TESTING ENGLISH FOR THE HEALTH SCIENCE STUDENT[1]

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"Becoming an effective teacher of ESP –wrote Strevens (1988: 43)– requires **more** experience, **additional** training, **extra** effort, a **fresh** commitment, compared with being a teacher of General English." Teaching in general, requires indeed, a special brand of people, but when it comes to testing is when we should show that we really know what we are doing.

Testing, whether by tradition, conviction or practice, is an indispensable part of our teaching methodology. It allows us, not only to measure the knowledge acquired by each individual student, but also test the validity of didactic strategies being used and whether or not the proposed aims and objectives have been achieved.

Nevertheless, investigation in language testing has dragged behind research in teaching and in materials design (cf. Alderson 1988b: 87). Applied linguists have largely concentrated on learning objectives: syllabus design and the different methodologies around it, but often make no mention of how these objectives might be tested (cf. Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 145). On the other hand, those who specifically have done research in testing and evaluation have basically stressed the linguistic rather than the communicative values of leanguage teaching/learning, and much less have they thought about testing in ESP. "Language testers –writes Heaton (1988: 88)–, with very few exceptions, have ignored the ESP challenge".

Teaching and Testing in an ESP Course

Most authors agree that ESP teaching requires "a distinctive approach reflected in different types of material, together with particular modifications or compensations in teaching methodology" (Mountford 1988: 76). Basically we can accept that an ESP course is "set up in order to enable particular learners to do particular things with language" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 145). It is also supposed to "regularly demonstrate that its continued existence in its present form is justified" (ibid. p. 152).

How can we, then, establish and ascertain that these objectives are being met? Through testing. In today's debate (in Spain) concerning the usefulness, validity, worth, or whatever, of an ESP course, we must convince the directors of our Nursing, Physiotherapy or Medical Schools that our course work is not only good, but above all that it is worth taking, and we must also convince them that we are meeting the course's aims, which are non other than a consequence of the aims of our individual school.

Students, however, seem to view testing rather negatively, as a "conservative restraint on development" (Alderson 1988b: 87). We must make every possible effort to make them realize that a test is a worthwhile goal for them, simply because "a test which sets out to measure students' performances as fairly as possible without in any way setting traps for them can be effectively used to motivate them" (Heaton 1988: 7). In this context is where the use of progress or 'formative' tests is called upon in terms of exemplifying what we

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mean by motivating our students. A well-constructed test will indeed provide them the opportunity to see for themselves that they can perform and communicate in the target language, and in turn it will provide the teacher with the necessary information to know them better and, consequently, to evaluate their progress with fairness.

> Feedback on the success of activities is regarded as crucial to learners, and when this feedback can be given during a course –what has come to be known as formative evaluation– it can motivate learners, inform their future learning and help to make possible a truly communicative process of interaction and negotiation between learners, language and teachers. (Alderson and Waters 1982: 40)

We must, therefore, convince learners of our "good" intentions when we administer a test. They certainly have a fairly good idea of what they want to see in a test and that it should be something more than just an evaluating tool (as we will see later), and we must make sure that such terminology as "testing", "evaluation" and so forth, has undergone the necessary recycling process by way of adapting our teaching methodology to real students' needs.

What are we going to test? Should tests reveal class work?

Obviously, we are not going to test our students on nursing theories or models, or on how a hydro-massage should be applied to a patient, or on the specific details of an open-heart surgery. On subject knowledge, for sure, we would be on the losing team. Here we recognize, as Strevens does, the sometimes enormous gap that exists "between the learner's knowledge of the special subject and the teacher's ignorance of it" (Strevens 1988: 42).

In our analysis of the target situations, based upon the students' own preferences, we have come to some interesting conclusions. First of all, charts A and B show some of the results of a survey we carried out with our students this past school year. While, on the one hand, it came as a surprise to us, since we expected a higher percentage of answers especially on the two conversation categories, on the other, it confirmed our previous determination to work basically with Health Science texts in class, and through them uncover the basic communicative skills to the students. A majority (first-, second- and third-year students alike) gave as their first choice for class activities "Reading Comprehension of Health Science texts" (over 50% of the students that answered our questionnaire, and the rest distributed among five more choices).

Secondly, and as far as their opinion on testing in general, and 'formative tests' in particular, 112 students (around 40%) considered this type of test as a pedagogic tool which should be analyzed, corrected and explained in class (see Chart C), while at the same time, they were not so happy about the fact that so many professors place such big – and almost exclussive– emphasis on final tests.

Achievement or Proficiency Testing?

In Anastasi's words (1976: 398), achievement tests "are designed to measure the effects of a specific programme of instruction or training". Proficiency tests, on the other hand, aim at determining whether the students' language ability corresponds to specific requirements (cf Valette 1977: 6), but without making necessarily any reference to the language courses he or she may have taken.

Within our university structure, where we have had to prepare, defend and sometimes fight for our Teaching Project, the evaluation of English courses, whether elective or not, would

fall under the first type of tests, that is, "achievement" tests, whose content is based upon the **objectives** of the course: to raise the standards of the students' English language as to meet the level and demands made and verbalized by the needs analysis.

