

A Proposal for the Implementation of an English for Specific Purposes Specialization in a Master's Degree Program in Second Languages and Cultures with Emphasis in English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Costa Rica, as a developing country, has been seeking growth by attracting international investment. In the last few years, however, a myriad of international companies of multiple working disciplines have been installed in Costa Rica, and they need a labor force that is competent not only in general English, but also in the technical English required. Higher education institutions (public and private) are not training ESP³ teachers at all; i.e, ESP education is being taught by untrained ESP teachers. In response to the above limitation, the Universidad Nacional, in its program of MSLC⁴, is designing a branch of ESP.

Key words: ESP master's branch, ESP methodologies and curriculum, ESP materials design, ESP testing, ESP research and practice, ESP

Resumen

Costa Rica, país en vías de desarrollo, ha buscado su crecimiento atrayendo la inversión internacional. Recientemente, gran cantidad de compañías internacionales en Costa Rica buscan una fuerza laboral que sea no solamente competente en inglés general, sino también en el inglés técnico requerido. Instituciones de educación superior (públicas y privadas) no están formando docentes en IPE¹, por lo que la educación en esta área se está realizando de manera empírica por los educadores no especializados. Respondiendo a la limitación señalada, la Universidad Nacional, en la figura de la MSLC², está diseñando un énfasis en IPE.

Palabras claves: Énfasis en IPE en programa de maestría, metodologías y curriculum en IPE, diseño de materiales para IPE, evaluación de IPE, investigación y práctica en IPE

Due to Costa Rica's effort to achieve a place in the global economy, the government settled on multiple initiatives to allow its citizens different opportunities to learn English. This situation created a national demand for many teachers highly proficient in English and its cultural norms, and also knowledgeable of and skillful in applying practical and efficient pedagogies to speed the second language learning rate of Costa Ricans. The demand for employees with proficiency in English for general purposes (EGP) was overcome in recent years by the demand for individuals who besides having command of EGPs were proficient in English for specialized purposes (ESP). Notwithstanding the above, neither public or private universities of the country have been able to keep up with the demand of training enough educators to administer appropriately the nation-wide EGP workshops, projects and programs, and even worse, there are still no programs aimed at training ESP teachers, except for the in-progress ESP project design being carried out by the Master's professional program in Second Languages and Cultures with Emphasis in English as a Foreign Language (MSLC) of the Universidad Nacional (UNA).

One of the missions of the UNA is to contribute to the academic formation of the professionals that Costa Rica requires. Since English teachers became one of the most relevant needs of the country, the Universidad Nacional responded (twenty years ago) by establishing with great success a graduate program entitled *Licenciatura en Linguística Aplicada* that rigorously trained English teachers for language for general purposes (LGP). With the experience and learning gained through the former program, in 2005 it was replaced by the MSLC. This master's program has two emphases: English for Adults and English for Children; it consists of four academic cycles⁵. The MSLC considers five essential disciplines as cornerstones to have an educator of second languages (L2s) be successful: linguistics and second language acquisition, curricular development, socio-cultural knowledge, different types of evaluation, and second language research. In addition, the Master's is oriented towards integrating communication, equality, environment and culture, gender neutrality, cultural diversity and sustainable development as cross-curricular themes.

Linguistics and L2 acquisition disciplines involve the theoretical principles, concepts and processes to understand the phenomenon of second language acquisition. For this purpose, there are four courses offered in this area which allow educators to support their teaching performances in a unified way. Curricular development includes theoretical framework, concepts and methodology which are essential to develop the knowledge and skills that every teacher should possess, in order to coordinate or implement a curriculum in L2 teaching in a scientific and systematic way. Socio-cultural knowledge consists of the theoretical, conceptual and strategic knowledge necessary to the communicative teaching of a L2. This area contextualizes the functional use of the language and integrates paralinguistic and cultural elements in the teaching\learning of a foreign language (FL). The socio-cultural area fosters empathy and provides preparation to understand the different cultural behavioral patterns among the

non-native speakers of the target language. Different types of evaluation like assessment and testing emphasize the formative processes, which every teacher must apply in the students' daily work. This can be carried out by means of a systematic process of formative strategies such as individual or group sessions of critical analysis, teaching journals, class observations, lesson reports, classroom investigations, advances of unit designs, materials, lesson plans, tests and evaluation scales. Second Language Research embodies theoretical knowledge, investigation types, concepts, and processes that educators must be exposed to and that will enable them to develop on their own professionally. This can be carried out through constant research and evaluation of their teaching performance in the workplace. The students, as part of their formation, must also carry out their applied investigations through case studies, diagnosis and proposals, documented productions, and laboratory and professional practice. Moreover, research is a cross-curricular theme permeating all the courses of the Master's program.

