

English Curriculum Development for a Technology Institution of Higher Learning

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Abstract

The article describes the curriculum developed for a technology institution of higher learning in Thailand by presenting the essential issues in English language curriculum development. The paradigm for developing an English curriculum was derived from the underlying principles which are practical and goal-oriented.

Introduction

“To be literate is not only to participate in the discourse of an information society; it is also to resist it...it is rather perverse to think you can engage in discursive contest without engaging in the language of the discourse. Most teachers are more prepared to embrace genre theory if it includes ...elements of critical linguistic awareness.” (Carter, 1995, p.55-56).

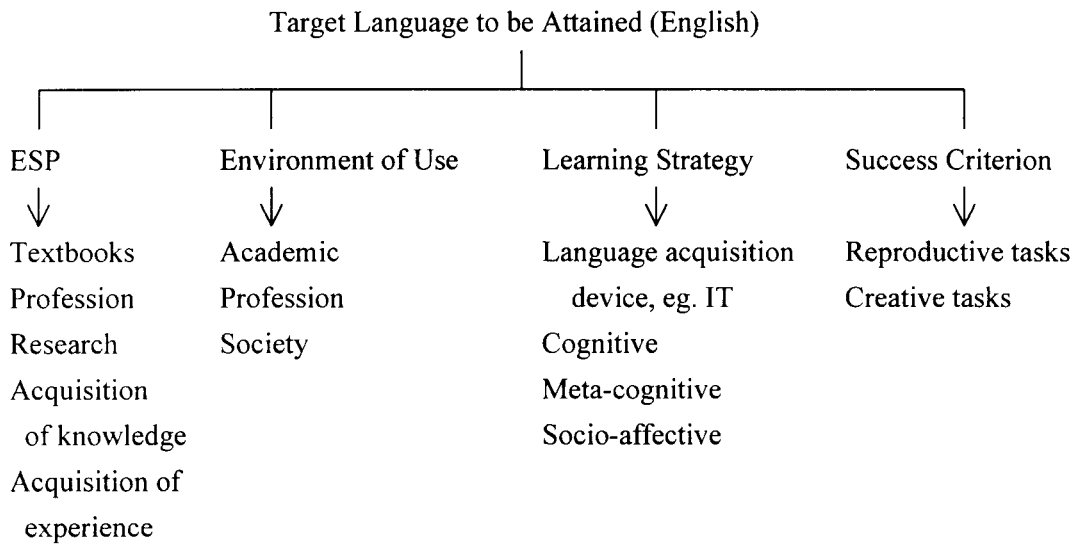
The contemporary social and educational paradigm adopts the interactive and integrative tenets of human developments in both the socio-cultural and psychological-educational domains for this knowledge-based economy and globalized society. Generalizability and specificity of

knowledge and skills in human learning shape ELT curricula.

In this day and this age of learning and knowing, adult learners of English, with an academic-professional orientation, need to have specific purposes for using the language in order to achieve success in communication. Mastery of specific language domains is necessary as these serve as ladders to higher ones, which require further complexity of language to communicate higher-level meanings. Thus, domain specifications for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are crucial for assessing learners' language mastery.

For a technology-based higher education institution, the learners are would-be engineers, scientists, architects, etc. Thus, the paradigm for developing an English curriculum is pragmatic.

The following diagram presents the relationships among various elements in an ESP curriculum:

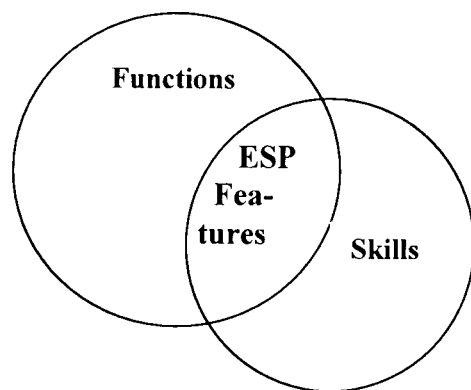


ESP learner needs and learner choices help determine the curriculum which includes materials, methods, techniques and strategies for ESP acquisition. Grammar and vocabulary used in the ESP genres--descriptive, informative, persuasive, are functionally sequenced, presented, practised, acquired, demonstrated and assessed. Grammar is not merely a bag of rules but principles that link the various parts together into a functioning whole. The natural co-occurrences of lexis and grammar in human communication would be meaningless without their linkages with the world of knowledge and experience. In order to be successful, ESP learners have to meet the criterion of success in both the reproductive and creative modes. It is with no doubt,

however, that in ESP the former tends to predominate.

