

## Teachers' Challenges while Designing an ESP Syllabus

**Nadia SARAA**

University of Mohamed Ben Ahmed Oran2, Algeria  
saraa.nadia@univ-oran2.dz

### **Abstract**

In Algerian Higher Education, there is no official English for specific purposes (ESP) syllabus; thus, practitioners usually design their own syllabuses. This study examines the challenges that Algerian ESP teachers face while developing syllabuses. In order to investigate this issue, a questionnaire was administered to 20 teachers from different Algerian technical departments (engineering, biology, computer sciences, and architecture) at the universities of (Oran, Tiaret, Saida and Mostaghanem). Results show that practitioners encounter considerable obstacles in the process of syllabus development such as lack of teacher training, lack of a syllabus model, and lack of documentation. Therefore, and in the hope of overcoming these challenges and improving the quality of ESP teaching in Algeria, it is recommended that some work must be done at the ministry level to develop a unified syllabus and textbook for the various disciplines across Algerian universities. Besides and in order to guide Algerian ESP practitioners, this study also suggests a methodology to designing a syllabus in an ESP context.

**Keywords:** ESP, syllabus design, ESP practitioners, challenges, methodology

## 1. Introduction

The growing tendency among people all over the world to learn English has urged many countries to introduce the teaching of English into their curricula. Furthermore, scientific developments and globalization have expanded the need to implement specialized English language teaching that is required by students who need it for technical education and workplace. Due to this need of technical English, Algeria has introduced the teaching of English in its Higher Educational programmes as a compulsory module, namely the teaching of English for specific purposes (ESP). The purpose this specialized course is to equip learners with specific English language skills, rather than general English.

Bearing in mind that the teaching of ESP in Algeria is still in its infancy, the review of literature shows that research work in the field of ESP in Algeria has given considerable attention to learners' needs, course design, teachers' training, teaching skills, teachers' development, methodology, and needs analysis (Allal, 2009; Mebitil, 2011; BenabdAllah, 2012; Bouzid, 2012; Bougandoura, 2012; Bensafa, 2012; Krarzia, 2013; Mebitil, 2015; Lachachi, 2016; Nouali, 2016). However, few research studies investigated the difficulties that Algerian ESP teachers encounter whilst designing their syllabuses such as the absence of textbooks. In this respect, the primary objective of this paper is to explore the Algerian ESP teachers' obstacles when developing their syllabuses then suggesting a methodology to designing a syllabus in an ESP teaching context. Consequently, the following research question is raised.

What are the main obstacles that the Algerian higher education ESP teachers at the universities of Oran, Tiaret, Saida confront while developing their syllabuses?

## 2. English for Specific Purposes

Many specialists have attempted to define the dimensions and meaning of ESP. Generally speaking, ESP is often viewed as a distinct discipline, but also as one of the most important sub-fields of English language teaching. Several definitions have been proposed to ESP. Mackay and Mountford (1978) define it as "the teaching of English for a clearly utilitarian purpose" (p. 2). They consider ESP as a language teaching approach for practical reason and well-defined purposes. The point is that ESP learners have particular English learning purpose dictated by their field of specialization and teachers need to also consider learners' needs and tailor courses accordingly.

In the same line of thought, Munby (1978) notes that identifying the communicative needs of learners is essential for planning courses, selecting materials and designing syllabuses. He firmly states that "ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learners" (p. 2). Similarly, Widdowson (1983) posits that "ESP is simply a matter of describing a particular area of language and then using this description to impart to learners the necessary restricted competence with a particular area" (p. 10). Thus, ESP as a concept has come to describe the teaching of English in a particular area of interest and equip students with the necessary language skills and competences needed in professional or academic domains.

