

Teachers' perceptions about the process and challenges of designing an English for Specific Purposes course in the Arabian Gulf

Samira Boukadi Haj Sassi

Higher Colleges of Technology, Abu Dhabi

UAE

Abstract:

This paper discusses teachers' perceptions about the process and challenges of course design in general, and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses in particular. The study involves the process of designing an ESP course for returning students from the work place in the continued education department at the Higher Colleges of Technology. The findings in this paper are based on a qualitative research that employed an interpretivist/ constructivist theory, in which qualitative data was gathered primarily through interviews with a view to clarifying teachers' perceptions and understanding the beliefs and practices behind them. The study attempted to answer mainly the following questions. How do teachers perceive the process of an ESP course design? And what are the challenges they might encounter while designing ESP courses in general? In the findings section, four major themes have emerged from the data analysis process; they consist of influence of 1- Culture, Ideology, and Politics 2- The controversy of Needs Analysis, 3- Challenges in producing adequate course materials, and 4- Theory versus practice. Finally, the study discusses the implications of the findings and presents some recommendations for further use.

Keywords: Arabian Gulf, curriculum challenges, curriculum design, ESP courses, teachers' perceptions

Introduction

There is a growing concern about quality ESP courses. The need to develop, design and teach relevant ESP courses to students who are already working is often seen as a challenging project for teachers. Most institutions offer very limited planning time before delivering courses. Therefore, planning and designing an appropriate course that suits target ESP groups can be a challenging experience for teachers, who often face various difficulties when trying to develop effective courses that cover address the specific language and cultural needs of their students. Within the landscape of ESP, teaching and learning in the UAE, course design is not solely based on comprehensive approaches; rather it is led by productivity-oriented inclinations. In spite of these constraints, ESP teachers are requested to develop engaging courses that meet the work place or the sponsors' needs in addition to the English language needs of the learners.

Study aim

This paper discusses teachers' perceptions about the process and challenges of course design, and the findings within come from a qualitative research study that employed an interpretivist/ constructivist theory, in which qualitative data was gathered primarily through interviews with a view to clarifying teachers' opinions and understanding the beliefs and practices behind them.

Research questions

How do teachers perceive the process of ESP course design? And what are the challenges they might encounter while designing courses?

1. What do teachers understand by course design?
2. What is the process of course design in current practices?
3. What are the particular challenges that teachers face while designing courses?
4. What are the possible solutions/How to overcome encountered problems in the course design process?

I. Contextual background and current practices

With reference to the website of The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), www.hct.ac.ae/cert, HCT is the largest higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates; it offers various academic and vocational programs such as; continued education (CONED). The CONED department resides within the Centre of Excellence for Applied Research & Training (CERT), which is the commercial research and training arm of HCT. "The CERT Group of Companies leverages unique relationships with global leaders in education and business to provide a wide range of educational, applied research, training and consulting services to government, private sector institutions and businesses in the UAE and the region at large". Recently, a new client, the UAE Customs Management requested intensive English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses for its employees, the Customs staff. The request was at short notice, and an immediate operational plan was requested. These types of contracts cannot be turned down by CERT because they generate a lot of revenue on the one hand, and because they help bolster the institution's reputation on the other. There is a lot of competition in the market, and CERT always tries to attract and satisfy potential clients' needs through proposals, because many private institutions are willing to offer their services to secure these lucrative contracts.

Proposals generally consist of course goals and objectives, which are derived from the HCT learning model, a time frame, and a rationale for a course to be designed in a later stage. This is where we first encounter the teachers' role; to devise a theoretical framework and an operational plan for the potential course. Teachers in charge of course design should be inspired from approved and published HCT courses. Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to research and produce relevant material and activities for the possible course following the HCT Learning Model, which is based on the following professional values:

1. Innovative practice
2. Continuous improvement
3. Professional integrity
4. Efficiency and effectiveness
5. Responsiveness to the needs of stakeholders (HCT website)

The HCT Learning Model sets standards for the design of courses, gives principles which should be followed in learning and teaching, and guidelines for assessment within the HCT. Additionally, it defines the HCT's educational philosophy while simultaneously identifying eight graduate outcomes:

1. Communication and Information Literacy
2. Critical Thinking
3. Global Awareness and Citizenship
4. Technological Literacy
5. Self-Management and Independent Learning
6. Teamwork and Leadership
7. Vocational Competencies
8. Mathematical Literacy (Ibid)

Through this learning model, academic staffs are committed to providing learning experiences that will change students who left schools at an early age into HCT students who will graduate with the knowledge, skills and attributes to effectively contribute to the nation-building process, and to help them develop a sense of personal and social responsibility.

II. Theoretical background and literature review

Curriculum documents in education generally describe the learning that is expected to take place during a course or program of study in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. They also describe the main teaching, learning and assessment methods, and give provide an indication of the learning resources required to support the effective delivery of the course. Curriculum development process is value-laden. It determines what should be taught in schools considering the social, cultural, political, and environmental influences. Syllabus design is one aspect of curriculum development, it is a description of the *content* of a course of instruction and lists what will be taught and tested as advised in J.C Richards (2001).

A syllabus can also be seen as a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students' learning and this is in line with (Breen, 1984a). Moreover, Nunan distinguishes between syllabus design and methodology. Syllabus -construction/design, he said "is connected with selection and grading of content, while methodology is concerned with the selection of

learning tasks and activities.” (Nunan, 1994, p. 5) Richards gives a precise definition of the term “syllabus,” restricting it to the content of a course while the term “curriculum” is seen as encompassing syllabus and other elements such as needs analysis, teaching, and evaluation.

