Theoretical Framework for Developing ESP Reading Materials at Tertiary Level of Education in Morocco

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Abstract

This paper highlights the growing demand for developing ESP reading Materials in Moroccan universities. ESP has become an important area in English Language Teaching (ELT) since there is a large variety of majors in Moroccan tertiary Education for which courses tailored to the needs of students are of paramount importance to achieve effective learning. Consequently, the role of ESP teachers differs to a great extent from the role of General English teachers. It usually involves needs analysis and syllabus design in addition to materials selection and adaptation. Obviously, all these tasks are equally demanding and contribute to the success of the ESP teaching/learning experience. When students are introduced to content based syllabi with focused language goal for their learning needs, ESP can prove to be a catalyst for developing and improving their language skills thereby making them more effective in their professional pursuit. The present study, then, aims to contribute to such debates by proposing a set of materials design and selection criteria and arguing that there is a direct link between the two stages in the process of developing teaching materials. Reflecting on my own experience as an adjunct ESP professor at the faculty of letters (Rabat/Morocco) in charge of designing an English reading course for students of Islamic studies, I suggest undertaking an analysis based on the criteria that informed the design of the textbook. The outcome of the analysis is a theoretical model that could prove relevant in informing the design of textbooks in other disciplines. More specifically, the current paper aims to present a theoretical framework for developing ESP reading materials by presenting some aspects of ESP that are decisive for materials selection and adaptation. It also outlines the guidelines I followed when preparing reading course materials for Islamic studies students. The paper concludes with observations that will definitely lend insight into the challenges facing ESP instructors acting as ESP syllabus designers in Morocco.

1. Introduction

Language teaching in Moroccan higher education has seen a lot of changes in recent years, particularly in the area of English language teaching. The Moroccan educational system has witnessed the implementation of a new reform in 2000. The reform has among other concerns, focused on the urgent need to instill a working knowledge of Foreign Languages with English being the predominant language of instruction in higher education as youth seek out better employment opportunities after graduation. However, the teaching of English in Moroccan universities has not reflected the basic academic objectives and worse, failed to meet learners' needs. This is mainly because English language teaching remained unsuitable for students' needs and disconnected from their specific majors. Instead of adopting language teaching materials that relate to knowledge gained in other courses and learners' future jobs, the easy task was to hire mostly untrained part time teachers with little support or no guidance on to how embark on the teaching of English. The result was unhealthy teaching practices, inconsistency and waste of resources. Thus, this paper is a way to consider the need to evince more efforts to modernize English Language syllabi and harmonize the teaching of English throughout the curriculum at tertiary level of Education in Morocco. The current paper is inspired from my own experience as a part time English Language teacher at the faculty of Humanities in charge of teaching English to undergraduate students of Islamic studies. I have been a stronger believer that attaining a better academic performance requires first, a special understanding of learners' needs and objectives, a selection of the appropriate tasks and teaching materials, and last but not least, a practical assessment while monitoring learner's progress to provide effective learning/teaching experience. Learners belonging to the Islamic studies department had very little interest in English language learning and were not willing to make the least effort to improve their English language. This was mainly because they were unable to see the value of what they were

learning to their overall course of study. Thus, one of my main objectives was to design EFL material that will help prepare them for subsequent courses and give them a better appreciation of the combined value of the courses they take.

Hence, after analyzing learner needs and setting objectives for the course, the following step was to select materials that will help the students to achieve the course objectives by providing materials that relate closely to their specific skills and content needs. The following is a detailed description of the motivation behind as well as the criteria that informed the design of the textbook for Islamic Studies students.

2. ESP Materials: Ready-made vs tailor-made materials

By definition, ESP teaching is aimed to cater for the needs of specific professional groups. This is what mainly makes the design of teaching/learning language materials an extremely complex process, since it requires a comprehensive needs analysis in terms of both learning and professional needs. The language learning syllabi and materials designed as a result tend to be 'multi-layered'[1] including topics, skills, structures, functions, roles, etc. For this reason, materials selection, adaptation, or even writing is a critical stage in ESP teaching, since the final product has to provide students with materials that will equip them with the knowledge they will need in their future professional life.

