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# CHALLENGES IN SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR ESP COURSES I / II (FOR STUDENTS OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZADAR)

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*Course development and syllabus design as a process within course development are frequently discussed issues within LSP. This paper strives to show the challenges that two ESP teachers faced in designing the most adequate syllabus for English for the Humanities and Social Sciences first year undergraduate students at the Centre for Foreign Languages (University of Zadar) within the given teaching context and in reference to its students' learning needs. The paper also shows how the challenges were approached and tackled. This paper can have implications for ESP/EAP teachers considering course development, syllabus design and materials development.*

**Key words:** *syllabus design, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), course development, ESP learners.*

## 1. Introduction

The educational changes that occurred with the Bologna process in Europe affected Croatian tertiary education, and it was because of the new demands in terms of the foreign language requirements that the University of Zadar founded Centre for Foreign Languages in 2006. Amongst numerous courses for foreign languages, the Centre also offers Language for Specific Purposes courses (LSP), English and German for specific purposes. Some of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses continued following previous traditions before the Centre was founded (e.g. English for Maritime studies), while most of the others had to be developed, such as the course in English for the Humanities and Social Sciences for first-year undergraduate students. The new course had to be developed on the basis of the Centre's programme which is designed to aid students' acquisition of academic and professional English at the university level (Program Centra, 2006). Design of the course and the syllabus that will be presented in this paper took years and several ESP teachers until it reached its present form. It is the aim of the authors to portray all of the challenges and issues that they had to face and overcome in finding the most adequate design that would satisfy students' needs and be in line with the programme of the Centre.

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The paper will first describe the background under which the course in question was developed. Then, it will attempt to define the syllabus by recognising its distinctive features. It will also show the challenges which led to the changes in the syllabus design, together with the rationale and the outline of the suggested structure. Finally, the implications for future work to those interested in the matter will be addressed.

## **2. Background**

If we refer to the four types of English for Academic purposes (EAP) situations that Dudley-Evans and St John use to describe different situations in which EAP teaching may occur worldwide, then we recognise our teaching as Situation 4 “in which all the students’ subject courses are taught in the national language, but English is included in the timetable” (Dudley-Evans, T. and St John, M. 1998, p.39). This would mean that our ESP course is to be taught in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. In order to understand the circumstances under which the course and its syllabus were created and designed, it is also important to look at the institutional procedures that led to this course development.

The Centre for Foreign Languages provides language-related services to the departments within the University of Zadar. The departments suggest the duration of the course and the year of study in which the intended language is to take place, as well as the ECTS credits to be awarded upon course completion. However, the content of the course is left entirely to the Centre and its ESP teachers. Currently, English for the Humanities and Social Sciences (course codes JEO101-winter semester and JEO102-summer semester) is an obligatory ESP course carrying 2 ECTS credits per semester taken by first-year undergraduate students in Archaeology, Philosophy, History, Information Science and Pedagogy in the duration of two semesters. The students from other departments (Art History, Sociology, Geography, and language departments other than English) can take the course as an elective with the same requirements. At present, the English for the Humanities and Social Sciences course is comprised of eight different groups of students (120 students all together) according to their study group, held by two ESP teachers, developers of the course in question. The course comprises 15 teaching units per semester; ESP classes are held once a week for 90 minutes. In order to take the course, the students are required to have been studying English for a minimum of eight years in their previous primary and secondary education. The majority of our students take the higher level of State English exam (Matura) and are therefore expected to be at least at the B1 / Intermediate level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

## **3. English for the Humanities and Social Sciences – syllabus design**

By researching theories on ESP course design, we discovered that defining our syllabus was a rather difficult task. Since it evolved over a longer period of time, it is difficult to recognise a prevailing methodology, approach to language learning or materials design, as it did not merely follow one clear course design pattern. This is a direct consequence of addressing the issues that have been identified during the implementation and teaching of the course, and trying to mitigate the problems. In frequent re-evaluations of the course aims, content and materials, our main goals were to be responsive to observed difficulties and create a

viable programme as most similar programmes that regard change as integral part do (Stoller, 2001, p. 208).

