

The Development of an English for Specific Purposes Curriculum in the Polytechnic University of Tirana

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The importance of learning foreign languages in a world where employment and education are increasingly being internationalized, brought to the fore the necessity of matching the language curricula with the students' linguistic and communicative requirements. For this purpose, the English curriculum must be subjected to research in order to rely on scientific basis.

This paper embarks on a theoretical and practical analysis of English language curriculums implemented in the Polytechnic University of Tirana (PUT) from 1994-2012, in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses and consequently draw some conclusions for improving the curriculums' design and implementation in PUT.

Firstly, we will give a brief historical account of curriculum studies. Next, there will be analyzed the English language curriculums by focusing on some of their most important aspects such as: structure, content, environment analysis, needs analysis and objectives. Finally, there will be given the conclusions obtained so far in the development of an English language curriculum in accordance with its teaching circumstances in PUT.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reformation of the Albanian educational system has become essential for the progress of the Albanian society. In this context, universities, as an integral part of this system, have to prepare the young people how to adapt quickly to social conditions and labor market demands. In this way they will be able to respond to such developments and even turn into promoters of changes in their field of study and work.

In the Polytechnic University of Tirana, the acquisition of contemporary knowledge at the level of the other European universities is already a fact. However several other elements such as teaching/learning methodology, campuses, and collaboration with sister universities and companies in Europe and beyond, still need improvements.

The application of Bologna Charter (2001) and the review of curricula in accordance with current institutional requirements has become an integral part of each university teacher's work. Furthermore, the students' expectations of foreign language have changed. As a result there should be sought for new ways to access knowledge and to use it as a means of communication in and out of class.

This paper aims to design research-based curriculum in order to provide students with knowledge and methodology that they will use throughout their life. First, we will give an historical account of the development of English for Specific Purposes in the Polytechnic University through the analysis of syllabuses and textbooks used there. Next, we will analyze the situation of English for Specific Purposes in PUT by conducting a needs analysis and reflecting on the experience accumulated so far in the field of language curriculum design. Developing a curriculum based on students' needs, will encourage them to reflect on English and the reason why they are learning it.

Experimenting with this curriculum is a complex process due to its design, constituent elements and the need for continuous monitoring during its use. On the other hand, the experience to date shows that the teachers' engagement in national and international projects introduces them to the latest developments in the field of ESP teaching/learning. Furthermore the teachers' participation in these projects directly affects their professional development and accelerates the design of curricula by multidisciplinary and multicultural teams that operate continuously in synergy with each other.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Foreign language learning in Albanian vocational universities clearly reflects the dilemma: to learn General English (GE) or English for Specific purposes (ESP)?

Even though, at first the foreign languages departments focused mainly on the general language learning based on the grammar / translation method, with time, the need for the use of language for specific purposes gained terrain. In the 1980s, as in all other Eastern European countries, vocational universities began to develop the first textbooks for students who needed to learn a foreign language closely related to their profession.

ESP teachers were actually the GE ones who tried to adapt their teaching to the students' needs and their field of study. Meanwhile, Albanian teachers conceived and wrote the first textbooks for ESP: Mechanical Engineering (1985), English for Electrical Engineering (1987).

Those teachers' efforts aimed to adjust teaching to the students' needs. The foreign language course was mandatory for four semesters and consisted of general language learning skills and vocabulary related to the students' field of study. Students usually chose the language that they had learned in high school.

It is worth mentioning that the teaching methods did not put at the center the student, who only had to know how to read and translate technical texts. In addition, all the researches were limited to grammar and vocabulary acquisition. The texts that the students had to learn were outdated and subjected to "the ideological filter" (Kromidha, Varfi, 2011). Assessment was based on testing students' grammatical knowledge and ability to understand technical texts.

Curricula changes in the 1990s brought back the focus to general language learning based on the idea that its full mastery would enable the students to read and understand even professional texts since they were somehow familiar with technical vocabulary. It was also experimented with the students' grouping according to their proficiency level which contributed to the effectiveness of teaching and learning English. This initiative was encouraged by a project of the American Embassy, which also brought an English language professor to teach at the university.

However an increase in the students' number and the lack of opportunities to group them according to their proficiency, led to mixed proficiency groups. Furthermore, due to the implementation of the Bologna Charter, foreign language learning in the Bachelor studies in PUT was reduced from 4 semesters into 1 (with a total of 42-84 classes) with the number of classes per week varying from one faculty to another.