Moreover, a syllabus is primarily informed by curriculum theory and instructor philosophy. Nunan (1994), for instance, distinguishes between the different types as shown below:

- 1- “*product-oriented syllabuses*” aiming at knowledge and skills which learners should gain as a result of instruction and the types of syllabuses that belong to this category are (i) The Structural Syllabus (ii) The Situational Syllabus (iii) The Notional/Functional Syllabus. This category calls for planning outcomes and directing the learning process to achieve these outcomes, it is product lead mapping. It is criticised for deviating learning from authenticity and dictating leading strategies to set outcomes.
- 2- And 2-“*process-oriented syllabuses*” emphasizing the learning experiences, (i) Procedural/Task-Based Syllabus (ii) Learner-Led Syllabus (iii) The Proportional Syllabus. The emphasis in this category should be on the process of learning, planners should focus on strategies leading to learning process and therefore to outcomes. Some educators prefer this category because it emphasises the learning process rather than the set outcomes.
- 3- Grundy, S. (1987) discusses “*curriculum as praxis*”, rather than “a product”, he argued that praxis gives the teacher emancipatory powers over what occurs in the classroom, by referring to Freire’s principles of praxis. Freire believes that real education is always a “practice of freedom” rather than an alienating inculcation of skills. “Critical pedagogy goes beyond situating the learning experience within the experience of the learner: it is a process which takes the experiences of both the learner and the teacher and, through dialogue and negotiation, recognizes them both as problematic... [It] allows, indeed encourages, students and teachers together to confront the real problems of their existence and relationships... When students confront the real problems of their existence they will soon also be faced with their own oppression.” (Grundy, 1987, p.105)

I think the three types of syllabuses presented above have different perspectives and need different learning contexts and philosophies to be applied. What is suitable for a particular learning environment might not be convenient for another one. I have discussed so far the leading theories informing curriculum; however other types are also discussed in the literature, for instance, curriculum as a syllabus or content to be transmitted as discussed in Breen (2001).

Few studies have emphasized teachers' views about issues and challenges in curriculum design in the UAE; they mostly focused on ESP courses outcomes. Zughoul & Hussein (1985) think that more attention to course design process is required to meet the gradually increasing number of ESP courses in the Arab and Gulf States. Shaaban (2005) discussed the importance of needs analysis for the employees at the American University of Beirut who attended a ten-week course on ESP. Based on the NA and ESP course delivery the teachers expressed their utter satisfaction with the NA conducted as it led to efficient learning of the communicative and linguistic tasks the participants needed in their workplace. An ESP programme is thus to be tailor-made fulfilling the learners' specific needs by conducting appropriate needs analysis. In Jordan, Zoghoul and Hussein (1985) stated that the dilemma of filling the gap between the students' English proficiency and the course demands poses a serious challenge for ESP teachers

who often find themselves returning to basic English rules to remedy students' linguistic weaknesses and at the same time enhancing students' communicative skills. Al-Busaidi (2003) investigated academic English, Almulhim (2001) and Al-Bazzaz (1994) looked at business English, and Gorashi (1988) investigated military English needs. I found that all the studies mentioned above examined course design processes and outcomes. Therefore, teachers' perceptions and views are often presented as part of course investigation rather than as a main focus. No study to date has looked specifically at the process and challenges of ESP course design in the Gulf as perceived by teachers or course planners.

In this paper, I will mainly focus on course design processes and challenges as perceived by teachers in the field. And for this assignment, I define a course as a *mini* curriculum – it is informed by curriculum theory and encompasses stages of syllabus design – That is in line with Darder as he says “Curriculum traditionally refers to the coursework offered or required by an educational institution for the successful completion of a degree or credentialing objective.” (Darder, 1991, p. 19) For the research background, I will *adhere* to Richards' model describing the steps involved in course design. Richards, among others for example Nunan and Graves, is recognised to be a leading specialist in the area of course design. He states that course design involves different levels of planning and development, which are “based on the aims and objectives that have been established for a language program.” (Richards, 2001, p.145) These levels include: 1) - developing course rationale, 2) - defining entry and exit levels, 3) - designing course content, 4) mapping course structure, and 5) - preparing scope and sequence plan.

In the following part, I will provide an overview about the different levels of planning. It is worth noting that the levels of planning a course are not in linear order, they rather depend on the planners' views and priorities, and this is in line with Richards (2001). Therefore, the order I present below is just a matter of organization.

1. Course rationale

A course rationale is an essential component of any course, it consists of describing the reasons and the nature of the course; and should seek to answer questions such as who is the course for? What is the course about? What kind of teaching and learning will take place in the course? According to Richards the course rationale should therefore answer these questions and demonstrate the beliefs, values and goals that underlie the course. Richards states that the course rationale “provides a succinct statement of the course philosophy for anyone who may need such information including students, teachers, and potential clients.” (Richards, 2001, p.146) The course planners therefore need to provide “careful consideration to the goals of the course, the kind of teaching and learning they want the course to exemplify, the role of teachers and learners in the course, and the beliefs and principles the course will reflect.” (Richards, 2001, p.146)

2. Entry and exit levels

Planners need to draw entry and exit levels for the course, international proficiency tests for instance, TOEFL or IELTS might be useful in determining the level of students' language skills as stated in the literature. However, local needs and students' levels might, sometimes, require deviation from the international standards. And course planners often adapt information from international tests to specific contexts and culture.

3. Course content

Course content is a vital element in course design, as Richards says “course content is probably the most basic issue in course design, given that a course has to be developed to address a specific set of needs and to cover a given set of objectives, and what will the content of a course look like.” (Richards, 2001, p.148) Choosing course content depends largely on the course designers' views, assumptions, and knowledge. Richards says in this respect that “Decisions about course content reflect the planners' assumptions about the nature of language, language use, and language learning” (Richards, 2001, p.148). Indeed course planners' decisions on the content depends on: 1- Teachers' beliefs and Knowledge, their own assumptions about learning would shape their choice for curriculum framework in addition to their beliefs and knowledge in the area of course design, 2- The needs analysis results conducted for the course, and 3- The materials available as resources in addition to reviewing similar courses, tests in the area, and consultation with teachers and specialists, that is in line with Richards (2001).

