to the kind of language they will face and need to use and understand in their academic and professional future. In spite of this, at any time the students came across relevant grammatical issues (even if related to General English), these were commented upon.

Once the conflict General English – English for Specific Purposes was solved, there appeared the problem of how to prepare or obtain materials which attended to the group’s heterogeneity, that is, to the diversity of levels and interests. The solution seemed to be in using open-ended tasks (either using existing materials, adapting them, or preparing new ones) so
that they would allow different degrees of achievement (different levels and different types of answers) and to avoid using or preparing differential tasks that may, on the one hand, make the teacher feel frustrated if the students drop out on a given class and s/he realizes that he has lost time preparing specific activities for them, and, on the other, make some students feel either “different” or left out. As Hemingway observes,

“a mixed level class can be demotivating for students if they are not encouraged to work to their own limits, and enabled to fully participate in the lesson. The student whose English is more advanced than the rest may feel cut off from the group if he/she is constantly given work to do alone, while the others catch up”.

(Hemingway, 1987: 18)

Apart from that, it must be remembered that most (if not all) textbooks are designed for an ideal homogeneous group. It is our role as teachers to overcome this restriction by adapting already existent materials and creating new ones. Thus, most of the activities were and had to be adapted from materials which had been specially designed for Business English, especially because students were not prepared to face authentic materials as such. In spite of this, authentic texts (without further adaptations) were provided twice along the course. The general tendency, however, was the use of adapted open-ended tasks or questions so that each student may achieve or perform at his or her own level. Moreover, more advanced students were given the opportunity, if they wished to, to use additional material so that they might advance at their own rhythm and according to their interests. In relation to this, it is quite noticeable that students were not interested in extra activities as their only purpose seemed to be to pass the subject and obtain (the) credits.

Another relevant question, probably the most important, as it was our main focus, was the study and introduction of the four skills in the teaching of such a heterogeneous course. At first sight, all of them seemed similarly relevant, specially if the learners’ interests, purposes, and needs were taken into account, on the one hand, and, in particular, if we consider the importance that communication (both oral and written) skills have in the business world in general and in banking and firms (the two main targets that most students pointed out as their potential professional future), on the other.

However, as practice demonstrated, despite being conscious of their needs, these did not always coincide with what they wished or were willing to do. Thus, for example, despite the importance that listening tasks had to develop the communicative skills that they needed, they asked
for them to be excluded from their classroom activities because, as they put it themselves, they “did not understand a word” and felt frightened by the situation. Accordingly, after the first listening activity (taken from Jones and Alexander, 1996: 11), most students showed their discontent and desperation; only more advanced learners, the least, expressed their satisfaction at having understood it and answered the questions correctly. As communication with students and the awareness of their needs and interests were used to orientate and manage the teaching (learner-centred approach), we decided to begin with simplified and adapted listening comprehensions, so that the teacher read texts aloud or said something and the students had to answer a number of questions. Later on, when the students felt more confident, cassette or CD recorded listening excerpts where provided: first, they listened to the cassette or CD; then, the teacher checked what they had understood; and, finally, the teacher repeated it (reading aloud or telling) to give the learners an opportunity to understand it better, successfully complete the tasks and, consequently, motivate them and make them feel better and more confident with listening. This was apparently a good measure, for several reasons: on the one hand, students felt more confident and less anxious; on the other hand, this allowed us to pay attention to the different levels in the class. For example, more advanced students were not allowed to talk until the rest had had a chance to answer the questions or participate in class. Moreover, the teacher used to mill around the class to check their degree of achievement in the written answers. In order to keep more advanced students engaged in the activities while the rest of the learners continued with their attempts to complete the tasks, they were asked to fill in as much information as possible. At correction time, as already suggested, primary attention was paid to basic information and then they were asked to complete the missing data, telling aloud to the whole class, so that more advanced students also had their opportunity to participate. Therefore, all students, independently of their levels and degree of achievement, had a chance to contribute with their answers at one time or another.

