

Isabel Simões-Ferreira*

Teaching English for Social Sciences: Making it Content-Based and Culturally Relevant

1. Introduction

The Bologna Process, by fostering student and staff mobility and the creation of comparable benchmarks at the level of academic qualifications, makes an urgent call for greater emphasis on transparent criteria and frameworks to define areas of content and learning performance. One of those frameworks, as we know, is the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2001).

Despite its wide scope, the language descriptors therein presented are very much skills-oriented and follow a somewhat horizontal logic in relation to what might be called broad “gestalts”¹, which characterize the different stages of learning. Language use by individuals is thus ascribed to a set of general competencies and activities “in order to process text (receptively or productively) in relation to specific domains.” (Council of Europe, 1997: 8) Noteworthy, “domain” means “the broad sectors of social life in which social agents operate.” (Council of Europe 1997: 8)

So, when we talk about English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which has been broken down into several branches, some of them with specific subdivisions - see, e.g., Hutchinson/ Waters (1994), Jordan (1997), Dudley-Evans/St. John (1998), Flowerdew/Peacock (2001) -, the language instructor is led to raise several questions, when he sets out to design his syllabus.

Common, over-arching benchmarks are certainly useful. But, in the case of English for Social Sciences, namely English for Journalism or Media and Communication Studies, which are those benchmarks? This is the sort of question that constantly arises, thus indicating perhaps the need for a greater coordination at the European level, regarding the teaching of special types of ESP within similar educational contexts.

In the context of the Portuguese Higher Education System, where I come from, there is no agreement on how to teach English for Social Sciences to adult learners, e.g., undergraduates taking degrees in Journalism or Media and Communication Studies, International Relations, Sociology, Anthropology, Management and Public Administration, etc. Pedagogical decisions vary according to different criteria:

- the institutional/academic setting;
- the overall curriculum design of the course in which students are enrolled;
- teachers’ perceptions of how to teach English for Social Sciences and what to teach, depending on their ability or readiness to draw the line between General English (GE) and ESP, or, on the contrary, on their decision to mesh them, so as to answer students’ particular needs and expectations.

1 The notion of “gestalt”, as advocated by gestalt psychologists was intended as an explanation of holistic perception, the perception of an object as a whole, similar to the notion of prototype categories. (See, for instance, Ungerer/Schmidt 2006: 34-43).

* Isabel Simões-Ferreira
Escola Superior de Comunicação Social-Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa &
Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas-Universidade Técnica de Lisboa
Lisbon
Portugal
iferreira@escs.ipl.pt

This diversity of options shouldn't, however, surprise us. It is obviously essential not to forget, as Hutchinson and Waters (1994: 19) remind us, that ESP "is an approach [not a product] to language learning, which is based on learner need", an assumption which gives rise to quite numerous teaching methods and learning practices. Similarly, other authors, like Peter Strevens (1988), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), also write about ESP's "absolute characteristics" *versus* its "variable characteristics", thus stressing the idea that language should be seen as a "*continuum*", a subtle network of complex interrelations, which cannot be segmented easily. Hence, the ESP/GE dichotomy should be reconsidered in the light of a more comprehensive perspective and degrees of specificity.

Having said all this, as a sort of introduction, let us move on to some of the next questions related to syllabus design:

- i) who are my students?
- ii) what are the theoretical assumptions and experiential views I bring into the teaching of English for Social Sciences, namely English for Journalism or Media and Communication Studies (though the principles I will defend can be applied to other courses that fall into the so-called category of social sciences)?
- iii) pedagogically speaking, how do I materialize students' present and future needs and the aforementioned theoretical assumptions underlying the ESL learning process into a specific learning experience?

Students' Profile :

- students aged 19 or over;
- students who in most cases have been learning English at the secondary school for 7-9 years;
- students that have to read extensive bibliography in English;
- students who will work for/at news agencies and other information centre networks, thus having to read or listen to authentic texts in English

2. Theoretical Assumptions

From the standpoint of a literacy-based curriculum, such as the one defended by John Kern (2001), language teaching/learning cannot be decontextualized from an integrative approach which acknowledges the interdependencies among textual products, cognitive processes and sociocultural factors.