3.1 Teachers' beliefs and Knowledge

Beliefs are different from knowledge as discussed in the literature, as beliefs can be questioned whereas facts cannot. In this respect Pajares (1992) states that the investigation of teacher beliefs is a vital aspect of educational inquiry for research and learning. Being able to identify and describe the impact of teachers' beliefs on instructional actions would strengthen and enrich our understanding of different practices. Beliefs can be identified in terms of personal assumptions about relationships, knowledge and society; professional beliefs about teaching and learning; and beliefs about change and development. Later Savasci-Acikalın (2009) suggests that beliefs refer to suppositions, commitments, and ideologies and do not need a truth condition while knowledge refers to factual propositions and understandings that inform skilful action and must satisfy a “truth condition”. Richards (1998), asserts that teachers' beliefs result from the relationship between (a) the values, goals, and assumptions that teachers have about the content and development of teaching, and (b) the understanding of the social, cultural, and institutional context where teaching takes place.

Additionally, Ernest (1998) believes that the autonomy of the teacher depends on three factors:

- i. The teacher's intellectual content, mainly his beliefs concerning the nature of teaching and learning.
- ii. The social context of the teaching situation, particularly the constraints and opportunities it provides.
- iii. The teacher's level of thought processes and reflections.

3.2 Needs analysis

Needs analysis or needs assessment (NA), which is used interchangeably in the literature, was first introduced into language learning through the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) movement. Nowadays, NA has a vital role in the process of designing all kinds of language courses (ESP, EAP, and general English). Richards (2001) describes the term *needs* as a “*linguistic deficiency*”, that is describing the difference between what the learner can *do* and what he or she should *be able to do*. And he defines NA as “the procedures used to collect information about learners' needs are known as needs analysis.” He adds that “Information

gathered during needs analysis contributes to the planning of course content.” (Richards 2001, p.148) Richards believes that “a sound educational program should be based on an analysis of learners' needs” (Richards, 2001, p.51). Dudley-Evans and St John agree with this idea, they define needs analysis as “the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused language course.” (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998, p. 122) NA processes can be different types; such as the learner's needs or the employer's needs or even the country's needs. Therefore, the concept of needs analysis has taken various different shapes across time. Needs may be divided into many different *categories* such as objective and subjective (Brindley 1989); target and learning (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987); academic and job related needs (Mackay, 1978). Munby (1978), for instance, called for the “communication needs processor” he claimed that it is possible to start with the learners themselves and work systematically toward creating specific needs that represent the target communicative competence. Chambers' (1980) introduced the “Target Situation Analysis” he claimed that the learner should not be the only main source of information to establish the program of learning. In addition to many other types of analysis that are mentioned in the literature such as *Present Situation Analysis, Pedagogic Needs Analysis, Deficiency Analysis, Strategy Analysis or Learning Needs Analysis, Means Analysis, Register analysis, Discourse analysis*. It would be appealing to explore the different types of NA, and explain how they all contribute to course design; but it is beyond the scope of this paper.

Course design is a cyclical process, thus NA is required at various stages: For instance, in the pre-course stage, also while delivering the course, and then after finishing the course. NA can be conducted through placement tests in order to check skills and levels, through running linguistics needs analysis and analysing the learners' perceptions in order to obtain a clear picture of the learners' culture and social context. The possible data collection tools are surveys, questionnaires, interviews or observation as advised in Richards (2001).

3.3 Materials

Material selection is an extremely significant step in course design, and needs sound decisions based on learners' contexts and culture. Planners have to base their decisions on contextual factors rather than follow the traditional textbook approach of an 'order of contents', or a pattern prescribed by a 'logical' approach to the subject, or even the shape of a university course in which they may have participated as pointed out by Curzon (1985). Moreover, designers need to be aware of the fact that published textbooks and commercial materials follow different standards of students' ability, Richards for example says “language programs and commercial materials typically distinguish between elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels, but these categories are too broad for the kind of detailed planning that program and materials development involves” (2001, p.146). Therefore, planners need to specify the proficiency level of learners with reference to contextual factors before engaging in material selection and development. One more issue would be the appropriateness of the materials and to what extent they support the local needs and lifestyle.

4. Course structure

Course structure involves form and sequence to provide a reasonable support for teaching, this stage involves: 1- syllabus framework, and 2 - instructional blocks.

4.1 Syllabus framework

“The content of a course will often depend on the type of syllabus framework that will be used as the basis for the course” (Richards, 2001, p.148) In fact, course designers decide on syllabus framework in the light of curriculum theory, Richards suggests the following syllabus frameworks that planners can tailor:

- a) Situational, which is organized around different situations with a main focus on oral skills.
- b) Topical, which is organized around different topics with a main focus on conversation.
- c) Functional, which is organized around the functions most commonly needed in speaking.
- d) Task based, which is organized around different tasks and activities that the learners would carry out in English.

It is also worth noting that while choosing a particular syllabus framework of a particular course, planners are mainly influenced by the following factors as discussed earlier in teachers' beliefs and knowledge:

1. Knowledge and beliefs: A Syllabus reflects ideas and beliefs about the nature of speaking, reading, writing or listening.
2. Research and theory: They lead to selecting a particular syllabus type.
3. Common practice: Experience serves as a basis for different syllabus type.
4. Trends: They are approaches to syllabus design; they reflect national and international trends. (Adapted from Richards 2001, p.152)

4.2 Instructional blocks

A further action would be to decide on instructional blocks which are self-contained sequences, for instance units, modules, or even lessons. It is a matter of organization and makes the course teachable and coherent, as well as linear with a clear starting point and a finishing point.