As regards speaking activities, different types were used throughout the course. Most of the students were first reluctant to talk, especially when they realized that more advanced students, including the Socrates ones, had a good level of oral skills and could speak fluently. Speaking tasks were always used as a complement to another task, for example, a listening or a reading comprehension, which was used as the motivator or engagement element. To increase their motivation and make them more conscious of the importance of speaking, they were usually told about the importance of communication (and, as a corollary, of oral skills),
especially in the business world. Moreover, we attempted to engage them by asking referential questions, that is, questions related to economy or the business world and to which the teacher (who was only an English teacher and not a Business specialist) did not know the answer. Thus, the lecture became a more natural environment to learn Business English. Apart from that, speaking activities were presented as an exercise to “rest” and relax (with their colleagues) for a while. Thus, students worked either in pairs or groups, and they were grouped together depending on their levels. Lower-level students were never grouped with the more advanced ones, in order to avoid the sense of unease. Quite exceptionally, however, if there was to be a leader in a group, for example, an advanced learner may work with the lower level students. Nevertheless, intermediate and elementary students were usually combined. Note, however, that many researchers concerned with mixed-ability problems usually consider that combining lower-level students with advanced ones is the most appropriate way of grouping learners (see Maddalena, 2002: 5). Furthermore, our experience tells us that groups formed by elementary students only should be avoided. The reasons for such a conclusion derive from the fact that, in speaking tasks, apart from their tendency to use their L1, instead of English, they tended to make efforts to write down in English what they had said in the L1, Spanish in our case (as all the foreigners had an intermediate level), so that, when asked, they simply tried to read what they had written. Modifying such behaviours was specially complicated or rather, almost impossible.

Unlike with listening and speaking, learners, above all lower level students, seemed more confident with reading and writing. However, we cannot disregard the fact that, like with the aforementioned skills, lower-level students were quite reluctant to participate in the reading tasks, especially at the beginning. But their participation improved as the course advanced, to the point that at the very end they participated in them of their own accord. Obviously, a factor that contributed to this was telling them that they were not being evaluated or assessed, but the point was simply to make them pay attention, fix, learn, improve, and acquire both oral and written skills. Reading comprehension tasks were also used for the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and even pronunciation as students were asked to read the texts aloud and the teacher used to correct their pronunciation. Quite noticeable is the fact that the students commented their satisfaction for the amount of vocabulary that they were learning and they also felt happy about the correction and feedback as regards pronunciation. As regards group heterogeneity, especially in relation to the different levels and backgrounds in the class, this was almost
imperceptible when students were given texts with very specialised vocabulary. Their level of comprehension did not differ greatly since more advanced students had a good command of general English only. This fact was quite motivating for all of them because the more advanced made great efforts to continue with their “status” of being the best in the class, whereas lower-level learners were happy to know that the others did not recognise the vocabulary.

As regards written tasks, they did not present problems of adaptation to the group heterogeneity, as compositions naturally allow for different levels of achievement and none is necessarily incomplete or incorrect. For the correction different techniques were used. On the one hand, the teacher may correct the text so that the student is given individual feedback (thanks to corrections on paper) and also group feedback as the most important and recurrent errors were collected and an explanation was given in a one-hour session. On the other hand, guided corrections were also made so that the student himself should re-write the text, following the teacher’s indications, and give it back to the teacher, who would correct it again and attend the student in a tutorial. For obvious reasons, those with higher levels were not asked to re-write their writings for their level did not require it.

Along the preceding paragraphs we have tried to offer some suggestions and share our experience dealing with a large heterogeneous ESP University group. Note that special attention was paid to level differences which eventually appeared as the most relevant in such course. As seen, we mainly tried to prevent better students from feeling bored and the weaker ones from being left behind. Moreover, we also touched upon other questions, such as the contradiction between students’ needs (of which they were perfectly conscious) and their wants. Thus, as seen, despite the importance of oral skills for their potential future jobs and their awareness of such a fact, they were reluctant to do speaking and listening tasks and they even tried to eliminate them from the syllabus. Apart from that, as regards other matters related to heterogeneity, it must be said that the differences imposed by the free-choice nature of the subject, were specially noticeable as regards the main degree studied (students from English Studies and Translation were always eager to do the oral tasks and completed them successfully), their age or course at University (more mature students showed more interest and their cultural background knowledge was relatively important) and the demotivation in the case of those who were just looking for credits to complete the curriculum (as explained above, in the case of the Computer Engineering students). Finally, two French male students who wanted to disrupt lessons cannot be
disregarded. The question is whether this was due to their own personalities or rather to their demotivation. The problem was solved by keeping an eye on them all the time and by forcing them to do the tasks.

