EAP in multi-discipline classes: An experience

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ABSTRACT

This article will share how a non-curriculum-planned English for Academic Purposes (EAP) approach was designed, sneaked in, instrumented and assessed in an English for General Purposes (EGP) undergraduate course in a multi-discipline class at undergraduate level in Argentina.

Keywords: EAP; multi-discipline; motivation; materials

RESUMEN

Este artículo comparte la manera en que se diseñó un enfoque no planificado para inglés con fines académicos, y cómo fue incluido, implementado, y evaluado en un curso universitario de inglés con fines generales en una clase multi-disciplinaria en Argentina.

Palabras clave: EAP; multi-disciplina; motivación; materiales

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AS TEACHERS AT educational institutions, we are not always in a position to make all the decisions regarding the classes we conduct due to the fact that complex multifaceted institutional aspects penetrate curriculum design and impact on its implementation. There are moments, however, when teachers *feel* that trying an alternative approach may prove to be a suitable course of action in order to move from a static curriculum conceived as a finished product to a dynamic and constantly-evolving one conceived as a process (Knight, 2001) with the ultimate objective of better adapting to students' needs. This article will share how a non-curriculum-planned English for Academic Purposes -EAP-approach was designed, sneaked in, instrumented and assessed in an English for General Purposes -EGP-undergraduate course in a multi-discipline class at undergraduate level in Argentina.

The Context

English is a mandatory annual subject for all degrees at the Universidad Católica Argentina (UCA), Facultad Teresa de Ávila, with two levels, name it English I and English II by the end of which undergraduates achieve an A1 English level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. Usually students take English I between their first and second year at the university and English II between their third and fourth year of studies. Initially, English courses at the UCA were discipline-oriented so that Law students would attend a Legal English reading-comprehension class, Psychology and Educational Psychology students would have their purposefully-designed reading-comprehension English course and so would do International Affairs and Political Science students. In time, the University entered an expansionist process by means of which four more degrees were incorporated to its educational offer (Notary Public, Accounting, Economics and Human Resources Management) resulting in a significant increase in students enrollment and a growing complexity in fields of study. At present, the number of students in an English class can be as high as 60 people at the beginning of the academic year though an average of 40 reach the second semester. There is only one EFL tenured teacher per course, however, TWO graduate teacher assistants (GTA) had been incorporated the year this project was implemented, 2017. Facing this new context, the University authorities instructed that the foreign language teaching approach should be EGP so that in one single English class students of different disciplines could take the same course. The underlying reason was that schedule arrangements for offering discipline-oriented courses for all new fields of study could not be possibly implemented.

Students' Needs

English is the chosen foreign language at the UCA as well as most universities from non-English-speaking countries as part of their curricula for simple and powerful reasons: it is the language of science and the modern world's *lingua franca*. At long last, its teaching at higher education should provide students with a handful of tools for accessing,

understanding and processing academic and/or professional contents of their interest and necessity, and, ideally, for producing knowledge if an international scope is pursued. Considering that English teaching at the UCA was covering general purposes but not specific ones the EFL practitioners understood that undergraduates might be lacking some skills which allow for academic or professional genre understanding in the foreign language. Analogously, a question raised: Did students consider that being able to comprehend and process academic pieces in English was an asset to acquire at University? So as to give a proper answer a survey was conducted whose sample covered 90% of the students' population attending English I and English II. Most of them, 53.9%, expressed that they would like to have a blended EGP and EAP instruction; 29.7% would prefer just EGP, and 16.4% considered that just EAP was the desirable choice. Given the facts, teacher's and students' perception intersected in that EAP instruction was needed to complement the current EGP approach.

The Procedure

Embedding an EAP approach to complement a multi-disciplinary course which was originally designed as an A1 general-purpose class posits considerable challenges to EFL lecturers: discipline specificity, language level, content selection and time constraints.

Discipline Specificity

EAP is agreed to have certain characteristics such as being goal oriented and subject specific. It assumes some previous knowledge of the L2 and is designed to meet learners needs in relation to their academic or professional environment (Robinson, 1991). One of the major feats is detecting what specific contents undergraduates of different fields of study need to handle and how to bring them together into a single classroom setting.

Subject specificity was tackled following what Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) suggested is the common-core of EAP, i.e. cross curricular subjects, text genres and text functions which serve as the basis for groups of disciplines. To exemplify, Law, International Affair, Notary Public and Political Sciences have much in common. A similar scenario occurs with Psychology and Educational Psychology, or among Accounting, Economics and Human Resources Management. Thus, the scope can be reduced to three broad branches instead of nine specific ones, making it possible to address the English teaching approach needed for academic or professional purposes.