5. Scope and sequence

The final step in course design would be sequencing course content and preparing the scope and sequence plan. That is to say the order of distribution of the content throughout the course, and sequencing of the content in order to provide a basis for things that will be learned then; for example from basic to complex or in a chronological order as advised in Richards (2001).

Overall, I have examined and discussed the different levels involved in designing course content, structure, and scope and sequence and this is in line with Richards as a leader and analyst in course design for language learning.

III. Methodology

The current study is mainly qualitative, seeking narrative information in order to understand better teachers' perceptions about course design process and difficulties. From a socio-cultural perspective, learning is the process of understanding how to participate in the discourse and practices of a particular community. (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) People follow a certain way of thinking by participating in social practices with more knowledgeable others. It is therefore about collecting and analysing narrative data, while focusing on people's attitudes and beliefs. Underpinning the research question is the assumption

that knowledge is socially constructed. For instance, teachers have different beliefs and perceptions about course design process and difficulties. These beliefs reflect teachers' attitudes and practices as noted by Richards and Lockhart "what teachers do is a reflection of what they know and believe". (Richards & Lockhart 1996, p.29). This paradigmatic assumption is constructed through a combination of individual and social processes (Vygotsky, 1978).

Consistent with the paradigmatic assumptions of interpretivist/constructivism, critical theory also defines ontology, epistemology, and methodology in a similar way. However, this paradigm -Critical theory- is also concerned with examining issues of power, control, and politics. The study therefore could embrace subjectivity because it is not value-laden and is openly ideological. The information gathered in this study mainly seeks deeper understanding and cannot be generalized.

1. Participants

The study involved two phases, a focus-group interview (FGI), and six one-to-one interviews (appendix1). The sample of the study consists of six teachers; as advised in Krueger and Casey (2000). Firstly, they all participated in the FGI, and then were invited for one-to-one interviews with a view of confirming and clarifying some issues that remained unclear to me. The sample might not be representative for the overall population of the college, however my intention was to gain a deeper understanding about the issue rather than generalise the findings. Additionally, the sample is purposive; it consists of the six teachers involved in designing an ESP course, the customs officers' course, as discussed earlier. The informants have been working together in the same department for few years so far, which ensures a friendly atmosphere. The following table presents an overview on the participants' social and academic backgrounds.

Table:1 *An overview on the participants' social and academic backgrounds.*

	Sex	Age	Nationality	Years of experience	Years of Experience in the UAE	Qualification	Job
Sam	M	46	Jordanian	20	12	MA	Teacher
James	M	52	South-African	30	20	MA	Teacher
John	M	55	British	35	10	BA	Teacher
Joy	F	50	Australian	25	4	MA	Teacher
Jane	F	40	United States	16	2	BA+DELTA	Teacher
Rea	F	30	Canadian	6	1	MA+ CELTA	Teacher

2. Ethics

I followed established ethical research procedures. Firstly, I submitted an ethical form to my supervisor at Exeter (appendix 4), describing the study process and methodology, which he approved. Secondly, I requested the permission to conduct research in the college from my work supervisor; and I got a verbal permission. Finally, I asked for the informants' consent to participate in the study, and to allow the use of the data for research purposes, they all signed a consent form (appendix 5). During the interviews, I also made sure the teachers did not mind me recording the interviews in order to ensure their awareness of the formality of the task.

3. Interview protocol

Following suggestions made in (Cresswell, 2002; Richards, 2003), an interview protocol was created. The participants were informed of the study aim. They were guaranteed anonymity, and given pseudonyms to protect their identities as suggested in (Cohen, Manion, & Morisson, 2001). They were also promised the opportunity to review the interview transcripts if needed.

4. Procedures and methods

This study was designed following a qualitative approach, which allows a wide range of data to be gathered and interpreted. Firstly, I planned and conducted a FGI for the data collection process; but after transcribing the data and attempting to analyse the findings, I found out that the information I have gathered was incomplete and vague. So I decide to go back to the informants seeking more clarification and further details about the aspects discussed in the interview. This stage seemed particularly relevant to me for research credibility. The rationale behind this decision was that the informant might provide sufficient details when asked in private.

4.1 Phase 1: Semi-structured focus-group interview

The first method employed to study participants' views is the FGI. It is qualitative in nature, and has recently gained popularity amongst professionals in the academic research field, primarily for its ability to generate large amounts of data in a relatively short time. Indeed, FGI helps explore informants' beliefs and views, enlightening their attitudes and behaviours. The main purpose of FGI is to collect data, clarify understanding, beliefs, cultures, feelings, and attitudes. Richards (2003) suggests the semi-structured interview, which is one possibility of gaining a critical view of participants' feelings and perceptions while maintaining a focus on the main research questions. I think that a semi-structured focus-group interview is ideally suited for this current research, which is aiming at exploring the complexity surrounding teachers' beliefs and behaviours within the context of verified teaching experience.

The interview was audio-recorded. In the beginning, I asked general questions, and then I asked additional questions for further details. While the interview protocol provided a general framework for addressing the overall research questions, participants were permitted to express ideas and opinions beyond the bounds of the questions asked. This approach served to reach a broader understanding of teachers' beliefs and attitudes about the process and challenges of course design.

4.2 Phase 2: Semi-structured one-to-one interviews

Kvale (1996) stated that interviews are a step towards regarding knowledge as generated between humans. The one-to-one interviews were conducted for a validity check and added more

information. The transcript of The FGI was shared with the participants in the second phase with a view to editing or adding information I might have missed. This step was extremely helpful; it brought up additional information to my initial findings, which helped me identify different views that were not unveiled in FGI.