Conclusions

With the preceding decisions, we apparently had quite efficiently solved or overcome most of the difficulties; however, we needed to ask the learners how they felt about it. In the last class of the term, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Emphasis was given to questions related to what they had learnt and enjoyed, on the one hand, and to what they would improve, modify or change, on the other. Opinions were, like the group itself, quite diverse and heterogeneous and apparently (cor)responded also to the individual levels. Even though all of them considered that the teaching method was good, that they had learnt quite a lot, and that they were happy but afraid of the final grade (which was their most important objective), some were satisfied with the use of both Spanish and English, whereas others would have preferred only English. Similarly, while some manifested that they would have preferred only cassette or CD listening tasks for the challenge that this implied, others expressed their satisfaction and stated that the teacher’s contribution in reading or telling aloud had helped them to improve their listening skills. Therefore, as expected, it is very difficult to find suitable activities for the whole class and make all of them happy. However, the teacher should always consider the students’ feedback to make new decisions on his/her teaching but sometimes they may also use intuition as the main boost for decision-making.

As just remarked, teaching ESP at University, especially when the courses are offered as free-choice subjects, is not an easy task. Heterogeneity and, with it, mixed-abilities and large classes make the teaching-learning process a challenge for the teacher. This entails a number of decisions regarding such fundamental aspects as what to teach (syllabus, materials, topics, etc.), how to teach (lesson planning, preparation, involvement, management, pair and group work interaction, feedback, etc.) and to whom (for example, should all students be taught the same and use the same materials if their interests and levels are so different?). However, despite the difficulties, nothing is impossible. Accordingly, if the teacher has good disposition and with some effort and reflection, taking into account the students’ needs and wants (which should be identified from the very first day) and trying to strike a balance between both the problems imposed by free-choice ESP subjects at
University will surely, though not exempt of difficulties, be not impossible to cope with. An example of how this could be done is provided in this paper; however, we cannot disregard the fact that every ESP subject, every class, and even every student (depending on the day), will be different, and therefore we will have always to keep an eye on the situation at every moment and be aware of the difficulties and demanding peculiarities of the (free-choice ESP) language classroom. In general, we should take into account the communicative principles that apply to any general purpose class. Among others, the importance of creating opportunities for discovery learning and genuine exchange of information, using the language in problem-solving processes; (2) collaboration between learners; (3) open-endedness (to avoid the sense of frustration that many students in large mixed-level classes have when they are denied the opportunity of using the language available to them at their own different levels of competence), and (4) enquiry (questions without closed predictable answers), which Pulverness (2002: 2) regards as “key factors in the large mixed-level EAP class”.

Finally, we cannot end this paper without saying that the ideal teaching situation would be that in which the learner receives individualised attention (on this, see McDonough and Shaw, 1993: 243 ff), however, as seen, this seems impossible in so large groups as Spanish Universities have. Instead, we can consider that “a heterogeneous class can also be addressed as a whole class of individuals who have a symmetry of learner needs” (Millrood, 2002: 135) and so attempt to achieve as much success in the teaching as possible.

References


AUTONOMY IN ESP: SOLUTION OR RECIPE?

NOÉMIA BÁRBARA

Introduction

To those involved in Higher Education it is clear that tertiary institutions are undergoing a reform which was triggered by a two-page document – the Bologna Declaration of 1999 – corroding its very structures while laying the foundations for the European academia in the 21st century (Reinalda & Kulesza, 2005: 3). Thus started the overwhelming steam-roller of bureaucratic recommendations of what is now known as the Bologna Process.