On the other hand, because of the students' requests, the General English textbooks such as *Essential* (1967) and *Headway* (Oxford University Press, 1998) were replaced with ESP textbooks such as: *Technology 1-2* (Oxford University Press, 2007/2008) and *Engineering 1.2* (Express Publishing, 2011). But the latter, being intended for a wider international professional public, contained topics that were far from the specific interests of our students and their field of study. Thus, in addition to dealing with the general topics of these textbooks, the students were asked to read more specific texts that they would find online.

Regardless of this change, the students' demands to learn how to independently consult scientific literature in English increased, as well as their requirements for improving their communication skills in English. Despite their level of proficiency in English, they are aware of this language's role for acquiring knowledge in their professional field.

In curriculum and syllabus evaluation criteria in the context of curricular reform in Albania, it is highlighted the importance of results but it is taken for granted the teacher's training, textbooks selections, learning strategies and evaluation of the acquired skills. With the inclusion of research

in the university teachers' workload, it is assumed that it is achieved their professional qualification. On the other hand, teachers in their pursuit for academic titles are neglecting teaching. For all these reasons, the development of a Learner-Centered Curriculum (Nuna, D., 1998) would help to see this reform as a problem to be resolved, rather than data that does not change.

Under these circumstances, it becomes evident not only the need to design for PUT a new English curriculum based on research but also to monitor its application in order to solve any possible problem.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 General Background of Research

The foreign language curriculum in the Polytechnic University of Tirana has continuously been subject to partial changes. These successive reforms aspired to harmonize study levels in accordance with the Bologna process, to improve the teaching methodology and to ensure quality teaching and learning.

The study was conducted at the faculties of Electrical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Architecture and Mechanics in the Polytechnic University of Tirana during 2011-2014. Its main purpose was to develop an ESP curriculum based on scientific parameters and in accordance with the context where it will be used and the engineering students' needs. By means of this curriculum we want to offer to the students' better quality training based on acquiring a range of skills and foreign language learning strategies that will promote independent learning and will assist them when they enter the labor market.

The reforming of the ESP curriculum in PUT poses several difficulties for its designer. First, it is the first time that it is attempted such a reform in Albanian universities. There are no precedents that we could rely on. Many universities have changed syllabuses but they have not conducted a complete and coherent study that takes into consideration all the components and stages of curriculum design which is a very complex process¹. On the other hand, the connection and harmonization of these components and the extension in time of the study create conditions for developing a quality curriculum.

Second, curricular changes are closely related to the teachers who play a crucial part in their implementation. Thus it is very important that while designing a new ESP curriculum, to train teachers to put into practice all the curriculum's components.

Third, the curriculum designers should be aware that there is a foreign language Laboratory in PUT but unfortunately it is not equipped with modern infrastructure and other facilities, such as CD-player, video-projector, etc., are almost non-existent. Thus they should not plan a curriculum which could not be carried out without these facilities.

3.2 Theoretical Background of Research

Curriculum development is referred to as the process or steps followed to plan and implement a curriculum. Since the 1940s up to the present days, it has evolved from an emphasis on teaching methods to how processes that compose a curriculum are interrelated one with another.

Many researchers Tyler (1949); Nicholls and Nicholls (1972); Briggs (1977); Litwack (1979); Richards (2001); Friedenber, Kennedy, Lomperis, Martin, & Westerfield (2003) have provided various processes for developing a curriculum, but we prefer the Nation & Macalister's model because it describes more steps in greater detail and it has been designed especially for language teaching. They considered curriculum design as a process consisting of the following parts:

Environment analysis, which refers to the analyses of the factors of the context where a language curriculum will be used. The factors may be social (educational policies, language teaching

¹ With the term Curriculum we understand the content of the course, teaching and learning materials and resources, selection of the teaching methods and testing and the evaluation of the curriculum as a whole.
http://www.unige.ch/fapse/life/textes/Painchaud_Lessard_A1998_01.html

tradition and community attitudes to language learning) or institutional (teaching staff and institutional policies and the physical aspect (environment where the learning process takes place).

Needs analysis which aims to obtain information about the learners' professional and linguistic backgrounds, their preferred learning styles, learning strategies, their motivation, and their willingness to attend classes, do homework, and commit themselves to learning. Learners' linguistic proficiency and the lack thereof are also very important in order to shape the syllabus and provide for quality teaching and teaching materials according to the learning context

Goals, Content and sequencing: After there are found out the students' needs, there are set the goals which are going to meet these needs. In return, these goals determine the language items, ideas, skills and strategies of the course.