IV. Findings and analysis

During the focus-group interview, I had a feeling that I merely scratched the surface of teachers' perceptions concerning their role in course development and the challenges they encounter. But, in the one-to-one interviews, the information being delivered was more detailed and significant. The input of the teachers was promising valuable findings. I have worked with the participant teachers for the past few years. Therefore, I was able to establish the rapport and build the relationships necessary to elicit honest and genuine responses from each participant. They were continually reminded of my role as a researcher, and that the information will be treated with extreme confidentiality. Their responses came without apparent reservation or hesitation.

The aim of both data collection methods, FGI and the follow up one-to-one interviews was to engage the participants in a reflective dialogue with the researcher (Cresswell, 2002; Richards, 2003). The FGI recording was forty minutes in length. I listened to the recording several times, and identified the major categories that emerged. I tabulated the data, and compared them to the study aim. I also revisited the research questions to find out what was missing in order to further investigate it in the second stage.

In the second stage, I listened to the recorded one-to-one interviews, which varied in length from fifteen to thirty minutes (appendix 1), and completed the missing information in the recurrent themes chart (appendix 3). Following Krueger and Casey (2000), I went back to the purpose of the study to manage the information and make sense of the data. And then, I carefully transcribed the relevant parts bearing in mind that the process of qualitative analysis aims to bring meaning to a situation rather than the search for truth.

The data Analysis process followed Cresswell's (2002) guidelines and Yin's (1989) suggested stages as he points out that data analysis consists of a number of stages, i.e. examining, categorizing and tabulating or otherwise recombining the evidence, in order to address the initial goal of a study.

Given my familiarity with the context, institution and teachers under scrutiny, I sought to minimize the impact of my views on the analysis of the data. I therefore attempted to use a "strategic and technical detachment" approach to both data collection and analysis (Holliday, 2001, p. 178). To avoid imposing my views on the data, I analyzed it using exploratory content analysis. I categorized and codified the emerging themes, and then compared them with the whole set of data using a constant comparison method that included reading and rereading within and across the responses of the participants (Lalik & Potts, 2001). Finally, few participants read the analysis to validate the themes that emerged.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe the analysis phase as "the interplay between researchers and data", acknowledging that there is an extent of subjective selection and interpretation of the generated data. It is important to note here that I do not claim to be an

objective observer in this study; so my aim is to honestly represent both the world of the participants and my own world. That is in line with the Vygotskian combination, of individual and social meaning making, will provide a framework to better consider the effectiveness of the current study. For the interpretivist what is meaningful emerges from the data. Therefore, the process is inductive. In presenting results it is the narrative of the participants that speaks.

Although the first method - FGI - was very limited and did not reveal enough information for the study, there were two evident resounding themes that dominated the interview; 1- the power of dialogue and 2- the impact of socio-cultural aspects on course design. These themes were also clearly revealed in the second stage. Therefore, I believe both methods were balancing, and I will consider the data gathered during both stages as complementary. I transferred the transcripts into the tables of the FGI data. Next, I will analyse the findings in the light of the FGI and the one-to-one data collected as one entity. (Appendix 3)

How do participant teachers define a course?

Before asking the participant teachers about their perceptions of the course development process and challenges, I asked them to define a course. This question yielded six individual responses. Rea, for example, said "A course is what needs to be taught, level, skills, assessment..." and Joy added that "A course gives teachers a direction of what they should be teaching." Sam agreed with them on the basics but thought that a course definition should also include alignment and time frame; she said "A course is a plan of study encompassing and aligning instruction for a study period." Another participant, James yielded a deeper definition that involved policy and outcomes; he argued that "The course we teach is a combination of materials based on the internal policy with an eye on the proficiency outcomes." John could not disagree with his colleagues and added a new dimension to the definition, which is "values" he said "A course is about values, understanding, knowledge, and skills, everything that ends up being transmitted to the learners. Hamm...course design a big responsibility." To conclude, Jane referred to the role of course designers and teachers in tailoring students' knowledge, she believes that "A course is what we tailor for learners to learn."

I found all the responses valuable and interesting as the participants kept adding on each other's views. Overall, the group defined curriculum as the academic content and concepts presented for students. The participants referred extensively to the crucial role developing materials plays in course design, and to the challenges they face during the process. This is consistent with Darder (1991) when he referred to the curriculum or the course as a document that guides and structures course content. Curriculum is essentially a course of study; it is value-laden.

While the scope of this study focused on teachers' perceptions of the course development process, acknowledging that course design depends mainly on materials development and selection is a recurrent notion in the interviews and worth to mention. I have just explained the general and collective definition of curriculum from the combined responses elicited during this research. I now turn more directly to teachers' perceptions of the course development process and challenges. Several resounding themes emerged during data collection and analysis.

In the following part, I will present and discuss the four major categories as recurrent themes that emerged from the data analysis process as represented in (appendix 3) 1- Culture, Ideology, and Politics 2- The controversy of Needs Analysis, 3- Challenges in producing adequate course materials, and 4- Theory versus practice.

