Developing student’s autonomy in an ESP reading class

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a step-by-step procedure for designing an ESP reading course for Biology students. The design included a skills-based approach focusing on training students in developing reference and reading skills and a semi-autonomous classroom-based learning program which aimed to encourage students to be autonomous. The students selected their own authentic reading material to work on. An adaptation of the ‘standard exercise’ proposed by Scott et al. (1984) was used as a tool for text exploitation. The paper outlines the rationale, the aims, the elaboration of tasks and the implementation of the course and discusses evaluative comments from the students and from the teacher.

1. BACKGROUND

In the winter semester of 1997 I was asked to teach an ESP course to Biology students. The course was elective in the department, taken 3 hours each week. The goals of the course, which were set by the Department of Biology, were to help the students acquire the reading skills and language they would need for their further courses. The class consisted of 20 students who were in the 2nd year of a 4-year course leading to a degree in Biology and had had 2 semesters of ESP in their first year of studies. They had been taught English from an ESP textbook for Biology students, which aimed to help reading comprehension but its texts were very short and non-authentic. Furthermore the topic content of these reading texts had no direct relationship to the students’ needs and interests, thus making motivation extremely weak for the students. Concerning the language proficiency of the students, we would say that we had to deal with a fairly homogeneous group - 85% held a First Certificate in English (FCE), 28% a
Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English, and only 2% were candidates preparing for the FCE.

2. RATIONALE FOR DESIGNING THE COURSE

The factor that greatly influenced the design and implementation of this ESP course was a view of second language learning as a developmental and active process in which a series of decisions are taken by both teacher and student, with conscious planning and monitoring of language activities (Wenden 1987).

Autonomy defined by Holec (1981) as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” is not an absolute concept. Nunan (1997) argues that there are degrees of autonomy ranging from awareness of the pedagogical goals, content and learning strategies at the most superficial level to transcendence of the classroom to become truly autonomous and utilize in everyday life what has been learned in formal learning contexts at the ultimate level. The development of a student’s autonomy in the management of his/her learning process requires that the teacher assume initially the role of a coach. This implies that the teacher has to provide each student with all possible opportunities to practise and command the strategies and techniques necessary for moving towards a learning process which he/she can control, independent of teacher or classroom.

In an environment promoting autonomous learning the student is encouraged to intervene in the process of learning by selecting the content, progressions, methods and techniques working at his/her own pace. The main responsibility for learning lies with the student, who finds the teacher someone to help him/her to stay on the right track. In such an environment, the teacher becomes a facilitator and a counsellor who creates and ensures a friendly environment that enables the student to get satisfaction from the actual experience of learning. Finally promoting and supporting students to move toward autonomy is best done inside the language classroom through pedagogical intervention (Nunan 1997).

In this context, I adopted the following procedure aiming to adopt a learner-centered approach which takes into consideration the needs, aims and characteristics of learners and in which, according to Nunan (1991) learners will contribute to all aspects of planning, implementation and evaluation.
Identify learners’ needs
↓
Formulate objectives
↓
Select and organize content
↓
Select and organize learning approaches
↓
Evaluate procedures and results

3. IDENTIFY LEARNERS’ NEEDS

The initial step in determining the type of syllabus, content and materials was gathering information on the objective and subjective needs, attitudes, learning-style preferences and motivation of target learners, as is recommended by many linguists (Munby 1978, Richterich and Chancerel 1980, Robinson 1980, Hutchinson and Waters 1987). The method selected for data collection was an anonymous questionnaire which was filled out by the students on the first day of class. The students were also asked to assess their current abilities in the performance of a variety of study skills by completing a self-assessment form of the type proposed in Floyd (1984).

The main findings from the analysis of the questionnaire were as follows:

Concerning students’ learning needs, the ability to read authentic specialist material ranked first, enriching specialized vocabulary came second, while writing a report or summary ranked third. Regarding reading, students reported that they had greatest difficulty with sub-technical vocabulary and, in decreasing order, with sentence structure, sense relations, and reading speed. Concerning learning-style preferences, the data indicated that the majority of students favoured an eclectic or mixed approach to instruction to a traditional one. That is, they preferred to be given material to work on individually or in pairs. In fact, students did not favour traditional approaches to foreign language teaching. They felt bored and found it difficult to tolerate the routine in a setting where the teacher leads the activities and students respond to controlled tasks.

