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0521282942 - Communicative Syllabus Design: A Sociolinguistic Model for Defining the Content of Purpose-Specific Language Programmes

John Munby

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

1. The upsurge of interest in the content of the language syllabus, following the concern with communicative competence generated by Dell Hymes, reflects inter alia a feeling that we ought to know much more about what it is that should be taught and learnt if a non-native is to be communicatively competent in English. Broadly speaking the post-war mainstream of language teaching (and testing) seems to have been concerned more with methodology, with *how* rather than *what* to teach, but syllabus design and content has in the present decade been receiving an increasing amount of attention. There has been a movement away from grammatical syllabuses, and then situational syllabuses, to what are variously described as notional, functional,¹ or communicative² syllabuses. A major factor here has been the work of Trim and his colleagues, especially Wilkins, in the Council of Europe Programme for a unit/credit system for adult language learning. Another line of development in this movement has been strongly influenced by the work in discourse analysis (written and oral) of Widdowson, Sinclair, Candlin, Trimble and their colleagues.³ However, the area of syllabus design which requires more systematic attention is the communication needs of the learner, especially the derivational relationship of syllabus specification to such needs. In terms of designing courses in English for specific purposes (ESP) this seems to us to be of crucial importance.

In recent years ESP has become a major developmental focus in the area of what may now be called communicative syllabus design and materials production. Adult language institutions, publishers, planners and writers have responded with alacrity to the increasing demand for ESP programmes. However, a look at many of the resultant courses and materials prompts the vital question: what *system* (if any) is being used to arrive at the specification of the English deemed appropriate for different purposes? If it does not exist, there is

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clearly a need for a model that takes account of all the potentially significant variables and systematically applies them to achieve an appropriate specification.

2. It is necessary to define here what is meant by the term ESP.⁴ ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner, rather than by nonlearner-centred criteria such as the teacher's or institution's predetermined preference for General English or for treating English as part of a general education. There should be important differences in the English course for a non-native requiring English in order to study medicine in his own country as opposed to England; or when the language of instruction is the learner's mother tongue as opposed to English (when, for example, he might need English only for reading medical texts). Similarly, a course for someone who needs English in order to do his job must take account of, *inter alia*, the environment and social relationships obtaining between him and his interlocutors. The two major categories of ESP are [A] where the participant needs English to perform part or all of his occupational duties, e.g. working in civil aviation or tourist hotel management (appropriately labelled English for occupational purposes – EOP, for short); and [B] where the participant needs English for educational purposes, to pursue part or all of his studies, the major subcategory of which is discipline-based study, e.g. in agricultural science or chemical engineering (often referred to as English for academic purposes – EAP, for short). These categories subdivide, and in Chapter 3 below we show Strevens' (1977a) classification of ESP.

At this point an explanation should be given of the use of the word 'specific' rather than the more usual 'special' in the term ESP. The word 'special' is contentious in that the statement that a purpose is special seems to imply that it is not ordinary, but this is not necessarily so, and in any case the antonymous characteristic that should be intended by the phrase 'special purpose' is that it is not *general*. Furthermore, 'Special English', which is associated with some of the earlier examples of materials in this field, focuses on distinctive features of the language, especially vocabulary, that are most immediately associated with its restricted use, e.g. technical terms in agriculture. ESP, on the other hand, should focus on the learner and the purposes for which he requires the target language, and the *whole*

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language programme follows from that. It is this that is new about ESP, together with a much more rigorous approach to the whole subject of course design, using insights and findings from sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and the communicative approach to language learning. The phrase English for Special Purposes, therefore, would convey its intended meaning more accurately, and avoid the confusion and doubt it sometimes causes, especially on first acquaintance, if it were changed to English for Specific Purposes. This is now the preferred use of the term among an increasing number of scholars, practitioners and institutions.