The following table shows the distribution of the sixteen courses of the Master's program according to the five academic disciplines emphasized in the program of the MSLC.

Linguistics and L2 Acquisition	Curricular Development	Socio-cultural Knowledge	Evaluation	L2 Research
Theories in Second Language	Curriculum of a Foreign Language	Culture and Target Language	Assessment	Quantitative Studies in Second Languages
Acquisition Pedagogical Grammar	Approaches and Strategies in the Classroom	Literature in Foreign Languages	Testing	Ethnography in the Classroom
Design and Evaluation of Linguistic Material		Ethnolinguistics	Curriculum Evaluation in Second Languages and Cultures	Research in Second Languages and Cultures
Interactive Processes		Sociolinguistics		

Table N.1. MSLC courses distributed according to the academic disciplines they support.

As a general objective, this graduate plan intends that students be able to analyze, develop, and apply—through systematic means—their studies of applied linguistics and related disciplines in order to better learn how to teach the acquisition of English as a second language, and to improve the administration of English programs.

Justification of the problem

Based on the scenario depicted above regarding the Master's program, it is evident that it does not include a specialization of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), in spite of the fact that Costa Rica has established as one of its main goals to create a bilingual national community that will be attractive for international market development and investment. Today, the training of educators in ESP is an imperative to be included within the foreign language programs in Costa Rican universities for two reasons: first, there is no ESP program (at the Master's level) offered by any higher education institution; and second, there is an accelerated high demand for these type of specialized teachers required in higher education institutions, technical high schools, colleges, commercial schools, and international companies.

Traditionally, since the creation of the public universities in Costa Rica (Universidad Nacional, Universidad de Costa Rica, Instituto Tecnológico, Universidad Estatal a Distancia), professors of teaching English as a foreign language have taught courses of English for other majors, even though these educators have not been specialized in ESP, since neither the above public universities nor any private ones offer programs in this specific area. Evidence of this is provided by an ESP research project called IMPACTO, carried out in Costa Rica, in which it is reported that many countries share the problem of the lack of specialized professors in occupational language, and that Costa Rica is not an exception (2003, p. 4). At the present, public universities are making efforts to offer English as a cross-curricular skill in programs with different specialized disciplines (veterinary, computer sciences, dance, biology, geography, physical education, etc.); nevertheless, FL teachers in charge of teaching this type of English courses, do not have any specialized formation in ESP. In other words, English teachers who are leading ESP training programs, both in private and public institutions, are not competent to do so. Ruiz and Arias in the *Actualidad Económica* journal reveal that there is a large quantity of private universities that form L2 educators deficiently, and the situation becomes more serious considering that two thirds of the whole teaching staff hired by the Ministry of Education come from the same private universities (2008, p.1).

The lack of appropriate formation in ESP makes educators expose their weaknesses in both specialized language and professional knowledge in the ESP courses that they teach. This identified problem is also supported by a research project described by Selinker (in Robinson, 1991, p. 21) that yielded the following result:

...the teachers were not only ignorant of the meanings of technical terms, but that they could not identify when 'common language words' were being used technically, misunderstood the meaning—in context—of certain modal verbs, connectives and even punctuation and, because of their lack of specialist knowledge did not in fact realize what the purpose of the entire article and its main content were.

In regard to the accelerated high demand of ESP teachers who are required in universities, technical high schools, colleges, commercial schools, and international companies, the Costa Rican Minister of Education, Leonardo Garnier, states that "...nobody can teach a subject matter if he\she does not master it, or if he\she does not know how to teach it well" (Ruiz and Arias, 2008, p. 1). An effort to train better educators in English for General Purposes is being made by the government through the national program entitled Multilingual Costa Rica. Meanwhile, the weakly prepared L2 educators will be the professionals teaching ESP courses, this in obvious detriment to the students' learning outcomes. To solve the above inconsistency, the Costa Rican government published decree No. 34425-MEP-COMEX: "We declare it in the public and the national interest the governmental initiative called Bilingual Costa Rica," meaning that governmental and private institutions must join efforts so as to create the educational conditions for all Costa Ricans to become bilingual as a means to enhance better professional opportunities (the Gazette, N61 of March 28 of 2008).

Therefore, what is desperately needed is government investment in the training of teachers of English to thus constitute—in number as well as quality—a professional specialized work force, who in the short term, can lead the Costa Rican people towards bilingualism and in the mastery of technical English.

The proposal itself

Knowing the pedagogical practice of ESP in terms of its curriculum design, methodology, materials design, evaluation and its lines of research in specialized disciplines, the proposal of the MSLC is to develop a branch of specialization in ESP and related disciplines in order to enable our graduates to analyze, develop and apply (in a systematic way) the studies of ESP within the field of applied linguistics. For this purpose a series of courses will be designed and in addition a line of investigation will be implemented in the field of applied linguistics. Furthermore, with the results of that research, the graduate must provide a coherent answer to either solve the identified problem or overcome the weaknesses encountered. So that what the students have already proposed must be piloted and tested as to evaluate its pertinence and applicability.

