

Integrating traditional and critical approaches to syllabus design: the ‘what’, the ‘how’ and the ‘why?’

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Abstract

It is commonly assumed that most courses taking place in an English for Academic Purposes setting at universities are, in the main, concerned with various EAP issues, such as listening to lectures and writing academic reports (lab reports, final-year undergraduate project reports and dissertations etc.). This article describes a course which, while taking place in an academic setting, is designed to equip undergraduates with general skills training in English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) practices to meet students’ future communication needs after graduation. EOP skills would include report writing (status; recommendation; proposal) and giving business presentations. A main feature of this EOP-oriented course is that it does not rely on any one single approach to syllabus design, but takes an eclectic approach by drawing on elements from a task-based syllabus, a text-based syllabus, and a content-based syllabus for the design of the programme, types of syllabi which can be considered as more established and traditional ones. However, the course is not solely designed with the aim of preparing students for workplace demands purely from an ‘accommodationist’ stance. It also attempts to address some of the more critical approaches to pedagogy whereby students are gently encouraged to develop a critical awareness of workplace practices in order that change might be implemented, where possible.

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1. Introduction

English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses can be considered as a type of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (see Robinson, 1991, p. 3, for a classification of all

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the main areas under ESP). Many different syllabus types have been proposed for ESP instruction: structural, situational, functional-notional, task-based, text-based, content-based (see [Feez, 2002](#); [Hutchinson & Waters, 1987](#); [Jordan, 1997](#) for overviews of these different types of syllabi). Whichever type of syllabus is implemented is, to a large extent, dependent on a previously conducted needs analysis which may not only examine the target situation, i.e., what learners are required to do, but also consider learning needs, i.e., how are learners best motivated to acquire the language and skills revealed through the target situation analysis (see [Hutchinson & Waters, 1987](#)). However, in reality, many syllabi constructed by course designers for their in-house courses do not neatly fall into one specific category, but draw on aspects of two or three different syllabus types. Moreover in recent years, the notion that ESP instruction should not merely address pragmatic concerns, that is, enhance students' literacies to ease their acculturation into various academic and professional communities, but also empower students by helping them to develop a critical awareness of those very institutions in order to facilitate change, has been gaining ground ([Benesch, 2001](#); [Pennycook, 1997](#)). But these are far from mainstream concerns, as pointed out by [Hyland and Hamp-Lyons \(2002, p. 10\)](#), "in many ways these are still voices on the margins, and EAP has yet to seriously confront these issues."

This article will exemplify how a communication skills course at a tertiary institution in Hong Kong combines elements from a task-based syllabus ([Ellis, 2003](#); [Littlewood, 2004](#); [Nunan, 1989](#); [Skehan, 1996](#)), a text-based syllabus ([Feez, 2002](#)) and a content-based syllabus, Content-Based Instruction (CBI) ([Brinton & Master, 1997](#); [Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989](#); [Kasper, 2000](#); [Pally, 1999](#); [Snow & Brinton, 1997](#)), with aspects of [Benesch's \(2001\)](#) critical pedagogy. At the same time, the course also aims to equip students with oral and written literacies ([Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000](#)), which will enable them to achieve real-world goals.

In the following Section I first review aspects of the three afore-mentioned approaches to syllabus design, which are pertinent to the design of the communication skills course discussed in this article. I then give a summary of the key findings of the needs analysis that was carried out. This is followed by an application of the needs analysis to the design of the communication skills course, which combines features from all three of the syllabus types outlined below.

2. Approaches to syllabus design

A task-based syllabus is concerned with purposeful activities which learners might be expected to engage in real-life situations. As [Ellis \(2003\)](#) points out, this type of syllabus also puts emphasis on meaning and communication, where students are primarily "users" rather than "learners" of the language. Learners may switch their attention to form when performing a task, but the code is seen as peripheral to the focus on meaning. These key features are encapsulated in [Skehan's \(1996, p. 50\)](#) definition of task as "an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome."

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