Top-up Students' Skills: A New Approach to EAP Course Design

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المستخلص

تقدم الورقة مدخلاً جديداً لتخطيط مقرر في اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض أكاديمية لطلاب الجامعات والمعاهد العليا. ويهدف المقرر المقترح إلي تلبية حاجات الطلاب ذوي القدرات المتدنية، والإرتقاء بمهاراتهم الدراسية واللغوية، وذلك بتكامل وتوحيد الخلفية المعرفية والمهارات اللغوية الأساسية (القراءة ، الكتابة ، الاستماع ، والمحادثة) لتكون كُلاً وظيفياً واحداً.

Abstract

The article presents a new approach to course design for students studying EPA at tertiary level. The course in question has been designed to meet the EAP needs of False Beginners, or low proficiency university students, and intend to top-up, their study and language skills through the integration of background knowledge and the four language skills: reading, listening (Input), writing and speaking (output).

1.University Education and the Aim of Language Teaching

1.1 University Education

Generally speaking, any university education should be committed to the socialization of the individual in what is worthwhile, and his professionalization. In other words, it should provide for the individual's personal, social and professional development. Hence, any study at tertiary level should be planned and designed to develop knowledge at the forefront of professional practice in any filed, and engage students in continuous learning and development through independent reasoning , research and scholarship. Such socio-professional skills, which can only be developed and promoted through 'participative learning', as against the 'non-participative' learning which are currently used in most of the of third world universities. These skills are well needed to meet the rapidly developing world of work through continuous social and technological change, where portfolio careers are a reality.

With the continuous developing globalization demands, today's world of work keeps changing, and graduates have to change jobs more frequently. Increasing numbers of graduates work in small   and medium companies, banks, national and international organizations ,etc. flatter organizational structures require multi–skilled professionals to be in tune with global completion and demand. Thus TEFL has been given a major educational priority in most countries of the modern world (Mckay,2000; Crystal, 1997).

Under such conditions universities should be prepared to help students, as well as graduates ,make the most of their attributes, and experiences . They should, therefore, offer top-up programmes to support the transition of both students and graduates into employment or   further   training   and education. A programme as this should be both modern and innovative to keep up with the changes of a knowledge-based technological society. Therefore, university educational planners and curricular designers should steer away from classical content–based programmes and provide for academic and professional programmes to facilitate the students and graduates' personal and professional development to access appropriate opportunities . However , these goals cannot be a achieved without developing the language of teaching and learning ,i.e. the medium of   instruction, research and training . The following   section explains this view point.

1.2 The Aim of Language Teaching

Any language teaching is often based on the four basic skills: reading ,listening (input),writing and speaking (output) which are assumed to provide for proficient language use .However ,the major objective of these skills is not only to enable learners produce correct written and spoken sentences , as this will turn language into a more structure of isolated lexical and grammatical items .In fact ,the main objective of all language teaching is 'language use', says Willies(1996), which is the   expression of ideas to reach at some kind of purpose. Accordingly ,language is not usage, i.e. it is not an end in itself , but the vehicle for different forms of communication. Today the four language skills are used as a vehicle, through 'content'   and 'task-based activities', to develop and promote critical thinking   (Richard and Shmidt,2002).An example of doing this, say Kangarith, Theara and Klein(2007: 2), is a 'questionnaire project' where students' skills are developed 'through brain storming, research,

writing, problem solving and group work''. This is a 'task- based activity' which helps students gain 'non-linguistic' benefits.

2. Statement of the Problem

The status of English in the curricular of the Sudanese university education is central, both as a medium of instruction and a research language for experimental sciences and technology, and for some human sciences. Again its importance increases with the urgent demands of the local and international markets of work . Unfortunately, the situation of ELT in Sudan ,today ,is short of coping with these demands for the continuous and total blows it received in the last forty years as a result of the unstable and inconsistent educational policies initiated by the different political regimes(1964-to present). The decline of English started with the Arabicisation of secondary education forced by the unelected government of October-Uprising in1964, followed by the disruption of general education and the first educational ladder of the May regime(1969)and finally the second educational ladder initiated by the present regime, of June,1989. The latter cut off one educational year, hence violating the total of 12 years which are known to be (in most countries of the world, including Europe and America) the minimum amount of education needed before entering the university. However, the purpose of this paper is not to discuss reasons and factors for the decline and total collapse of English in Sudan , as these are well known to all Sudanese educationists and specialists involved in ELT. All that one can say, Sudanese secondary school leavers and university graduates are no longer in a position to pride themselves of their good English .