1. *Culture, Ideology, and Politics*

Education is a socio-cultural process, which involves learning in a specific educational setting. The UAE is a multicultural society, where English is the official second language. In the educational field almost all the English teachers are expats holding different social backgrounds, for instance Canadian, American, British, South African, Tunisian, and Syrian... They all belong to different cultures, religions, and experiences. The team in charge of designing the custom's course for the Emirati students represents a blend of cultures as well as academic experiences as discussed earlier. The challenge is considerable because the team members do not share the same socio-cultural background. The interviews revealed the importance of dialogue, and the benefits of being able to discuss issues in course design as a team. They all agreed that the team managed to develop a culture of their own, collectively and individually, through dialogue. When asked about the importance of cultural aspects in course design, the participants acknowledged the huge challenge of socio-cultural issues in the current context, Jane said in this respect "I've been here for more than ten years, but still don't know all about right and wrong." And Joy added "When we first came, we were told that politics, religion, and culture should not be discussed in class." In her turn Rea expressed her concern about the choice of appropriate materials, situations and mainly pictures, she said "For example, while designing materials we should avoid *alcohol*, *bacon*, and always make sure the clothes are *conservative* in the pictures". This view was further discussed by Sam who voiced a deep concern about culture sharing and the students' rights of authentic exposure to foreign cultures. She said "We understand it is a different culture, but these are facts. Aren't the students supposed to know what is going on in the target language culture as well?" Joy shared Sam's point of view, she thought "maybe we should not have a picture of a local person in a pub, but why not a westerner, this is real life after all...I always avoid discussions in class about politics, rights, democracy..." She also alluded to discomfort and continuous fear from losing one's job when it comes to sensitive issues. During his turn John could not hide his frustration, he said "They ask for authentic material, but don't tolerate real situations. To me this is contradictory."

Additionally, when asked about how "global awareness and citizenship" - one aspect that is mandated by HCT learning model as discussed earlier - is translated in the course under scrutiny, the participants considered this question of political tendency, and that such subjects should not be discussed. The participants clearly expressed their disagreement with the policy, John, for instance, said "Some values cannot be discussed in class, the teachers do not discuss issues such as democracy and human rights, these topics are very sensitive in this part of the world" Jane added "Learning outcomes should be purely linguistic; teachers are mostly westerners with different political backgrounds, religions and values. And these should not be carried to class if they want to keep their jobs."

The conclusion that teachers perceive dialogue is important was drawn based upon direct and implied statements. Dialogue between teachers satisfied the teachers' need to feel valued, listened to, and respected for their opinions and experiences despite the differences in their perspectives. To my understanding, it is more a compromise for the benefit of the team work and

the advancement of the project. The team therefore, created a climate conducive to group deliberation to overcome their differences. However, the teachers might be knowledgeable and well-informed in their respective cultures and societies. But, in the current situation, they still need to understand better the values, cultures and attitudes in the UAE. I even felt hidden disrespect for local traditions in some responses. In this respect, Banks and McGee Banks (1995) believe that educators need to have the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to successfully implement a culturally relevant and equitable pedagogy. They argue that before teachers can effectively enrich their students' lives, they need to enrich their own cultural and sociolinguistic understanding. Fostering the attitude and encouraging teacher personal and professional development may be accomplished through self-reflection, study of pedagogy, and learning how to "recognize and respond to multiple students' characteristics, including race, social class, and gender" (Banks and McGee Banks, 1995, p.153). In this respect, Mckernan argues that "there are also difficulties in applying the culture concept to society because we live in multicultural society with pluralist values." (Mckernan, 2008, p.8) Therefore, values, traditions, customs, and politics should be managed with care in course design, which is frustrating, and limits teachers' freedoms and voices.

Vygotsky (1978) supposes that language is directly related to learning; it is actually spoken, thought, and influenced by the cultural context within which it occurs. Vygotsky also asserts that culture provides the tools for cognition and learning and that this cognition and learning are socially constructed. The question therefore is to what extent would the *-new-*developed culture be beneficial to local learners? And how would it help the learning process in the UAE context? It is obvious that the socio-cultural perspective has a powerful influence on course development.

In conclusion, the socio-cultural perspective and its ideology cannot be separated from the concept and the process of course design. Mackernan says "There are also political and cultural reasons for the way curriculum is mandated and implemented at present" (Mckernan, 2008, p.5) he also elaborates that "Every society sets up schools in order to induct students into the culture that is the way of society" (Mckernan, 2008, p.7) I agree with this view, and I strongly recommend the involvement of local teachers in course design processes in order to enrich the outcomes.

2. The controversy of Needs Analysis

The interviews revealed a vast deal of information on NA, theory versus practice. When asked about the current course design process and the importance of NA, all the participants agreed that NA is a critical component in course design, but it is practiced in different ways. The needs refer mainly to the client's needs. Courses are based on the client's needs rather than the learners' needs; they are tailored according to the employers' demands. And, the employers often assume that their employees need to foster their communication skills, and be able to read official documents in a relatively short time. Thus, the primary aim of an ESP program in our context is to present holistic English learning program for all students, John, for instance, said "I don't think we look for individuals' needs, the needs are always assessed by groups." Jane agreed with John, she added "We were never asked to assess the needs, we are asked to design a course that suits all learners. Needs analysis belongs to theory. In practice we use common sense." Rea in her turn stated that reality is different and that theory is rarely turned into practise, she said "How can we assess students' needs when we design course before meeting the

students?" This point of view was shared by Sam who added that "The needs always refer to the sponsor or the clients' needs rather than the learners." In his turn James justified this practise, and attributed the fault to time constraints, he said "These are intensive short courses; I don't think time allows NA." Joy justified the absence of needs analysis in a different way, she said "In short intensive courses, we have mixed-ability classes, levels, different learning styles, we can't cover all learners 'needs in short courses, we look mainly at general needs or urgent needs."

I found out that ESP courses have different agendas and priorities, contrary to Munby's assumption "ESP courses are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learners." (Munby, 1978, p. 2), courses are now determined by employers' needs and vision in addition to the institution's policy. It is therefore a business and an agreement. Mckernan argues that "Policy-makers are notoriously obsessed with cost, effectiveness, and efficiency, and not only in education" (Mckernan, 2008, p.25). Course designers should then focus more on producing materials, which would satisfy the school administrators', the employers', and the students' needs. Reflecting back on Richards' framework and the different levels of course design, I discovered that NA is not properly used while attempting to design ESP courses. For the customs' course for instance, different aspects were revealed to be more salient than those of the comprehensive NA process, such as the employee's needs and practicality in setting classes. The individual's needs are not central; the learners are perceived as one group with common interests and needs. And catering for individuals' needs may be the teacher's job in class through using the right methodology for successful outcomes. Another technical issue which is tightly related to the design process is time constraints, almost all the informants voiced their concerns about the insufficient time allotted for course design. This challenge affects the quality of materials to be developed.