Likewise, the work of Claire Kramsh (1994: 3-4), amongst many others, has also helped to illuminate the importance of the cultural dimension in language teaching. She explicitly accounts for the process leading to the devaluation of language teaching within the academia in relation to other disciplines:

"One of the more tenacious dichotomies in foreign language education is that of skill versus content. Language is viewed as a skill, a tool that is in itself devoid of any intellectual value. [...] Functional approaches to language teaching have been adopted with enthusiasm by educational systems in which educational effectiveness is traditionally measured according to its practical outcomes. [...] American foreign language education values action over reflection; it believes that the sole responsibility of language teachers is to get their students to talk and write as fluently as possible. Depth and breath of thought belong to other subjects. The overall result of both these aspects of the skill versus the content dichotomy has often been the trivialization of the teaching of foreign languages; it has made the teaching of culture a particularly controversial issue."

Building on Michael Halliday's concept of language as social semiotic, as well as other contributions in the field of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, both authors advocate a cultural dimension of language teaching that is discursively and critically- oriented. That is to say, teachers should draw their students' attention to language as a medium of representation and constructedness, carrying ideological meaning. As a consequence, the focus should be placed on how ideas

are represented in a text and how the organization of ideas is signaled lexically and structurally in that very text.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the notion of “cultural literacy” differs from the notion of “receptive literacy”. The latter, according to Flower (1990), refers to the ability to understand information, facts, rules and instructions that allow students to perform different learning tasks. However, it should be noted that both types of literacy are crucial to students’ academic performance.

Bearing in mind that language learning occurs at different levels of text decoding and encoding, what I think is particularly useful, in this case, is an eclectic middle ground pedagogical attitude, which enables language instructors:

- i) to combine the various meanings of literacy, depending on learners’ former linguistic background;
- ii) to raise students’ cultural awareness of their own and other societies;
- iii) to equip students with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts/discourse communities.

We can, then, ask: what sort of syllabus best serves these purposes? In 2000, Loreta Kasper, together with other colleagues, published a book entitled *Content-Based College ESL Instruction*, in which she tried to lay the foundations for a content-based pedagogy. By following cognitive theories, particularly S. Krashen’s input model (1985) that states that second language acquisition is a process similar to that which occurs with a first language, in which language is acquired as it is used as the medium for learning other things, she regards content as the substantive basis for language teaching. This represents a significant departure from skills-based approaches. As Kasper (2000: 18) further explains content-based instruction (CBI) does not specifically “focus on grammar, writing, or vocabulary exercises, but rather present these linguistic points in the context of learning about something else. [...] Justifying CBI to students is easier if course content reflects their needs and interests, as well as the requirements of the institution.”

As students progress from secondary schooling to tertiary/university level education, I am strongly convinced that content is, in fact, one of the key-factors that can provide a motivational and useful cognitive basis for students’ cultural empowerment. This entails either the choice of a broad or of a narrow-focused thematic syllabus, built around relevant, interrelated topics through which not only language, but information is acquired.

3. Materializing Theoretical Assumptions into Concrete Learning Practices

Do ESP textbooks for Journalism or Media and Communication Studies really exist? This is a central question that I had to address a few years ago; at the time the answer was “no” and, I am afraid, it is still “no” today.

Under present circumstances, since my students have to deal with news broadcasts and current political issues very often, newspapers, particularly broadsheets, were a source of inspiration for me. We don’t have to carry out a very thorough analysis of this sort of newspapers or TV news broadcasts to realize that they contain a kind of thematic subtext. News items, though varying each day, are very much related to specific themes: politics, international relations, economics, human resources and other societal issues. These are broad thematic areas that frame news in general.

So, following this sort of thematic blue-print, authentic texts from various sources were collected:

- articles from British and American newspapers and magazines;
- articles from scientific journals;
- chapters from academic books.

Each thematic unit is composed by a set of texts, each one of them ranging from 1 to 20-30 pages, and each of which illustrating a specific sub-topic. This academic year, just to give you an example, the thematic unit “Politics” was subdivided into the following sub-topics:

- UK/US politics (New Labour and its main protagonists – Tony Blair vs. Gordon Brown -; American Elections, the candidates, the run-up to the White House and Obama’s victory);
- The Third Way Debate (the so-called renewal of social democracy in the context of free market capitalism and the realities of globalization);
- Politics in the Information Age (the way the media frame the political process and messages, the pervasiveness of the politics of scandal, the crisis of democracy and the ways to reconstruct democracy).

