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ESP in a secondary Italian school

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Abstract

Aim of this paper is to share my experience of an ESP course, mainly based on LSP, held in a secondary Italian school and to discuss the methods with the idea of suggesting that such a scheme can be successfully used at secondary level to enhance jargon for further studies at post-secondary or university level.

Keywords: ESP, LSP, secondary school.

Introduction

The *Liceo delle Scienze Sociali* (Social Sciences secondary School) is a quinquennial secondary school created by the Italian Ministry of Education in 1997. The syllabus is centred around the Social and Human Sciences and their relationship with man, society and cultures; experimentalism and interdisciplinary team working are the main characteristics, which, together with research methods, lead to work for projects (Pontecorvo & Marchetti, 2007: 260-3). Students after graduation usually attend post-secondary/pre-university courses, called IFTS (*istruzione formazione tecnico superiore*) or go to the university, where they mainly enrol in the faculty of Social Studies or Education.

To date, this *liceo* consists of 281 Institutions, representing the 5.5% of the total amount of secondary schools in Italy (source: Italian Ministry of Education), each one follows a common syllabus designed by the Ministry but has also a certain range of independence in experimenting interdisciplinary topics. Along the years, all the majors have been structured around a basic/common syllabus whereas English as second language has gone no further than GE prescriptions.

At the beginning of the 2007/2008 school year a shift from GE to a more focused study of English was wished-for to increase the interdisciplinary method and to prepare students to further education.

Review of literature

To my knowledge, little has been done on ESP courses for secondary non-vocational education in Italy because of the widespread idea that specific language purposes do not suit secondary level learners for their young age, which in Italy ranges from 13 to 17/18, or, as Anthony said in his general survey, because the

borderline between ESP and GE is very thin (Anthony, 1997), and attempts might not have left the classroom. The only published example I know of concentrated on writing and speaking skills for vocational schools (Sheppard & Stoller, 1995). CLIL projects (*Content and Language Integrated learning*), offered at present in many Italian secondary institutions, cannot be counted as ESP courses as the former concentrate on the teaching of non-linguistic subjects in a foreign language, whereas the latter are based on the foreign language specificity. To be successful CLIL courses require students to have a good L2 competence or to attend pre- and in-sessional language courses (Solly, 2006: 99).

An alike state of the art can be found in foreign literature, rich in complaints on the low rate of English proficiency freshmen possess. The first example of a proponent treatment occurred to my attention is Steinhausen's article (1993) where a move towards specificity in secondary school English is wished for; the most recent one I have been able to track, is a research made in one Iranian high school (Jahangard, 2007), where the author suggests to start LSP at secondary level, giving also useful hints for future research.

Nevertheless, a change is in progress as can be seen from the flourishing of LSP projects in some European countries like Romania (the project *English for the World of Work*) or a curricular re-shaping as is the case of Slovenian vocational schools (Potočar, 2002); these courses have probably been fostered by new trends in mobility across Europe and by the special attention devoted by the European Community to language learning. Even by an academic point of view the situation has changed along the years, as can be seen from Dudley-Evans' suggestion (1998: 5) that ESP features can be used in senior secondary school classes.

Methods

The task of organizing such a project was challenging but very difficult, as it is – so far- the first attempt in this type of secondary school of an ESP course and others' research is valuable as a source of inspiration in terms of design and findings.

Taking into account the aims required by this project, that is guiding students towards language specificity, the ESP cut was deemed the most suitable for its peculiarities, that is “conciseness, economy, swiftness and adaptability” (Maglie, 2004: 11).

The first step was to look for a team to fix the main lines of the project, i.e. the *what* and *why*. The idea of group work is important because the ESP teacher is usually the one and only to set the needs analysis, to organise lessons and to prepare all the materials, whereas a unit of many teachers can help bring personal experiences and knowledge. The choice took place on a voluntary basis, so the working unit consisted of three persons: an ESP practitioner and course director, a GE and a Social Sciences teacher. Each member of the staff had precise tasks in the development process, namely the GE instructor had to see that tasks were “affordable” for the target students, the Social Sciences teacher had to help with the choice of topics (and give the necessary interdisciplinary hints) and the ESP expert had to organize the whole work.

The second step was to choose a target group of students. The idea was that of calling subjects from different classes, but was soon put aside as it did not offer homogeneity of learning and common specialist tasks to be developed.

The third step was to build a needs analysis and a development process. This was not an easy undertaking because of the lack of help from current literature, apart from HE examples, which not always suit the secondary school field of research.