ESP consisting of various language registers is a complex combination of language features, rules, functions and manifestations. In developing an ESP curriculum, considerations regarding such a combination are crucial to its success. It plays a crucial role in education in producing technology students for the Information Society and in forming necessary knowledge and skills.

The composition of an ESP curriculum is based on language skill paradigms which are function-based. The diagram below illustrates the relationships among these elements.



This diagram of relationships among the three elements illustrates that grammar and lexis or features alone are inadequate functions, and skills. Amplified objectives incorporating multi-dimensions of language communication geared towards the ESP curriculum can help shape a realistic program with criteria of success, failure, and feedback for remedial learning (Wongsothorn, 2001). The discourse dimension incorporates theme, topic, genre, mood, attitude, formality and language function. The skill-component dimension includes the productive and receptive skills as well as the integration of skills, such as listening and writing.

The ESP curriculum needs to be responsive to the technological challenges of the information society by giving necessary background for forming base knowledge and motivation for constant improvement of knowledge and skills. The end goal of the ESP curriculum is the production of successful graduates to live and work in this new knowledge-based society and economy. Universities and companies are both successful if employees are able to communicate professionally and socially in the language which is the main medium of communication--transactional and interactive.

A demarcation between EAP, General English (GE) and ESP needs to be

established focusing on new aspects of education and research in the networked information environment and IT usage. Such questions as "What kind of EAP and how much GE are necessary for ESP graduates?" need to be answered by research. Both qualitative and quantitative research is needed in developing a successful ESP curriculum.

ESP courses with specific objectives, media, materials and methods of instruction and evaluation need to be delineated, tried out, improved and implemented. The "refresh button" is necessary to update and rejuvenate existing programs. In addition, learner variables, teacher variables, and contextual variables need to be explored for maximum program effectiveness.

Background of ESP Curriculum

Development in Thailand

Freshmen students entering into higher education are not all Limited English Proficient students. The majority are average in their English use. The university entrance examination indicates a mean English score of higher than 30% for entrants to an educational system which requires English, especially 6 credits in the first year, as parts of their general education. Students generally take ESP courses in their second year and higher depending on the

faculty and institutional requirements. Technology-oriented higher education institutions also follow this scheme, but with a greater number of credit requirements for English, not only 6 but 15 or higher. The English curricula at these institutions are more demanding. To meet the standards of excellence of quality assurance stipulated by the Ministry of University Affairs, higher education institutions must fulfill their role of producing world class graduates who can function effectively in the required fields. ESP students in the technological field, the future graduates who will serve a society where English is the language of the "Wider Circle," are required to be proficient in the language in order to cope with the influx of new demands--in both tangible and intangible forms. It is thus the goal of the English curriculum for these students to cater for both the requirements of their fields and the personal-social purposes of well-educated and refined citizens.

Global-Local Use of English Paradigm

ESP is not on an equal balance between the bi-polar paradigm of global and local, but rather weighs heavily on the "global" side of the paradigm as ESP is worldwide. The localization of ESP, in other words, the injection of local cultures and norms into the curriculum, is merely for situation-specific understanding of the local cultures, not for the goals of ESP performance. Furthermore, no dialectal nor pidgin language varieties are included in the curriculum. Therefore, language skills of standard norm will be emphasized, not the cultural orientation, which can be learned after the acquisition of language skills. Here lies the significant difference between General English and

ESP. While the former requires a balance between language skills and cultural paradigms for developing contents of learning on equal terms, the latter leans heavily towards language skill paradigms which are function-based.

In planning a curriculum for technology-oriented higher education institutions, the criteria for "knowing a language" consist of:

- Productive and receptive skills condition;
- Individual structural items of sounds, lexical items and grammatical structures which integrate into larger units of functions in a specified domain of communication;
- Content domain with vocabulary and expressions integrate into larger units of ideas, topics, issues and themes (Lemke, 1990).

Manifestation

Below is an example of curriculum for a technology university.

GROUPING

Students are grouped into 3 groups according to their English proficiency.

CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

Group I (Low Group) Pre-course Intensive Course (IC) (Non-credit) + 12 Required + 3 elective credits

Group II (Average or Main Stream Group) : 6-9 Required + 6-9 Elective Credits

Group III (High Group) 12 Required + (at least) 3 Elective

OBJECTIVES

1. To enable students to use English for

- communication;
2. To enable students to use English for academic and professional purposes;
 3. To enable students to use English for self-development.