Before defining the syllabus and analysing how certain problems were tackled, it is worth mentioning here that defining the very course as ESP, EAP or ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) was not an easy task either. Knowing that ESP courses narrow their focus (Basturkmen, 2010, p.18), how narrow this focus really should be was an ongoing discussion among course developers. In the absence of a needs analysis (as explained in detail later), the course's focus width has changed over time, experimenting with a wide-angle approach to a more specific approach, until finally the current combination of both (ESAP) was achieved. Therefore, the course is best described as English for specific academic purposes. Although its Croatian translation remains as *Strani jezik struke*, and its official translation is English for Specific Purposes, this poses some initial difficulties as students starting on this course often expect a narrower focus than they get.

The initial syllabus design was shaped by the institutional template format that required precise definition of learning goals, as well as a 15-week instruction description, with reference to materials. The learning goals (defined quite broadly), which the authors inherited with the current course in question, have not changed much; rather, they were translated to more precise learning outcomes. The course content and materials, on the other hand, have changed drastically. By analysing the latest version of the syllabus, it could perhaps be defined as both product and process-oriented (Nunan, 1988, p.27-61) as it focuses on achieving defined learning outcomes, but simultaneously (or possibly) paying even more attention to the learning process, as it strives to enable all of the students to become successful achievers within their possibilities (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991, p.70).

In terms of course content, we have not set about analysing any specific specialist discourse; still, genre analysis marked the real and carrier content (Dudley Evans and St John, 1998, p.11), and entire course design, with special attention given to features of formal academic writing and academic papers.

## **4. Syllabus design challenges**

As our course development and syllabus design is primarily based on our ESP teaching experience, we would like to show how it is that we came to the design of our syllabus as it is today and what challenges and problems we had to overcome along the way. In this section we are going to address the issue of needs analysis as the fundamentals of ESP course design and our approach and solution to the challenges which led to the present-day syllabus.

### **4.1. Needs analysis**

If the task of ESP is to satisfy learners' needs in terms of language and communication skills of their field of study or occupation/workplace enabling them to function effectively within those chosen communities, then it is the aim of ESP course designers to investigate those needs (Basturkmen, 2010, p.16). It is therefore no surprise that many established authors within ESP and EAP claim the needs analysis as one of the most important elements of

any ESP/EAP course development process (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998; Stoller, 2001; Basturkmen, 2006; Basturkmen, 2010; Flowerdew, 2013). Basturkmen (2010) states that the needs analysis process consists of: “target situation analysis, discourse analysis, present situation analysis, learner factor analysis, and teaching context analysis” (p.19).

Even though we did not formally comply with the stated needs analysis procedures, our approach to syllabus design incorporated all of the mentioned analysis elements as we frequently discussed them in order to find the best solution for the benefit of the students; and simultaneously paying attention to all the restrictions (or challenges) we noticed. As we have opted for a wide-angle approach, we committed to ongoing course revisions and evaluations in which we try to grasp both our students’ and our “perceptions of effectiveness” of the course (Basturkmen, 2010, p. 65).

Our course design is mainly based on our experience and our classroom practices. Being quite realistic in admitting several failed attempts, we truly believe that we have found the right *formula* for our present situation, and have realised that we need to continue working on understanding students’ “linguistic, academic and acculturation needs of our students” (Stoller, 2001, p.209), and accept the possibility that the course will remain an ongoing process indeterminably.

In answering the initial question, suggested by many needs analyses: *What do our students need English for?*, we came to a rather discouraging conclusion that our students will need academic English in a more distant future, and thus will not be able to transfer the knowledge and skills gained within the ESP course to a broader academic context of their study programme. The only segment where some of them (not all students) will need English skills during the course of their studies, is reading authentic materials as some of them are given study materials in English. It would perhaps seem logical to focus the course on reading comprehension skills. However, we have opted to focus on writing skills, and in this way integrate reading comprehension as one segment of many. We tried to use this opportunity with the students in order to share with them the basics of academic skills, and in connection to humanities and social sciences, writing was among the most important ones. Students were still frequently reminded that general academic skills are applicable in all academic contexts, regardless of the language they used. Thus, we attempted to go beyond language and encourage the transferability of the gained knowledge and skills (Knezović, 2016, p.3).

#### **4.2. Textbooks**

Materials design in ESP is not usually a step in syllabus design that is developed or discussed immediately after conducting a needs analysis; and commercial textbooks are also rarely used as materials in a course (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p.106). However, in describing the process of syllabus design, it is necessary to mention this topic along the other challenges we encountered. When we started teaching this course, we inherited both the course and the syllabus as a *final product*. Initially, the course greatly relied on a textbook, but we soon realised that these textbooks (both General English and EAP) did not satisfy our students’ learning needs. The textbooks were either linguistically simplistic, too advanced for our students, or demotivating in terms of content as the texts did not relate to the students’

field of study or interest. Once we decided to discard the commercial textbook, we analysed the elements of our version of the needs analysis and initiated a syllabus design.