3. Challenges in producing adequate course materials

Material development is a crucial stage in course design as it is the most tangible part. The product of the course design process is the manual or the textbook. Therefore, teachers and administrators believe course planners should focus mostly on this aspect. However, the teachers find this stage extremely challenging. Joy, for example, said in this respect "Selecting appropriate materials for ESP courses is not an easy task, because textbooks were produced in different parts of the world, they recount different contexts and experiences." Rea agreed with Joy on this issue, she added "You have to look for materials on the internet, Canadian customs or American customs use different documents, which sometimes make the learning experience irrelevant and more difficult." The participants showed discontent and frustration because some policies and internal routines prevented them from achieving their goals in the way they wanted. Sam, for instance, was unhappy because she was not allowed to use official documents for educational purposes in the teaching manual, she stated "We asked for the permission to scan official documents and use them in the manual, but we did not get approval to use *all* the workplace documents." John raised an important point when he said "Some documents were not available in English; how can we teach students about something we don't know!" indeed some documents needed translation in order to be used in English language courses. Curiously, however, these documents are used in Arabic in the workplace. Additionally, Jane talked about the difficulties in finding appropriate materials that are socially and culturally convenient, she said "There are no locally produced materials to inspire or serve as support for us."

The findings in this area reminded me of Darder's view of knowledge, which is taught based upon what is recognized as "legitimate and necessary by those who dictate curricular decisions" (Darder, 1991, p. 19). Unlike traditional perspectives of education that claim to be neutral and apolitical, critical pedagogy views all education theory as intimately linked to ideologies shaped by power, politics, history and culture. Hence, I believe teachers are urged to recognize how schools unite knowledge and power in order to understand the big picture and contribute successfully to the learning process. However, we cannot deny teachers' perceptions and philosophies about imposition; power structure and voice may affect the material development process.

4. *Theory and Practise*

The interviews revealed that there is a considerable gap between educational research and educational practice. When asked about the theory informing the course and the syllabus frameworks, the teachers provided very little information, their answers were mostly monosyllabic such as "yes, nothing special, the usual..." Overall, they seemed unable to further develop their responses. I even tried to suggest possible terminology, and sometimes expand the discussion through multiple choice questions, for example, do you think the framework is "situational or functional". Or which model did you follow in your design? Was it the Taba or the Tyler model? I also tried to explain some theoretical aspects in order to elicit more information. But, the teachers were very reluctant to what they called "useless academic terminology" I even had the feeling that I was embarrassing some participants by further explaining my questions. I decided to avoid such situations in the interviews. The participants had different responses to these questions. Jane was funny; she was giggling, and then said "I forgot what I learned. I believe success is shaped by experience." But Sam had a serious tone, she firmly stated "I know how to frame the work, but can't recall what they call it..." Joy in her turn did not appreciate the question; she said "I don't go back to theory! Theory belongs to the study age...exams..." Overall the participants did not seem to like this question. Rea added "Research is too theoretical, for real learning to occur; you need to focus on the students' real needs rather than what scholars advise. Being aware and knowledgeable is great but not enough for creating successful learning opportunities." Similarly, John addressed the same point as he said "Theory is important, it is the backbone for education, but also theory is changing, Richards, Nunan...they all have different approaches. But our context is also different from theirs." The teachers tried to justify their positions through generalisation and common practices, James concluded that "Research is forgotten on shelves or in drawers; we are always asked to contribute, answer questionnaires, surveys, and interviews. But there is no change in daily practices. I am sure you will finish your assignment and forget this issue. Sorry, but this is the truth." It is worth noting that I had a bad feeling on the spot because the situation seemed like accusatory rather than intended to elicit the truth.

I found out that bridging the gap between *theory* and *practice* is very difficult. I had the feeling in the interviews that theory belongs to scholars and to my doctoral studies, but not to my colleagues and our jobs. Theory is far away from practice as claimed by the participants. Jane said that she read once about the importance of the *process* framework, but she disagrees with the concept. She added there should always be a *product* in the learning process. Task-based planning for instance is always based on predicted outcomes, which is the product. It is a backward design, "but process lives on random planning". I felt that teachers favour experience

to theory, and that they draw a sharp line between them. They confirmed my feeling as I continued the discussion. This is consistent with what Freeman (1998) says about research and knowledge of curriculum, "do not appear to translate into classrooms in the seamless, logical fashion in which we might hope or expect they would." (p.117)

VI. Reflection and conclusion

Teachers' perceptions of course design process and challenges was the focus and emphasis of this study, but critical theory assumptions did arise during this research and would need additional consideration and attention if the scope of this research allowed. However, I cannot ignore the questions I ended up having in mind.

- 1- If praxis is a system of reflection and action upon the world, and praxis is one way to transform the world as advised by Freire (1971) and his followers later on, and if key human values, such as democracy or human rights cannot be discussed in class. Would any course or curriculum in the region claim to belong to the Praxis category?
- 2- How can a country's philosophy and vision be reflected in its courses and curriculums if the course designers do not believe in them, and they belong to divergent socio-cultural backgrounds? The policy is not importing materials; rather it is importing teachers to design materials.
- 3- Some teachers believe that designing multicultural courses could bridge the gap between the west and the region under scrutiny. But, I think a multicultural course generally caters for ethnic minorities within one society, in the UAE context, the target students belong to one socio-cultural context, they all are Emirati. However, the real problem is that the locals represent a minority in their own country, and they have to deal with imported systems. Expat teachers and course designers also counted as minorities in this context.