Format and presentation: It consists of designing and selecting teaching materials and teaching methods.

Monitoring and assessment- involves designing what test and how to test.

The final step is *Evaluation* of the whole curricula and course.

3.3 Sample of Research

The sample of this research consisted of 172 students who volunteered to take part in the survey. They were from different faculties such as Electrical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Architecture and Mechanics and from different academic years: 2010-2011 and 2011-2012

English for specific purposes is offered as a course in the first semester of the first year in the Bachelor studies so most of the participants (134) were first year students in their Bachelor studies. However, we have to point out that in this first semester, they take very few courses related to their field of study and as a result they might not be aware of their true needs regarding English. Thus, the sample was enriched with 37 students in the first year of their Master studies in the academic year 2013-2014.

Instrument and Procedures

We performed a quantitative analysis of the students' linguistic needs through a questionnaire that summarized the main activities in which they had to use English. The purpose of this questionnaire was to obtain information about students' needs, interests and expectation from the English language course. This analysis will help us to define clearly the course's objective since students should know in advance what they will learn. (CEFR, 2001). The questionnaire will also assist us in the selection of topics and communication situations (Mangante et Parpette, 2004) that will be included in the syllabus.

In order to obtain more reliable results the survey was repeated with a difference in the sample. The participants in the first sample were first year students in their Bachelor studies, whereas the second sample consisted of students in the first year of their Master studies. The sampling method was that of cluster sampling.

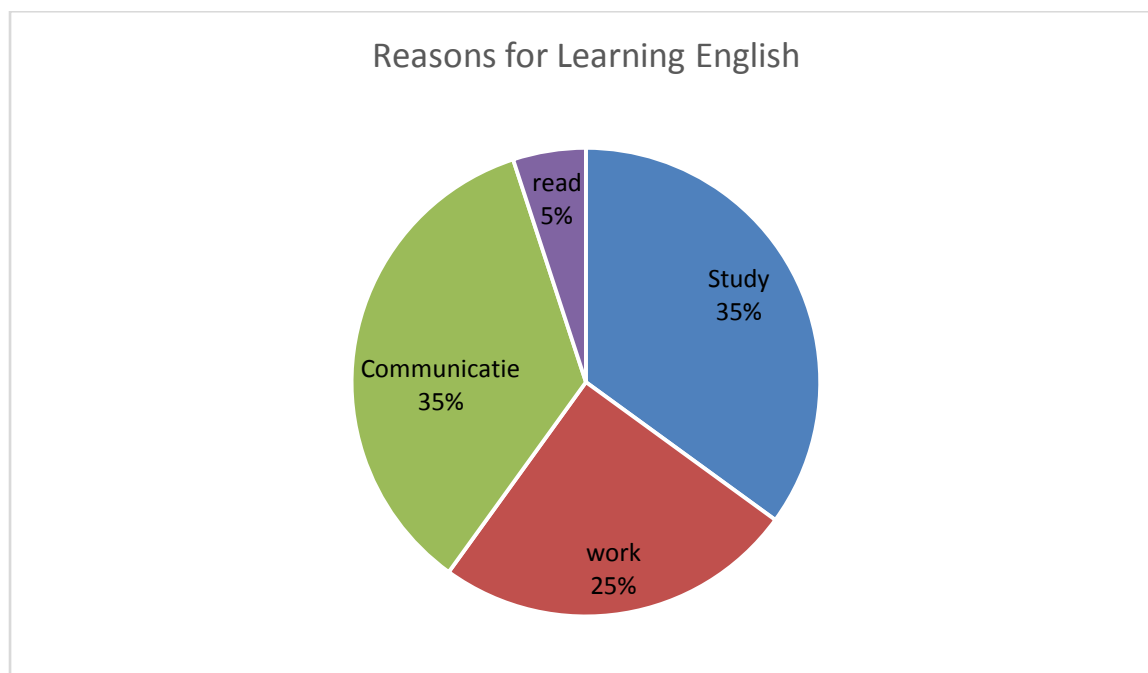
The second instrument were **English language curricula** implemented in the Polytechnic University of Tirana (PUT) from 1994-2012 and a sample French language curriculum designed under a francophone project² which will serve as a model for developing a quality ESP curriculum.

The third instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview with PUT's English teachers. The focus was mainly on the students' proficiency, their learning needs and the difficulties the teachers have encountered in all aspects of their work. Our experience as teachers will help us investigate this curricular reform from the teacher's perspective.