In building the needs analysis, the typical scheme (Dudley-Evans & St. Johns, 1998: 125; Wright 1999) of questioning the students was not followed as information on learners' tasks, attitudes, activities and their previous learning experience were gathered from the GE teacher. The job concentrated on the development process which was considered more important:

Development process	
Needs	Study of English in specialised contexts
Group level	- at least two previous years of GE study - homogeneous
Short-term objectives	- different use of L ₂ at school - vocabulary widening
Long-term objectives	- Specialist vocabulary - English for further studies - Study method
Contents	disability in Italy and UK
Materials	Adapted texts

TAB. 1 Development process

As concerns the needs, the main objective was that of letting learners take advantage of the interdisciplinary method, at the basis of this school, by getting in touch with a foreign reality matching the one they had already studied in other disciplines.

The group had to be homogeneous with reference to the GE proficiency, so at least two years' exposure was deemed a suitable period to avoid grammar explanations and possible attendance boredom, this last a common fear shared by every ESP teacher. As regards the learning party, it had to come from the same class to have a common GE background and similar ESP targets.

Short term objectives were to appreciate English texts for the communicative tasks they could offer. Long term objectives had, on the other hand, in mind the learning of (or at least a first contact with) specialist vocabulary to be used in further education and/or work, and the acquisition of a different study method.

Course outline

The course counted an average of seventeen student per lesson (mean age 16); the total amount was twenty, but some were sometimes not present. The course lasted from the first week of October till the end of January and consisted of two weekly meetings of 1 to 3 hours (total amount 35 hrs) in the morning to prevent students' overworking and the subsequent lack of motivation. For this same reason no homework was

scheduled; this choice was guided by the idea of not letting participants identify ESP classes with the other ones.

The very first lesson learners were explained the meaning, reason and aims of the meetings and the differences with a GE class. The ESP course concentrated on a comparison between the British and the Italian way of dealing with the handicap, namely a short description of the *Disability Discrimination Act* (2006) and the Italian Law on disability (*Legge 104/92*); types of disability (sensory/physical/mental impairment); facilities for disabled people in terms of access to public services. By a linguistic point of view, the ESP modules were based on the reading of texts adapted from the Internet (mainly the UK social services site). The principle that guided the choice was the assumption that students did not need to learn the topic – already exploited and probably owned, but to have glimpses on how such topics were dealt with in English and letting students familiarize with L2 jargon, to widen vocabulary and to exploit the communicative properties of language. The last lesson students had a final comprehension test of the true or false type, results showed a good understanding of topics.

Course evaluation

Learners were simply asked their opinion on the course in an informal and friendly chat because the administering of questionnaires might have led them to show off and checklists might have given unanswered items, thus altering the aims of evaluation.

From this talk emerged that the first two meetings were a sort of a shock as students had to get accustomed to this “new” kind of lessons where grammar was scanty and previously met topics existed in a foreign language. When the trick was understood, students eagerly played the game and enjoyed the overall comprehension of a new English text from the general context.

The adjectives most used to describe the course were *interesting* – because of the topic comparison they could do; *new* – as they did not realize it was learning under disguise. The ones who missed some lessons regretted their being away, and in general, attendance was high and the rate increased as the group got more involved. Topics were appreciated for the interdisciplinary implications they offered and the opportunity of using them for their A-Levels final project-work.

The only complaints were for the Christmas holidays which interrupted the learning *continuum*, and for the final test.

Suggestion for further projects

As emerged from the informal evaluation, students appreciated these lessons. These results make me assume that an ESP course can be designed for secondary school because young age has no effect on specialist learning. What seems important is a careful project planning and administering it without interruption.

Even if the Italian educational context has its own peculiarities which may be different from those in any other country, I think every secondary institution has a common aim the world over: to prepare students for

further education or for the world of work. The following parameters are from this project, but can be adapted to other secondary school systems:

Needs analysis: gotten by a team of teachers from the school because they know their learners' needs and are able to plan the general outline;

Homogeneous group: students from the same class to have an alike GE knowledge and common topics to be developed;

Time: diluted through a convenient period and not too much concentrated, my idea is that 2 hours per week along one term be a sufficient time; the course, to let students acquire specific language, should be scheduled for the last three years before graduation;

Based on past experience: in the sense of dealing with topics already known from other majors to stimulate comparison and therefore discussion and study motivation;

Evaluation: informal techniques are the most suitable as traditional evaluation may generate boredom;

Materials: adapted to the students' GE knowledge;

Assessment: optional. Written progress tests are important, but informal methods, like oral questions, may be most suitable.

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