

The Concordance between EFL Learners' Linguistic Sequential Development and the Curricula of Formal 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 the real life situations. The study has been conducted in Alahsa College of Technology, Saudi Arabia. Methodology used was analyzing an ESP textbook in corpus-based approach and matching the units of the textbook to an observed real life situation in a car workshop. Results show that the content of the textbook, to some extent, meet the course objectives in technical terms with some shortage in expanding the activities to be a functional simulation of an authentic environment regarding conversational and written functions.

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Introduction

Curricula are designed and constrained to the 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 formulate successful methods of teaching that suit real situations. In this paper, a particular aspect of second language acquisition will be highlighted to examine the extent of the curriculum adherence to this aspect 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).

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.

Literature Review

There has been several works, articles, books and research carried out to focus on the curricula content and its structure. Lightbown and Spada (2006) listed the milestones and the developmental sequence of linguistic input to the L2 learners. They stated three stages and sub-stages: grammatical morphemes, negation and questions (pp .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 the rule of $i+1$ in order to stimulate the learners' cognitive abilities (pp. 26)

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 $i + 1$. (pp. 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.

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 and 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, and Pienemann 1981).

Methodology

Research Question

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

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 workshops 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.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive analysis of the textbook (Technical English for Vehicles Dept.)

After working on a quantitative count of reading passages in the first five units of the textbook, Counting technical terms, exercises and observing real conversation for a mechanic in a workshop, there is an interesting corpus 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 what the textbook offers and an authentic situational conversation in a workshop. Table 1 below illustrates the sequential development of the linguistic input throughout the first five units of the textbook.

	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

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

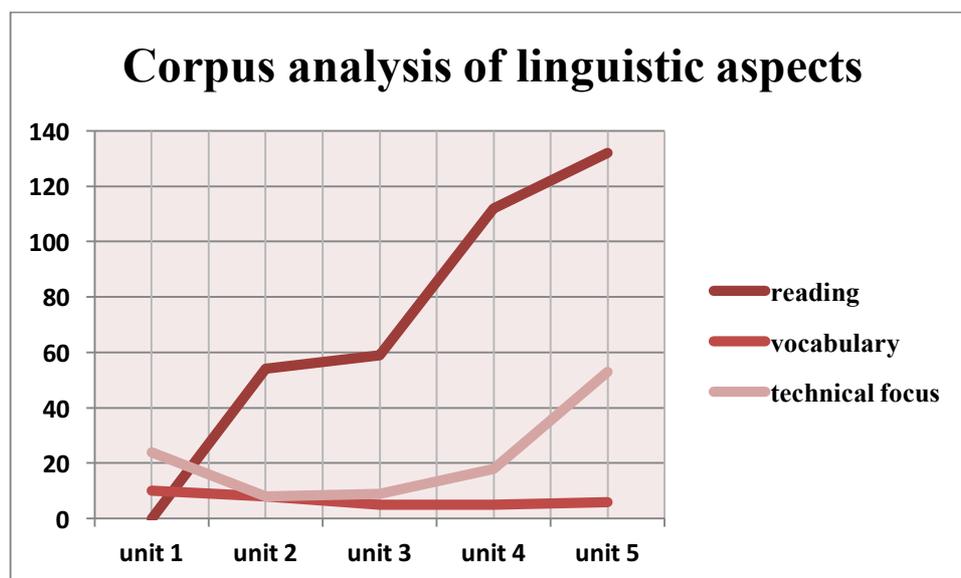


Figure 1: Linguistic development in the textbook

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 contains 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 $i+1$. 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 regarding the word count. There must be a 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 high frequency words and the 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 seen in the chart 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 with $i+1$ 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.

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.

	Writing	Reading	Speaking & Listening	Vocabulary	Technical Terms
Textbook (1st five units)	1 exercise about job description - Comparison between production	-Assembly process - radio - directions - joysticks - multi-tools	-What is this called? -answer about fixings -size and quantity -phone message -conversation about tools - directions - listen to numbers -driving instructions	Notes 9% covers grammatical and language exercises	Tools Surf board parts Fixings Repair verbs Tool parts Special directions 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 . Linguistic components detected in both formal and informal settings

Table 2 shows the linguistic skills needed in 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 implemented 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 to the authentic situations. 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 technical, real situations. Here is summary of the differences:

In the conversation:

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?". 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 functions.
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 ought 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).

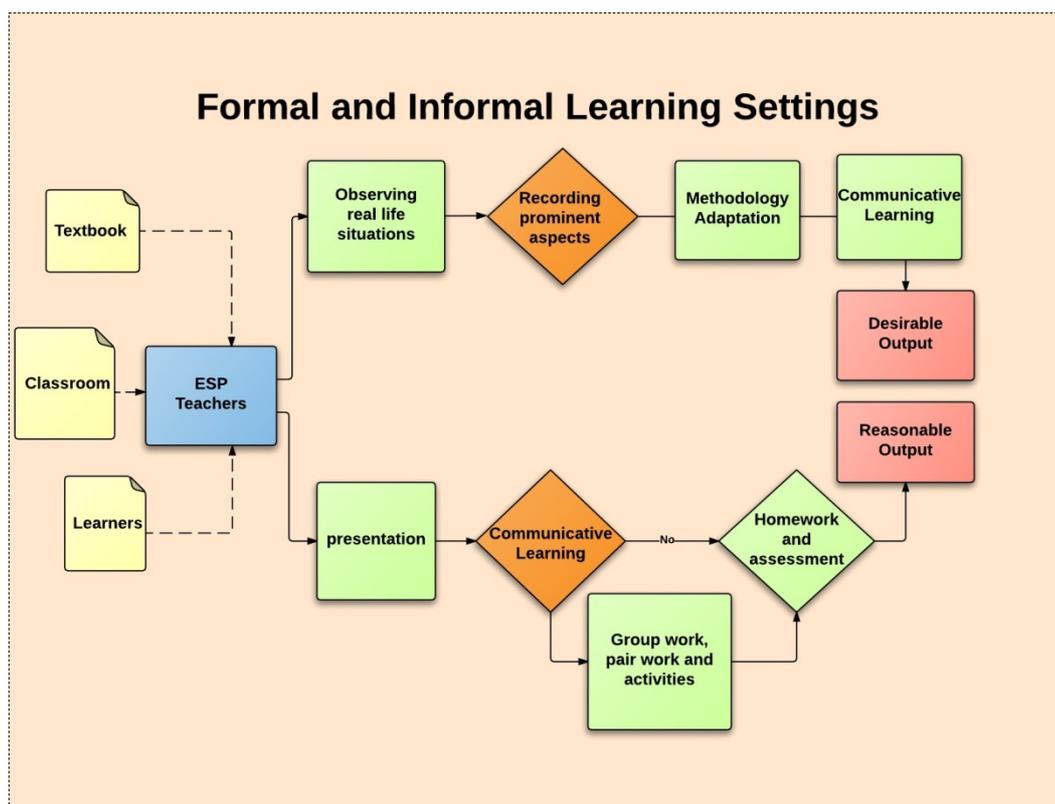


Figure 2: Needs Analysis-based approach vs. traditional ESP courses

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.

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 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 important skills to master in order to functionally communicate in their career. 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 the 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 speech. This can be performed by observation to the 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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