Battling against the loss of ground in higher education to Asia and the USA1, Europe strives to achieve greater compatibility and comparability in the courses it offers so as to increase its competitiveness. Having defined the strategy: to create the most dynamic and competitive economic space of the world in a knowledge-based society, and the deadline – the European Area for Higher Education should be completed in 2010 – the “eurocrats” are urging higher education institutions to become actors in this process of change and to compete “more resolutely than in the past for students, influence, prestige and money in the worldwide competition of universities” (Reinalda & Kulesza, 2005: 124).

Portugal should be no exception. However, as the emphasis in our country was laid not so much on the strategy and the goals but on detail, namely on the duration of learning cycles 3 + 2, or 4 + 1, we lagged behind the adoption of measures. This will probably lead to unemployment of teaching staff rather than the deep reform and innovation envisaged by European planners. The adopted strategy was

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1 Blight, Davis and Olsen discuss the diversity of higher education on a global scale focusing, among others, on Universitas 21, an association of major research-intensive international universities where 16 member universities from the U.K., U.S.A., Asia, Australia and New Zealand (each participating with 4 universities) provide services of assistance to local universities to advance their plans of internationalization since 1997.
perceived by some as changing the least, joining in the last minute, and considering change just because we are told to by Europe (Neves, 2005:5).

If what is at stake is a reform of higher education, in Portugal, in my understanding, the implementation of the Bologna Process seems to be a superficial “facelift” of the degrees offered, focusing only on course duration, on form, and not on content, nor new methodologies which are at the core of a new knowledge paradigm to modernise higher education European institutions (Bárbara, 2005). And yet great many changes are demanded of the new bachelor and master students. According to the Portuguese Higher Education Act of 2006 that regulates the new courses in a “Bologna format”, following the Dublin descriptors, bachelors should, among other competencies, have the competence to learn in a lifelong process with a high degree of autonomy. Not only are there new demands in terms of student profile, but the desired student attitudes should be different and aimed at self-directed learning and autonomy.

Globalization and the new role of languages

A buzzword such as globalization pervades today’s academic discourse, among others, focusing on worldwide political, social, and cultural interactions (Sousa Santos, 2001), regardless of geographical boundaries, which immediately raises questions about language (Block & Cameron, 2002). In fact, globalization is changing the conditions under which language learning is taking place. As English has been adopted as a lingua franca, not so much as a remnant of a British imperialism but as a synonym of the United States economic imperialism, the rise of transnational corporations contribute to the spread of English and therefore to its demand as these corporations disperse into more “flexible centres of production”. Again, with the increase of world organizations and new global networks, English continues to be in great demand globally (Gray, 2002). A new area where English is dominant as a commodity to serve other commodities is the internet, in itself a worldwide web of ongoing growth.

Nowadays, languages are more and more treated as language commodities and this new role has been transforming language departments into service units “providing skills additional to the core capacities required by other areas of professional activity” (Phipps & Gonzalez 2004: 8). General English courses are more and more becoming English for Specific Purposes courses in order to guarantee their survival. While the language loses its human environment, its social experience, it becomes more and more instrumental, devoid of educational values, and
embedded with training features to win out in the marketplace. According to Moreira:

“Higher Education has been forced to question its value for money, but also its usefulness, it has been required to re-package itself in attractive wrappings promising financial and social rewards to consumers, but also to reflect on and redefine learning outcomes, desired exit profiles, skills and attitudes”.

(Moreira, 2005: 55)

Due to its strong connection to the marketplace and its practical features, ESP may be a strong field in the difficult world of job hunting for teachers of L2. Almost all Polytechnic Schools in Portugal have at least one semester of English for Specific Purposes, usually connected to Business, Communication or Engineering courses. The latter have managed to include English across the curricula for more than a decade now. Such is the case with Escola Superior Agrária de Coimbra, which offers classes of English for Engineering since 1985 as well as French and Spanish for the course of Ecotourism since 1999 (Bárbara, 2005), and Biotechnology since 2005.

