

The Concordance between EFL Learners' Linguistic Sequential Development and the Curricula of Formal and Informal Learning Settings: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

This research explores the sequence of content in ESP curricula to our learners' linguistic development and to authentic situations. This study has been conducted in Alahsa College of Technology, Saudi Arabia. Methodology used was an analysis of an ESP textbook in corpus-based approach and matching the units of the textbook to students' needs analysis of observed real life situation in a car workshop. Results show that the content of the textbook, to some extent, meet the course objectives and students' needs in technical terms with some shortage in expanding the activities to be a functional simulation of an authentic environment regarding conversational and written skills.

Keywords: ESP, needs analysis, curriculum development

1. Introduction

Curricula are designed and constrained to formal environment of education which can be enhanced by certain facilities and feasible methodology. Especially with ESP courses, there is a separation, to some extent, between curricula content and authentic situations. This separation can lead to a lower curriculum functionality and compatibility to the sequential development of learners of English for specific purposes. According to Second language acquisition research, there are plenty of maxims and postulates which must be considered in order to implement successful methods of teaching that suit real situations. In this paper, a particular aspect of second language acquisition will be highlighted to examine the adherence of curriculum to its real application which is the authenticity of the written-spoken interaction. English for specific purposes (ESP) programs offer their courses with a diversity of textbooks and methodologies. This diversity creates, in some cases, optimal learning opportunities but result, in other cases, to ineffective outcomes. The conflict of such results presents a high demand to examine whether or not these curricula meet real ESP environment and situations.

Considering the linguistic aspects, conversational maxims proposed by Grice H (1989), speech act theory, and the sequence of linguistic development proposed by Pienemann Johnston and Brindley (1988), there is an increasing demand to conduct a painstaking research on this aspect leading to an adaptation act in some of current curricula of EFL settings in order to conform to the theoretical bases of second language acquisition (SLA). Change can take the form of either methodology adaptation or curriculum development.

Because this paper is intended to be carried out in a setting, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) Saudi Arabia, and Saudi teachers and supervisors of English always complain about the textbooks and attribute the students' slow development to the curricula, needs analysis is a necessary part of the solution to overcome the teachers' and supervisors' concerns.

2. Literature Review

There has been several studies, articles, books and research carried out to focus on the curricula content and its structure related to needs analysis. Lightbown and Spada (2006) listed the milestones and the developmental sequence of linguistic input to L2 learners. They stated three stages and sub-stages: grammatical morphemes, negation and questions (p. 4). They claim that learning a language must pass through certain processes in a particular sequence and in a certain chronology.

Troike (2006) sheds light on Krashen's input hypothesis and which is one factor of the three in this study. Troike is an advocate of Krashen's input hypothesis and believes that curriculum should be designed according to the rule of $i+1$ in order to stimulate the learners' cognitive abilities (p. 26).

Kaewpet (2009) carried out a similar study to the current pointing out how needs analysis is of much importance to methodology inside the classroom. This applies to all ESP, ELT and EFL. The sample was engineering students who studied ESP in a foreign language environment. There are some principles which were put in Kaewpet's study which are: give first priority to communication needs (oral skills), give equal importance to learning needs and take context into account. These principles show the extent of significance of needs analysis in ESP curricula in formal learning in order to maximize the authenticity. He also concludes that addressing the complaints of technical communication courses leads to better achievement of objectives. Moreover, after analysis of the courses, there is high irrelevancy between the content and the students' specialization.

Hossain (2013) also conducted a study aiming to reach the needs and of engineering students in writing and speaking skills in order to offer appropriate materials in class. The methodology used in his study was twenty close-ended questions in form of questionnaire to find out the students' perspectives and their needs based on their authentic confrontation. On the other side, he also analyzed the teacher's content and materials to match and compromise between students' expectations and their teacher's preparation. Major findings showed that they need to be taught communication intensively because they showed better writing skills than speaking abilities. Also classes should not be only on face-to-face basis but also internet and electronic learning has been recommended. The third point was the materials selection which need to be carefully selected and assigned based on the students' needs.

