

# English for Specific Purposes

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### 3 A learning-centred approach

Before describing this approach, we should expand our explanation of why we have chosen the term *learning-centred* instead of the more common term *learner-centred*.

The learner-centred approach\* is based on the principle that learning is totally determined by the learner. As teachers we can influence what we teach, but what learners learn is determined by the learners alone. Learning is seen as a process in which the learners use what knowledge or skills they have in order to make sense of the flow of new information. Learning, therefore, is an internal process, which is crucially dependent upon the knowledge the learners already have and their ability and motivation to use it. It is difficult to fault this view of learning, if we see learning simply in terms of the end product in the learner's mind. But learning can, and should, be seen in the context in which it takes place. Learning is not just a mental process, it is a process of negotiation between individuals and society. Society sets the target (in the case of ESP, performance in the target situation) and the individuals must do their best to get as close to that target as is possible (or reject it). The learners will certainly determine their own route to the target and the speed at which they travel the route, but that does not make the target unimportant. The target still has a determining influence on the possible routes. In the learning process, then, there is more than just the learner to consider. For this reason we would reject the term a learner-centred approach in favour of a learning-centred approach to indicate that the concern is to maximise learning. The learner is one factor to consider in the learning process, but not the only one. Thus the term: learner-centred would for our purpose be misleading.

To return to our discussion of approaches to course design, we can see that for all its emphasis on the learner, the skills-centred approach does not fully take the learner into account, because it still makes the ESP learning situation too dependent on the target situation. The learner is used to identify and to analyse the target situation. The learner is with the language-centred approach, the learner is discarded and the target situation analysis is allowed to determine the content of the course with little further reference to the learner.

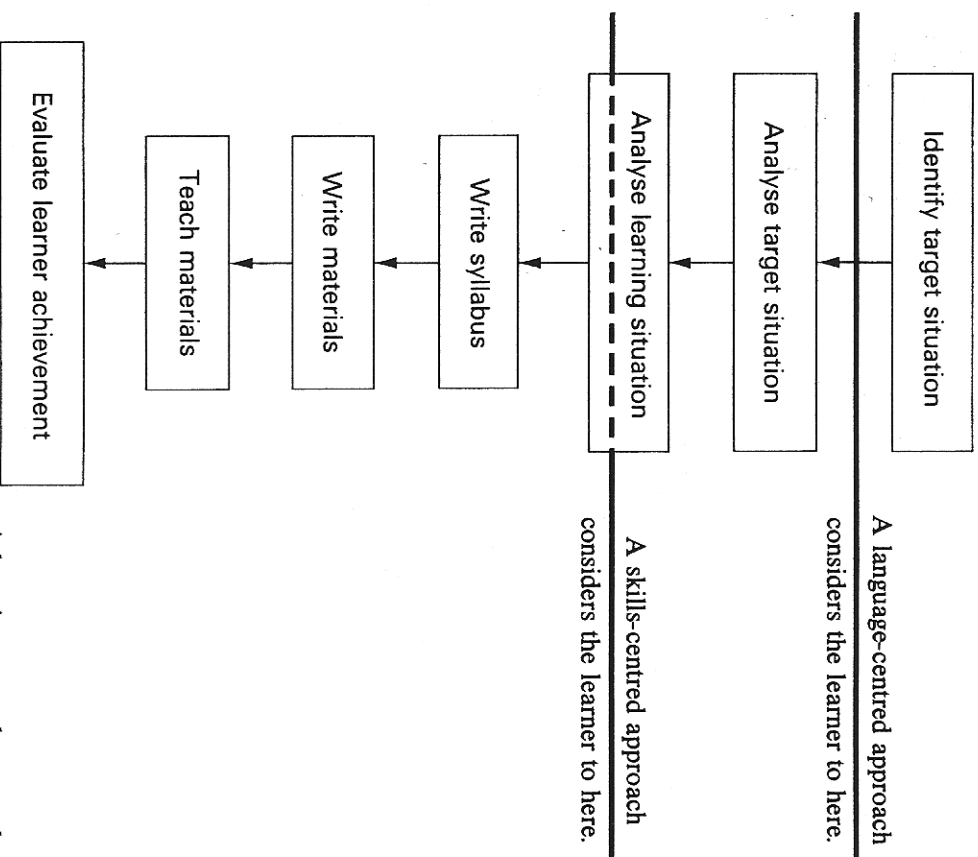
A language-centred approach says: This is the nature of the target situation performance and that will determine the ESP course.  
A skills-centred approach says: That's not enough. We must look

\* A truly learner-centred approach does not really exist at the current time. We would not like to give the impression that it is a formalised approach in actual use. Indeed since most learning takes place within institutionalised systems, it is difficult to see how such an approach could be taken, as it more or less rules out pre-determined syllabuses, materials etc. Thus it should be viewed more as a theoretical attack on established procedure than as a practical approach to course design.

behind the target performance data to discover what processes enable someone to perform. Those processes will determine the ESP course.