It is also worth noting that students were completely ignorant of reference skills. Training in these skills was completely neglected even in their mother tongue.
4. STEPS IN PLANNING THE COURSE

4.1. Objectives
Taking into account the data from the needs analysis, the length of the course and the resources available for its implementation, the following list of course objectives was drawn up:

- **General Objectives**
  - satisfy the language learning needs of the students
  - foster the development of favourable attitudes towards learning
  - help students maintain initial positive motivation
  - instill the notion of autonomy and encourage learners to develop it by providing adequate circumstances and contexts

- **Specific Objectives**
  - help students acquire efficient reading strategies that enable them to process texts for themselves through:
    - practice in reference skills
    - practice in extensive and intensive reading

4.2. Skills
After defining the objectives, we decided on the skills that learners had to develop, relying heavily on the work done by Frydenberg (1982). In the selection of tasks, care was taken to have both pedagogic and authentic tasks. The list of skills we drew up for the course is given below:

*Skills and Sub-skills List*

A. Reference skills
1. Using a dictionary efficiently:
   a. pronunciation key
   b. homographs/homophones
   c. syllabification
d. appendix-type information
2. Using the library
   a. using the catalogues (card-index type), and periodicals list
   b. locating books and journals on shelves in the library
c. understanding book and journal references
3. Documentation
   a. understanding book and journal references (quotations, indices, footnotes and bibliographies)

B. Reading Skills
1. Pre-reading activities
   - predicting by making intelligent guesses about what a text contains using only the title or a small sample.
2. Quick reading activities
   - skimming to obtain the gist of the text
   - scanning to search for specific information

3. Intensive reading activities
   - understanding of explicitly stated information in the text through understanding conceptual meaning (comparison, cause, contrast, etc.)
   - understanding relations within the sentence and between parts of a text through lexical or grammatical cohesion devices
   - understanding through making inferences of information not explicitly stated in the text
   - understanding graphic presentations (diagrams, tables etc.)

4. Vocabulary comprehension
   - guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words through contextual clues or understanding word formation

C. Writing skills
   - summarizing

It should be noted that at the beginning of the course the students were informed of the objectives of the learning approach and became aware of the linguistic skills that the teacher wanted them to perform. The idea behind this was to allow them to make key decisions on what they wanted to study and how. The design of the course was received enthusiastically by all students.

5. MATERIALS

The solution to the problem of increasing and maintaining interest and motivation was to ask students to choose their own authentic reading material. This maximizes the intellectual involvement of the students and familiarizes them with the most important linguistic features and rhetorical structures found in the literature of their field of study.

Thus with the help of a staff member of the Department and 3 randomly selected students, a bank of some 80 texts was compiled from a wide range of genres. Classified according to type of publication, the following sources were used: special journals, scientific magazines, Biology textbooks, instruction manuals, catalogues, encyclopedias, newspapers and magazines, etc. Classified according to expository type, the following material was selected: research articles, reviews, reports, essays, forms, entries in encyclopedias, business letters, summaries, etc. The rationale for using a genre-based approach in selecting materials was two-fold. First, specific skills, such as scanning or locating the main idea of a paragraph, would vary with different types of texts. Second, students’
reading comprehension skills would improve by identifying and focusing on the particularities and difficulties inherent in different text types.

We can now proceed to the tools that the students used in order to exploit all those different texts. I selected an adaptation of the 'standard exercise' of Scott et al. (1984) proposed by Walker (1987), which, according to the authors, could apply to any text, be used for self-access and guide students towards more efficient and critical reading strategies. This exercise was deemed quite suitable because it is based on a principled procedure, developing from superficial reading to deeper and more critical levels of comprehension. We could also claim task authenticity since in real life situations our reading purposes and ways of reading constantly vary. The detailed reading activities of the exercise require a careful decodification of the writer’s discourse through an understanding of the rhetorical organization and vocabulary. Finally, the questions that aim to elicit personal critical reactions to the content of the text reflect the principle that reading with some sort of personal involvement is likely to be more motivated and effective.

6. IMPLEMENTING THE COURSE
6.1. Organization

The course consisted of two main components: a skills-based component focusing on training students on study skills and a semi-autonomous classroom-based learning program which aimed to encourage students to become autonomous.

As far as allocation of time and content were concerned, the course was structured as follows: In the first component of the course, which was task-oriented, 4 weeks were devoted to (a) instruction and practice on reference skills plus practical training in the library of the Biology department (6 hours), and (b) instruction and practice on reading skills and on summary writing (6 hours). In the second component of the course the learners took control of their learning and became more autonomous. In fact, 30 hours were devoted to what I call semi-autonomous learning which again was classroom-based.

In more detail the program operated as follows: after the students selected authentic material from the bank (10 texts of different genre type), they were asked to bring one text at a time in class and work on it in pairs answering the questions of the ‘standard exercise’. If after the first scanning they realized that the text did not contain the information they needed, they could decide to go on to another text. Working in pairs rather than individually was negotiated with the students. This mode of working had a number of benefits since it got learners fully involved in the learning process, actively cooperating and communicating with each other and getting self-satisfaction from self-discovery. It must
be pointed out that during class students could seek any kind of help and support from the teacher and get feedback on their written work. As a result the teacher-student relationship was maintained but the role of the teacher in the classroom shifted from the traditional teacher/instructor model, in the first part of the course, to the more innovative language-facilitator model, in the second.