Gass (2012) used a mixed (quantitative- qualitative) methodology in his research employing questionnaire, observation, situational analysis and interviews. Encompassing all these analysis tools enlighten some areas where they should be discovered. His study was to find out the needs of English for nurses and exploring their proficiency. Gass asserted that some topics have to be focused in the course as a result of data collection through questionnaire and interviews. He added that "we found out that cultural aspects of English should also be included and provided". From the study, he affirms that he confined topics, syllable development and skills priority.

2.1 Krashen's Comprehensible Input

Krashen's comprehensible input as explained by Lester Loschky (1994) is that acquisition occurs when one is exposed to language that is comprehensible and that contains $i + 1$. (p. 305) The "i" represents the level of language already acquired, and the "+1" is a metaphor for language (words, grammatical forms, aspects of pronunciation) that is just a step beyond the level. This model serves the learner to gain new aspects as they improve in their linguistic competence to go through levels with considerable mastery of the language domains simultaneously.

2.2 Developmental Sequence

Developmental sequence in learning languages as described by Baily, Madden and Krashen can be summarized as follows:

Morphemes (see Krashen 1977 for a review), subject-auxiliary inversion in English questions (Ravem 1974; Wode 1981), word order rules in German (Pienemann, 1980; Meisel, Clahsen, & Pienemann, 1981), etc. But there is evidence from other research to suggest that while acquisition sequences are determined in part by linguistic universals or characteristics of the target language, they are also affected by the native language of the learners (Mace-Matluck, 1979; Schumann, 1979; Wode, 1981). To make matters even more complicated, there may be considerable individual variation in acquisition sequences, based possibly on different learning (acquisition) strategies, and differences within languages such that some systems of a given language will be acquired in a predictable sequence whereas others are not subject to any particular acquisition sequence. The latter would show variable patterns of acquisition, dependent upon affective and language contact factors (Meisel, Clahsen, & Pienemann, 1981).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Question

Do Technical English curricula best adhere to the learners' needs regarding linguistic sequential development?

3.2 Data Collection and Sample

To examine The ESP curricula taught in Alahsa College of Technology, data have been collected from the

textbook, observing an authentic situation in a workshop and from the students' department syllabi. The book is technical English for students of vehicles. The first five units of the book are extracted and analyzed descriptively. A short conversation between two persons in a workshop is also recorded and analyzed.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Analysis of the Textbook (Technical English for Vehicles Dept.)

After working on a quantitative count of reading, technical terms and vocabulary in the first five units of the textbook, the researcher recorded technical terms, exercises and observing real conversation for a mechanic in a workshop interacting with a client. The numbers show interesting outcome which can be considered as an indicator of whether or not Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis is applied and matched to the content of the textbook. Also there will be a questioning if there is a harmony between a textbook content and an authentic situational conversation in a workshop. Table 1 below illustrates a sequential development of the linguistic input throughout the first five units of the textbook.

Table 1. Corpus analysis of linguistic aspects in the textbook (units 1- 5)

	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5
Reading (word count)	0	54	59	112	132
Vocabulary (word count)	10	8	5	5	6
Technical terms (word count)	24	8	9	18	35

