SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR AN ESP READING COURSE
AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract
This paper presents a syllabus design for an ESP Reading Course for undergraduate students at university level. The syllabus, based on a communicative perspective, proved to be operative since the approach used gives students self-confidence, makes them understand the social dimension of reading, helps them to get to the writer’s intentions, and finally, all activities tend to make them understand the communicative value of the text, the final target of our reading course.

Key-words: ESP Reading Comprehension, syllabus design, communicative perspective, global approach, functional approach, speech act theory, text typologies.

This paper presents a syllabus design for an ESP Reading Course. A definition of ESP which is still current is that given by Munby (McDonough 1984: 3): “ESP courses are those where the syllabus and the materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner”.

The course has a sole objective: to develop reading comprehension in English for academic purposes. It is designed for undergraduate students, first level, belonging to the Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de Salta. whose L2 requirements centre on reading skills in the social sciences to have access to specific bibliography. Our students make up a heterogeneous group: they belong to the careers of Philosophy, Literature, Educational Sciences, Anthropology and History. The course is placed in the first or second year of the curricula and is allotted about 90 hours, during two three-month periods, 4 hours a week. The classes are of about 150 students, most of them belonging to a low socioeconomic group coming from public high schools. Exercises are developed, and the contents of the texts are discussed in L1. Authentic texts are used from the beginning. As this kind of course requires specific material that is not available, we select original texts from various sources -magazines, newspapers, books, encyclopaedias, software-and design comprehension exercises for each text.

Our students face many difficulties, especially due to the poor preparation they have obtained from high scool. Some of the problems they often have are:
• poor or no L2 competence. Even those students who have studied English at the secondary school, in general cannot read in this language in an efficient way;
• many reading and writing problems in L1, poor logical and rhetorical-pragmatic and encyclopaedic competence. They often lack the background cultural knowledge necessary to process information. Besides, they do not have enough knowledge of the rhetorical patterns and linguistic conventions which characterize different types of texts. They also have poor reading strategies, for example, they present difficulties in distinguishing the main ideas from the secondary ones, thus failing at getting the basic information from the text;
• their motivation is initially low because they are beginners in their own careers and do not realize yet the importance of reading bibliography in English for their academic training;
• their attitudes are predominantly negative, with stereotypes with respect to the English language and culture, and affective filters are frequent due to negative experiences in high school.

In view of this situation, we have coped with many of these problems by applying a methodology within a communicative perspective that combines the contributions of the global approach, the lexical approach, Halliday's functional proposal, the speech act theory, discourse analysis and text-typologies in an eclectic way.

A cognitive perspective of reading is supported. According to this, reading is a highly complex process of interaction between a reader and a text where the processing of information takes place. Readers bring to the text their own store of information, linguistic competence and knowledge of the rhetorical patterns and linguistic conventions which characterize different types of texts (Haarman et al. 1988: vii). Texts are the medium through which meaning is negotiated between the producer and the receiver. Meaning is not in the text itself, but it is achieved by a process of exchange.

The readers' capacity to produce meaning depends on:
• their ability to decode the lexical and syntactic signals of the text;
• their knowledge of how these features combine to realize linguistic and rhetorical conventions; and
• their ability to make efficient use of their reading skills and strategies.

Our concept of language is functional, emphasizing use and communication. Grammar is explained in relation to how language is used to express different communicative functions and considered as an integrated part of the speech act, in its relations with semantics and pragmatics.

Following Wilkins (1976: 1-14), the methodology applied does not include the presentation of carefully selected samples of language. Instead, grammatical structures are taught in a cyclic rather than a linear way, as they appear in texts, always in relation to the function they fulfill. In the teaching
process linguistic forms are extracted from the text, isolated and explained in relation to the L1 grammar. It is well known that just as there is a range of forms through which one function can be realized, so a variety of functions may be fulfilled by one linguistic form. There exists no one-to-one correspondence between the signification of linguistic forms and their communicative value as utterances in context.

