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The ESP Syllabus

Lecture notes

First published 30 November 2009

A. METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES (Jordan 1997:109)

Jordan makes some useful points.

1. Language for Specific Purposes courses must:

- a. set the students a task
- b. these tasks must be related to the structural characteristics of the learner's special purpose. In other words, the tasks themselves must be the kind likely to be done in the speciality. Writing essays for instance might not be relevant but writing reports would be.
- c. the tasks must be as integrated as possible, and not divided up into minute discrete elements.

2. This implies four principles:

a. reality control

Task difficulty is controlled, by using simplification, but of a kind that would be used in the discipline. This is a good point and well made.

b. non-triviality

Tasks must be perceived as meaningful, and related to the Specific Purpose.

c. authenticity

Language acquired must be that of the Specific Purpose

d. tolerance of error

Errors of content and form only judged important if there is a major breakdown in communication.

B. DIFFERENT TYPES OF SYLLABUS

1. Syllabus or curriculum- often ordered thematically

2. Scheme of work

This is what a teacher has. A good teacher, maybe the Head of Department, takes the syllabus, and re-writes it into an order that can be followed in a series of lesson plans.

3. Textbook

Especially in languages, it is the textbook writer who often sets out a syllabus.

4. Students

This is an internal syllabus. It is based upon the prior knowledge and attitudes and skills. It is a *retrospective* record of what has been learnt. Through this filter, all new syllabuses are judged. Students often have a hidden agenda.

C. CRITIQUE

1. Be aware of who wrote the syllabus, and for what purposes. If it is written just for cosmetic purposes to please a sponsor, it should not be used as a guide for selecting texts, or deciding which exercises to do.
2. A written syllabus is ideal, and is approximate.
3. A Syllabus is important for what is NOT said. Any teaching materials must operate several syllabuses simultaneously. One of them will be used as an organiser.
4. The real issue is not which type of syllabus to put first. It is how to integrate all the different types into a sensible scheme of work.
5. In practice, the syllabus and the materials often evolve together.

D. THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT SYLLABUSES

1. Content syllabus

- a. **This is determined by the subject.** Subjects divide up their content in different ways. For Medicine there are several ways of doing this. These include:
- 1). **Preclinical**, such as anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, psychology etc, and **Clinical**, such as Cardiology, Psychiatry, etc
 - 2) **Systems**, such as the cardiovascular system, the nervous system etc
 - 3) **Cross subject** courses such as
 - a) The History of Medicine
 - b) Embryology
 - c) Growth and Aging (book by JM Tanner etc)
 - d) Demography
 - e) Epidemiology
 - f) Research Methodology
- b. **Academic Content difficulty** should match the content difficulty of the material used by the students in their strongest language. I have argued for this in the article on authenticity. www.scientificlanguage.com/esp/authentic.pdf

2. Language syllabus

- a. From level B1+ onwards there is no obvious progression. The language syllabus will be influenced by:
- 1) The language used by equivalent professionals - in other words, **Target Situation Analysis**
 - 2) The gaps known/predicted/discovered to exist. Here is where the **Lacks Analysis** is important.
- What often happens is that a teacher will focus on the language gaps that become evident in their course of the teaching.
- b. Students need massive exposure to authentic material.
- c. Multiple reinforcing routes should be used, such as hearing AND reading. MP3 players are common. Students can listen to English outside the classroom. Therefore most texts need recording. Online they can both read and listen, or even read, listen, and watch (subtitled video)
- d. The material should be authentic.
- e. The activities and questions should be authentic.
- f. Elaboration, not simplification is needed.
- g. Speech and pronunciation can be practised, by regular use of ‘shadowing’.

- h. Students should be trained to extract information from long texts and difficult texts. Even native speakers, lecturers in Medicine, do not always understand what they read. But they read for the information they want. Therefore, this skill is authentic.
- i. Use a variety of genres for the same topic. Do some language transformation exercises, as explained in www.scientificlanguage.com/esp/terminology.pdf

3. Skills and learning syllabus

- a. In medicine, even native speaker doctors do not always understand everything they read. Therefore it is vital to teach students to read texts and make deductions, follow the reasoning, etc, without understanding all the words.
- b. The tasks (such as comprehension questions) must be authentic. I have seen professional online teaching material for retraining doctors, and I have even taken the training and passed some of their online tests. I have used these ideas in my lessons.

E. Summary

1. We should focus more on comprehension questions than vocabulary or grammar.
2. We should build on what students know, and stretch them
3. Texts should teach something new and interesting
4. We should use many inference and evaluation questions
5. We should train students to extract information
 - ++ from long texts
 - ++ from difficult texts
6. As much as possible, the language learning activities themselves should be authentic.
7. We need to spiral, and keep coming back to difficult language points.

Comments

I am firmly convinced that from level B1+ content must drive language learning. *Les étudiants vont apprendre le langage dont ils ont besoin.*

My ideal would be for one subject each year to be taught in English. In this way the number of hours that included English could be doubled.