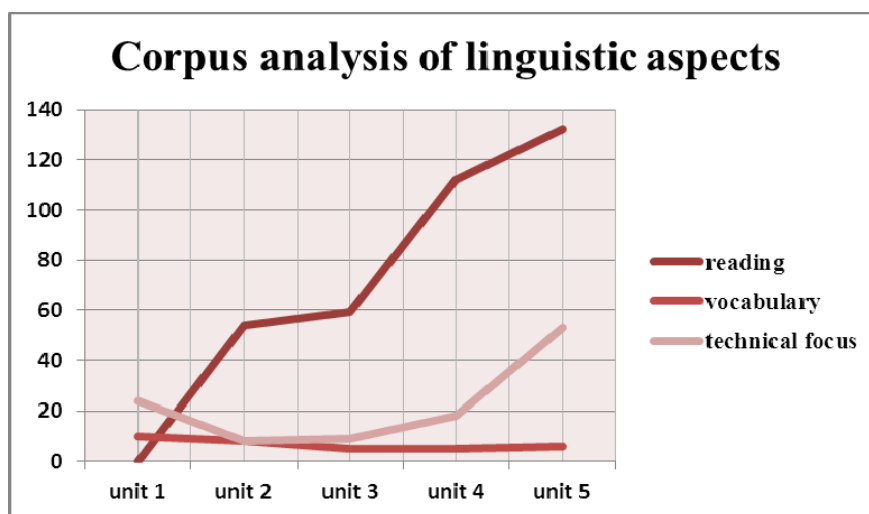


Figure 1. Linguistic development in the textbook

Having an overview to Figure 1, it can be said that this textbook offers big leaps in reading graduality in which unit one has no reading at all while unit two and three contain reading of 54 and 59 words respectively. Unit four and five show the range of 112 and 132 words in their reading quantity. This may break the smooth sequence which fits $i+1$ model. Chun and Nation (2003 as cited from Hou) "observed, when specialized vocabulary words constitute as much as 30% of a text, it is difficult for students to acquire these words" (p. 34).

The descriptive data shown in table 1 illustrate a situation in which students are exposed to reading skills increasingly by % 102 in two weeks based on quantity. There must be a smooth, gradual rising of reading quantity based on the students' level. The quantity of the word count in the reading is not as significant as the frequency of words and theme of the topic. For example, even reading can be simulated to situational activities in form of discussions, description and active reading activities. Regarding vocabulary and technical focus can be also seen in figure 1 as a normal advancement which conforms to Krashen's $i+1$ model. The gradual development is smooth and balanced where students can catch up with successfully.

A major aspect to be addressed is relating content and expanding it according to $i+1$ model. For example, in an

exercise of technical terms, they should be expanding to form questions and answers in a role play activity which enhances more practical aspect of the learning process. Thus, in a technical college or vocational training centers, ESP content should meet the needs of authentic situations as well as the department materials of the students.

4.2 Needs Analysis by Observing a Real Conversation

An excerpt from the observed conversation in a garage is as follows:

Customer: Hi

Mechanic: Hi

Customer: I have a problem in the car.

Mechanic: Describe the problem.

Customer: When I push the brakes, there is a strange sound. I think it comes out from the brakes.

Mechanic: Oh Ok, we can check the pads and figure it out. You can wait for 30 minutes while we check it out.

Some other questions and phrases are also observed:

Customer to Boss: How long does it need to get done?

Boss to Mechanic: Check the problems and refer to the car owner.

Boss to Mechanic: He will bring spare parts or we do?

Mechanic to Boss: Engine leak, brakes need to be replaced.

Table 2. Linguistic components detected in both formal and informal settings

	Writing	Reading	Speaking & Listening	Vocabulary	Technical Terms
Textbook (1st five units)	1 exercise about job description	-Assembly process	-What is this called? -answer about fixings		Tools Surf board parts
	-	- radio	-size and quantity		Fixings
	Comparison between production	- directions	-phone message -conversation about tools	Notes 9% covers grammatical and language exercises	Repair verbs Tool parts
		- joysticks	- directions - listen to numbers		Special directions
		- multi-tools	-driving instructions		Joystick parts
	%	2%	31%	37.5%	18%
Workshop conversation	Writing Three lines in a car repair report (basic info + Diagnosis + suggested spare parts and handwork)	Basic info in the report + technical symbols such as negative and positive	-Listening to questions from customers and answering them and giving suggestions. -Describing problems and asking for diagnosis.	Push problem sound come out check replace spare parts leak need	Engine brakes pads
	%	11 %	10%	79%	

Table 2 shows the linguistic skills needed in a workshop and the skills covered in the textbook. There is an obvious gap in the content and the amount of each skill. For instance, writing, speaking and listening skills are used in real life more than in formal setting while reading is intensified in the textbook much more than in a workshop. Noticeably, technical terms used in the book highlight more subsidiary terms which are not helpful in

a hydraulic or vehicle workshops. However, verbs and tools are very important and relevant in professional situations. Based on the recorded conversations and observation done in the workshop, the formal curricula should focus more on interrogation to be practiced and how to answer relevantly.