Therefore, among the observed challenges was also the choice of materials to use. The decision was made not to use any of the commercial textbooks, and focus on in-house materials development. Our approach to material development could be described as rather pragmatic, since the winning combination was found by using authentic materials (such as academic papers, and book chapters) and students' own written materials (assignments used for feedback practice). It is important to stress here that the course's focus gradually was narrowed to academic writing, also partly due to this challenge in materials development, and partly because it was recognised as a primary issue that we needed to address in terms of our learners' needs, as mentioned earlier.

### **4.3. Mixed disciplines groups**

Another challenge in relation to defining the course programme were groups with students from various disciplines attending a class together because of their department timetables (e.g. Information Science, Geography, Philosophy or similar). Such a situation required a lot of preparation on the teacher's behalf, and an inability to attend to all of the students' learning needs was a key consequence of this situation, which resulted in their lack of motivation to learn and participate during class. When asked on various informal occasions about the ESP course they attended (usually after the semester or at the end of the academic year), the students' perception was that the course was not related to their fields of study and they often stressed the lack of domain-specific vocabulary (technical vocabulary). It is our impression that they expected us to teach them their own disciplines in English. However, focusing entirely on disciplinary discourse with mixed-discipline groups and first-year students was not an option for us. In that sense, we agree with Flowerdew (2019, p.55) that it would be more reasonable to define the discourse once the students define the discipline community they wish to belong to at a postgraduate level.

Narrowing the focus of our course to academic writing was partly related to this issue as we found a recipe to satisfy everyone's *taste* within the group by focusing the work on authentic materials as well as the students' own writing, creating thus what Flowerdew (2016, p.13) refers to as a "hybrid approach" to students' writing, giving students the opportunity to observe and adapt to their discipline-specific texts. In this way, we address both general linguistic and academic needs (formal language features and writing skills) as well as the more specific needs regarding academic disciplines (such as specific terminology and specific topics) (Stoller, 2001, p.208). This was also feasible as we decided to seize the opportunity the 21<sup>st</sup> century has to offer and opted for blended teaching approach (a combination of in-class teaching time and online learning time) (Štulina et al., 2018). The online learning segment provided additional space and means of communication to diversify the materials and topics, and enable students of different disciplines to attend classes at the same time, follow the same programme, while focusing on their own specific discipline.

Therefore, during the first semester the students are required to write an expository essay, while learning about general academic language principles and text coherence and

cohesion. At the same time, students use authentic materials for their research, and in that way familiarize themselves with the specificities of writing in their target disciplines as at this stage they possess very little, if any, subject-matter knowledge. The focus is not on target specific vocabulary, nor on specific or detailed discourse analysis, as with the course's rather limited duration, it would be difficult to pay enough attention to this aspect and achieve specific goals. Frequently, students select materials they would like to work on (advised to choose in line with their abilities and interests). It is in fact exactly in this segment that our course can be identified as process oriented since we have paid more attention on offering students the possibility to achieve what they can in connection to their abilities than on setting a specific goal to obtain (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991, p. 70). This is also directly connected to the fact that our students were of mixed-ability and will be discussed in the following subchapter as another challenge in designing our syllabus.

#### **4.4. Mixed-ability groups**

Another challenge we faced when teaching the course was the language proficiency of our students, expected to be at B1 (intermediate) which is in line with Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p.5) statement that ESP students are mainly intermediate or advanced, adult students. Although the B1 level is a prerequisite, we noticed that the majority of students did not meet this requirement. They frequently lack the necessary proficiency in English, as well as maturity.