2.1 False Beginners

All the sufferings of secondary education are reflected in the poor performance of the university students . On entering the university, most of freshmen students lack the ability and aptitude to start any education in English, and they many be classified as 'false beginners'. The term refers to learners who have been exposed to English ,perhaps for many years, but have not achieved the necessary standard in one ,or more, of the target skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking). In fact, almost all students who obtain the Sudan School Certificate, whether government or non-government, are false beginners in English. Of course, a very few number of students who come from private schools may be in a better situation. But one has to make the distinction between private schooling which, to be more

accurate, does not exist in the Sudan, with the exception of two or three foreign schools, and the so called private education which constitutes the bulk of non-government education is not private in any educational sense; it is in fact Ahli(i.e. non-governmental) education with all its short shortcomings.

2.2 The Need For A Top-up Programme

It is clear from the previous discussion that almost all students of the Sudan School Certificate may well need further English language preparation before they start their college education. Unless they score 500 points in TFEL examination they will not be able to survive an English medium study environment. This makes an English language Top-up Programme, at tertiary level, a vital first stage for many students who wish to succeed in their specialized academic education. The length of time students must allow for EL preparation depends on their ability, motivation and learning capacity.

This paper proposes a two-components programm: to top-up the students' language skills and prepare them for studying their specialized academic courses. The first component provides for Content (i.e. Input), the second for essential training in study skills (i.e. Output). By completing this programme, students are assumed to have reached and appreciable degree of proficiency in English. Accordingly, students are tested regularly to decide when they are ready to undertake specialized academic subjects. But how to prepare suitable materials for such a programme has always been the question. A lot of time has been wasted by individual teachers and English departments in compiling materials from different books of sciences and technology for academic English. Never the less, their efforts proved to be futile as the material they usually compile is solid, disintegrated and boring. Course Materials, are nowadays, prepared on demand by reputable publishing firms (e.g. Garnet Education, Cambridge, etc.). Teams of expertise produce tailor-made courses in a wide range of specific areas including experimental and human sciences, technological and vocational works. The following section accounts for such made courses.

3. Content-based Vs Common-core Course

Since the 1960s language teaching practitioners were indulged in writing materials for teaching different types of academic English, be it ESP(English for Specific Purposes), EST(English for Science and Technology), or EAP(English for Academic Purposes). Their main focus is on course content,

as they believe that acquiring knowledge is the aim of "all language teaching". To concentrate on content alone is not enough, and proved to be ineffective, because it provides for more learning about the language(i.e. usage) at the expense of language use for communicative purposes. For this reason many ELT specialists have turned attention from the content-based syllabus design to modern approaches such us the use of Multimedia Technology (Pino-Silva,2004; Stepp-Greang, 2002; Jonassen, 2000). Most of the present EAP course materials in Sudanese tertiary education for instance, provide for knowledge of academic subjects, through teaching grammar and vocabulary, rather than developing students' communicative shills.

ELT practitioners (e.g. Philips, 2004; Schleppegrell and Royster, 1990; Arnold, 1999), who are adopting modern approaches to course design, point out several ways in which content-based approach is deficient. First, in a content-based unit, or lesson, of a course, teachers focus on form (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, organizational patterns, etc). The whole lesson activity is therefore directed towards knowledge of content, which is in turn viewed as a vehicle for the correct application of the formal language taught. Second, they view students writing as more production, i.e. what students write is used to test their ability in understanding the text content. Third, EAP course writers and instructors are not concerned with the scientific and technological content of the text, because their main concern is about English language. Therefore, it is not unnatural that such specialists lack the interest, enthusiasm and ability of presenting such scientific or technological content. Forth, EAP writers are faced by the problem of selecting the appropriate concepts for a reading or a listening lesson. They may not be able to understand the basic concepts, facts, technical terms, etc. of the content, or they may lack the efficiency to digest them, re-write them or present them authentically. Again, they can not guarantee the ability and confidence of the instructors to interpret and present the course materials. Fifth, even if this is possible, students may not be ready at this stage to cope with this type of information before they start their specialized college courses. Sixth, the students standards in English are not the same which is the case of almost all preliminary year population.

Despite all the deficiencies and shortcomings of the content-based EAP courses we have mentioned, they are still used by some Arab and most

Sudanese universities. Conversely, some EAP course writers consider the content-based approach as classic and steered away from it by using the same content as a vehicle for developing students language skills. Nowadays, EAP specialists reject both approaches in favor of a Common-core-based EAP approach to course material writing, which they believe is more useful and effective. It helps students, says Phillips (2004), make sense of their specialized college subjects, especially those who have studied part or a whole of this common-core of knowledge in their secondary education, be it in Arabic or any other language. Students with previous knowledge of a certain scientific and technological text, can easily be acquainted with it, i.e. discuss it and write about it in the foreign language they are learning.