Mountford (1988: 80), speaking about ESP materials production and use, points out the attitudes by institutional heads and staff as being one of the main constraints against the status of English in the curriculum. Actually this means to be our own fight, especially when we see our politicians and even our directors of university schools and/or faculties discussing whether it's worth an ESP course within a career in Health Sciences, or in Technology, or in Economics.

Hence the need to constant restructuring of the course, making it appealing to our students, updating materials on the specific subject. Does this mean we are against the use of a textbook in class? Not really. What we do mean is that we cannot rely solely on a textbook. We must feed the students with what some authors have called –we don't– "authentic" materials and mingle them with the different book units. The textbook sort of sets the pace, while the combination of these materials is what really helps to motivate the student, whose main interest, as we have already mentioned, is the mastery of reading comprehension of Health Science texts. Here is also where interdisciplinary work comes into play, since many of the texts used in class are suggested by the students themselves, often from the bibliography they have received from professors of other disciplines.

Experience shows us that testing is most successful in the eyes of our students when they become participants in the evaluating process. There is no such a thing as a full-proof test, an optimum testing method for an accurate and objective evaluation of the students' knowledge. We think it necessary to take as an important point of departure a dialogue between students and teacher (and formative tests viewed as a pedagogic tool will be an important part of that dialogue), through which we may be able to come to the best teaching/testing methodology possible. As Conroy and McCarthy (1990) have already said, "a test not accepted is difficult to use".

What and How Should we Test?

Our experience with students has led us to believe that the basis for an ESP test must be built upon the specification of those communicative needs which will lead them to acquire a positive attitude towards 'testing'. This attitude will enable them to interpret testing as being an important aspect of the whole educational process and a practical application to their reality.

In the survey mentioned above, and in an attempt to approach the students' needs and to draw an interested opinion directly involved in the learning process, we were able to verify that over 50% of them gave priority to the study and comprehension of Health Science texts.

1. General Testing Criteria

First of all, we are not testing students' knowledge of specific desciplines, and we are not testing either a general language mastery; what we are going to test is "the ability to perform appropriate communicative operations requiring specified language skills and insights in specified subject areas" (Carroll 1980: 59). Since in our class work we have not dealt separately with each language skill, we are advocating the use of global integrated tests through which we may be able to closely relate to language "use" and to the students' reality, rather than to language "usage". Not grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary **per se**, but the language as used by each one of the students and how well he or she can perform.

It is not so important to specify whether we use a discrete point test or an integrative test, a direct or an indirect method of testing; what's important here is that "there is only one language competence and therefore [...] it does not matter how you test because it is always the same competence that is being tested" (Davies 1988: 6). The validity of a given test, however, will be increased "by making the test truer to life, [...] more like language in use" (Davies 1978:149). Omaggio would suggest a "hybrid approach to test design." By this she means that in a foreign language test not only lexical, grammatical features, but also sociolinguistic and discourse characteristics should be taken into account, and they should be treated in the curriculum and later tested "as they operate in naturalistic contexts" (Omaggio 1986: 313). Language, indeed, must be tested beyond the level of the sentence. This is especially true when we pretend that our test have a communicative approach.

Hutchinson and Waters, coming to grips with the transition we are trying to make from theory to practice, argue that the construction of an achievement test should follow similar criteria as you would for constructing any test. Above all, in an ESP test the correct answer to any item "should not depend on specialist subject knowledge **outside** the material used in the test" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 147). That would indeed give an unfair advantage to some of the more learned students in the subject materials included in the test, and, at the same time, we avoid bias in the test.

Another aspect that should be borne in mind is that we can only test what we can reasonably assume our students have learnt; in other words, our test should be close to a desirable level of proficiency. At the same time "your test should test what we actually want it to test" (ibid., p. 147).

2. Specific Testing Criteria

As far as specific contents of our test, we believe it must reflect, first of all, the conclusions drawn from the needs' analysis, which have been translated into operative course objectives, and, above all, an adequate conbination of grammar and context, structure and situation (Omaggio 1986: 314).

The core of the evaluation should reflect both the receptive and productive aspects of language communication (Widdowson 1978: 57 ff). This is carried out through the different ways of interpreting a text, both in its linguistic, lexical or grammatical items, but also in its extralinguistic and situational context, utilizin items such as wh-questions, truth assessment, multiple-choice, topic discussions, summaries, and so on. We will soon realize that students are more motivated when both the materials selected, the type of exercises in class, as well as the type of tests, reflect communicative use, needs and interests that resemble authentic language use.

This first and main part of the test could be considered sufficient and a fairly reliable assessment mechanism of what we may reasonably assume students should know. Nevertheless, based on the reading materials used in this part of the test, we would also evaluate linguistic aspects of language, not as an end in themselves but as a means to an end. The emphasis of this second part is pedagogical and formative, and as a complement to the receptive-productive ability of the student. In this regard, we may include not only grammatical aspects, but also specific lexical items a Health Science student should be familiar with. For instance, physician's jargon, headwords, compound words, eponyms, including the use and meaning of prefixes and suffixes, so common in medical literature, always with the premise of contextualization.

Finally, through this test, which we have divided into two parts complementing each other, together with formative tests administered throughout the year, and class participation by students --which they consider such an important motivating factor (see the results obtained in our survey, shown in the poster entitled "A learning-oriented approach to testing in English for the Health Sciences"), will lead us to obtain a more reliable assessment of the students' achievement in a course of English for the Health Sciences.

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