6.2. Practice in Reference skills
6.2.1. Using a dictionary efficiently
After a brainstorming session in which we discussed the advantages and disadvantages of using a dictionary and explained the arrangement of entries, abbreviations and pronunciation symbols, we distributed several kinds of dictionaries e.g. learners’ dictionaries, native speakers’ dictionaries, pronouncing dictionaries, specialist subject dictionaries, thesauruses, and bilingual dictionaries. Then the students were asked to work on a task-oriented worksheet and compare the different dictionaries listing editorial or lexicographic similarities or differences. Then we provided them with a reading passage asking them to look up the words that were underlined in different dictionaries and list as many definitions from as many sources as they could. Finally they had to select the appropriate definition justifying their choice.

6.2.2. Using the library
To familiarize with the operation of the library it was deemed necessary to give students some practical training in the library itself since the library, as a learning location, is more realistic for reference and study skills than the classroom (McGinley 1985). The students were briefed on the procedure of consulting the library catalogue and the catalogue cards and were divided into small groups. Each group was given a list of 10 authors, titles, and subjects and a task-oriented worksheet to practice on. The worksheet was then evaluated to assess their progress and if necessary reinforce their training.

6.2.3. Documentation
Following formal instruction of the conventions for the layout and sequencing of references and footnotes, the students were given relevant exercises; these aimed to help them enhance their understanding of footnote writing and correct errors in footnotes and bibliography entries. Then, as proposed in Wallace (1980) and Jordan (1997), they were asked to prepare source or index cards for all the books and articles they were going to use in their reading class.

6.3. Practice in Reading skills
We followed a content-oriented approach to train students in developing different reading skills, using a wide range of extracts from authentic material related
to the students' interests. The texts were chosen so that they reflected different genres and consequently different methods of development and organizational structure.

Taking into account the fact that reading is "an active skill and a constant process of guessing" (Grellet 1981) and that "a text is a vehicle for information" not a "linguistic object" (Johns and Davies 1983 cited in Jordan 1997), different tasks were devised with the aim of helping students discover the main aspects of academic reading and developing efficient reading strategies. The tasks initially involved global understanding of the text and then moved towards a more detailed and deeper understanding. The procedure employed drew from the ideas of Grellet on reading comprehension (Grellet 1981) and could be summed up as follows:

a. Looking at the title, length, diagrams, first and last paragraph of the text and making hypotheses about the content and function.

b. Skimming the text quickly to confirm the hypotheses.

c. Slow and careful reading of the text trying to understand as much as possible.

d. Re-reading the text as often as necessary to answer different questions concerning:
   - recognition of the aim, function and organization of the text (e.g. finding topic sentences, filling in tables, etc.)
   - comprehension of the meaning through understanding lexical cohesion devices and link-words and through deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items through contextual clues or understanding word formation.

In order to facilitate the comprehension of the so-called sub-technical vocabulary, we provided students with a strategy which is an adaptation and extension of the one proposed in Nation and Coady (1988).

6.4. Practice in Writing Skills

Students were trained in writing a summary by producing notes referring to topic sentences for each paragraph; they also produced an organization diagram of the text by extracting the salient points. Then they were asked to reconstitute the notes they produced into a summary.

7. EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

At the end of the course the students were asked to evaluate it by filling in a questionnaire. On a scale of 1 to 6 (6 being the highest), the mean rating for the effectiveness of the course overall was 5.3. The students most liked the work done in the library and in class while answering the questions of the 'standard exercise'. They least liked the training on reading skills. The students also esti-
mated that their ability to comprehend authentic material in their field of specialization had increased from an average of 3.5 (on a scale of 1 to 10), at the beginning of the course, to an average of 8.7, at the end. They attributed this to the following: they became more self-confident and autonomous; their attitudes towards reading became increasingly more favourable; the training had helped them to acquire appropriate strategies for tackling text and vocabulary. Furthermore, their involvement in this reading class had given them the initiative to continue independent learning on their own after the course. A major limitation was considered the lack of a self-access center which could provide facilities and support for independent learning. A further limitation was the lack of other tools available for text exploitation besides the ‘standard exercise’, which was quite long and sometimes took time to complete.

Some of the positive outcomes observed in class were increased responsibility, increased participation and sustained motivation. Students' initial anxiousness and reluctance to tackle unfamiliar texts on their own gave way to self-confidence and awareness of the cognitive implications of the reading process. The psychological barrier that prevented them from working on their own with reading material of their specialization was very quickly overcome after the initial training. In addition to the teacher’s insights, students’ feedback confirmed that it was a successful approach (in fact there was only one drop-out).

This course has been designed to meet the needs of Biology students and promote their autonomy. In creating a language setting that leads through cooperative to autonomous learning, we hope that we have given students not only a useful tool to use in class, but also learning resources which will remain with them long after the completion of their foreign-language course.

REFERENCES


