General English or English for Academic Purposes? Revising the Approaches for Core Language Instruction in English Studies

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This paper revises the approach traditionally used for core language instruction in English Studies, and confronts its nature and objectives with the real necessities of the students in the academic and professional contexts in the short, medium and long term. The conclusion is that the there are a number of skills that cannot be easily acquired unless a more academic approach centered on the program real nature and demands is considered. For this reason, a reorientation of the language instruction courses towards a more specifically academic scope is presented as a potential solution for providing students with a methodological framework in accordance with the requirements, needs and goals of their field of studies.

Core language instruction in English Studies (*Filología Inglesa*) at Universidad de Murcia has traditionally been centered on a proficiency-based approach: students are hence expected to gain a knowledge of General English use, functions and skills in their widest sense. Writing complaint letters to hotel managers, scanning texts on how pensioners manage to keep fit, listening to interviews with actresses, and speaking about risky experiences in the ocean are common activities in the language classes. No specific academic contents, goals or demands are stated for these classes though, and, therefore no particular attention to the nature and conventions of academic writing, reading, listening and speaking are normally considered. Assessment is based on tests and exercises that measure the learning of linguistic forms and evaluate students' performance in the different general skills. By means of these core courses, students are expected to acquire a command of language competence for which three standardized levels are determined. So, first year students are supposed to enroll in the program with an intermediate level of English, and gain further knowledge along the academic year that will take them to finish the course with an upper-intermediate level of linguistic command. Second-year instruction establishes its target

level in the acquisition of an advanced competence in the language. Third-year core language course is the final requirement for general language instruction. At this point students are supposed to reach a proficiency level of language command. The labels 'intermediate', 'advanced' and 'proficiency' are taken from the levels established by the University of Cambridge Language Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). Although our department has no connection with these exams neither are these a requisite for students in our program, the textbooks used are purposely selected among the ones specifically designed for preparing students for these exams.

The nature and style of the teaching and learning activities and tasks, as well as the typology of the materials used, are familiar to the students as they maintain the same communicative methodology used in secondary education. The thematic content of these courses follows linearly the topic selection offered by the textbooks adopted, usually focused on an extensive number of trivial and superfluous issues which are supposed to be attractive for young international students: travelling and tourism, the secrets of the mind, risky sports, moral dilemmas, environmental issues, popular culture, etc. As one of the textbooks used (Foley and Hall 1993: back cover) states 'Language analysis and practice are contextualized and integrated with the themes, creating enjoyable, lively and purposeful learning'. These courses focus on what Cummins (1984, 1992) has described as 'social language proficiency' based on interpersonal communicative skills used in informal and cognitively undemanding environments (Dupuy 2000:205).

From the second and third year of the program onwards, the English instruction courses are progressively replaced by discipline study in English, whereas the fourth and fifth-year courses are integrally centered on disciplinary subjects in this language. The subject-matter courses are based on discipline-related syllabi

associated with different fields in English Studies: literature, culture, applied linguistics, language history, translation, semantics, socio-linguistics, phonetics. The classes are delivered in English, and the class materials and bibliographical sources are always written in this language as well. Students are not only required to follow the classes but also are they expected to participate orally, process information, and write their assignments and exams in English. However, there exists the common complaint among discipline professors that many students suffer from deficiencies in their linguistic command, particularly when dealing with their academic language use. Using Cummins words, they claim that the students lack of 'the cognitive academic language proficiency needed to process and express content area concepts' (Cummins 1992 in Brinton and Holten 1997:15).

Some reasons are often provided among lecturers as potential factors that may lead students to unsuccessful achievement of the aimed linguistic objectives, although no methodological research has been carried out to determine the certainty of these presumptions. Class sizes that in some occasions exceed one hundred students, assessment based on final multiple-choice tests rather than on a continuous evaluation of the students' performance, and the limited number of weekly classes (3 hours) are some of the most commonly alluded apologies. Although the mentioned justifications undoubtedly have some sound incidence on the unsuccessful accomplishment of some students, I particularly think that there is another underlying explanation among those factors that prevent students from acquiring the appropriate linguistic competence for discipline study. From my point of view, this has to do with the use of a proper approach, for we are centered on a proficiency-based communicative methodology without noticing that the program demands a reorientation toward a more specific dimension of language learning.