And yet even Languages for Special Purposes seem to be under threat due to the Bologna framework in which reformulation of courses set to competition for contact hours the hard skills, connected to the engineering core of the courses, and the soft skills. The latter seen as complementary but superfluous at a time where the decrease from 5 to 3 years will tend to obliterate this niche of language learning and teaching. The irony lies in the fact that while Bologna sets out to promote employability and the use of languages in mobility programmes:

“If higher education programmes are to be relevant to the European labour market, graduates have to be able to communicate in a number of languages and to expand their repertoire in changing needs. It is the responsibility of higher education institutions to provide opportunities and incentives for students to acquire these abilities”

(CEL/ELC, 2002)

employability is being mistaken by early specialisation and professional training. If a student is to be “processed”, to use Barnett’s term2, in less time, it can be understood to be prepared for the profession in less time as

2 Barnett uses the idea of universities as enterprises where the logic of competition amongst them compels to the treatment of students as products to be processed quickly so as to improve the university’s comparative position in benchmarking.
well, therefore shedding all the complementary subjects which do not have immediate bearings with job performance.

To some, the promotion of employability may mean a more general curriculum for the student to be supplemented with later specialisation. To others, it may mean the defence of one’s own employability: defending one’s job and one’s departmental power by including in the new syllabuses the disciplines one has always taught, overlooking new goals and the new exit profiles of the courses. For ESP teachers there are not many solutions but to observe the contest among departments and to watch the reduction to a bare minimum of contact hours for language learning while engaging in the debate.

On the one hand we are witnessing a crisis in the humanities and in traditional language learning, and on the other hand the increase in global demand for speakers of English in remote areas of the globe. In the dawn of a of new capitalist era with the dominance of new regions, such as China and India, Europe is trying to define its place in the world by reinforcing its economic dimension, visible with the creation of the Euro; and its educational dimension in the knowledge society, visible through the creation of the Bologna area, overcoming the European Union boundaries of its 25 members. Language teachers of European countries have certainly a role to perform and a word to say in this new European dimension in helping its citizens in their mobility.

**Why learner autonomy? A rationale**

It is commonly accepted that autonomy is a precondition for effective learning, therefore when learners succeed in developing autonomy they become better language learners and enhance their capacity for critical thinking and responsibility (Holec, 1981), (Dickinson, 1992), (Dam, 1995), (Benson, 2001). Autonomy, once seen as an idealistic goal distracting students and learners from the real business of teaching and learning languages, in recent years, however, school reforms in European countries have resulted in new national curricula more attuned to the idea of learner autonomy and more likely to promote innovation in the language classroom (Trebbi, 2003), (Moreira, 2001). The aforementioned Dublin descriptors which determined the Portuguese Higher Education Act of 2006, are an example of how autonomy steadily has made its way into a new teaching/learning paradigm.

Two years after signing the Bologna Declaration, the European ministers in charge of higher education met in Prague and furthered some
of the goals already accepted, but emphasized other aspects. To quote from the Prague Communiqué of 2001:

“Lifelong learning is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. In the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life”.

First of all, autonomy is a desideratum in a society where lifelong learning is valued and since teachers cannot provide students with all the knowledge and skills they need or would like to learn, they can perhaps serve the students better by equipping them with strategies to learn how to teach themselves. In view of the speed of technological developments and the subsequent needs of today’s society, learning cannot be understood exclusively in a primary, secondary or tertiary context (Van Esch, 2003), and autonomy as a goal may draw formal education to life (Vieira, 1998).

Secondly, it is also important to equip the learners with tools and strategies that will empower them in a world where the teacher is only one of the many providers, or sources, of language exposure and communicative practice (Van Esch, 2003). For instance, the internet is a tool of paramount importance offering multimedia sources and language opportunities and easily accessible to higher education students.

A third reason for this rationale has to do with the nature of learning itself. Because learning is a personal process it can only be efficient if the learner wants and wills to learn. Students recognition of responsibility for their learning is considered as a first step towards autonomy, and what is more, they should exercise this accountability by being fully involved in all aspects of their learning process – planning, implementation, evaluation - to fully understand the why, the what, and the how of their learning (Little, 2003). Ultimately, the teacher cannot take the final responsibility for a student’s learning.

So why should we want our students to be accountable for their learning? As many have pointed out, preparing learners for a changing future will allow them to better function in an ever-changing society that values independent initiative and adaptability to change and would also maximize their life choices (Cotteral, 1998), or lifelong strategies (Prague Communiqué, 2001).