Consequently, the decision on whether to use a readily available textbook or tailor-made one is an important question to ask at this very stage. According to Hutchinson and Waters, the decision primarily depends on the learners' major. If their major is general, then the possibility of adapting suitable published material can be useful. In the case of more specific subject areas, the most agreed upon tendency is that ESP teachers should first "question whether the learners' needs are significantly different from those of other groups" and, if possible, resort to writing materials or rely on existing ones "when all other possibilities of providing materials have been exhausted." [2]

One of the disadvantages of a readily available textbook is that the selection of structures, vocabulary, skills and functions is conditioned by the material at hand, whereas Tailor-made materials provide the teacher with the opportunity to decide on more relevant combinations of vocabulary, functions and structures that present a logical whole and enables students to feel and track their progress. Put differently, Tailor-made materials provide students with activities that suit the specific needs of their future jobs. In the same vein, Sheerin [1989] points out that: "In-house produced material is extremely valuable as it is inevitably more precisely geared to the needs of students than published material".[3] When identifying which tasks to include in ESP materials, teachers are on the right path of designing tasks that will simulate the learner's motivation and help them get ready for a successful professional phase.

With these considerations in mind and based on my own teaching experience, I decided to err on the side of a tailor-made textbook. Given the fact that there is a lack of English language textbooks for undergrad students specializing in Islamic studies. I took the decision to prepare a tailor-made course-book in which the selection of topics has been dictated specifically by student needs. Accordingly, the choice of materials has been firstly, based on the demands of employment market;(students after graduation might work as preachers abroad) secondly they need English to communicate with fellow Muslims during Pilgrimage, and finally, on the student needs and knowledge base.

The final product was a Reading textbook; with units each comprising *a theme* under which topic-related texts are subsumed to help the students exchange ideas and views referring to that theme. A *Comprehension* section to check their understanding of the reading part and encouraging them to express themselves; A *Vocabulary section*, with the help of which learners revise the basic terms of that definite topic, enhance their word-building knowledge and improve their linguistic repertoire; and A *Language Practice part which* checks how cohesive and coherent students are in their written as well as oral discourse.

3. Specific criteria underpinning the design of the English textbook for Islamic Studies students
3.1 Meeting students' needs

The criteria that informed the design of the current English textbook for Islamic Studies students are described in Table 1. They derive from a communicative approach to language teaching which makes learners aware of their own learning experience.

Table1: Textbook design criteria

Criteria	Description
1. Matching Type of syllabus with students needs	Identify needs in terms of three major criteria: **Relevance**, **motivation** and **diversity**
2. Having students participate in the learning process	Draw upon students background knowledge and ideas, encouraging participation
3. Relating grammar with meaning for the sake of better communication	Fuse both meaning and form and present language structures as vehicles for expressing meanings.
4. Simplifying texts for students	Going beyond recommendations for authenticity, adopting simplified materials, understandable language that is within students level and abilities
5. Assisting students in developing reading skills & strategies	Activate students prior knowledge. Make question answer relationship and make inference analyzing information, distinguishing important from unimportant elements and translating large chunks of information into a few short cohesive sentences.
6. Authenticating the Tasks	plan tasks that encourage genuine communication and interaction

To sum up, the model of Islamic Studies material using a communicative approach is an attempt to enable learners with religion-related interest to communicate the target language effectively. To do this, the learners are provided with meanings and functions in which the themes or topics are under the umbrella of Islamic studies. The needs were very specific and required the integration of both language and content. Therefore, content and structure-related decisions were made accordingly. In terms of language proficiency, the textbook was designed for lower intermediate to intermediate level. The following is a description of a sample unit from the textbook which is meant to make the criteria more operational and transparent for designers.

4. Proposed model for Islamic Studies material design

The textbook was designed with the ultimate aim to match subject specific language with professional needs Reading, speaking and writing are all catered for, both at the level of presentation and production through accomplishment of authentic tasks. Moreover, Learning and performing are closely intertwined, as students perform for the sake of learning, and also learn for the ultimate purpose of efficiently performing in real professional situations.

Table 2: Operationalizing the criteria: sample unit from the English textbook for Islamic Studies students

> • **Guiding principles:** Select the meanings students need to communicate and decide on the specific language they need to use in order to construct those meanings.

Sample Text: The Fourth Pillar of Islam: The Fast

The fourth of the five pillars of Islam is to fast every day during the month of Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic year). According to the Koran, the purpose of the fast of Ramadan is to cleanse the soul and cultivate piety. During Ramadan, Muslims are also expected to refrain from indulging in violence, anger, envy, greed, lust and backbiting, and are meant to get along with each other better than normal. During the fast, Muslims are also prohibited from eating, drinking, smoking, and engaging in sexual activity.

