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The Synergy of a Triune Curriculum: Balancing Skills, Tasks, and Content in an EAP Course

This case study describes an effective approach for organizing the key elements of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course: content, skills, and tasks. The suggested approach uses content as the syllabus framework, skills to format the units, and tasks as the building blocks of lessons. This triune approach is illustrated through the curriculum design for an EAP course for graduate students of Translation and Interpretation (T&I). The necessary catalogs of content, skills, and tasks are assembled by a combination of continuous needs assessment of the professional skills and the target learners, as derived from course evaluations, reference materials, and interviews with T&I faculty. The approach is exemplified by the syllabus outline and a sample unit plan, and implications are drawn for EAP course design in general.

1. Introduction

Ever since the work of Wilkins (1976), MacKay and Palmer (1981), Munby (1978), and other specialists in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) moved the grammatical syllabus off center stage, language education in general and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs in particular have been struggling to find optimally effective and relevant curricular frameworks. After a lengthy stage of seeking essentially one-dimensional replacements (notional-functional, skill-based, thematic, rhetorical, task-based, and so forth), it became clear (see Jourdenais & Shaw, 2005; Leaver & Willis, 2004; Mohan, 1986; Mohan, Leung, & Davison, 2001; Munby, 1978; Yalden, 1983) that a multidimensional approach is needed. This raises two crucial and foundational questions for curriculum designers:

1. What dimensions should be incorporated?
2. What framework provides an effective and efficient combination of those elements?

In offering a case study of EAP curriculum design, our purpose is to answer

these questions in detail. We shall describe an advanced 6-week EAP program called English Preparation for Translation and Interpretation (EPTI), offered each summer at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) to provide English language training for international students (speakers of Korean, Japanese, Chinese, French, and Spanish) who have at least a 600 TOEFL score and who will subsequently enter the MA programs in the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation (GSTI), where the expectations for language proficiency are extremely high.

We write as instructors in this program who are responsible for conducting assessments of learner needs and for writing and rewriting the curriculum. From reflecting on such experiences, we have established a three-pronged approach, a triune design in which content provides the macrostructure for the syllabus, skills furnish a framework for the unit, and tasks are the building blocks of lessons. Given such a structured model, the content, skills, and tasks we assemble through needs assessment and other activities can be readily slotted into the syllabus and unit designs, using common criteria for sequencing (simple to complex, concrete to abstract, and so forth). In this way, we have been able to diminish the false dichotomy of content-based instruction and task-based instruction, resulting in greater synergy among content, skills, and tasks.

In designing each iteration of our curriculum, we rely on (a) our sustained and detailed interaction with the academic program (GSTI) being served (section 2 below); (b) our ongoing systematic needs assessment (section 3); and (c) our frank examination of the successes and failures of the previous year (section 6).

It is important to present a caveat here. It has been well documented in the ESP literature that the relationship between the EAP course and the target academic/professional program, on the one hand, and the learner population, on the other, can be complex and ambiguous. Swales, Barks, Ostermann, and Simpson (2001), for example, illustrate these challenges in the case of graduate students of architecture; Aiguo (2007) uses the case of aviation English to sketch an appropriate approach to ESP in an EFL context, specifically China; and Shi, Corcos, and Storey (2001) show how the needs of medical students can be clarified through the use of video samples of target discourse. In this case, the relationship between the EAP course (EPTI) and the academic/professional target (Translation and Interpretation—T&I) is less ambiguous and more straightforward; and the gap between the two is relatively narrow, with considerable overlap in the acknowledged significance of language features (technical lexis, discourse markers, for example) and language-related skills (summarizing, paraphrasing, for instance). That said, we see no reason why lessons presented here cannot be stretched to more distant and vaguer targets.

2. The Academic/Professional Target Program

We are able to tailor our instructional framework and approach to learner needs by maintaining close ties to the target program in Translation and Interpretation. This means interviewing professors and students, observing classes, attending faculty meetings, and the like (see section 3 for more

details). One contribution we have found especially helpful was a catalog of skills required by the T&I professions and provided to us by our T&I colleagues. The categories are as follows (each includes as many as 25 items; here we provide a typical subset):

Table 1
Translation and Interpretation Skills

<i>Translation, sight translation, and transcription skills</i>	<i>Interpretation, conference interpretation, and simultaneous interpretation skills</i>
Writing and summarizing skills	Presentation skills
Reading comprehension skills	Confidence
Researching skills	Cultural knowledge and of current events
Breaking down sentences (especially long or confusing ones)	Listening for main and supporting ideas, including names and numbers
Time management	Control of various registers
Skimming quickly to discern the main idea	Memory skills
Note-taking skills	Note-taking skills
Register switching (when necessary)	Coping effectively with stress and anxiety
Distinguishing and analyzing genres	Summarizing and paraphrasing skills

Such catalogs of target skills are of great value in developing our own menus of skills (the broader elements) and tasks (the more specific items).