SCOPE OF THE CONTENT

1. Skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, including their integrative skills
2. Study skills
3. Skills in using English for academic and professional purposes
4. Skills in using English with various nationals, taking into account the differences in cultures and ways of life for the promotion of cross cultural understanding

REQUIRED: SKILLS PROGRAM

- ORAL COM I (3 credits)
- ORAL COM II (3 credits)
- WRITTEN COM I (3 credits)
- WRITTEN COM II (3 credits)

ELECTIVE: ESP PROGRAM & English as an International Language (EIL PROGRAM)

PREPARATORY STAGE (Non-credit)

Placement of students is made according to their English proficiency on the university entrance examination or a specially designed test for this purpose, together with data concerning students' English language aptitude or English GPA at the secondary education level. Students will be divided into three groups:

1. Students with low proficiency and aptitude for learning English must take the pre-course intensive program before taking regular courses.
2. Students with high entrance

examination scores can choose to take the exemption test for the skills programs, i.e. they can be exempt from Oral Communication I and/or Written Communication I and start the required skills courses at Oral Communication II and/or Written Communication II. They will also have to take elective courses to fulfill the requirements of 15 credits of English.

3. Students with average entrance examination scores will take four 12-credit required courses and at least one 3-credit elective course.

The pre-course intensive program focuses on mastery of language components, i.e. vocabulary, grammar, and phonology (stress, accents and intonation). Language practice will be done through practice of listening-speaking skills and of reading-writing skills at the phrasal and sentential levels. Grammatical accuracy and correct choices of words and phrases including the mechanics of writing will be emphasized as well as correct word stress, accents and intonation patterns of English sentences. The Language Resource Center provides facilities and clinic materials for individual practice as assigned.

The Three Programs

The programs consist of: the Skills Program, the English for Specific Purposes Program (ESP) and the English as an International Language Program (EIL).

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Students are required to take the skills program and then choose either the ESP or the EIL programs. Courses in the elective

programs are not prerequisites for one another.

REQUIRED COURSE

I. THE SKILLS PROGRAM (Pre-requisite)

The skills program consists of oral courses and written courses.

A. The oral components (6 Credits)

Course Description: The Oral Components consist of courses aimed at imparting the skills of listening and speaking, first via the aural-oral mode and later via the written mode. Both unitary-skill and integrative-skill approaches will be used for students' language practices. The Oral Courses consist of two courses: Oral Communication I and Oral Communication II. Each course gives 3 credits.

- Oral Communication I (3 Credits)
This course aims at developing students' listening skills at the discursal / textual level. Students' oral and written responses are to demonstrate acquisition of the listening skills. The course also aims at developing listening and speaking skills for everyday transactions such as asking for/giving personal information, inquiring/informing about happenings of personal and general concerns, etc.
- Oral Communication II (3 Credits)
This course aims at developing students' listening and speaking skills with more emphasis on speaking. Techniques on giving oral presentations which are related to the learner's field of interests are practiced via audio-video and written channels of communication. Students' practice also

include the study skills of extracting information, recording information such as note-taking, note-making, finding main ideas--cause-effect relationships, comparison and contrast, and preparing synopses of lectures, and presenting information via oral channels.

B. The Written Components (6 Credits)

Course Description: The Written Courses aim at imparting the skills of reading and writing, first via the written mode and afterwards via the oral mode. Both unitary-skill and integrative-skill approaches are used for students' language practice. The written courses consist of two courses: Written Communication I and Written Communication II.

- Written Communication I (3 Credits)
This course aims at developing students' reading and writing skills for everyday communication such as newspaper-reading, reading articles of personal and general interests from magazines, brochures, leaflets, etc., writing personal letters and taking oral or written messages by writing notes and summaries.
- Writing Communication II (3 Credits)
This course aims at developing students' reading and writing skills via both the oral and written channels of communication. Input includes reading long articles such as newspaper editorials, reports and short stories. Students' ability to write formal letters, longer informative, descriptive and persuasive paragraphs and essays is expected. Student practice also

includes the study skills of finding references, note-taking, note-making, finding main ideas, cause-effect relationships, comparison and contrast, etc., text-attack skills, and preparing synopses of academic texts.

