The English Language Curriculum for Petroleum Students at Hadramout University of Science and Technology (HUST)

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Introduction

Like all engineers, petroleum students need the English language to meet their academic and professional needs. However, it has been found that petroleum students at Hadramout University of Science and Technology (HUST) faced a lot of difficulties in using the language. There may be many reasons for the difficulties. One of the reasons might be the English language curriculum which is offered to the petroleum students. Given this, the present paper discusses issues related to the English language curriculum for petroleum students at HUST in its past and current situation and what should be done in the future.

English Language Curriculum for the Petroleum Students at HUST

Like all the faculties in HUST, English is taught to first year petroleum students as a faculty requirement for one year. It aims to qualify these students with the required proficiency level they need on their professional lives. Another important aim of the English course is to "develop and improve students' communicative competence in the four language skills" (Al-Fadly, 2004: 18). Despite taking the course, they might face a lot of difficulties in using English as most of the graduates were rejected when applying to work at the oil companies. In fact, they have been advised to take intensive courses in English to improve their language.

Obviously, there are many factors that might cause the students' low proficiency in English. Yet, much more insight and beneficial data may be obtained by concentrating on the appropriateness of the English language syllabus.

Generally speaking, before 2004, the English language syllabus in almost all the faculties in HUST was designed by English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers based on their own perceptions and views of the students' needs (Al-Fadly, 2004). Designing the English language course to the engineering students and other majors presented a lot of difficulties to the teachers. This is because their background knowledge, which is education, is different from the students'. This problem has been highlighted by many researchers. For example, Pritchard and Nasr (2004) comment that as these teachers do not have as much technical background as their students do, they "lack confidence in their own knowledge and expertise" (ibid: 426). Moreover, English courses designed by these teachers might neglect the students' needs and interests (ibid). The importance of having relevant background knowledge and expertise is clearly pointed out by Nunan (1987: 7).

If teachers are to be the ones responsible for developing the curriculum, they need the time, the skills and the support to do so. Support may include curriculum models and guidelines and may include support from individuals acting in a curriculum advisory position. The provision of such support cannot be removed and must not be seen in isolation from the curriculum.

From the above, it is now clear that the problem is not just for these teachers as syllabus designers but also as ESP teachers. The latter issue needs to be further researched so as to know whether these teachers are competent enough to teach the ESP students in all the faculties at HUST in general and in the Faculty of Petroleum and Engineering (FPE) in particular or whether they need some orientation and/or training to be effective teachers.

However, since 2004, the English language department at the Faculty of Education has revamped the syllabus by replacing the materials designed by the ESP teachers with materials more related to General English (GE). This syllabus is offered to all first year students in HUST regardless of their different majors. As such, instead of developing new English courses to meet the needs of the students, GE course has been taught to all the students including petroleum students.

The new syllabus was written by Al-Khuali (2003) for Jordanian post-secondary school students and published by Dar Al-Falah. It consists of two books entitled "English Skills One and English Skills Two". Each book consists of fourteen units. Each unit contains one passage divided into three parts. Two of these parts are for reading comprehension while the third for listening comprehension. Each passage is followed by exercises on reading, listening, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, spelling, pronunciation and writing.

It seems plausible at this juncture to mention some of the titles of the passages to show how far these topics are from the petroleum specialisation. In English Skills One, for example, one can find: *The Migration of the Birds, Language and Community, What is Linguistics* and so forth. In the English Skills Two, one can read: *What is Language, Moonlight, and Bees and Colour.* Implementing such topics, instead of ESP ones, to the petroleum

students may be a learning obstacle. Teaching the petroleum students such a course would mismatch the awareness of what these students exactly need. This stems from Hutchinson and Waters's (1987: 53) argumentation that differentiates the ESP course and the GE course by stating that: "What distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need". They go on to state that, "if learners, sponsors and teachers know why the learners need English, that awareness will have an influence on what will be acceptable as reasonable content in the language course and, on the positive side, what potential can be exploited" (ibid).

In a detailed description of how to design an ESP course, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) come up with a thorough approach which they called the learning-centred approach. They focused on the needs analysis of the ESP learners to be the first step on designing an ESP syllabus. On this account, Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 12) state that

"The purpose of an ESP course is to enable learners to function adequately in a target situation, that is, the situation in which the learners will use the language they are learning, then the ESP course design process should proceed by first identifying the target situation and then carrying out a rigorous analysis of the linguistics features of that situation. The identified features will form the syllabus of the ESP course."

As far as the English language curriculum for the petroleum students at HUST is concerned, these students should study English for specific purposes. That is, they need to study English to meet their academic and professional needs. As discussed before, the current English syllabus is not so appropriate to these ESP students. In other words, such a syllabus is not designed to provide the petroleum students with the English language and learning needs that they require. From bad to worse, the history of the English language syllabus at HUST was just like a patient who wished to get a recovery from fever but was infected with flu. Instead of diagnosing the symptoms and come up with a good treatment, the English department at the Faculty of Education in HUST implemented GE course to all the ESP students. These materials are much more far away from the students' needs if compared with the previous ones. Even though the previous materials were designed by teachers who have no relevant background to what should be taught, one can find some related topics to each specialisation.

The background knowledge of ESP teachers at HUST was another important issue. Ideally, in order to teach English for specific purposes, teachers need sufficient background knowledge of the students' specific field of study. On this account, it is argued that as these teachers were graduates of the Education Faculty, they might face some difficulties to teach petroleum students and/or to design their English syllabus for these students. Another important issue related to the English language curriculum was the socio-cultural background of the students. Like all Yemeni EFL learners, petroleum students have different socio-cultural backgrounds such as the type of school, parents' education, the area of residence, the family size and so forth. Given this, it is contended that taking such factors into consideration prior to course design is indispensable.

To sum up, the main objective of the current paper is to discuss issues related to the English language curriculum for the petroleum students at HUST. The review and discussion presented so far make it clear that the present syllabus might not suit the petroleum students' language and learning needs. It is more related to GE than to ESP as described by the English language teachers. Some recommendations that may be taken into consideration by the ESP syllabus designers, teachers, students and researchers at HUST are as follows:

- Identify the petroleum students' language and learning needs of English as perceived by five different stakeholders, i.e. students, ESP teachers, faculty teachers, graduates and experts in the field. These needs can be used as a basis to design an ESP course for these learners.
- Relate the petroleum students' needs to their socio-cultural backgrounds and try to find out what these Yemeni EFL learners need English language for and how their needs might differ from other engineers' needs elsewhere.
- Identify the job-related language needs for the petroleum graduates at their workplace.
- Conduct empirical research to testify all the possible factors that might cause the ESP students' low proficiency in English in all the faculties at HUST in general and in the faculty of petroleum and engineering in particular.

References

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