The most relevant characteristics of this approach are:

- the texts are analysed at different levels: pragmatic, semantic and morphosyntactic. As we know, these levels coexist and form an interdependent network;
- it proposes a grammar that applies the principles of syntax to explain the role of the different linguistic forms in relation to the building of meaning. Instead of analysing grammatical items and then enquiring about their meaning and use, it is the use itself that is taken as the starting point;
- it starts from the text as a whole, going from its communicative function to linguistic forms, thus developing in the students an awareness of how sentences are used in acts of communication. This allows to tackle the text from the most general features and proceed step by step towards the most specific aspects providing a global approach to the teaching of reading;
- it provides the means for taking into consideration different text types. As we know, they are written with different purposes in mind and employ language forms appropriate to them. Thus, narrations will contain verbs in the past and causal and time connectors, while the imperative mood, purpose infinitive and modals will probably appear in instructions;
- as regards lexis, it plays an important organizing function in the text. Students are trained to recognize the semantic relations marked by lexical cohesion. If beginners can recognize the key vocabulary and identify the lexical items used to introduce the different rhetorical functions in a text, they will be able to understand how the text is organized and extract the relevant information from it;
- it takes into account the context of situation, the environment in which the text unfolds, the extra-linguistic factors affecting the linguistic choices that the writer makes. These external factors are, according to Halliday (1976: 21), field, tenor and mode. The analysis of the context of situation provides the possibility of activating students’ content and linguistic schemata;
- it takes into account the semantic aspect, within which we consider the cohesive relations in the text. They are expressed partly through grammar and partly through vocabulary. Therefore, according to Halliday (1976: 6), there is a grammatical cohesion and a lexical one;
- the developing of reading strategies is also considered. They include reading with prediction, deducing the meaning of unknown items by means of the already known ones, skimming, scanning, focused reading, and making profitable use of the dictionary;
- this approach also considers the pragmatic aspect, performed through speech acts which involves the function of the text as regards the writer’s intentions and how they may influence the reader’s actions.

**Syllabus design**

The syllabus is organized according to the most common text-types found in the social sciences. We have adapted Bell’s functional text-typology (Bell 1991: 204-206) that classifies texts in three major text-types - exposition, instruction and argumentation - and each of these major text-types contains two or three subtypes.

- Exposition: focusing on states, events, entities and relations, and subdivided into (a) descriptive, with focus on space; (b) narrative, with focus on time; (c) conceptual, in terms of analysis or synthesis.
- Instruction: focusing on influencing future behavior either (a) with option or (b) without option.
- Argumentation: focusing on the writer’s arguments, either (a) non-conversational or (b) conversational.

This gives a total of seven text-types for each of which there are large numbers of text-forms, each of which can be realized as a limitless number of text-samples (actual texts).

We also consider text-types as regards language functions - expressive, apelative or informative- depending on whether the major focus is on the producer, the receiver or the subject matter. As we know, texts have a hybrid nature and text purposes may only be viewed in terms of ‘dominances’ of a given purpose or contextual focus. However, a perceptible dominant focus is always present while other purposes remain subsidiary (Hatim and Mason 1990: 146).

Speech acts are also considered. Their identification contributes to understanding the function of the text and the author’s intentions. We follow Searle’s categories that classify speech acts in five types (Leech 1983: 105-107):
- Directives are intended to produce some effect through action by the hearer, for example, ordering, requesting and recommending.
- Commisives function as promises or refusals for action, for example, promising, offering and refusing.
- Representatives can be judged for truth value of the expressed proposition, such as stating, affirming, suggesting, reporting and so on.
- Expressives denote the speaker’s psychological attitude towards the state of affairs which the illocution presupposes, for example, thanking, praising, blaming, congratulating, etc.
• Declaratives: are illocutions whose successful performance brings about the correspondence between propositional content and reality, for example, resigning, naming, appointing, sentencing, etc.

Steps in a class

The first step is to activate the students’ interest and schemata through a conversation about the topic and a general view of the text. Typographic and iconic elements and external textual organization is taken into account, so that students’ metacognition may be activated. Thus, students are able to make predictions about the text content.

The next step is the global reading of the text—without interruptions or regressions—that allows the students to get an idea of what the text is about, focusing on certain lexical items that present no difficulty because of their similarity with their Spanish equivalent. By means of this skimming students can also determine the context of situation—field, tenor and mode—of the text. They may also recognize the text as an instance of a particular text-type depending on their experience of previous instances of the same type both in Spanish and in English.

After a second reading, they can seek specific pieces of information in the text, according to the tasks given. Here their expectations are heightened by our awareness of certain lexical fields or other textual features which are likely to signal the presence of information they are looking for (Haarman et al. 1988: viii). The semantic relations within the text are analysed to identify the markers of grammatical and lexical cohesion and also of the logico-semantic relations both at the inter and intra-sentential level.

The last step is a general discussion that involves the whole class placing special emphasis on the information students have obtained from the text. There is a summary of the intended objectives. Were their predictions confirmed? What have students learnt about content, grammar, and discourse functions? Was the text interesting? At the end of the class students should feel that their reading was purposeful.

As already said, every activity in the class is conducted in Spanish. Students are not expected to express themselves in English, neither orally nor in writing. It would be impossible to demand from them any language production in L2 when the time alloted is so short. However, these courses have proved to be a good foundation when students want to take a four-skill language course.

