

An EAP Theme and Task-Based Approach within a University Context

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This paper discusses an approach that integrates theme and task-based instruction in English for Academic Purposes. It is argued that if students are actively engaged in meaningful related theme-based tasks, they will be exposed to real language which will help them develop their communicative competence. Likewise, students' awareness of reality as well as of their critical thinking skills can be strengthened while applying different language strategies in a particular task. Moreover, global issues can be approached from different perspectives allowing interdisciplinary work. The approach here described is based on an analysis of the learners' needs, which permits knowledge of the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the student so that the learning goals can be specified. Finally, on-line support through e-learning within classroom instruction enhances autonomous language learning.

Key words: theme and task-based instruction, English for academic purposes, communicative competence, critical thinking skills, autonomous learning, e-learning

Este artículo discute un enfoque que integra la instrucción basada en temas y tareas en inglés para propósitos académicos. Se argumenta que si los estudiantes están activamente involucrados en tareas basadas en temas significativos, estarán más expuestos a la lengua real lo cual les ayuda a desarrollar su competencia comunicativa. Así mismo, el reconocimiento que los estudiantes tienen de la realidad y de sus habilidades de pensamiento crítico se fortalece en la medida en que apliquen distintas estrategias del lenguaje a una tarea específica. Además, los temas globales se pueden abordar desde distintas perspectivas, que posibilitan un trabajo interdisciplinario. Este enfoque parte de un análisis de necesidades, que conduce a un conocimiento de las dimensiones cognitiva y emocional del estudiante de tal manera que se especifiquen los objetivos de aprendizaje. Finalmente, se sostiene que la enseñanza de inglés apoyada en las Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación contribuye a un aprendizaje autónomo de la lengua extranjera.

Palabras Clave: instrucción basada en temas y tareas, inglés para propósitos académicos, competencia comunicativa, habilidades de pensamiento crítico, aprendizaje autónomo, aprendizaje virtual

Tendencies such as globalization, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and knowledge in society are influencing higher education and permeating their curricula nowadays. This phenomenon has led us to create a new model of university, which can be put into practice through a thorough curricular review. According to Law 808 regarding the introduction of academic credits in undergraduate programs in Colombian universities, the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Cali, started its process of curricular review three years ago in order to meet the curricular flexibility and interdisciplinary work demands. As a response to this task, the former Language Department (now called Social Sciences Department, Language Area) began to reflect upon the curricular process of its approach: “English for Academic Purposes” (EAP), which is offered to the different academic programs. Its starting point was some research carried out by a group of teachers from the Language Department (See Mosquera, Mora and Valencia, 2000).

In that study, the researchers analysed the four-level English program. They found that the program was built on the theoretical components stated in the different stages of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) development. For instance, level 1 focused on sentence analysis (verb tenses, construction of questions, and so on); level 2 added rhetorical aspects to the structures (passive voice for processes, nominalization for historical events, etc.); level 3 applied rhetorical techniques to the writing of different types of paragraphs (contrast, cause-effect, etc.); and level 4 emphasised the writing of abstract outlines and essays. Thus, the different approaches to the teaching of ESP did not evidence a spiral process as students advanced through their levels.

According to the information gathered, the texts selected by the teachers partially satisfied students’ needs since they were neither related to their undergraduate programs nor to their real personal wants and needs. In terms of evaluation, questions were based on a linguistic structural approach that did not count on the cognitive processes that a student uses in solving problems. Many texts were not exploited to make sense to students.

When reading, students could not easily infer the meaning of words and expressions through context; neither could they self-regulate their reading process. When writing, the students’ work lacked organization. It also presented lexical and syntactical errors.

After analysing the English program, the teacher-researchers conducted a needs analysis, whose purpose was to learn about the learners as human beings, their values and interests as well as users and learners of the language; we wanted to understand how their language learning process could be maximized. It was found

that students showed great interest in global issues, and in developing the listening and speaking skills.

Based on these findings, the Department carried out a needs analysis with deans and faculty members to find out their perceptions and expectations with respect to the learning of the language. It was found that the academic community wanted to combine the use of general and specific purposes of English teaching.