A learning-centred approach says: That's not enough either. We must look beyond the competence that enables someone to perform, because what we really want to discover is not the competence itself, but how someone acquires that competence.

We might see the relationship in this diagram:



A learning-centred approach must consider the learner at every stage.

Figure 20: A comparison of approaches to course design

Figure 20 shows that a learning-centred approach to course design takes account of the learner at every stage of the design process. This has two implications:

a) Course design is a negotiated process. There is no single factor which has an outright determining influence on the content of the course. The ESP learning situation and the target situation will both influence the nature of the syllabus, materials, methodology and evaluation procedures. Similarly each of these components will influence and be influenced by the others.

b) Course design is a dynamic process. It does not move in a linear fashion from initial analysis to completed course. Needs and resources vary with time. The course design, therefore, needs to have built-in feedback channels to enable the course to respond to developments.

The learning-centred course design process is shown in this diagram:

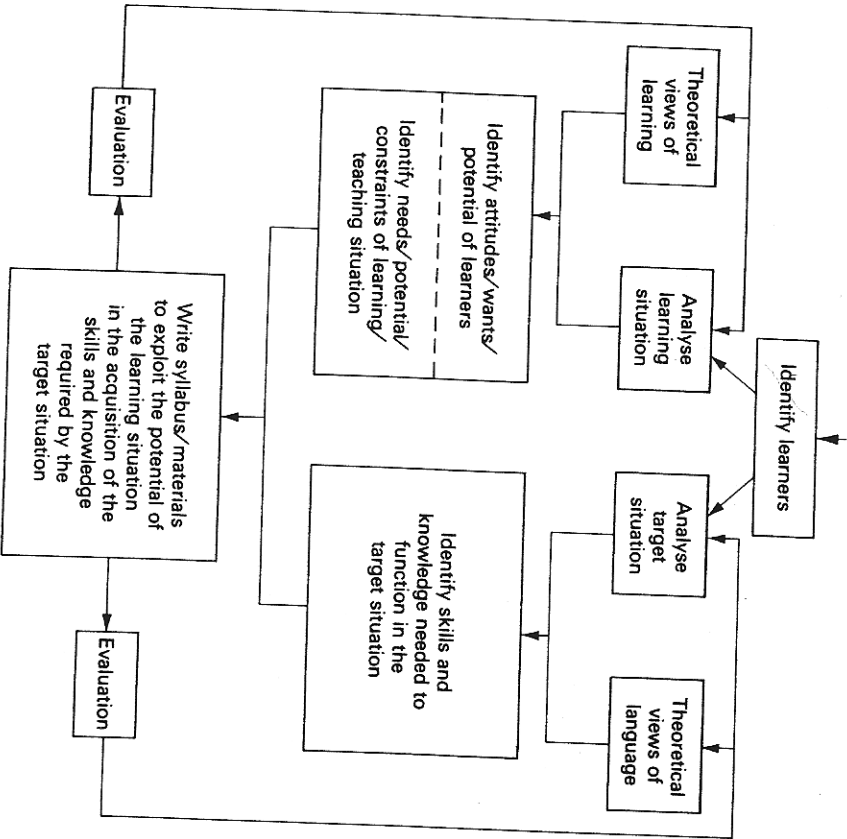


Figure 21: A learning-centred approach to course design

What does it mean in practical terms to take a learning-centred approach to ESP? We will look in more detail at this question in *Materials design* (chapter 10). For the moment let us look at a fairly common example at the level of course design.

A needs analysis reveals that the ESP learners need English in order to be able to read texts in their subject specialism. They have no need to write, speak or listen to English. Their sole need is to read English texts. If we followed a language-centred or skills-centred approach to course design, we might conclude that ESP lessons would concern themselves only with the activity of reading texts. There would be no listening work; all discussion would be in the native language and writing tasks would be minimal. This would be a logical application of the models for course design above (figures 18 and 19). But if we took a learning-centred approach, we would need to ask further questions and consider other factors, before determining the content and methodology of the course.

a) Can we only learn to read effectively by reading or can the other skills help the learners to become better readers? For example, is it possible that learners might grasp the structure of texts more easily by writing texts themselves? Can a knowledge of the sound or rhythm of a language help in reading? Stevick (1982) stresses the importance for memory of creating rich images in a way which closely parallels our own model of learning as a network-building process (see chapter 4):

'The higher the quality of the image – that is, the richer and better integrated it is – the more easily we will be able to get back one part of it when we encounter another part.'