To provide the ESP focus in this master's program, four courses have been sought to have the academic essentials of this language specialization: Methodologies in ESP Curriculum Design; Design and Evaluation of ESP Authentic Materials; Evaluation of ESP Performances; Research and Practice in ESP Occupational Settings.

The course on Methodologies in ESP Curriculum Design will approach the multiple pedagogical trends toward the development of different types of syllabi. The setting up of an ESP design involves a series of decision-making processes such as needs analysis, designers' selection of approach to syllabus and methodology, and the creation of materials. Another decision-making process involves the selection of content-based syllabuses: language form, language

notion, language function, language situation, language topic, language skills, and tasks. All these decision-making processes will lead the teachers and students to a clear “Route-map” to achieve the goals of the learning process (Robinson, 1991, p. 34).

The Design and Evaluation of ESP Authentic Materials course will provide the theoretical principles for devising the selection and or creation of in-house materials of the specialist discipline of the work-place. The course will help consider the ESP students’ age, level of LGP, professional knowledge, institutional context, and others. Theory on evaluating materials will also allow the teachers and students to verify the quality of the existent or designer-made materials. The nature of this course will orient educators to the creation of materials as an essential professional skill. In this regard, Baumgardner, et al, state that “under favorable circumstances the writing of materials is an integral part of teacher training and that ‘locally produced materials’ incorporating local themes would be of more interest...” (in Robinson, 1991, p. 57).

The Evaluation of the ESP Performances course will include formative and summative theoretical accounts and the design of assessment and testing instruments aimed to monitor the students’ learning process in regard to EGP and ESP. At every stage of the ESP learning process, ESP evaluation knowledge will enable the testing of the appropriateness of the students’ field of professional or occupational interest performances. “Theoretically, an ESP test will consist of performance in a real-life situation” (Robinson, 1991, p. 73). The course will also allow teachers to obtain data as to determine if the course goals are being attained successfully, and if not, to make the required changes in the learning process. Robinson assures us that “One of the tasks of the ESP test designer is to determine the exact nature of the criteria, or, more probably, criteria for judging adequate performance. This will require the assistance of experts in the specific work/study area that students are or will be involved in” (Robinson, 1991, p.73).

The Research and Practice in ESP Occupational Settings course will enable the students to explore particular language and behavioral phenomena of the work-place, analyze the data gathered, and systematize the results in order to formulate a proposal to modify, strengthen, rectify, solve, or generate the desirable curricular conditions. Although somewhat impractical, this course will require students to test their research findings and proposal in a real-world job setting, for this instance will yield more objective results than would artificial environment settings.

Conclusion

The proposal for establishing an ESP branch in the MSLC, is the first ESP academic experience at the higher education level nation-wide. The educational initiative is highly pertinent and necessary to satisfy the need that Costa Rica has for ESP teachers to lead the bilingual project directed by the government.

The proposal as stated by the MSLC is innovative from the perspective of the ESP research and practice within the field of applied linguistics, and although it will constitute a challenge for the Master's program, it is one that we are willing and eager to take. The ESP branch project is an opportunity to monitor the ESP students in their occupational settings through multimedia projects, a practice that will provide meaningful learning experiences to both ESP teachers and students. The creation of the ESP branch in the MSLC will also stimulate other universities to emulate the project, and this will set the conditions for training higher quantities of efficient ESP educators. And last, but not least, this proposal is open to feedback from the ESP experts for improvement, since we are aware that Costa Rica is in its infancy with regard to ESP practices.

As the teaching of ESP and how to accomplish it spreads throughout Costa Rica, the impact would be felt almost immediately. As the circle of teachers of ESP become widely distributed, the effects will become more and more noticeable, and then this government initiative will not be just another government program, but will lead directly to more foreign investment in Costa Rica, higher productivity which means higher salaries, and thus, a higher standard of living. Because the world becomes more and more a global market, the necessity of the mastery of English becomes highly relevant. Throughout its history the Universidad Nacional has been a trailblazer in introducing new and effective teaching methodologies for second languages in Costa Rica. Therefore, the intent of this proposal is to follow in the path of our predecessors and blaze a new trail into the future.

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Notes

- 1 Inglés para Propósitos Específicos.
- 2 Master's in Second Languages and Cultures with Emphasis in English as a Foreign Language.
- 3 English for Specific Purposes.
- 4 Maestría en Segundas Lenguas y Culturas con Énfasis en Inglés como Lengua Extranjera.
- 5 In Universidad Nacional, the term cycle refers to an eighteen week scholarly period.