A more elaborated definition is given by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) who consider ESP as "An approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and methods are based on the learners' reason for learning" (p.19). According to them, ESP

can be purely seen as an 'approach' to language teaching, but not as a 'product'. More specifically, there is no standard methodology or language teaching materials that is compulsory to the ESP classroom. Yet, the foundation of ESP, as they state, occur simply by answering the question of why the learner needs to learn the foreign language. In fact, the view of Hutchinson and Waters (1987) on ESP is different from cDudley-Evans and St-John's (1998) who maintain that ESP must make use of a particular methodology that should link the ESP teacher with his/her learners.

### 2.1 Syllabus Design in English for Specific Purposes

Syllabus design can be viewed as a productive and rich field of study, but also a challenging one. That is to say, courses in ESP syllabus or in language programmes development depend on the planning that proceeds it such as determining needs analysis, language level, time allocated for the language course, methodology, materials, testing, and sometimes assessment procedures. Following this logic, Munby (1978) claims that syllabus design is the specification of the content to be taught and it is organized in the form of appropriate teaching learning units. In the same vein, Maley (1984) states that the fundamental aspects of language syllabus design (such as analysis, goals-setting, content specification, methodology selection, and assessment) must be considered in advance. Thus, no matter what type of the course is, the language syllabus designer needs to take into account salient guidelines before forming the syllabus.

Likewise, Richards (2001) suggests a model of a curriculum which could be adapted into language syllabus design and programme development. The model proposed by Richards (2001) focuses on needs analysis, situational analysis, preparation of learning outcomes, organization of the course, selection and preparation of teaching materials, and provision for effective teaching and evaluation. Further, the relation between the aforementioned elements is cyclical.

Similarly, Brown (1995) suggests a systematic approach to language curriculum development which can be used in language syllabus design. It includes six interrelated components, which are needs analysis, goal and objective setting, language testing, materials development, language teaching, and evaluation. provided a model to syllabus design that focuses on

Based on Munby (1978), Maley (1984), Richards (2001) and Brown ( 1995) models to syllabus design, it can be noted that for the formulation an effective syllabus, the designer must consider important elements such as needs analysis, content specification, and units organization. However, the most crucial step within this process of syllabus building, notably in ESP, is needs analysis. The latter, be it in language teaching in general or in ESP, aims at identifying who the learners are, why they want to learn language, how and what they need to learn.

### 3. Methodology

This study was conducted with 20 ESP teachers from different Algerian universities (i.e., University of Tiaret, University of Saida, and University of Oran).The teaching experience of these teachers ranges from experienced (more than 10 years) to less experience ones (from 1 to 9 years). Working with teachers from different universities aims at, first, getting a reasonable number of informants, and, second, at investigating the

perceptions of the respondents from various working environments and geographical areas.

The research design of this study is exploratory and it uses a questionnaire for data collection. Although the questionnaire includes 6 close end and 3 open end questions, data analysis follows a quantitative approach as the findings are analyzed statistically. Brown (2001) claims that questionnaires are "any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing their answers or selecting them from among existing answers" (p. 60). Moreover, questionnaire is deemed easier to implement with many teachers from different universities, rather than would be an interview.

#### 4. Data analysis

This section will present and analyze the data yielded from the implementation of the questionnaire. The findings are illustrated in tables and followed by their comments.

Question1: (what is your degree? Doctorate/ Magister /Master)

Teachers	Number	Percentage
Doctorate	4	20%
Magister	10	50%
Master	6	30%

Table 1: Teachers 'Degree

As it is shown in the table 1, the results indicate that half of the participants were holder of Magister while a few numbers of participants (20%) were doctorate teachers. However, (30%) of the participants have a Master's in ELT.

Question 2: (what is your current teaching status? Full time teacher /Part Time teacher)

Teachers	Number	Percentage
Part time teachers	15	75%
Full time teachers	5	25%

Table 2: Teachers 'Status

As indicated in table2, the majority of the participants (75%) were part time teachers and only (25%) of them were full time teachers. This fact could hamper the teachers' efforts in designing efficient syllabuses since most of teachers do not have a permanent post.