The fast begins every day at dawn, at the beginning of whiteness at one point on the horizon, and ends at sunset. In the evening, when the fast has ended, family and friends come together for special prayers and recitations of the Koran and to share a small meal. Ramadan is a time of worship and contemplation and a time to strengthen family and community ties. At the end of the great month of Ramadan, Eid ul-Fitr is celebrated. Muslims come out and rejoice with a sense of accomplishment for coming closer to Allah.

Sample comprehension Questions

- **Guiding principle**: Help students develop learning strategies by providing them with tools such as
- ➢ Predicting the content of a text
- ➢ Extracting salient info from the text
- ➢ Summarizing a text
- ➢ Analyzing the content , structure and style of texts and applying the insights into their own writing. (when answering questions)

True or false

1. Ramadan is the eighth month of the Islamic year-------------
2. Backbiting is forbidden during the month of Ramadan--------------
3. Sexual activity is allowed during Ramadan----------------
4. The purpose of the fast of Ramadan is to cleanse the stomach-------
5. The fast begins at sunset--------------

➚ *Answer the Following Questions*

1. Why do Muslims fast?
2. What do Muslims celebrate after the great month of Ramadan?
3. What are Muslims expected to do during Ramadan?
4. What are Muslims expected to abstain from during the month of Ramadan

- **Guiding principle for Vocabulary and Grammar sections:** Present grammar structures and vocabulary as sets dedicated to the construction of meaning and improvement of students communication

Vocabulary check

↗ Find in the text words that have the same meaning as:

1. Deep thought, meditation = (2nd paragraph)-----------------------
2. The aim= (1st paragraph)---
3. To have a friendly relationship= (1st paragraph)-------------------
4. End= (2nd paragraph)--
5. Abstain= (1st paragraph)--
6. To make something stronger= (2nd paragraph)---------------------
7. Not allowed= (1st paragraph)---------------------------------------
8. The sacred Book of Muslims= (1st paragraph)----------------------
9. To become involved in an activity= (1st paragraph)-----------------

Grammar Activity: passive/active voice check with special focus on can and allowed to
Think of some things that you can and can't do in the following places
Example: The Mosque
You are not allowed to ride a bike in the mosque
You can say a prayer or perform prayers

1. A Hospital
2. A church
3. A museum
4. A swimming pool
5. A park
6. The Classroom
7. During the month Ramadan

- **Guiding principle:** building upon students existing knowledge and conceptual framework in order to help them understand specific input & perform specific tasks
N.B. Students existing knowledge should be tapped into and integrated in task accomplishment .This way student will talk and write better

**Classroom activity semantic map vocabulary building**
Oral Practice:
Semantic Map 1: Complete the following semantic map with words learnt from the above passages on the fourth pillar of Islam. Students reuse these words to produce their own sentences
The practice of lexis in context by relying on their own knowledge base

Assignment : Writing
Write a summary of what you have read and learnt from the above passage. Try to use as many words (from the semantic map) as you can.

Words learnt
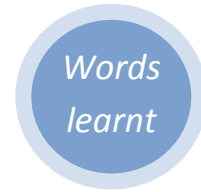
Design of language learning materials is far from being an easy practice since it requires operationalizing sound   methodological tools to match the specific needs of a particular group. Although the model proposed in this study does not claim to be exhaustive, it can serve as a benchmark for design issues since it represents a set of language teaching principles which are meant to hopefully offer language professionals with a reliable instrument that will contribute: first, to their awareness raising when it comes to the content of textbooks as well as their own role in adopting materials to meet the specific needs of their students.

5. Concluding thoughts

To sum up, language textbook design is a professional activity which needs appropriate pedagogical tools derived from two sound sources namely the expertise of ESP practitioners and the professional knowledge of their students which both contribution considerably to the teaching/learning experience. It is true that guidelines about how to design new teaching materials are useful to a certain extent; however, the main quality ingredient resides in ESP designers' awareness of the diverse factors underlying the course design process and the wide array of methodological tools that can be adopted to meet particular needs. The instrument I have outlined in this study highlights a set of principles that ESP professionals can be usefully inspired from at the outset of a course design process. I also presented this instrument suggesting that the principles that informed course design could be successfully used as a benchmark for the design of other ESP materials.

References

[1] McDonough., & Shaw, C. (1993). Materials and Methods in ELT. Oxford: Blackwell, p.47
[2] Hutchinson, T. and Waters. (1994). English For Specific Purposes. Glasgow: Cambridge University Press, p.125
[3] Sheerin, S. (1989). Resource Books For Teachers: Self-Access. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, p.25