In this context, it is worth recalling the words of Richard Kern (2000: 129), when he remarks that “in a literacy-based program [...] students need controlled tasks, not controlled texts.” Undoubtedly, in an academic setting, reading is at the core of almost every activity. Almost the same happens in a professional setting, where media students are asked to read a constant barrage of data published by news agencies, newspapers and other documental sources to carry out their daily activities. In short, we want students to read more, better and quicker.

Reading is therefore directed at combining extensive and intensive reading skills, so as to further the interaction of top-down and bottom-up reading processes to make sense of a text. As a rule, the act of interpreting a text involves several decoding and encoding/ transformational competencies :

- guessing/determining the content of a text on an inferential basis, using students’ socio-cognitive knowledge of the world and former experiences;
- extracting salient information, i.e. the “facts” of the text upon which an interpretation can be based;
- linking content to form and intent (coherence and cohesive devices, rhetorical organization and pragmatic function);
- rephrasing and summarizing either in order to enhance the understanding and simplification of ideas or to identify the macrostructure of texts and transform the analyzed text into a condensed form, an extremely useful exercise that promotes broader conceptual interrelationships within a reading, or between different readings.

This sort of discursive competence cannot obviously be separated from linguistic competence. And at this level one of the main, if not the main stumbling block, is vocabulary. When we are dealing with authentic, unabridged texts, even upper-intermediate/advanced students often struggle against lexical difficulties, i.e. insufficient vocabulary. That is why I entirely agree with Michael Lewis (1993, 2001) and J. Alderson (1984), among other authors (e.g., T. Cobb/M. Horst, 2001), who argue that lexical knowledge, in comparison with other types of knowledge including syntax, is the key-ingredient in successful reading and communicative power. This partly explains the emphasis which has been placed on vocabulary in recent years by authors, such as McCarthy, (1990), Nation (1990, 2001), Lewis (1993, 1997), Schmitt (2000), Bowker/ Pearson (2002), Fowle (2002), Davidson (2003), Huntley/ Davidson (2008).

Taking into account that developing an adequate vocabulary is an ongoing problem, the question arises as to how the usefulness of lexical items can be pragmatically established.

Not surprisingly, vocabulary, as we know, is specific to certain thematic or subject areas. So, in this case, the lexical content of learning is largely derived from an analysis of the higher meaning content words present in the texts studied in class, whose core vocabulary has precisely to do with politics, international relations, economics and human resources, etc. The implemented learning procedure ensures that all lexical items are isolated or grouped according to particular semantic fields or lexical networks in order to facilitate mental retention and foster active use on the part

of students through further gap-filling, reutilization, matching and vocabulary building exercises. In addition to that, students are also encouraged to organize vocabulary journals, according to specific macro- and micro-criteria. As for the macro-criteria, the concept of semantic field is followed; on the other hand, micro-criteria include a fairly comprehensive list of the type of useful information related to selected lexical items:

- word meaning, explanation or synonym with an optional antonym;
- any other relevant meanings of the same word;
- any spelling irregularities (e.g., plural forms);
- other word forms (noun, verb, adjective, adverb),
- prefixes and suffixes included in the word;
- prefixes and suffixes which can be added to form new words;
- collocations (words that are commonly used together);
- an original sentence.²

Despite the primary role attributed to reading and vocabulary learning, reading assignments do not leave out all the concerns about the other skills. In a literacy-based syllabus, the relationship between reading, listening, talking and writing is overlapping. Students are asked to make short oral presentations about the texts of the syllabus, discuss ideas, evaluate different viewpoints, listen to news broadcasts or other televised events, summarize and compare the information presented to other material studied.

Furthermore, each learning unit has got a section entitled “Cultural Focus”, which should be regarded as a sort of post-reading activity. It aims to explore content-related assignments that evolve from previous text reading. For instance, getting back to “Politics”, one of the broad thematic areas that has been selected, students may be asked to:

- role play an interview to a British politician, which presupposes some research work about his/her major decisions and policies ;
- discuss the strength and weakness of the first-past-the-post electoral system in Great Britain in comparison with the proportional representation system;
- explain the way the American President is elected;
- compare the presidential candidates’ performance in the two most important debates on TV: differences and similarities of thought regarding the key-issues discussed during the campaign;
- write a summary-analysis of the “Introduction” written by Anthony Giddens, in *The Global Third Way Debate* (2001) and compare his ideas to the political discourse and current political reforms implemented in Portugal by José Sócrates, our prime-minister, and so forth.