Question 3: (Have you received a professional training in ESP? -yes /no, explain please)

Teachers	Number	Percentage
Yes	1	5%
No	19	95%

Table 3: Teachers' Professional Training in ESP

The purpose of this question is to determine whether or not the target ESP teachers have benefited from professional training in ESP that would enhance their skills for syllabus design. The results show that the majority of the participants (95%) did not receive professional training in ESP and only (5%) of the participants claimed to have attended ESP teacher development programmes, but this latter did not meet with their expectations. Even though training in ESP is definitely required, the majority of the ESP teacher of this research study did not benefit from practical training in this field.

Question 4: (does the Ministry of Higher Education provide you with an official ESP syllabus to each level?) Yes/ No. If yes, does this syllabus meet with your expectations?)

Teachers	Number	Percentage
Yes	16	80%
No	4	20%

Table 4: Syllabus Availability

(20%) of the participants stated that the university departments provide them with a teaching syllabus which includes guidelines and titles that teachers must tackle when lecturing; however, they also expressed a very negative attitude saying that this document did not meet with their expectations. On the other hand, the lion share of (80%) of the participants' responses claimed that no official ESP teaching syllabus is distributed to them and that the authority department, in the beginning of the academic year, hands out them with a 'Canvas' that includes the general goals and objectives of the ESP courses and the assessment modes. On the whole, even though the syllabus document exists, it seems unsatisfactory as it is superficial and far from satisfying the ESP teachers' needs.

Question 5: (Do you think that syllabuses are necessary tools in ESP teaching learning process? Yes/no, if yes, explain why please)

Teachers	Number	Percentage
Yes	20	100%
No	0	0%

Table 5: The Importance of Syllabuses

Table 5 reveals all the participants viewed the absence of syllabuses in their department as being a real hindrance; they stated that the absence of syllabuses does not only put teachers into dilemma of what to teach and how to teach but also in front of a long list of enquiries.

Question 6: (Do you follow a specific methodology when developing your ESP syllabus Yes /No. If yes, please explain)

Teachers	Number	Percentage
Yes	16	80%
No	4	20%

Table 6: Methodology to Designing an ESP Syllabus

(20%) of the participants pointed that they do not follow a specific methodology when designing their syllabuses. However, (80%) of them confirmed having a particular strategy. They all had similar opinions for instance they maintained that in ESP syllabus design, teachers have to undertake students' needs analysis as prior step; then based on the obtained results, they design a syllabus that should answer the needs and meet with the expectations of learners. They also reported that unlike the general English syllabus, ESP syllabus design is not easy because it demands from the ESP teacher to have a sound knowledge of the subject of specialization. It can be stated that the ESP teachers emphasized on needs analysis in the process of syllabus design, but no particular methodology is stated by them.

Question 7: (how do you select the course content of your syllabus?)

As far as this question is concerned, a variety of responses are expressed. However, the majority of the participants maintained that to select the course content of their syllabuses, they undertake needs analysis with the target group of learners. Some of the participants' answers are reported verbatim in the following quotes:

- 'I negotiate with my learners of the content of the courses'.
- 'I asked the subject matter teachers and sometimes I negotiate the topics with my students'.



- 'Since I am not having that much knowledge of the subject matter, I usually ask specialized teachers working at the same department with me about the topics that might motivate my learners to learn the target language'.
- 'From websites and books'.

As it can be seen in the above quotes, the ESP teachers seem to strive to define what to teach.

Question 8: (What are the criteria that you take into account before writing your ESP syllabus?)

As far as this question is concerned, the participants asserted on many aspects among which is the level of the students, the available teaching materials and the time assigned to teaching English. The majority of the participants ( 18 out of 20) reported that they elaborate the syllabus only after undertaking needs analysis at the beginning of the academic year. In addition, the participants stated that since they teach through a lecture course, the integration of the panel skills is adjusted according to the time allocated for the English course.