Hence, we adapted our syllabus to include English for General and Specific Academic Purposes (EGAP and ESAP, respectively). Within this framework, we decided to include strategies that fostered independent learners capable of using high levels of cognition, and to select a course book.

During the first three (3) levels of English, the emphasis would be on EGAP while the last level would emphasize on ESAP. EGAP refers to the teaching of the skills and language that are common to all disciplines (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). In other words, it takes into account particular skills associated with study activities such as listening to lectures, reading articles or other reading material and writing essays. For instance, reading involves understanding the main ideas, distinguishing facts from opinions or main ideas using supporting details, evaluating the author's intention, or scanning to find specific information.

ESAP, on the other hand, refers to the teaching of the features that distinguish one discipline from others. It integrates the skills developed in EGAP with the tasks students need to perform. That is to say, students transfer the skills they have learned in EGAP classes to the understanding of their current lectures, readings, or the writing of essays. (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998).

A successful ESAP approach requires the cooperation among language teachers and discipline teachers at the following three different levels: i) The language teacher must take the initiative of gathering information about the students' subject course in order to see how English fits into their course, and what the Department and students considered to be priorities; ii) The language and discipline teachers prepare students for particular tasks. In this type of collaboration, both teachers work outside the classroom planning a series of classes; and iii) Team teaching occurs in which both language and discipline teachers work together in the classroom. This third level of cooperation will take place in the subject called "*digital system*" in which the discipline and language teachers join forces, since students must report their work in English. To achieve that objective, they will write papers oriented, corrected and assessed by the English lecturer as part of the program of electronic engineering, for example.

The idea with this EGAP and ESAP approach is to use global issues and current debates which allow students to establish relationships between what they learn and their prior knowledge. This may reduce students' anxiety because they will feel more confident when expressing their ideas. Besides activating their schemata, the topics will foster their cultural understanding - a fundamental concept when learning a language.

Some English programs in Colombian universities have focused on reading and writing, since there is a need to prepare students to be part of their academic communities. EAP, then, seems to be a good approach to meet the students' academic and professional needs. However, today we need professionals who not only have knowledge but also use and develop strategies - professionals who use critical thinking skills when solving a problem and that are independent learners.

With this approach we hope to contribute to the students' total education and to develop their communicative competence in English, in terms of the following four areas of knowledge and skills outlined by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983): grammatical competence (mastery of the language code itself), sociolinguistic competence (the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors), discourse competence, (mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres), and strategic competence (mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action for two main reasons, namely, (a) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence; and (b) to enhance the effectiveness of communication.

Integrating global issues in the English for Academic Purposes Curriculum

Until recently, language contents at our school were not developed around a specific topic, but from diverse ones. For instance, passive voice could be worked from a text about the process of making chocolate or from the production of paper. This caused comprehension problems as well as lack of internalisation of vocabulary.

Now that we have centered on learning from topics, students become effectively engaged in meaningful, related theme-based tasks and gain exposure to language that helps them to process that language. That is why content materials

were chosen according to their relevance and interest. For example, in the first level there is a whole unit about environmental issues in which students are engaged in a variety of activities such as writing on how to take advantage of garbage with methods such as recycling and researching about the Navarro waste centre in Cali.

With this theme and a task-based instruction program, our students showed they developed the ability of writing theme reports and making oral presentations, self-evaluation and reflection. This encouraged us to choose carefully and organize a theme, develop appropriate reading materials and writing assignments within that theme, and build assessment tools that take into account the students' learning styles and strategies.

Student centeredness

One of the fundamentals of EGAP and ESAP approaches is taking into account the students' needs, not only as language users and learners, but also as human beings. This agrees with the Javeriana institutional philosophy (Ignatian Pedagogy) that considers the student's development process, which is built and rebuilt in interaction with themselves and the others. Teachers accompany learners via their growth and development process known as "*Cura Personalis*" (Vásquez, S.J., 2005). This implies not only preparing excellent students, but also being committed to their personal growth; in other words, caring for the students, not just delivering a curriculum or service, as stated in the document "Conceptual Framework: Competence, Conscience, Compassion" by The Education Department of Loyola College in Maryland, USA (2005). Thus, *Cura Personalis* is a reflective and dialogic experience in which the teacher listens to, orients, encourages, and promotes students' autonomy. Such action implies the participation of the different community members and the multiple relationships in the learning process: teacher-student, student-student, and student-knowledge (Ocampo, 2000). In the Language Department, this work is referred to as English Assistance Program (ENAP), a tutoring with pedagogic and growth purposes.