This means furthering knowledge through an Internet search or other traditional bibliographical sources at their disposal, and lead them to present that information in both verbal or written forms, thereby promoting the integration of content learning with language aims.

With regard to language properly speaking, namely grammatical accuracy, the content-based approach I follow doesn’t exclude this aspect totally, though grammar instruction is not linear. It is context-dependent and needs-oriented (i.e., revisions result from salient linguistic structures foregrounded by the texts studied in class and from average learner mistakes and/or further needs for improving patterns of language use (particularly at the level of rhetorical structure, various types of connectors, prepositional phrases and prepositions, inversion after negative adverbs, verb tenses, etc.). That’s why a “Language Focus” is also included in each thematic unit.

2 Most of these entries have been already presented by Huntley/Davidson (2008: 175).

4. Concluding Remarks

As a conclusion, teaching English for Social Sciences at a tertiary/university level should view language as a cognitive, higher order cultural learning task, one that requires authentic texts, not-controlled texts, custom-made materials, purposeful content and subject/thematic specific language in order to raise students' cultural literacy and thus boost their academic and non-academic success.

References

- Alderson, J. 1984: Reading in a Foreign Language: a Reading Problem or a Language Problem?. In Alderson, J./ Urquhart, A. (eds.), *Reading in a Foreign Language*, London, Longman, 1-27.
- Bowker, L./ Pearson, J. 2002: *Working with Specialized Language*, London, Routledge.
- Cobb, T./Horst, M. 2001: Reading Academic English: Carrying Learners Across the Lexical Threshold. In Flowerdew, J./Peacock, M. (eds.), *Research Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 315-329.
- Council of Europe 1997: *Modern Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. A Common European Framework of Reference*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe.
- Council of Europe 2001: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, P. 2003: Developing Learners' Vocabulary Through the Use of Vocabulary Notebooks. In *Teachers, Learners and Curriculum*, 1/1, 24-28.
- Dudley-Evans, T./St. John, M., 1998: *Developments in English for Specific Purposes. A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Flower, L. 1990: Introduction: Studying Cognition in Context. In Flower, L. et.al. (eds.), *Reading- to-Write: Exploring a Cognitive and Social Process*, New York, Oxford University Press, 3-32.
- Flowerdew, J./Peacock, M., "Issues in EAP: A Preliminary Perspective", in Flowerdew, J. & Peacock, M. (eds.), *Research Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp.8-25.
- Fowle, C. 2002: Vocabulary Notebooks: Implementation and Outcomes. In *ELT Journal*, 56/4, 380-388.
- Huntley, H./Davidson, P. 2008: Using Vocabulary Journals to Facilitate Academic Vocabulary Learning. In Krzanowski, M. (ed.), *Current Developments in English for Academic Specific and Occupational Purposes*, Reading, Garnet Publishing Ltd., 171-184.
- Hutchinson T./Waters, A. 1994 [1987].: *English for Specific Purposes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Jordan, R. 1997: *English for Academic Purposes. A Guide and a Resource Book for Teachers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Kasper, L. et.al. 2000: *Content-Based College ESL Instruction*, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kern, R. 2000: *Literacy and Language Teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Kramsch, C. 1994 [1993]: *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, M. 2001 [1997]: *Implementing the Lexical Approach. Putting Theory into Practice*, Hove, Language Teaching Publications.
- Lewis, M. 1993: *The Lexical Approach*, Hove, Language Teaching Publications.
- Lewis, M. 2001: Lexis in the Syllabus. In Hall, D./Hewings, A., *Innovation in English Language Teaching*, London, Routledge, , 46-54.
- McCarthy, M. 1990: *Vocabulary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Nation, I. 1990: *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*, New York, Newbury House.
- Nation, I. 2001: *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N., 2000: *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Stevens, P. 1988: ESP after Twenty Years: a Reappraisal. In Tickoo, M. (ed.), *ESP: State of the Art*, Singapore, SEAMEO Regional Centre, 1-13.
- Ungerer, F./Schmidt, H-J. 2006 [1996]: *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics*, Harlow, Pearson Education Ltd.