Students use authentic documents. As they belong to different careers, text selection is a complex task. In general, non-specialized publications such as The National Geographic, The UNESCO Courier, or Time are of interest for all disciplines.

Final considerations

This methodology proves to be operative in the following aspects:
texts are analysed at different levels: pragmatic, semantic and morphosyntactic;
the global approach gives students self-confidence from the very beginning contributing to lower the affective filter;
linguistic forms are systematized with a focus on the communicative function of the text;
the functional approach helps them understand the social dimension of reading,
the speech act theory helps them to get to the writer's intentions;
both reading and writing skills improve in L1
their reading skills improve both in L1 and L2;
all activities tend to make students understand the communicative value of the text, the final target of our reading course.

References


Biographical note

Liliana Fortuny is a Public Translator. She has been teaching ESP reading comprehension at the Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de Salta for the last fifteen years. She belongs to a research team that has carried out several projects on different subjects related to ESP at university level.
APPENDIX 1

SYLLABUS

UNIT 1: EXPOSITION

- **Text-type:** description
  - **Text-forms:**
    - definitions
    - classifications
    - physical descriptions
    - description of a process
  - **Text-samples:** from encyclopedia articles, textbooks, software.
  - **Function:** mainly informative
  - **Speech acts:** mainly representatives

- **Text-type:** narration
  - **Text-forms:**
    - historic narrations
    - biographies
    - news articles
  - **Text-samples:** from encyclopedia articles, textbooks, journals, software.
  - **Function:** mainly informative
  - **Speech acts:** mainly representatives

- **Text-type:** conceptual texts
  - **Text-forms:**
    - scientific articles
    - experiment reports
  - **Text-samples:** from encyclopedia articles, textbooks, software.
  - **Function:** mainly informative
  - **Speech acts:** mainly representatives

UNIT 2: INSTRUCTION

- **Text-type:** instruction with option
  - **Text-forms:**
    - advertisements
  - **Text-samples:** from book catalogues, travel brochures, course advertisements.
Functions: mainly apelative and expressive.
Speech acts: mainly directives, commissives, expressives.

- **Text-type:** instruction without option
  - Text-forms: regulations
  - Text-samples: instructions to perform certain activities from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO, forms (application forms, forms for subscriptions to magazines, etc.).
  - Functions: mainly apelative and informative.
  - Speech acts: mainly directives, representatives.

**UNIT 3: ARGUMENTATION**

- **Text-type:** non conversational
  - Text-forms: editorials, articles, letters to the editor, literary/film criticism
  - Text-samples: from magazines and newspapers.
  - Functions: apelative, expressive, informative.
  - Speech acts: directives, commissives, expressives, declaratives.

- **Text-type:** conversational
  - Text-form: interview
  - Text-samples: from magazines and newspapers.
  - Functions: apelative, expressive, informative
  - Speech acts: directives, commissives, expressives, declaratives.

**NOTE:** Each unit includes the linguistic and rhetorical features that characterize different text-types.
APPENDIX 2

Example of a lesson plan

Unit 2: Instruction

Time of the year: first part of the second term

Text-types: Instruction with option (Text 1)
            Instruction without option (Text 2)

Text-forms: magazine advertisement and subscription form.


Specific objectives:
- To recognize the characteristics of instruction as text-type.
- To identify the differences between instruction with and without option as regards their functions, speech acts, discourse strategies and lexical selection.
- To identify the imperative mood as a linguistic feature characteristic of this text-type.
- To apply the reading strategies adequate to this type of text and to the reading purpose.

Activities:

1. Pay attention to the layout of the texts to make predictions about the contents and function. Conversation to activate schemata.

2. First reading to determinate:
   a) context of situation:

   Field:

   Tenor:
   - addressee
   - addressee
Mode:
- channel
- register

b) text-types, speech acts and functions.

3. Second reading for more details.

4. Do the following tasks:

a) What is the writer’s intention in text 1?

b) What kind of strategies does the writer use to achieve his/her aim?

c) Read line 30 and compare it with the rest of the text as regards its function.

d) What’s the writer’s intention in text 2?

e) Read text 2 from line 1 to 9 and compare it with text 1 as regards lexis and grammar.

f) Give the following information:
   - Price of the subscription.
   - Where it can be paid.
   - Time allowed for delivery.

g) Explain the difference between the three possibilities mentioned from line 26 to 35.

h) Translate text 2 from line 38 to 50. Relate this part of the text with the information given from line 26 to 35.

i) General discussion involving the whole class.
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