3. Needs Assessment

Informed by the tradition of needs assessment in ESP in general, and EAP in particular, our needs assessment for EPTI is multifaceted (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) to ensure greater reliability of information collected, rather than relying solely upon applied linguists' intuitions or upon pre-experience learners' stated needs (Long, 2005). Moreover, the basis for EPTI in terms of objective and subjective needs (see Graves, 2000; MacKay & Palmer, 1981; Tudor, 1996) is continually refreshed. We derive the former from class observations, reference materials, and surveys and interviews involving GSTI faculty, administrators, and students. The latter come from EPTI participants before, throughout, and after the program. The objective data provide us with a catalog of skills and knowledge, academic and professional, required for success; the subjective component clarifies the priorities among those skills and the learning approach desired by a particular population.

This objective and subjective continuum applies equally to content, skills, and tasks. As an example, we model the content themes after the T&I curriculum; however, when the Hezbollah crisis in Lebanon broke out during the summer of 2006, we made this the main focus of the UN unit. Thus, while we develop a solid skills, task, and content curriculum from a thorough analysis of learners' target and objective needs, it in no way results in a static curricu-

lum. Our understanding that learners' needs make the curriculum more dynamic and nuanced underscores the importance of the target needs analysis that has helped frame the EPTI curriculum.

Interviews with content experts are widely used to target the skills needed in an ESP course (Brindley, 1984; Cumanaratunge, 1988; Fixman, 1990). Semistructured interviews and panel discussions with T&I faculty and administrators revealed the following skills needed for success: speed reading with instant comprehension, analytical listening, getting the gist without being inhibited by unknown phrases or words, anticipation, and public-speaking skills.

Surveys we conducted with EPTI participants who have completed either the first year of their MA or their GSTI degree provide additional feedback that informs the subsequent iteration of EPTI. EPTI 2006 and 2007 alumni recommended more emphasis on cognitive skills such as note taking and memory retention, more opportunities for listening practice from a variety of genres (i.e., lectures, speeches, interviews), and greater coverage of economic topics. However, while interviews with T&I faculty affirmed the importance of these recommendations, they cautioned against explicit instruction in note taking for students beginning their studies of translation and interpretation. This discrepancy reveals the importance of collecting needs-analysis data from a variety of reliable sources and not depending solely upon a single outlet (Long, 2005).

Another reliable way to study learners' target needs is by collecting written sources of information (Long, 2005). We consulted a core text in the discipline, James Nolan's (2005) *Interpretation: Techniques and Exercises*, which affirmed the need for students to hone their public-speaking skills; become familiar with common patterns of argumentation; build their language flexibility by paraphrasing, compressing, and simplifying complex information; adjust the word order and shift adverbial clauses when translating and interpreting; and grasp the underlying meaning of figures of speech and allusions. Interpreters also need experience with various registers of the target language and exposure to wide-ranging genres, particularly economic and political discourse. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (no date), successful interpreters and translators will possess strong research and analytical skills and a thorough understanding of the subject matter in which they work. Exceptional memory skills are essential for interpreters, as writing and editing skills are for translators.

Fourth, we collected additional information about the discipline by visiting a series of T&I classes (see van Lier, 1988), including the summer course offered by a T&I faculty member to all EPTI participants. In the summer T&I course, students deliver extemporaneous speeches, learn and apply memory techniques and note-taking strategies, and learn techniques for chunking language into meaningful message units so as to move away from literal word translations. During the academic year, interpretation students listen to a speech, take notes, and interpret it into or from their target language, while peers and the faculty member provide constructive feedback on their interpretation. In their translation courses, students bring their translated text to class and everyone participates in critiquing the accuracy

of the translation, suitability of word choice, concision, clarity, and register for the target audience and context.

Taken collectively, the results from these needs analyses helped us to formulate overarching goals for the EPTI curriculum, while diagnostic tests and ongoing participant feedback allowed us to tweak the curriculum to students' levels and interests. One aspect of special interest here is the balance between accuracy and fluency, on the one hand, and between general EAP skills and those required specifically for T&I on the other. Given the immense emphasis in T&I courses on accuracy, previous EPTI instructors had tended to focus on developing the fluency and confidence necessary to make good use of the copious accuracy-related feedback they will subsequently receive.