ELECTIVE

II. THE ESP PROGRAM

The ESP Program consists of two courses: Negotiations of Meaning in the Spoken Discourse and Negotiations of Meaning in the Written Discourse. Students are free to choose practice materials and practice modes specific to their field of learning and interest. Activities are organized according to the pre-learning, while-learning, and post-learning phases. Learning tasks such as recognition, replication and reorganization/ reporting can be used to enhance the student's comprehension of the meaning of oral and written texts. Student interactions with texts are supported by interactions with the teacher/tutor and with other student(s).

The study skills of pinpointing main ideas in lectures, listening and reading text-attack skills as well as techniques for giving both oral and written reports and presentations including discussions and debates on selected issues are practiced.

Test-taking skills are to be practiced in both the oral and the written modes.

- Negotiations of Meaning in the Spoken Discourse (~ 3 Credits)--This course aims at enhancing the student's ability to extract meaning from texts presented orally or in writing as input for speaking output. The student is expected to present

oral reports and discuss or debate issues of contemporary and professional concerns.

- Negotiations of Meaning in the Written Discourse -- This component consists of three separate courses: Fiction Reading, Reading of Academic Texts and Translation. In this course the study skills of text-attack skills, finding references, use of dictionary, note-making and preparing reports and synopses are to be practiced.

- *Fiction Reading* (3 Credits): This course aims at consolidating students' reading skills by assigning them to read entertaining fictions such as space novels and thrillers, etc. Exercise sheets and question-answer sessions are interspersed with individual reading sessions. The student's oral and written performance, to demonstrate the ability to comprehend the stories and to make inferences, is assessed for instructional and grading purposes.

- *Reading of Academic Texts* (3 Credits): This course aims at consolidating the student's reading comprehension of texts in the area of interest related to science and technology. Language-exercise sheets and question-answer sessions are interspersed with individual reading sessions. Students' presentations of written reports and summaries of the texts are for instructional and grading purposes.

- *Translation* (3 Credits): This course aims at enhancing students' comprehension and expression in English. Selected texts will be translated from Thai into English or vice versa for academic and professional purposes. Brochures, manuals, journal

articles, written excerpts from various academic texts, etc., serve as practice materials.

III. THE EIL PROGRAM

The EIL program consists of two courses: EIL for Oral Communication and EIL for Written Communication.

- EIL for Oral Communication
(3 Credits)

This course aims at imparting the skills of communication with the speakers of English from a variety of mother tongues, e.g. Singaporeans, Japanese, Indians, Filipinos, Italians, etc. through exposure to varieties of English in matters related to personal, general and professional concerns. Students are expected to comprehend meanings expressed through gestures and various English accents including significant underlying social and cultural variables of communication, and to communicate intelligibly through the oral mode.

- EIL for Written Communication
(3 Credits)

This course aims at developing the skills of extracting information from English texts produced by speakers of a variety of mother tongues. Analyses of rhetorical features are practiced. Students are expected to comprehend the meaning of the texts and to produce effective pieces of writing.

METHODOLOGY

- Lectures
Overviews, outlining, language explanations and expositions are given in large-class lectures.

- Tutorials

Practices, questions and answers and presentations are in small-group tutorials. Individual work, pair-work and group-work are used.

- Language Resource Center

Equipped with audio units, a video section, a PC lab, a testing room, reference materials, language bulletin boards, cabinets containing card catalogues, students' exercise portfolios, individualized materials and progress/evaluation charts, the Language Resource Center is there to build, consolidate, and enhance students' English language learning in the skills program, the ESP program and the EIL program. Students can practice individually according to teachers' assignments and to their own choices while teachers take turn serving as consultants.

- Language Enrichment Activities

Happy hours and English Club/Camp social activities including entertaining tasks such as video music and feature films with or without English subtitles are organized in order to motivate students to practice and acquire the English language skills.

EVALUATION

The A-F grading scale is for the required skills courses while students can choose the A-F scales for the elective courses.

TESTING TECHNIQUES

- Paper-pencil tests
- Computerized adaptive/tailored tests
- Performance tests of the oral mode
- Self-assessment

- Portfolio
- Authentic on-going assessment

Conclusion

The language skill paradigm that underlies ESP curriculum development when incorporated with ESP contents which belong to the global community of ESP users clearly reflects its functional focus. It is imperative that ESP curriculum developers be flexible and responsive to

changing needs and new functions to meet the fast-growing industries and technologies. The example of an ESP curriculum presented in this article serves as a framework for incorporating new inputs of new contents and new functions. Thus, the pragmatic paradigms of ESP will empower learners to better serve society and become effective members of the technology workforce when it comes to language communication.

References

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