Here we start to answer the research question which is: Do Technical English curricula best adhere to the learners' needs regarding linguistic sequential development?

Observing the conversations and terms used in the students' department was the first step followed by job market needs analysis. When comparing the units of the textbook and the observed real conversation in a workshop, it can be concluded that there is, to some extent, a mismatch between what is taught inside the classroom and the real situations. Here is a summary of the differences:

1) The introductory question-answer dialogue is essential and required while this is not employed functionally in the book as authenticity is not high. Stephen Krashen's model ($i+1$) is not employed in the right way in the book while it is needed to proceed in conversational skills.

When the researcher was observing a conversation, the first linguistic interaction was a spoken conversation between a customer and a mechanic. Therefore, it is suggested that in the book there are drills learning for a conversation and then to direct it into meaningful follow ups. For example, when we teach a trainee the question: *When was it brought?*, a teacher can use it as a primary pattern to start meaningful practices such as *"When do you want it?"* or *"when do you come to pick it up?"*. Unfortunately, this type of development in most textbooks is absent.

2) Technical terms are required in both settings and this is achieved already. The book covers most of the technical words needed but there is a need for reinforcement and sequencing the same theme through the units. For example, the book should be designed and developed with more authentic materials rather than jumping from vehicles to airspace or joystick parts.

3) Some reading passages in the book do not contain the direct instructions which can be utilized in a car garage or workshops. Formal settings like a traditional classroom is not enough for teaching ESP courses if success is sought. In technical colleges and vocational training centers, ESP classrooms are usually in easy access to workshops of other departments. Therefore, taking some classes in the workshops will help students in understanding what is going on in intermediate and advanced reading passages as well as will facilitate to create speaking opportunities. Also, it is recommended for a teacher to visit a real site to observe what language is needed to be transferred into a classroom.

4) Grammar is highlighted in the book while it is needed to be a facilitator for conversations. This leads to grammar focus rather than speaking skills. Therefore, grammar should be employed to ignite conversational activities.

5) Based on the real observation in the workshop, the most important skills are ranked as follows: listening/speaking, technical terms, then writing. In the formal setting, there is a sufficiency of the technical terms and writing with lack of contextualized, sequenced theme. In the field observation, a major aspect of writing was technical report writing. However, in the textbook this type of practice is absent. Moreover, reading is highlighted in formal learning while it is not as significant as the other skills for a future mechanic.

It cannot be said that the textbook used in Alahsa College of Technology is defective. However, slight modifications should occur in the next edition. Also, teachers of ESP should employ and adapt the activities, exercises and topics in a methodology based on needs analysis of the students. A suggested sequence for English for vehicles is to concentrate on the prominent three skills based on the observation conducted by the researcher. Speaking and listening skills, technical terms and writing skills will be on the focus, since initial stage of interaction among customers, mechanics and managers includes spoken conversations which carry technical terms, such as spare parts and functions of the car elements. Finally, writing a report about the problems found and actions to be taken can be done for each case in a workshop. In classrooms, technology and tools can facilitate active lessons and lead to effective class. But there is still a need for practical parts to be fulfilled in an authentic context to simulate real situations. Albaqshi and AlShakhs (2015) confirm a considerable challenge would occur when practice and authentic teaching come too late after the completion of theoretical preparation (p. 35).