Keeping a methodological approach disconnected from the actual

needs and demands of their study area deprives students of the familiarity with valuable mechanisms that could assist them in facing the academic requirements for higher level subject-matter courses. By dealing with university-level language learning using the same secondary school friendly patterns, similar activities and equally trivial contents, students are missing the necessary transition between their less demanding teenager instructional style and the real requirements of university upper-courses academic study. Language analysis and practices integrated with superfluous themes may create 'enjoyable and lively learning', as the above mentioned textbook claims, but it is quite debatable that the proposed learning methodology and contextualization is really 'purposeful' for English Studies students.

My opinion is that students need a transition in their learning progression that may help them bridge the gap between (a) the initial stage of involvement in language classes focused on the learning of form and social/interpersonal communicative functions, and (b) that step that requires a completely different approach based on the acquisition and production of knowledge in specific subject matters using the language not as a goal in itself or as a tool for social communication, but as a vehicle to express discipline content.

Moreover, the difficulties that students have to face when dealing with content courses are not exclusively attached to language requirements, for students soon realize that they also have to handle a whole set of previously unknown techniques, activities and study skills necessary to enable them to meet the requirements of disciplinary study. These deficiencies derive logically from the lack of previous exposition and experience with real academic discourse and content in the former years' core language classes, which leads to the most logical conclusion that 'students cannot develop academic knowledge and skills without access to the language in which that knowledge

is embedded, discussed, constructed, or evaluated' (Crandall 1998:256).

For these purposes, a sensible solution could be the substitution of the General English approach for an English for Academic Purposes methodology as a coherent way to fill in the gap that students notice between pre-college English as a Foreign Language instruction and university upper-level disciplinary courses in English Studies. The rationale for this decision can be soundly supported if we review carefully the nature, objectives, demands and purpose of the core language instruction courses in the program.

Hutchinson and Waters state that 'it is the awareness of a target situation —a definable need to communicate in English— that distinguishes the ESP learner from the learner of General English (1987:54). In the English Studies program the learners' needs are quite obvious: students need to acquire the linguistic competence necessary for dealing with academic practises in the humanities, a distinct and clearly identifiable field for which particular skills should be developed in particular ways.

As Flowerdew and Peacock (2000:178) point out, 'There is a general consensus that needs analysis, the collection and application of information on learners' needs is a defining feature of ESP and, within ESP, of EAP (...)'. Needs analysis is the necessary point of departure for designing a syllabus, tasks and materials'.

In order to depict a general overview of the situation so as to check whether the presumption of the lack of validity of the existing language curriculum for the English Studies program is true and, consequently, whether the convenience of replacing it by means of an approach reorientation should be considered, a brief needs analysis has been carried out. No attempts to gather detailed information about what the eventual new courses should contain is made, as it is considered that this should be integrated in a more exhaustive needs

analysis as a primary step for the new curriculum design if it ever takes place. The ultimate goal of this survey has therefore been to find evidence to support the perceived inadequacy of the existing core language courses within the broader English Studies program in order to start considering the possibilities for a renovation.

In order to establish not only the students' *needs* but also their *lacks* —what they actually require taking into account what they already know—, a number of questions proposed by Flowerdew and Peacock (2000:179) should be considered: (1) why students are doing an English course, (2) in what situation they need or will need English, and (3) what they must do in those situations.

Among the different methods for gathering data for needs analysis that Jordan (1997:30-39) considers, I have used the following instruments for this particular case: *advance documentation* (for information about educational background and previously attended courses), *observation in the classroom* (both as a language teacher in first and second year instruction, and as a subject-matter lecturer in advanced courses), *evaluation/feedback* (including round-up discussions in which the main features of the course are analyzed and suggestions for improvement made), and *follow-up investigations* (carried out some time after the courses have finished, both with the students and receiving subject-specialist professors).

Moreover, my experience in General English teaching, receiving constant informal feedback from students and higher-level subject courses' professors regarding the benefits and pitfalls of the instructional model used, can provide a consistent basis for drawing some evident conclusions and developing a number of ideas for further application.

Regarding the first questioned proposed —why students are doing English courses—, the answer is straightforward: they take the core English classes because these are compulsory subjects in the program;

moreover, they belong to the group of «asignaturas troncales» (main subjects), which comprises those courses that have to be offered by all the Departments of English Studies in Spain according to the national *Consejo de Universidades* (Board on University Policy) guidelines. These subjects are therefore considered as basic instruction in the curriculum, and constitute the basis for further advance in the students' educational progress.