Students' L2 level

Despite the fact that 95% of the undergraduates the UCA had the subject English across all the years of their secondary studies, very few can achieve a level higher than A1. At the beginning of their studies undergraduates are offered the possibility of taking a computer-based English achievement test. It mainly consists of multiple-choice exercises that assess

communication skills, grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension corresponding to an A1 plus level. It is a little above a regular A1 level since it incorporates some, though not most, features of an A2 level. Passing this test, which can be taken just once during the degree, means being freed from attending English I and English II and getting a passing mark. Most novices decide not to take it, however, maybe because they are not confident enough to even trying it. It must be noticed that failing to achieve a passing mark in this exam does not bring about any consequences for students because its results are neither publicly displayed nor registered in academic records. From those who do take the test, only a 35% passes it. Consequently, undergraduates' English entry level could be named as a starters level, though certainly their interlanguages differ from person to person.

For the sake of embedding EAP into the EGP course it seemed sensible to do it towards the end of the English II course so that all students would have at least a basic understanding of the L2, which facilitates grasping more complex language chunks such as the ones present in academic or professional contexts.

Content Selection and Time Constrains

Around reaching the end of the second English course and having completed the syllabus some time before the expected date, the remaining four classes of the academic year were disposed for trying an EAP teaching intervention.

Having only a few classes available thoughtful content planning was mandatory. An EAP experienced lecturer and author was consulted, N. A. Gigena of Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos. In terms of texts selection Gigena (personal communication, October 17, 2017) coincided with Dudley-Evans and St. John in that common-core texts are preferable in the described teaching-learning context. Additionally, the scholar suggested resourcing from texts of fields such as Anthropology, Philosophy or Ethics, which are cross-curricular, to introduce key features which she regards as essential to academic/professional genres comprehension:

- noun phrase and verb phrase analysis and resolution in Spanish
- modal verbs appraisal, and
- -ing cases correct interpretation and translation into the L1

According to Gigena, learners' motivation is the driving force behind the teaching approach and contextualization of EAP courses. As she stated (Gigena, 2010, p. 431),

> [students' motivation] is the reason why EFL practitioners should efficiently integrate into the L2 curriculum objectives and tasks which can be perceived as valuable by learners. This will be achieved if the objectives and tasks succeed in reflecting students' needs and interests in connection with the degree they pursue.

Implementation

Initially, an authentic descriptive text about Anthropology was selected and reading comprehension activities were designed as an introduction to the present the new contents. The same text was used for all three broad branches which will be referred as Law, Psychology and Economics. The exercises students had to resolve were a traditional True, False of Not in the Text activity followed by comprehension questions produced in the L2 but which were meant to be answered in the L1. Especially this last type of task presents a significant challenge: interpreting in the L2 and translating into the L1.

Even when able to understand the general idea of the text, giving more precise answers in Spanish proved to be hard for the learners. This difficulty was the trigger to introduce the planned contents and some translation techniques. First, the noun phrase was introduced, considering cases of pre and post-modification and its resolution in growing levels of complexity. A simple chunk was extracted from the text which served as a kick start, then gaps were given for students to complete which implied applying their previous knowledge and new items, the ones to be introduced, were already given. This can be better understood with an extract from the exercise whose aim was teaching noun phrase pre-modification translation:

1. human <u>societies</u> (line 3): sociedades _____
2. modern human <u>societie</u>s: sociedades _____ _____
3. these modern human <u>societies</u>: _____ sociedades _____ _____
4. those old and modern human <u>societies</u>: _____ sociedades _____ _____y antiguas
5. studied human <u>societies</u>: sociedades _____ _____
6. extensively studied human <u>societies</u>: sociedades _____ ampliamente _____
   sociedades _____ _____ ampliamente
7. developing countries human <u>societies</u>: las sociedades _____ de _____ en desarrollo

In number 1 above the phrase *human societies* was retrieved from the text as indicates the parenthesis which shows its line location. Students were told that to start translating they had to identify the head of the phrase which could be detected by answering to the question: What is the phrase *talking* about? The head was then underlined by students so as to remember it was the starting point. The next sentences though not directly from the text, are adaptations of the original version which were designed to present aspects of a noun phrase pre-modification that can be challenging such as word order in examples 2, 3 and 4, the past participle *studied* in number 5, the possibility of the double location of the adverb *extensively* in number 6, and the translation of the present participle *developing* in phrase number 7. However, elements of the phrase which students were already acquainted with were left for them to complete, for example the demonstratives *these* and *those*. Once a new

element was introduced, it was then not given resolved in the next phrases, for example the past participle *studied* was given in number 5, but not in its next appearance in number 6. The rationale for such a methodology lies in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory (as cited in Daniels, 2005) which recommends departing from prior knowledge to increasingly incorporate new contents in growing degrees of complexity.