Learning styles

One of the strategies of the new curriculum is the recognition that learning happens quite differently from one person to the other. Scarcella and Oxford (1992), for example, talk about visual learners (learning by reading or seeing the material); auditory learners (learning by hearing the material); and kinaesthetic learners (learning by physically interacting with the material). Kolb (1984) in Sharp et al

(1997) talks about four learning styles based on the different ways of perceiving and processing information. The learners using these styles are defined as accommodators, divergers, convergers and assimilators¹.

Although we know that learners like to send information the way they prefer to receive it, the idea is to stretch our students into using different learning styles and being aware of those differences. Particularly, we have found very valuable the use of David Kolb's theory to enhance writing. In engineering classes, we have designed different activities and writing tasks suited for each type of learner. Some activities deal with summarizing; others ask students to make proposals or recommendations; others ask for comprehension and analysis; and others invite students to categorize information.

Critical thinking skills

This term rests on the ability to analyse and criticise what is read or heard. The purpose of the Language Area is to teach students to go from simple thinking processes to elaborate, complex ones. In order to do this, Bloom's taxonomy of knowledge (as described by Orlich, 1990) has been of great help to devise appropriate activities with which to develop these skills. The cyclical stages in the cognition process in Bloom involve knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

The knowledge level refers to the capacity to evoke appropriate material when solving a problem; the comprehension level refers to the capacity of comprehending a set of qualities that characterizes a piece of information; the application level refers to the transfer of acquired knowledge to the solving of new theoretical or empirical problems; the analysis level refers to the ability to fragment material into its components in order to establish relationships among those components and to

¹ **Accommodators** grasp information through concrete experience and process it through active experimentation. They are intuitive and prefer learning by themselves. Their greatest strength is doing things; they are risk-takers and problem-solving. **Divergers** perceive information through concrete experience and transform their experience through reflective observation. They rely on feelings, seek personal meaning as they learn and want personal interaction with others. **Convergers** grasp experience through abstract conceptualization and change their experience through experimentation. They prefer dealing with objects, rather than people, and are often considered inexpressive. They are strong in practical application of ideas. **Assimilators** perceive information through abstract conceptualization and assimilate it through reflective observation. They tend to be less interested in people and more interested in concepts. They are strong at creating theoretical models and excel in inductive reasoning. Kolb, David. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1984.

understand principles of organization; the synthesis level refers to the capacity to gather diverse elements to form a whole; and the evaluation level refers to the capacity to form judgements about the value of ideas, methods and materials.

Language strategies

Since learning occurs in the total environment in which a student lives, a curriculum should encourage action-learning and the use of projects and resources beyond the campus. In addition, a university environment requires methods of instruction and modes of inquiry that lead the student to a perception of the structure of the disciplines studied.

The role of the teacher thus goes beyond that of an information-giver; he or she becomes a diagnostician of individual student strengths and weaknesses in learning, a guide to appropriate growth experiences, a motivator, an enthusiastic model of the area under study and leader conscious of broader values and moral issues raised by its methodology or findings.

Learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self – confidence (Oxford, 1990).

According to Oxford (1990), these strategies are divided into two major classes: direct and indirect. Direct strategies, which directly involve the target language, are composed of memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies support and manage language learning without (in many instances) directly involving the target language. They include metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Since the Ignatian Pedagogy encourages us to educate discoverers, decision makers and doers who can act, understand soundly, contemplate with imagination, be self-disciplined, take initiative, learn autonomously, we want to develop in our students learning strategies that involve cognition, observation, reflection, evaluation, resolution and conscience formation.

These strategies could be achieved by having students become aware of the rhetoric of their own texts by doing analyses, looking for structure, figures of speech, techniques for persuasion, accuracy of content (evaluation of evidence) and authorial biases among others.