4. Goals of the EPTI Curriculum

From the target needs analysis, we classified the goals for the EPTI curriculum according to Stern's (1992) categorization of cognitive, proficiency, and affective goals. One example is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
EPTI Course Goals

<i>Cognitive goals</i> <i>Students will learn:</i>	<i>Proficiency goals</i> <i>Students will sharpen</i> <i>their ability to:</i>	<i>Affective goals</i> <i>Students will feel</i> <i>more confident in:</i>
The skills needed for success as a translator or an interpreter. These skills include, but are not limited to: summarizing and paraphrasing, public speaking, making their writing more clear and concise, and developing their sensitivity to different levels of formality in English.	Perform the skills needed for success as a translator or interpreter.	Their ability to perform the skills needed for success as a translator and interpreter.

To complement these program goals, EPTI students also write individual goals during the opening module, which includes learner training, community building, and other preparation for success in the course and, subsequently, in their profession. In other words, we seek in EPTI an efficient and fruitful balance between individual development and cooperative achievement. This is also true in affective terms, with our sustained focus on balancing the development of individual motivation with the creation of a learning community with strong interpersonal ties and access to a variety of communal resources.

5. The EPTI Syllabus

The organization of and relationships among content, skills, and tasks are central to our approach. In this section, we present a rough sketch of how these elements are integrated in the syllabus and thus represent what we mean by "synergy." First, a unit of content (possibly "topic," though we are concerned about the rather random use of this term in our literature) must be sufficiently well defined as to clearly correspond with students' academic

and professional needs. Second, a skill (or “sub-skill” or “skill area”—again the terminology is not as precise as we would like) must be sufficiently well defined as to be readily distinguished from other skills and must be characterized with sufficient specificity as to suggest both possible tasks through which the skill might be effectively deployed and possible content within which the skill will be exercised. Third, a task (or task type, see Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Leaver & Willis, 2004; Prabhu, 1987) must be described in such a way that the skill or skills deployed are clearly identifiable, that the inputs and outputs are readily discernible, and the nature and scope of possible content are likewise easily described.

Further, our approach is based in the following pragmatic considerations, largely related to the issue of face validity (or, as Kumarivadivelu, 2001, puts it, Minimizing Perceptual Mismatches and Maximizing Learning Opportunities): First, the largest syllabus units (4-day modules) must be sufficiently broad to allow relevant choices to be made among various possible narrower content areas (or “subtopics”). Second, since the key to skill development is repetition in a cycle of planning, execution, and reflection, the ideal syllabus template balances the need for variety with a sufficient number of repetitions for each skill. In the case of this 6-week course, we determined this to be a 2-day template, meaning 12 significant incidences for each skill. Third, we achieve this same balance between variety and consistency at the lesson level (1- to 2-hour block of sustained learning activities) by developing a menu of tasks corresponding to each content-skill combination mandated by the higher-level planning. These considerations for selecting and structuring the content material are illustrated in the syllabus for the 2007 version of EPTI:

Table 3
EPTI Syllabus

<i>Module</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Content</i>
1	Orientation, community building, and learner training	1	Introductions, self-diagnosis, skill profiles
		2	Goal setting, introduction to T&I, the nature of advanced language learning
2	Science and technology	3	Climate change and global warming
		4	Global medical issues and technologies
3	Business	5	World oil trade and energy conservation
		6	California wine industry
4	Economics and environment	7	Sustainability and corporate responsibility
		8	Free trade and globalization issues
5	Law	9	Immigration and migration
		10	The American judicial system
6	United Nations and other world bodies	11	The UN Security Council
		12	Other world bodies

Over this matrix we then lay the skill framework established for each module:

Table 4
EPTI Skills Framework

	<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
8:30-9:50	Public speaking	Advanced writing and editing	Vocabulary building	Advanced writing and editing	Debates, committee and L1 project presentations, mock trials
10:00-11:10	Language and content comprehension and application skills	Language and content analysis and synthesis skills	Language and content comprehension and application skills	Language and content analysis and synthesis skills	Debates, committee and L1 project presentations, mock trials
11:15-11:45	Debate team meetings, L1 meetings	Committee meetings	Debate team meetings, L1 meetings	Committee meetings	[Field trips]

We designed the EPTI curriculum, then, so that each module integrates the skills, tasks, and content to the greatest degree possible. We first select authentic and current materials that represent the content modules and then, working within the designated skill-based framework, design pedagogic tasks to optimally facilitate the development of those skills. We employ principles of effective task design, maximizing negotiation for meaning and modified output. For example, students are required to select debate propositions in teams, which leads to negotiation for meaning. In the delivery of timed arguments in the debate, they are forced to economize their language production. In the execution of each task, we take copious notes, providing students with feedback on their style, register, and accuracy of language.