The same methodology was implemented for the presentation of techniques to identify, understand and translate noun phrases post-modification, simple and complex verb phrases including passive voice, and modal verbs. The work with these contents occupied two of the four classes available.

For the third class students were divided into the three broad fields Law, Psychology and Economy to be assigned authentic descriptive texts according to each of the mentioned disciplines, yet the type and number of tasks was the same: answering comprehension questions in the L1, a true or false, then resolution of noun phrases and verb phrases followed by the translation of a paragraph. Undergraduates worked in peers, and once finished, they were urged to contrast their answers with other students' to build their self-confidence. After that, each member of the teaching team, i.e. the tenured teacher plus the 2 GTAs, took charge of a subject field to check the answers by alternating between asking for volunteers and randomly choosing learners to answer. At the end of the class the learners were asked to gather in groups of four or five and select a book review in English connected to their professional interest and e-mail it to the professor who assessed their suitability for working with them the next and last lecture. Book reviews seemed the natural next step to descriptive texts due to being one of the shortest academic genres. Since elaborating activities for several different texts - there was a total of 9 - is often a hard-to-accomplish challenge due to time-management reasons, generic questions were produced that applied to all book reviews alike. All questions were written in English but asked to be responded in Spanish. Some examples were:

Who wrote the book?
What is the name of the book?
Who is the reviewer?
What is the book about?

Next, students were instructed to translate into Spanish the topic sentence of each paragraph. To conclude, each group had to express whether the reviewer had a positive impression of the book and whether they would find it useful for their studies and consider buying it. As a follow-up, learners socialised the tasks resolutions with the whole class making use of ICTs. Power Point or Prezi presentations were elaborated either in the classroom with students' own mobiles or at the university's computer lab.

The assessment of such a variety of texts being all instrumented in parallel just in a single class resulted to be a huge and exciting challenge at the same time. In the lapse of two

weeks -which was the time span between class 3 and class 4- each teacher read 3 out of the 9 reviews and produced suggested keys. That process involved going deep into unfamiliar specialist terms and concepts to be able to give proper responses to students' possible doubts. During the fourth class, learners worked on the texts in teams and after elaborating the ICT-mediated answers shared them first with the teacher who had dealt with their topic and next with the whole class.

Conclusion

It is too well known that teaching-learning contexts are anything but simple scenarios. Moreover, when the content to be taught and learnt is a language, both protagonists -learners and teachers- are presented with an extra challenge, that of the code of communication. Notwithstanding class size, all English courses entail a certain level of disparity between students' language goals and attainment levels. However, as Pulverness acknowledges it, the "[d]emands on the teacher common to any teaching situation -in terms of classroom management, involving and motivating students, attending to individual learning styles- are magnified exponentially in the large class" (2017, p. 2). While attempting to cater for the English linguistic needs of undergraduates in large mixed-discipline courses, as it is the case at UCA, Pulverness' assertion becomes premonitory.

What triggered the search for an alternative, meddled EFL teaching approach was the perception that undergraduates needed to be given resources that would empower them to successfully cope with career-specific materials. It goes without saying that being able to read authentic texts is not enough in covering all future graduates' needs. It was, however, the path chosen according to content prioritization and time constraints in an attempt to bridge the gap between the official curricula and uncovered contents which the EFL lecturers perceived as crucial for future professionals.

Since there is an unresolved dispute about EAP teaching methodology (Pulverness, 2017), it seemed sensible to implement some guidelines proposed by Dudley-Evans and St John's common-core approach and Gigena's valuable experience in contexts closer to UCA's reality. Thus, text genre selection reflected typical job-related pieces in English and content presentation was triggered by the need of achieving reading comprehension. The fields of study were grouped into three broad categories with shared groundings to obtain a nearer proximity to subject specificity. Students' engagement was encouraged by making them select texts of their own interest and assess their purpose, understanding that "given the difficulty of identifying the right material the best source of such texts, may well be the students themselves" (Pulverness, 2017, p. 7). Technology was an ever present aid across the whole process. The use of devices such as e-dictionaries, translators, Power Point and Prezi software among others, was not only allowed but fostered. We understand that the ICTs must take part in the EFL class for two main reasons. On the one hand, students will profit from

their usefulness; on the other, they will become aware that tech tools cannot be blindly relied upon but demand users' constant and careful supervision.

To sum up, it can be said that implementing an EAP approach in a mixed-discipline undergraduate class with an original EGP curriculum demanded extra time and dedication in terms of teaching and assessment strategies, material selection and teacher training, yet it was a most rewarding experience. After classes had finished students answered a survey about the relevance they assigned to the contents studied throughout the whole academic year in the English course. More than half of them, a 56%, expressed that the most important content taught to them had been interpreting and translating career-specific texts from English into Spanish, curiously, the one which was not in the curriculum.

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