² The project « Mutualisation des formations en FOS sur des réseaux interuniversitaires (droit, économie) » was carried out from 2011 to 2014 and its goal was to develop a curriculum of French for Specific Purposes. For more information: <http://www.auf.org/bureau-europe-centrale-et-orientale/actions-regionales/recherche/appui-aux-projets-de-recherche/>

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of the questionnaires showed that the PUT's students' main reasons for learning English were studying abroad and communicating in English with native or non native speakers.



It was also observed that the students make use of different learning styles but at the same time show a preference for traditional teaching methods with the teacher at the center. 45.7% of them preferred a teacher-led instruction full of explanations. They do not like neither pair work nor group work. However, 30% admitted that they learned best when engaged in creative activities and course assignments.

When asked which skill they wanted to improve most, the result of the analysis indicated that students and their professors expressed different needs. While professors believed reading was the most important skill for them, students themselves considered speaking and listening skills as most needed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Skills the students would like to improve

Skill	Percentage (%)
Listening	30,7
Reading	4,9
Speaking	46,1
Writing	8,7
Grammar	3,5
Vocabulary	6,1

4.1 Model of a French Language Curriculum

The participation of French teachers in an interregional project whose aim was the development of modules for French for Economics showed that there is a lot of work to be done from the conception to implementation of the curriculum. It also served as a model for developing an ESP curriculum. Some of the strengths of this project were the learner-centered approach and the student-teacher and student-student interactions which encouraged the development of oral communication skills. Some of the written tasks were: to write an e-mail, an official letter, a letter of application etc. Another good feature was the use of multimedia learning resources which spark the students' interests and provide a greater exposure to French. In addition, reading texts were

selected from divulgative science journals which gave to the students updated scientific information, helped them understand technical concepts while using the language as a means for understanding the information. But in order to make these texts more interesting and more useful for the student, the teacher should process them and turn them into teaching resources.

The hardest challenge for the English teachers in PUT is the reorganization of the course's content in order to adopt it to the students' needs because of the limited amount of hours allocated to foreign language learning in PUT. Our goal is to familiarize the students with different types of texts (descriptive, explanatory, and argumentative) related to their field of study. On the other hand the wide range of professional target situations and documents imposes the need to analyze the type of discourse or register. Since engineering texts have figures and other visual elements, we tried to include readings and interpretation of charts and tables in the modules for the ESP curriculum.

By practicing the modules' exercises the students helped in improving them. They gave the idea of accompanying the modules with a mini dictionary and proposed clarification or reformulation for the instructions of some activities in order to make them easy to understand.

The modules could be accessed online and students were free to choose any activity they wanted and to approach it the way that they considered most appropriate. This way it was encouraged autonomous work and it was catered for the various learning styles..

5. DISCUSSION

The teachers' training and qualifications directly influence the positive changes introduced to higher education institutions. The more qualified the teacher, the greater are the chances for increasing the quality of the teaching and learning process resulting in better professional formation for the students.

But how can the teachers affect the improvement of student skills if they are required to master a set of complex skills associated to the practice of their profession? How can they develop group or individual teaching / learning situations? How can they experiment with diverse teaching methods and use different resources to improve the students writing and speaking skills in English? All these questions can find their answer in the continuous training of teachers so that they are able to guide the students in their efforts to learn ESP.

The questionnaires showed that all our students are interested in learning how to use English at work on in the everyday life. But in many cases, wrong learning habits prevent them from communicating in class or learning independently. The teacher has to initiate every learning activity and the students are not able to be the true "actors of the learning process" (CEFR).

It was also observed that when a student was given the tools necessary to do a particular task, he was able to accomplish it on his own and to present it to the class. Thus, independent work is viewed as one of the means that enables the student to know how to deal with unexpected problems that have not been previously encountered and to find a solution for them.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Designing a research-based curriculum helps in developing an effective learning process. The teachers' continuous training will contribute to the fulfillment of the curriculum's goals.

Curriculum design has to take into consideration the environment where it will be used and it should seek for new ways of overcoming its constraints. Language learning through songs, the teacher creating new teaching materials by themselves, and reading scientific journals online are good examples in this regard. Encouraging students to look for materials online and to read individually using a series of compensatory strategies positively affects their mastery of professional and linguistic skills.

Training the teachers with contemporary teaching methods and research skills by participating in national and international projects, help the exchange of experience among teachers. On the other hand the students' involvement in these projects where they can as well interact and exchange experience with students from other polytechnic universities remains a future plan.

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