3. There are a number of reasons for the rapidly growing need for ESP programmes. One of the most significant is the spread of higher and further education with the concomitant need to gain access to the required knowledge that is available, either exclusively or most readily, in English. This is the case with the high-demand area of English for science and technology (EST), from the pioneering work in Chile⁵ in the mid 1960s to the projects in Saudi Arabia⁶ in the mid 1970s. The science students' need for English to pursue their studies in an English-medium situation, at the University of Zambia, is described, together with illustrations of the different exercise types used, by Wingard (1971). The same type of requirement, but in a non-English-medium situation, at Tabriz University (Bates and Dudley-Evans, 1976),⁷ is discussed by Dudley-Evans, Shettlesworth and Phillips (1975).

It has also been observed that in countries where there is a change in the status of English from medium to subject, standards of English are considered in quite a number of cases to be dropping. A third reason for the growing demand for ESP programmes is the obvious attraction to the client or learner of custom-built courses in the English that will enable him to do his job⁸ or pursue his studies,⁹ rather than the ubiquitous course in General English or general literary English whose irrelevance becomes apparent sooner or later.

4. In spite of all the considerable ESP activity that is going on (a lot of which is ESP in name only, being poorly disguised General English courses), this area of communicative syllabus design as yet lacks a rigorous system for deriving appropriate syllabus specifications from adequate profiles of communication needs. This book is an attempt to solve this problem by designing a dynamic processing model that starts with the learner and ends with his target communicative com-

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petence. It is the detailed syllabus specification, the target communicative competence, which constitutes the essence of what should be embodied in the course materials. The model does not deal with materials production and so no more than an indication is given of the implementational constraints on the syllabus specification, e.g. the number of trained teachers available, quantity of instruction, the expectations of the institution, traditional strategies of learning, etc. It is pointed out (in the Epilogue, and elsewhere, e.g. page 40) that such variables, although important in the modification of syllabus specifications and the production/selection of materials, belong to the subsequent stage of course design and should not be considered before the syllabus specification has been obtained.

5. In this communicative approach to syllabus design, Chapter 1 is a discussion of some theoretical issues which form the backdrop, as it were, to the designing of the model that is needed, an overview of which is provided in Chapter 2. The next six chapters then go into detail on each part of the model.

In Chapters 3–6 the variables involved in the communication needs of learners of a foreign language are identified and organised as the parameters of the ‘communication needs processor’. In this first sector of the model a detailed profile of needs is produced for the particular learner-participant or category of participant.

In Chapters 7–8 the profile of needs is interpreted in terms of the required micro-skills and micro-functions marked for attitudinal-tone. The meaning units may then be realised as appropriate language forms. The result is a syllabus specification systematically derived from the profile of needs.

The model is set out as an operational instrument (i.e. for actual use) in Chapter 9; and to exemplify its application, two very different participant types requiring English for their specific purposes are processed through it in Chapter 10.

6. Advice to reader. The intended (and recommended) order for reading this book is, as can be seen from Section 5 above, straight through from beginning to end. Some readers, however, especially those who are unfamiliar with the subject matter of Chapter 1, may find it preferable to leave Chapter 1 to the end or even to approach the book as follows: begin with Chapter 2 and then go on to Chapters 9 and 10; after this, read Chapters 3–8, the Epilogue, and then finish with Chapter 1.

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- 1 e.g. the programmes devised by Jupp and Hodlin (1975); Morrow and Johnson (1975).
- 2 See Shaw (1975).
- 3 e.g. the Doctor–Patient Communication Skills materials produced by Candlin, Bruton and Leather (1976a), or the *English in focus* materials designed by Allen and Widdowson (1974 et seq.).
- 4 cf. Strevens (1977b) on defining ESP, including a discussion on the difference between ‘general’ and ‘special’ purposes, and the bandwagon effect of the latter on course organisers and educational administrators (and publishers).
- 5 Ewer and Latorre (1967 and 1969).
- 6 Reported by Mountford (1976) and Chamberlain (1976).
- 7 This programme is now published by Longman as the *Nucleus* materials.
- 8 e.g. the Mobil Oil course for prospective technicians on the Arun Gas Field, Indonesia, reported by Knowles (1975); or ‘English in Flight’, a course for air hostesses prepared by ELTDU/OUP (1973).
- 9 e.g. the materials developed by Moore et al. (1977) at the University of Los Andes; or the University of Malaya project, reported by Cooper (1975).