Furthermore, we also noticed that the grammatical weakness of some of our students interfered with their formal academic writing. However, we have decided not to pay attention to linguistic features that our students should have acquired earlier in their education. There was neither time in the syllabus nor the conviction that we would make a difference, so we "felt justified on moving on to more discipline-specific features" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.17 in Flowerdew, 2016, p.12) and decided to shift focus from language and grammar to academic context and skills. Still, we decided to persist with some of the grammatical elements relevant to their needs. Due to the fact that there was not enough revision time during class, we once again relied on modern technology use in the classroom and went for a blended teaching (Štulina et al., 2018). Grammar elements, such as brief revisions of the form and use in context, were therefore offered for online self-study, in line with course credits, trying not to overburden the students but still keep them aware of the importance of accurate grammar and its applicability to the academic language. At the same time, in-class lessons focused on grammar elements that were identified as important during the discourse analysis of academic writing. This way the needs of students with mixed-ability could be catered for.

#### **4.5. Motivation**

Although both of us as ESP teachers strongly believe that our students find it difficult to stay motivated in our classes (evident in their class participation and completion of given tasks), we still have not been able to figure out the reasons. We are inclined to believe that it is maybe too early in their studies, and therefore they do not and cannot value the importance of academic English learning (as it is not the focus of their studies) at the university

level, and still cannot grasp the complexity of academic English (even Croatian) and the academic skills in that respect. Perhaps it would be a good idea to offer the course at a later stage, even at the graduate level when the students are more aware of academic linguistic patterns in Croatian in order to be able to transfer them to English and be able to compare/contrast to their own benefits of learning. However, as previously explained, this is a matter upon which we have no influence as departments give priority to their own courses and English is '*fitted where there's room*'. The study conducted in 2009 by a former colleague and a current Head of the Centre, Martinović and Poljaković (2010) on attitudes of university students towards ESP (students who attended ESP courses at the Centre for Foreign Languages) revealed results opposite to our belief and showed students' positive attitude toward the teacher, evaluation method and toward English and learning English, and suggested the need for further evaluation of course materials. In that light, it seemed logical to make alterations to the syllabus starting with the course materials (as already explained), and partially narrowing the course focus by introducing authentic materials, different for each study group and tackle this way with student motivation. Unfortunately, it could be claimed that even with, and after the complete alteration in the syllabus and course materials, the issue of motivation still remains, so the question remains should syllabus be challenged again or should moving the course up to the graduate level be considered. However, the latter is completely outside the ESP teachers' domain as EAP/ESP centres provide services to and for different departments and in that sense do not have a voice in organizational matters of the course (as to when and how long the course is to be held for as in our case) which we believe should also be in the realms of our decision making (Flowerdew, 2019, p.52, 53).

## 5. Conclusion

ESP is said to be very context-dependent, so the aim of this paper was to show how we approached the challenges that we faced in both course development and syllabus design within our teaching and learning context, that we believe are quite specific. Although it may not be an ideal syllabus design and it may not be applicable under different circumstances, it is for the time being adequate for our context, but we still consider it *work in progress*. We tried to create the syllabus based on the situation we teach in and our students learn in, with the benefit of our students as the final goal. As this syllabus is mainly developed from our experience and practical perspective, we hope that some of our ideas could be used by other practitioners who may be at the beginning of their career and wondering which road to take, or even those more experienced stuck with inadequate materials. Again, based on our experience we recommend that fellow colleagues consider the importance of current issues related to course development, syllabus design, and needs analysis, as well as current research in language learning and language teaching in ESP contexts.

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Sažetak

**IZAZOVI TIJEKOM IZRADE SILABUSA ZA POTREBE KOLEGIJA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA STRUKE I i  
II (HUMANISTIČKI I DRUŠTVENI SMJER SVEUČILIŠTA U ZADRU)**

*Razvoj kolegija i izrada silabusa kao jedan od sastavnih procesa razvoja kolegija su česte teme rasprave unutar stranog jezika struke. U ovom se radu pokušalo prikazati izazove s kojima su se susrele dvije nastavnice tijekom izrade najoptimalnijeg silabusa za potrebe kolegija Engleski jezik struke I i II za humanistički i društveni smjer namijenjen studentima prve godine prediplomskog studija pri Centru za strane jezike (Sveučilište u Zadru) u odnosu na postojeći kontekst poučavanja i na potrebe njegovih studenata. Rad također pokazuje kako se prepoznatim izazovima pristupilo i kako ih se na koncu savladalo. Ovaj rad može poslužiti nastavnicima Engleskog jezika struke i Engleskog za akademske potrebe zainteresiranim za razvoj kolegija, izradu silabusa i izradu nastavnih materijala.*

**Ključne riječi:** izrada silabusa, Engleski jezik struke, razvoj kolegija, studenti Engleskog jezika struke.