To benefit from a Common-core- Based course, students must have an appreciable amount of knowledge in both experimental and human sciences. This background knowledge was possible in the past, even after Arabicisation in 1965, when students at the secondary level used to take a wide range of subjects in arts and sciences in Arabic. With this background knowledge the students of Sudan School Certificate benefited from the classical Scientific English (later ESP) courses at the English language Unit, University of Khartoum, which was established in 1970 and afterwards developed by Prof. Swales. Unfortunately, students came to lose this background knowledge with the inconsistent Educational Policy of the May regime. The problem was provoked by the streaming of secondary school students into arts and science in the first educational ladder. Since then, and up-to-date, students are not making real progress in English and are not benefiting from the different types of EAP courses, now taught at the University General Requirements Centre. Students have to cover a wide range of Content-based subjects, including English, in a very short period of time. Most of these courses proved to be of no use, as they are disintegrated in any way. In fact, they are sandwich courses taught mostly by TAs in very big classes.

1. A Lesson Design Model

In this section we present a lesson model in a proposed 'Common core-Based' course which we believe essential to EAP learning. The idea of the lesson design is drawn from research into how we learn EAP, and is

influenced by Terry Phillips' (2004) talk on "Assessing the Content", where he argues for "Teaching a Common-core of Knowledge" for EAP students.

The steps followed in designing a 'common core-based' lesson may be summarized. First, the course designer should decide upon a 'content area', or 'subject matter area' which he/she believes suitable for the specialty of the EAP learners. Content areas include subject matters as: Food Technology, Space, Business, Cinema and Theatre, Health, Nutrition, etc. Hence, the lessons selected in each subject matter area should be interesting, appealing, and present the students to the kind of terminology, concepts, structures, etc. they will meet at their specialized studies. The content area should provide for all the linguistic tactics and patterns they need to know for academic studies and future life, and the objective should be 'achievement of fluency and logic'. The example below explains the whole idea.

A Subject Matter Area: Health and Nutrition

Key Concepts for Nutrition

Energy $\longrightarrow$ solar, waterfalls, wind, food.

Food $\longrightarrow$ growth, people, plants, animals, work, meat, wool, play, etc.

Measuring (energy) $\longrightarrow$ calories, degrees, grams, units, etc.

Protein $\longrightarrow$ milk, cheese, meat, eggs, chemical compounds, etc.

Carbohydrates and Fats $\longrightarrow$ human body, carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, oil, butter cream, peanut, etc.

Vitamins $\longrightarrow$ health, disease, fruits, vegetables, etc.

Each content area is broken into key concepts and knowledge which constitute the Common-core as shown above. Complex scientific ideas are supported, or explained, by simpler ones. For example, a student can not understand the topic of 'Nutrition' unless he knows what the concept 'energy' really means, which in turn means he/she must have an idea of the different types of energy. Then, he/she would know what happens if we have one type of energy, say 'Food', and so on. Moreover, if the text about Nutrition mentions famous names of scientists, then the students probably read about who those people were/are, which in turn means some knowledge about their native countries, in what part of the world, their today's government, capital, etc. Again, this means knowing about other people's civilization. By so doing the lesson will achieve two major objectives:

(a) By the end of the lesson students would know things which they did not know at the beginning.

(b) The students, now, can do things(e.g. ask and answer questions, discuss, think, etc) which they could not do at the beginning.

Unlike lessons based on teaching 'content', leaving out skills, the common-core based lesson concentrates on both 'content' and 'skills'. Of course, it is much easy to test content by enlisting key facts and concepts from each content area, provided with a wide range of multiple choice, T/F, gap-filling, etc. questions. To test skills, an 'output' (writing and speaking) can be taken from the mentioned 'content tasks', e.g. students may be asked to explain verbally or in writing some of the key concepts.

To sum up, since such an EAP course contains both content and 'key skills', all learners are assumed to have an appreciable amount of common-core knowledge as well as good reading and listening skills. Therefore, only those students who finish their secondary education with good reading and listening skills, and possess some degree of common-core knowledge, are assumed to make use of a course as this. In fact, with the abundance of the disintegrated 'university general requirements courses' and the short time allowed, the university could do nothing about these two conditions. This means that the secondary school subjects should be revised and developed to provide students with such background knowledge and communicative skills. To be more accurate, the whole system of streaming the students into arts and sciences at the secondary level should be abolished.

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