1

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In trying to design a model for specifying the communicative competence of a foreign language participant, it would seem inappropriate to work within one particular linguistic theory. It may well be the case that a theory of linguistics (in the sense of formal linguistics) is neither the necessary nor the sufficient basis for such a study. 'There is no guarantee that generative transformational grammar, or for that matter any other linguistic theory, will be able to account for all the facts about language which native speakers possess' (Jakobovits, 1970). Furthermore, some of the ideas or activities with which this study is concerned may not be dealt with by such existing theories.

It is proposed, therefore, to operate within a theoretical perspective or framework, which will be derived from a particular view of the concept of competence. This is discussed in this chapter. A theoretical framework will ensure that, in the designing of our model, we ask appropriate questions from a consistent standpoint. Such a procedure should also have the incidental advantage of allowing the model to accommodate developments without sacrificing the underlying philosophy.

Central to the formation of our framework is the concept of the language user's competence and its relation to knowledge and communication, to which we now turn.

KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNICATION

This topic area is full of statements or comments on the nature of competence and performance. What may be regarded as seminal positions and some important related viewpoints will be briefly examined and evaluated in terms of appropriateness for the purpose of this book.

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Communicative competence

1. Chomsky

I accept Chomsky's rejection of Skinner's behaviourist model as inadequate to account for the complexity of human language and the creativity of the speaker-listener, though it should be noted [1] that a stimulus–response model can probably explain *some* of the facts of language behaviour (Lyons, 1970), and [2] that the equation of this creativity with the ability to produce and understand an infinite number of novel sentences, with the theoretical possibility of infinite length of sentence, does not bring out the important point that in the majority of cases this novelty lies not in the grammar, lexis, or phonology, but in a novel concatenation of non-novel meaning components (Hasan, 1971). In this discussion the major drawback of Skinnerian theory's refusal to consider anything that is not observable is its inability to handle the now generally accepted notion of two levels of language, one underlying the other.

Chomsky's view of what it means to know a language is reflected in his distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. (This distinction has a psychological orientation and is not the same as de Saussure's 'langue' and 'parole'.) In *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) Chomsky writes: 'Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.' The perfect knowledge referred to here is the mastery of the abstract system of rules by which a person is able to understand and produce any and all of the well-formed sentences of his language, i.e. his linguistic competence. The actual use of language, affected by what he terms grammatically irrelevant conditions, and identified with the criterion of acceptability, not grammaticality, is the domain of linguistic performance.

Two major problems arise from the foregoing. These concern [1] two different interpretations or claims that Chomsky makes for competence and [2] his line of demarcation between competence and performance.

Neutral and stronger definitions of competence

Greene (1972) points out that Chomsky makes both a weaker, or

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neutral, and a stronger claim for linguistic competence, with very different implications. The neutral interpretation refers to the knowledge of a system of rules (a generative grammar) that in some explicit and well-defined way assigns structural descriptions to sentences. This is purely descriptive, and is not intended to say anything about the way in which the speaker-hearer actually constructs the output of such a system of rules (1965, pp. 8–9). But when Chomsky (1970) says: ‘A person who has learned a language has acquired a system of rules that relate sound and meaning in a certain specific way. He has, in other words, acquired a certain competence that he puts to use in producing and understanding speech’, he has moved to the stronger claim that the rules of grammar are internalised in the head of the speaker and provide the basis for his understanding of linguistic relations (Greene, 1972). This is also reflected in Chomsky (1965) where he says that a generative grammar ‘attempts to characterise in the most neutral possible terms the knowledge of the language that provides the basis for actual use of language by a speaker-hearer’. And, as Greene says, it is this stronger claim, that the system of rules (the underlying linguistic competence) is put to use in producing and understanding speech, that needs to be empirically tested.