Question 9: (What are the hindrances that you encounter while writing your ESP syllabus?)

This question attempts to unveil the participants' difficulties and challenges while designing their ESP syllabus. The participants reported the following obstacles:

- Insufficient knowledge of the subject matter.
- There is no official methodology to teaching ESP or to designing a relevant syllabus.
- Lack of resources, books and manuals.
- Time constraint (i.e. inappropriate class hours).
- Students with different specialties are gathered to study together.
- Lack of teaching materials.
- Lack of expertise and absence of practical pre-service or in service teachers training.
- Lack of close cooperation and coordination among the subject matter teachers.
- The large number of classes and students low level in English.

Because of the myriad of obstacles that Algerian ESP teachers meet in designing appropriate syllabuses, it seems more convenient to provide them with a ready-made one.

## 5. Discussion of the results

A syllabus serves as road map for teachers because it draws up the '*what*' and the '*how*'. The '*what*' is specification of what is to be learnt in the class while the '*how*' is the teaching strategies, teaching methodology, teaching materials, as well as assessment procedures. In this line of thought, Wilkins (1976) notes that syllabuses "are specifications of the content of language teaching which have been submitted to some degree of structuring or ordering with the aim of making teaching and learning a more effective." (pp.83-89). Despite of the numerous research that tackled the concept and aimed to move this field forward (Allal, 2009; Mebitil, 2011; BenabdAllah, 2012; Bouzid, 2012; Bougandoura, 2012; Bensafa, 2012; Krarzia, 2013; Mebitil, 2015; Lachachi, 2016; Nouali, 2016 ), the distribution of an official ESP teaching syllabuses in Algerian higher education is accomplished. As far as this research work is concerned, question 4 reveals that syllabuses are of utmost importance in ELT in general but in ESP in particular. In other words, there is a total agreement among teachers of the necessity of having this teaching

document. Meanwhile, results to question 5 confirms that the Algerian ESP teachers are not yet equipped with official readymade ESP syllabuses, thus lots of them turned to self dependent designers of their teaching programmes.

Bearing in mind that writing a syllabus, particularly in an ESP, is not always easy but rather time consuming and challenging task, results to question 6, 7, 8, and 9 shows that Algerian ESP teachers confront with many challenges when it come to the elaboration of their syllabuses, these challenges can be grouped into three groups: teaching materials, teaching environment, and ESP professional training. Some of the challenges that are related to materials are the limited availability of ESP specialized resources, lack of teaching materials, and absence of textbooks. As far as the challenges relating to the teaching environment, they can be enumerated as follows: students low level in general English, teaching mixed groups of learners who have different specialties, large number of classes, time constraints, and lack of collaboration with the subject matter teachers. Regarding the challenges of teachers' training, ESP teachers complained that they did not receive practical service training; neither a specific methodology to teaching ESP is available nor is the guidelines to writing the syllabus are provided.

## **6. Suggestions and recommendations**

On the basis of the findings that have stemmed from this study, the following recommendations are made to Algerian higher education authorities, ESP syllabus, designers, 'Canvas' writers, and ESP teachers.

### **6.1. Providing a syllabus for ESP teachers**

Since most of the teaching staff is not stable to work on a long term syllabus and most of the teachers have not received adequate training in ESP to design their own syllabuses, it is advisable for ESP Higher educational authorities to form team working on putting together specialized ESP syllabuses guidelines for each specialty. The Canvas provided for ESP teachers is at best insufficient as it simply specifies only the topics to be taught, objectives, and references

### **6.2. Providing teachers with ESP textbooks**

The teacher-participants in this study reported the lack of ESP libraries and their resort to haphazard use of the internet materials; consequently, it deemed more appropriate to provide these teachers with a textbook designed by specialists of the field to overcome the difficulties of the documentation shortage. Additionally, this will significantly assist the teachers who are mostly trained in general English to progress along with their students in getting to grips with specialized language of each discipline.