We can apply this argument to the question of skills. If an image gets into the brain through a number of different pathways – by hearing, reading, writing and speaking – that image is likely to be a richer image than if it gets in through only one pathway. The image will thereby be much stronger and much more easily accessible, since it will have more connections into the network. The fact that the learner will eventually use the knowledge gained only for reading is largely irrelevant. What is of most concern is how the learner can learn that knowledge most effectively. If the effectiveness of the process can be enriched by the use of other skills, then that is what should be done.

b) What are the implications for methodology of having a mono-skill focus? Will it lead to a lack of variety in lessons or a limited range of exercise types, which will soon induce boredom in the learners? Could other skills be used to increase variety? These are not trivial questions. One of the basic paradoxes of language teaching is that we need to repeat things in order to learn them, but frequent repetition creates boredom: our minds switch off and learning is

minimal. Variety is, therefore, not just a nice thing to have for its own sake: it is a vital element in keeping the learners' minds alert and focussed on the task in hand. Processing the same information through a variety of skills is one way of achieving reinforcement while still maintaining concentration. It is much more difficult to get variety if we have to operate to target situation imposed constraints, such as a restriction to one skill (see chapter 11, *Methodology*).

- c) How will the students react to doing tasks involving other skills? Will they appreciate the greater variety and interest of the activities or will they say 'I don't need to understand spoken English, so why are you asking me to listen to something in English? I need to read.'
- d) Do the resources in the classroom allow the use of other skills? Is it quiet enough to do listening or speaking work? Can the teacher handle an integrated skills approach?
- e) How will the learners react to discussing things in the mother tongue? Will it help them to feel more secure? Will it enable them to express their views more easily and freely. Or will they feel that it isn't really helping them to learn English?
- f) How will the learners' attitudes vary through the course? At first they may prefer a reading only approach, because it is novel and may give them a good sense of achievement. Will this motivation carry on through the whole course, however? Will the learners get bored with the same kinds of activities and start to want a more varied methodology?
- g) How do the learners feel about reading as an activity? Is it something they like doing, or is it an activity that they avoid where possible, even in the mother tongue? If the latter is the case, will a reading only approach help to remove some of their aversion to reading or will it reinforce existing antipathies?

The answers to the questions we have been considering might reinforce the idea of doing reading only or they might indicate that an integrated skills approach is required. The answers will vary depending on the learners and the learning context. The example, however, serves to show how factors concerned with learning may affect the design of a course, sometimes in total contradiction to the apparent needs of the target situation. The *Framework for analysing learning needs* (see above p. 62) provides more questions that could be asked. The answers, as we have said, will vary according to the individual situation and may vary within the timespan of the course. The important point is that these questions must be asked and the results allowed to influence the course design.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at the question of how the data of a needs analysis can be used to design an effective ESP course. Traditionally the target situation analysis has had a direct determining influence on the development of syllabus, materials, methodology and tests. We have argued that the course design process should be much more dynamic and interactive. In particular, factors concerned with learning must be brought into play at all stages of the design process. We have called this a learning-centred approach – an approach with the avowed aim of maximising the potential of the learning situation. Such an approach is inevitably more complex: it is based, after all, on a recognition of the complexity of the learning process. But everything must have the defects of its qualities. In the next section we shall look at how the approach can be applied to the construction of a syllabus and to the evaluation, design and teaching of materials.

## Tasks

- 1 Analyse an ESP course in your institution and decide what approach has been used to design it. What do you feel are the merits and drawbacks of the design?
- 2 What do you think a fully learner-centred course would be like?
- 3 The Malaysian and the Brazilian ESP Projects (see above p. 13) differ in their attitude to skills. The University of Malaya project has a Spoken Interaction component (Chitravelu, 1980), while the Brazilian project uses the mother tongue for all oral work:
  - a) What factors might have influenced the course designers in these two projects in making their decisions?
  - b) Consider the 'reading only' problem in your own situation. What answers do you think you would get to the questions we raise above (p. 75)?
- 4 A learning-centred approach to course design is complex and time-consuming. Do you think it is worth the trouble?