Although some kind of competence may underlie the actual use of language, it does not necessarily follow that this consists of the rules of transformational grammar, at least not as formulated in the Standard Theory. Chomsky’s neutral definition of competence is not at issue here since it is purely descriptive; we are concerned with his stronger definition since it is offered as the basis for a theory of cognitive processes – for the actual use of language. As has been observed, such a claim must be subject to empirical validation, and insofar as there seems little evidence at present that the rules of TG (Standard Theory) represent how the mind operates, and, given that on the contrary such a process seems implausible in that the human mind appears to operate heuristically rather than algorithmically, any ‘stronger’ definition of this underlying linguistic competence must refer to a system of rules that has a form and is organised in a way that has psychological reality. Lockwood (1972) seems to be saying much the same thing when he writes to the effect that Stratificational Grammar starts from the premise that any model of competence must be plausible in terms of the principle that it must interact with performance.

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‘Although a distinction of this kind is undoubtedly both a theoretical and a methodological necessity in linguistics, it is by no means certain that Chomsky himself draws it in the right place. It can be argued that he describes as matters of “performance” (and, therefore, as irrelevant) a number of factors that should be handled in terms of “competence”’ (Lyons, 1970). Hymes, Jakobovits, Campbell and Wales, Widdowson, Cooper and others, all reject Chomsky’s restricted view of competence.

Hymes (1971) points out that Chomsky’s category of competence provides no place for competency for language use but neither does his category of performance, despite his equating language use with performance. This omits almost everything of sociocultural significance, concerning itself with psychological constraints to do with memory and perception, etc, rather than with social interaction. Also Chomsky’s notion of performance seems confused between actual performance and underlying rules of performance (e.g. stylistic rules of performance) which Hymes considers part of underlying competence. Jakobovits (1970) argues that social context selection rules are as necessary a part of the linguistic competence (non-Chomskyan sense) of a speaker as those in syntax with which we are familiar. Campbell and Wales (1970) accept Fodor and Garrett’s (1966) one clear sense of the distinction between competence and performance, i.e. ‘in which competence in any sphere is identified with capacity or ability, as opposed to actual performance, which may only imperfectly reflect underlying capacity’. But they point out that Chomsky’s competence omits by far the most important linguistic ability: ‘to produce or understand utterances which are not so much *grammatical* but, more important, *appropriate to the context in which they are made*’, and they continue ‘by “context” we mean both the situational and verbal context of utterances’.¹

One could go on, but the message is clear. ‘There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless’ (Hymes, 1971), so the notion of competence must be enlarged to include contextual appropriacy. As empirical evidence from sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics (cf. Laver, 1970 and 1973), and any other relevant discipline, indicates that the constraints they provide can be formalised as rules, one should extend or recast the concept of competence as performance-constrained competence, to include them –

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perhaps eventually to cover all rule-governed language behaviour.

The restriction of competence to perfect knowledge in a homogeneous speech community independent of sociocultural features is inadequate to account for language in use, for language as communication. These points are made and others taken up by Dell Hymes (see below) in his concept of communicative competence; but first mention should be made of a different conception of this term, as used by Jurgen Habermas, a leading social theorist interested in sociolinguistics, before turning to consider a different approach to the problem, that of Michael Halliday, who rejects the distinction between competence and performance as either misleading or irrelevant.

2. Habermas

Habermas (1970) preserves Chomsky’s distinction of competence and performance but criticises his conception of competence as a monological capability, on the grounds that it provides an inadequate basis for the development of general semantics and because it fails to take account of the essential dimension of communication (in a highly idealised sense). Let us look very briefly at these two points in turn.

Habermas argues that ‘universal meanings, which return in all natural languages, neither precede automatically all experience, nor are they necessarily rooted in the cognitive equipment of the human organism prior to all socialization. The universal distribution of meanings and even meaning components is not a sufficient criterion for the a priorism and monologism of general semantics strived for by the Chomsky school of linguistics.’ Habermas differentiates between ‘semantic universals which process experiences, and semantic universals which make this processing possible in the first place (i.e. a posteriori/a priori)’, and also between ‘semantic universals which precede all socialization, and semantic universals which are linked to the condition of potential socialization (monologic/intersubjective)’. He shows the four resultant classes as below.

Semantic universals

	<i>a priori</i>	<i>a posteriori</i>
intersubjective	dialogue-constitutive universals	cultural universals
monologic	universal cognitive schemes of interpretation	universals of perceptive and motivational constitution