### **6.3. Teacher training in ESP**

Providing teachers with a textbook does only partly solve the problem of ESP teaching in Algerian universities. Teachers should given a minimum of training in specialized language and in designing ESP syllabuses. In ESP there is no standard syllabus that fits for all. Rather, the contents of ESP teaching vary in accordance to the learners' needs and specialty. Therefore, teachers should be adequately taught to design their own syllabus or at least adapt the contents provided by the Ministry of Higher education in line with the needs of their students.



#### 6.4. Suggesting a methodology to designing a syllabus in an ESP teaching context

The following description is expected to be of vital use by ESP teachers because it prescribes a procedural methodology to designing a syllabus in an ESP teaching context. To do so, we have proposed three main phases illustrated as follow:

Phase 1: In this phase, the ESP teacher has first to conduct his/ her needs analysis (NA) to sort out information such as the teaching goals and the learning objectives. Moreover, NA permits to examine the linguistics needs of the learners i.e. (abilities, problems, preferences, likes, dislikes, purposes, and expectations) ; these linguistics elements are fundamental to determine the language components (skills, functions, grammar, and technical vocabulary). Another important step in this phase is outlining learners 'learning styles learning preferences so that to map out the learning activities and the teaching techniques of the ESP course of the syllabus.

Phase 2: We proceed to this phase only when the ESP teacher undertakes successfully the first phase i.e. (identifying needs, formulating aims and objectives). Phase 2, thus, involves the selection of the course content of the syllabus. In fact, phase 2 is formulated according to the results obtained from the NA in phase 1. When the designer makes decisions about the content topics of the ESP courses, He/she goes then to the selection of a framework syllabus that indicates how the learning activities will systematically be sequenced.

Phase 3: In this phase, the ESP teacher has to select an appropriate teaching methodology and provide instructional materials for the syllabus. One point to mention here is that the teaching methodology we refer to here is mainly concerned with the teaching approach, in other words, what is the type of the teaching method that the teacher is going to use in order to reflect on the teaching tasks presented in the syllabus. The next step the ESP teacher is required to do is to engage in the preparation of the materials of the syllabus as well as making decisions about assessment and evaluation procedures.

#### 7. Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges that a sample Algerian ESP teachers come across while developing their syllabuses. A questionnaire was used to explore the problems and constraints that teachers confront while developing their own ESP syllabuses in their classes. Results indicate that they face many obstacles which prevent them operating adequately in the target context. Among the biggest hurdles they encounter is lack of a comprehensive syllabus model for each discipline, lack of professional training, and lack of materials. On the basis of these insights, it is mainly suggested to provide adequate textbooks of ESP for each discipline, training teachers, and providing a syllabus model for each specialty. Further, a procedural methodology to designing a syllabus in ESP context was also suggested.

#### References

- Breen, M. P. (1987a). Contemporary paradigms in syllabus design", Part 2- in Language Teaching, 20(3), 157-174.
- Brown, J., D. (1995). The element of language curriculum: A systematic approach to programme development. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

- 
- Brown, D. (2001). Teaching by principles. An interactive approach to language pedagogy. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Dudley-Evans T, St John M. J. (1998). Developments in English for specific purposes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A. (1987). English for specific purposes: A learning centered approach. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mackay, R. & Mountford, A. (1978). English for specific purposes: A case study approach. London: Longman.
- Maley, A. (1984). Constraints-based syllabus design. In Read, J.A.S.(ed), trend in language syllabus design. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Munby, J. (1978). Communicative syllabus design. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J., C. (2001). Curriculum development in language teaching. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, B. (2007). Developing materials for language teaching. London: Continuum YTH Ltd.
- Wilkins, D. (1976). Notional syllabuses. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widdowson, H. (1983). Learning purposes and language use. Oxford University Press.
- Yalden, J. (1987). The communicative syllabus: Evolution, design and implementation. London: Prentice-Hall International.