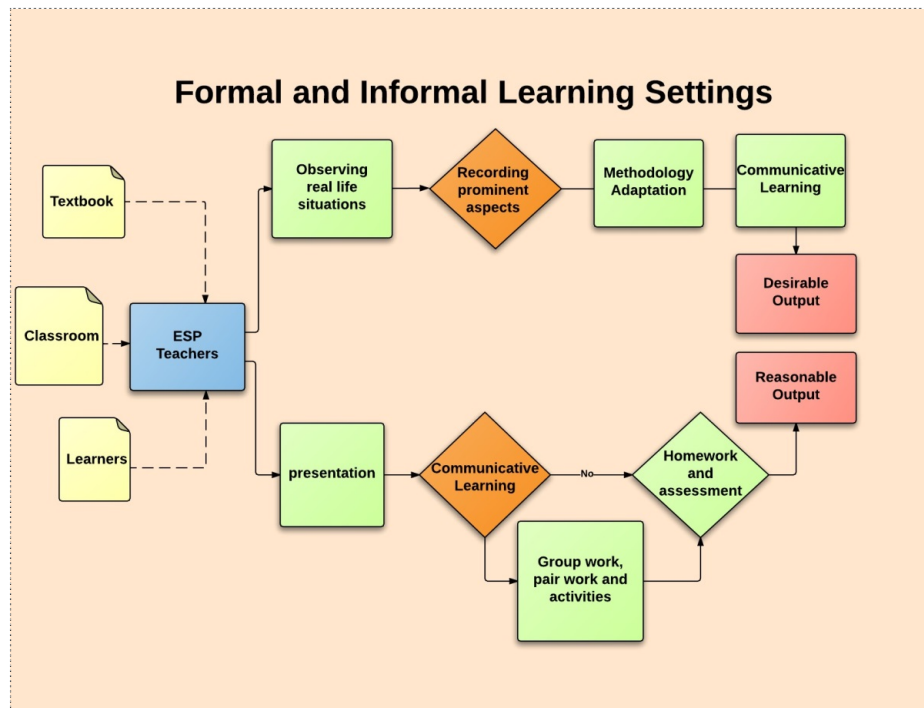


Figure 2. Needs Analysis-based approach vs. traditional ESP courses

Figure 2 has two paths for ESP teachers which can advance learners' linguistic development in different outcome quality. Input factors (learners, classroom and textbook) are essential components for formal learning in which a teacher can approach a traditional method using these components to start a presentation and to delve into communicative learning or traditional discussions, homework and assessment. This usually lead to reasonable output of learning. The other path which supported by Krashen's input hypothesis (1985 cited from Gulzar, Gulnaz, & Ijaz, 2014) which "noticed that older language learners learn more by having more comprehensible input" (p. 136). Undoubtedly, a context of authentic situations usually unifies its components of vocabulary, theme, technical terms, reading materials, writing and even oral skills. This makes linguistic input more comprehensible because of the high relation and frequency of its parts. This helps to achieve more comprehensibility and intelligibility for adult learners as mentioned by Krashen above. When teachers choose to observe an authentic context at the beginning of teaching an ESP course, they will raise their awareness of their learners' needs and what real content they will encounter in their future jobs. Therefore, these teachers can adapt, extend, focus and modify their methodology, pedagogical practices and skills concentration accordingly.

5. Conclusion

This paper came out to explore how smooth is the gradualism in an ESP textbook. From the results and outcome, it is concluded that gradualism is appropriate in technical focus and vocabulary presentation. However, reading passages levels uplifting does not conform fully to Krashen's input hypothesis (i+1). Thus, reading skills presentation should be considered in less aggressive flow especially to EFL learners, since they need to have more usable skills to master in order to functionally communicate in the field. Overall, there is a considerable portion of curricula which adheres to the learners' development but still there is a gap in the gradualism regarding the reading skill and speaking skill development. This also applies to general English course as teachers teach and train students on some patterns and drills but it can be a surprising fact when these teachers observe their students out there in reality and find them talk differently. It cannot be said that curricula are developed and designed inefficiently, but teachers need to consider how the content of a textbook can be manipulated to function efficiently in situational interaction. This can be performed by observing an authentic environment. Therefore, ESP courses should be more focused and narrowed to specific jobs to enable learners expand their linguistic abilities within their field of expertise rather than offering a variety of topics which serve more than one major.

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