As regards the second question asked —in what situation students need or will need English—, the different scopes are easily identifiable, involving short, medium and long-term perspectives. First of all, students need English immediately in order to cope with the English Studies program demands in the different courses on literature, linguistic, culture and related issues. In the medium-term, most students will need English to study abroad either participating on one of the exchange programs sponsored by the European Union (Socrates, Erasmus...), or independently, by enrolling in courses overseas at colleges, universities and other institutions' summer programs. Furthermore, after their graduation, many students will decide to pursue graduate studies —mostly Master's degrees— in any of the fields associated with their academic interests (applied linguistics, literature, translation...) at British or American universities. Moreover, a few students enrol in PhD programs in English Studies or related fields. In the long-term, the majority of the students will become professionals in the field of language teaching and will therefore need English as a working tool in their daily tasks within educational contexts. So far, only a very limited number of students have found job opportunities in some other occupational contexts not associated with their previous undergraduate instruction (import-export companies, tourism-related activities, etc.).

With regard to the third aspect of this basic needs analysis —what students must do with the language in the identified

situations—, the answers address once again the three previously stated scopes. In their program context —short-term needs—, a proficient command of English language is required to process the textbooks, books, articles and other materials in which the content of the subject matter courses is transmitted. Students also need English to understand and interpret the information offered by means of the professors' lecturers and other audio sources that may be used for conveying subject knowledge. Moreover, they need English to participate in class discussions, make presentations, express ideas and knowledge in essays and papers, and demonstrate their successful command of the subject-matters in exams and interviews both in writing and orally. For all these activities, a number of skills related to academic language command need to be activated besides the ones used for plain effective communication. For this purpose, a previous familiarity with the nature, style, tasks and conventions of the academic language register should hence be highly desirable.

For the medium-term implications —English is necessary for studying abroad—, the above-stated necessity of academic register familiarity is a must. Here, the skills development necessity could be conveniently complemented with the inclusion of knowledge about the academic cultures of the English-speaking countries. Providing instruction for helping students understand other educational values, principles and patters, explore foreign academic expectations, and promote their smooth integration into new, international educational settings would be highly valuable for helping students accommodate with new instructional and cultural patterns.

In the long-term implications —the eventual professional context—, academic English competence is also highly desirable. Most students pursue the goal of becoming public secondary-school or language-school teachers, and it is General English what they are expected to teach. However, a skilled command of academic English

could be highly beneficial in the process of competing for one of the teaching positions annually offered by the official educational institutions in the different regional 'autonomous communities'. The selection process includes as requirements the familiarity with a number of thematic units, and the ability not only to show that the candidates have acquired the required knowledge, but also that they are able to express it proficiently in writing and orally. For this purpose, they must use the appropriate register and show their capacity for expressing and developing their ideas, developing critical analysis, organizing the acquired knowledge in a coherent and meaningful way, and making use of presentation techniques. The previous familiarity of the candidates with the application of these skills would undoubtedly have positive implications in the successful outcomes of these endeavors. Furthermore, the benefits of the familiarity with these academic abilities may be transferable to many other professional or occupational contexts for which a capacity to function in English beyond its social communication dimension may be required: writing reports, editing texts, organizing ideas, presenting information, note-taking, etc. are common activities in a variety of fields, and the ability of making a proficient use of them can be highly valued.

For all the reasons stated, the conclusion is that an approach specifically centered on the acquisition of academic language competence rather than on general English use could be more convenient in core language instruction for English Studies students as it addresses directly to the requirements of their short, medium and long term requirements. We must take into account that, besides their weekly classes, students have many other sources for gaining familiarity with the social and more general dimension of English: some opportunities are even offered by the English Department by means of conversation workshops, film watching and discussion, etc. Moreover, most students will eventually travel to English-speaking

countries for extended periods of time and, therefore, the conditions for acquiring social language command will be guaranteed. A balanced combination of both dimensions —the academic competence acquired in the program and the social competence developed by extra-curricular activities— would undoubtedly conform to the pattern of what a most competent and complete student and eventual teacher of the language should be like.

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