6. Program Evaluation

We perform summative evaluations of EPTI through extensive formal assessments by participants at the end of each summer course as well as in subsequent questionnaire surveys and interviews during the first and second years of study in the MA program. EPTI components that are consistently rated highly by T&I students include the following: discussions, debates, and the use of authentic newspaper and magazine articles. Based on results from an online survey conducted midway through the 2005 program, 90% of the 20 respondents strongly agreed or agreed that “the in-class activities are useful and instructive” and 85% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “I feel that this program is contributing to my overall professional and academic goals.” Based on a survey conducted with all 26 EPTI students at the end of

the summer 2007 session for how well the English curriculum addressed specific professional skills deemed important for their profession, students rated “confidence,” “summarizing and paraphrasing,” and “public-speaking skills” very highly, but “memory skills” and “knowledge of idioms and collocations” less so. Looking at one cohort of the 2007 students’ self-reported ability on each of these professional skills at the start of the program compared to the end of it, students reported the most significant progress on “knowledge of vocabulary,” “looking at units of meaning,” “public-speaking skills,” and “confidence.” Even in the areas in which students ranked the English curriculum less highly (i.e., “memory skills” and “knowledge of idioms and collocations”), the vast majority reported some improvement on these skills during the course of the program. While these self-report findings may be influenced positively by students’ increased confidence in their abilities at the end of the program, we believe that this also testifies to the strength of the EPTI program: Confidence building is an essential skill for success, especially for students who have little or no experience in an English-speaking country. This may be why T&I faculty have stated in interviews that EPTI is particularly valuable for students who have not had the opportunity to live or study in the US. Moreover, one T&I faculty member reported hearing “no complaints” about the EPTI program from students in the last couple of years, which is precisely when the triune curriculum was introduced.

Among the nearly one-third (or 19 of 60) EPTI alumni from the 2006 and 2007 program who responded to a follow-up program evaluation, the mean scores reflected their agreement (where 4 = agree) that the skills, content units, and tasks in the EPTI curriculum prepared them well for their study of translation and interpretation. The mean scores were: 3.95/5.0 for “the *skills* addressed in the EPTI curriculum prepared me well for my study of translation and interpretation”; 4.0/5.0 for “the *content units* in the EPTI curriculum prepared me well for my study of translation and interpretation”; and 4.17/5.0 for “the *tasks* in the EPTI curriculum prepared me well for my study of translation and interpretation.”

There is also some evidence that EPTI’s attention to learning process has an impact for students throughout their MA work and beyond. Among the positive comments is this, from a professional interpreter: “As I often told you the EPTI program I attended is still the best course I have ever had the chance to attend in my life. I bear the fruits of what I did and my English is improving. You gave more clues on how to improve it and that is what I now appreciate most.”

7. Applicability to Other Programs

The key insight we draw from our experiences with EPTI is this: While the skills, tasks, content (STC) components are all vital to the construction of effective ESP programs, the optimal structure, providing maximal synergy, is to use a content framework for the syllabus, a skills outline for units, and a task framework for lessons. Given such a prewired model, the content, skills, and tasks assembled through multifaceted needs assessment and evaluation can be readily slotted into the syllabus and unit designs, using common crite-

ria for sequencing. The unrelenting juxtaposition in EPTI of the content, language foci, skills, and learning tasks not only contributes to the effectiveness of the course but also to the students' subsequent success in the target academic and professional arenas.

That said, this triune design does present unique challenges. For example, occasionally we have had to limit the variety of skills and tasks because the content material did not lend itself to the particular skill or task we wanted to prioritize. However, when the language skills for the target program are clearly defined from a meticulous needs assessment, as they are in the EPTI program, task relevance may be more important for students' success in their target program than task diversity. In this synergistic model, students strengthen their language skills through repeated practice and feedback on a narrow set of tasks, such as summarizing and paraphrasing, and they broaden their content knowledge through exposure to a variety of topics and genres.

Another challenge with this model is that the content materials must always be refreshed for currency, which places an enormous burden on instructors to rebuild the curriculum during each program cycle. Depth in any one subject is virtually impossible when the program ambitiously aims to cover such a broad range of topics in a short time. Despite these challenges, nevertheless we contend that students in a language class may not necessarily need to develop expertise within one content area; breadth may in fact prepare them better for their target programs. This is certainly the case for EPTI students, as they must command a broad knowledge of business, economics, politics, and the environment, in addition to other fields, so that they can successfully interpret or translate a variety of topics.

In other ESP settings, where breadth in terms of content may be less important than breadth in skills, we recommend that instructors still organize their curriculum by content units (albeit with fewer topics) and emphasize a greater range of skills in the syllabus. The balance and variety of content, skills, and tasks can be adjusted accordingly for a range of ESP settings, but it is the synergy in the curriculum design among these three elements that, in our view, contributes to its effectiveness and efficiency.

Authors

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