Some ways of assessing their learning are the portfolio, peer review, and journal response.

Autonomous learning

An objective of any teacher is to develop in their students autonomous thinking. We, as language teachers, want our students to learn the language, learn through the language, and learn about the language. To achieve this goal, we must emphasize learning to learn so that our students can take responsible decisions. Therefore, we believe that designing appropriate teaching materials and carrying out activities that help the student identify their learning strengths and weaknesses ensure independent learning. This can be reached with the use of the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC), a fundamental tool that complements the formal actual learning process that takes place in the classroom. Self-organized material, on the one hand, promotes the second language autonomous learning and on the other, allows the student to determine their own pacing and time when carrying out a series of tasks. Likewise, the SALC favours different study habits and ways to solve a problem.

E-learning environment support

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have developed tools that allow different means and ways of communication among teachers and students with the purpose of improving teaching and learning processes. These tools offer the advantages of flexibility and an asynchronous environment (anywhere and any time education), availability of resources outside the classroom, application of student-centered and collaborative approaches, active learning, a wider coverage, updating of contents, and access to different sources of knowledge.

The Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Cali has established a process of integration and use of ICTs in its curriculum. This process was designed in the 2000 Master Plan. With that in mind, the University opened an office that is in charge of promoting integration and use of ICT. The office purchased a web-based course delivery system (Blackboard) to support course instruction and trained teachers in the use of the platform and e-learning. Up to now, the platform has proven to be an important communication and learning media between teacher and students. The new English curriculum, which was implemented in the second semester of 2005, used some tools that this platform offers. The courses were bimodal: online and instructional and were based on pedagogical software.

Implementation of the syllabus

The Language Area was divided into three pairs of teachers, each pair working on three units composed of sessions. Each session represented a 90-minute class period. Each group used a format called “session plan”. Each session plan had the

following four parts: a warm up, a presentation, a practice and a wrap up. Each part included the corresponding activity and its duration.

Besides the session plan, we gave our students independent work in the form of “protocols”. These protocols were intended to offer more practice on the same topic. Some of them were evaluated by teachers.

The contents of the syllabus were based on the reading books of the Tapestry series. That way, the Department was choosing a content and theme-based syllabus already in existence. The themes in Tapestry, reading 1 book were interesting and practical enough to attract our students’ attention. However, our intention was not to work the book the same way as it was presented. We added all the resources we had at the university which included videos, visits to specific places, databases and web pages from the Internet, our library, our Self Access Learning Centre (SALC), among others.

After planning came implementation. Even though three teachers of the Language Area had created pilot courses that worked more or less well, when putting things together, we started having difficulties of diverse kinds. Regarding the session plans, we could not go at the same pace because some teachers needed to give more feedback to their students; so, they felt the plan was a strait jacket. With regard to Tapestry, we realized that it was not a series intended for EFL teaching. It was developed for English students living as immigrants in the United States. The book did not have a zero level. Also, there was too much material to teach and students did not have the basic concepts needed to understand readings and videos from Tapestry 1.

The situation at the moment of writing this article is changing positively. The lesson plans have been simplified and an introduction has been added to the program. Thus during the first module, students are given grammar and vocabulary practice with exercises, quizzes, games, and workshops. Students are asked to study vocabulary in advance of each reading session. This has helped learners achieve the understanding of readings in less time.

We have also advanced in the operative procedures. In some classes, students have submitted online exams. They report feeling happy with the work in the virtual platform and participate actively in the development of all class environments. We give some classes in the media labs, others in audiovisual rooms, others in traditional classrooms, and a few in other places on and off campus.

Final comments

Integrating global issues and current debates in an English for Academic Purposes curriculum does not guarantee the development of the students’

communicative competence. Communicative competence is produced with the help of cognitive and social processes. Therefore, it is necessary a) that students be aware of the different language strategies they apply for a particular task; in other words, that students reflect on their learning process, and b) that we, teachers, recognize our students as unique individuals with different needs, wants, lacks, and approaches to the language learning.

The integration and use of ICT states a new logic of communication, participation, social relations, and development of thinking skills; at the time, that modifies our teaching practices from an expository didactic model to a more constructive one.

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