Additionally, as discussed earlier, I think more intensive research should be conducted in the educational field in order to investigate the relationship between the assumptions that teachers have about the content and development of teaching and the social, cultural, and institutional context where teaching takes place. That is in line with Richards (2000). Similarly, and in line with, Ernest (1998) more investigations should focus mainly on the teacher's intellectual context, in terms of beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning in addition to the social context of teaching situations and the constraints they provide. Finally, special attention should be devoted to the teacher's level of thought processes and reflections.

These recommendations would help overcome difficulties and solve issues of course design, I think teachers would benefit greatly from such studies that would enrich the educational research field.

In conclusion, educators and consultants in the region are trying hard to change and reform the educational system in the UAE, the government is spending huge amounts of money in this respect, but professional development is not yet seen as an emergent need. I think every institution should develop a thorough professional development plan in order to equip its staff with adequate knowledge and enable them to bridge the gap between theory and practice on the one hand, and overcome the socio-cultural challenges on the other.

About the Author:

Dr. Samira Boukadi Haj Sassi: I am a graduate of the University of Tunisia, Aston University in the UK, USQ in Australia and Exeter University where I obtained a doctorate degree in TESOL. I am currently working at the Higher Colleges of Technology, Abu Dhabi. My research interests include language policy, classroom instruction, blended learning, mobile learning and Information Communication Technology.

References

- Al-bazzaz, A. A. (1994). The students' low achievement in business English at the College of Business Studies in Kuwait: An analysis of the students' educational and occupational language requirements. United Kingdom, England: University of Sussex.
- Al-Busaidi, S. S. (2003). Academic needs of EFL learners in the intensive English language program at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman. Illinois: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, United States.
- Almulhim, A. M. (2001). *An English language needs assessment of Saudi college-of-technology students with respect to a number of business sectors in Saudi Arabia* . Mississippi: The University of Mississippi, United States .
- Banks, J. A. (1995). Equity pedagogy: An essential component of multicultural education. *Theory Into Practice*, 34, 152-158.
- Banks, J. A. (1995). Equity pedagogy: An essential component of multicultural education. Theory into practice.
- Breen, M. (1984). Process syllabus for the language classroom. In C. J. (Ed.), *General English syllabus design ELT Document*, 118 (pp. 47-60). Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Breen, M. (1984a). Process Syllabuses for the Language Classroom. In *Brumfit, C.J. (ed.) General English Syllabus Design Pergamon Press Ltd. and the British Council*.
- Breen, M. (1984a). Process Syllabuses for the Language Classroom. In C. Brumfit, *General English Syllabus Design*. Pergamon Press Ltd. and the British Council.
- Brindley, G. (1989). The role of needs analysis in adult ESL programme design. In *R, K Johnson (ED); The second language curriculum* . (pp. 63–77). Cambridge: CUP.
- Brindley Brindley, G. (1989). *The role of needs analysis in adult ESL programme design*. In *R.K. Johnson (Ed.), The second language curriculum (pp. 63–77)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chambers, f. (1980). A re-evaluation of needs analysis. *ESP Journal*, 1/1, 25-33
- Cohen, L. M. (2001). *Research Methods in Education*. New York: New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2001). *Research Methods in Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Cresswell, J. W. (2002). *Educational Research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating qualitative research* . Columbus: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Cresswell, J. W. (2002). *Educational Research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Columbus : Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Curzon. (1985). *Teaching in Further Education. An outline of principles and practice 3e*. London: Cassell.
- Darder, A. (1991). *Culture and power in the classroom*. New York: Bergin and Garvey.
- Darder, A. (1991). *Culture and power in the classroom*. New York: Bergin and Garvey. New York: Bergin and Garvey.

- Dudley-Evans, T. a. (1981). *Developments in ESP: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Dudley-Evans, T. a. (1998). *Developments in ESP: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Ernest, P. (. (1998). *Social constructivism as a philosophy of mathematics*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ernest, P. (1981). *Social constructivism as a philosophy of mathematics*. Albany, NY: New York Press. Even, R.
- Freeman, D. &. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly* , 32 (3), 397-417.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gorashi, A. K. (1988). *The English communication needs of military cadets in Saudi Arabia as perceived by junior officers in the Saudi Army and air difference*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University.
- Grundy, S. (1987). *Curriculum: Product or praxis*. New York: The Falmer Press.
- HCT. (2011, 10). Retrieved from [http:// www.hct.ac.ae/cert](http://www.hct.ac.ae/cert)
- Holliday. (2001). *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research (Second Edition)*. . London: Sage Publications, .
- Hutchinson, T. a. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centered approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutchinson, T. a. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centered approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- J, S. A. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research, Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory 2nd ed*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.
- Jack C. Richards. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Krueger & Casey. (2000). *Focus Groups: A Practical Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lalik & Potts. (2001). *Social reconstructionism as a framework for lite*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Lalik, R. &. (2001). *Social reconstructionism as a framework for lite*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Lave, J. a. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Lave, J. a. (1991). *Situated Learning; Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- MA, K. R. (2000). *Focus Groups: A Practical Applied Research*. . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Mackay, R. M. (1978). *English for Specific Purposes*. London: Longman.
- Mckernan. (2008). *Curriculum and Imagination: Process theory, Pedagogy and action research*. London: Routledge.
- Munby, J. (1978). *Communicative Syllabus Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Munby, J. (1978). *Communicative Syllabus Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1994). *syllabus design*. Oxford: OUP.

- Pajares, F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(3), 307- 332
- Richards, J. & Farrell, T. S. (2005). *Professional Development for Language Teachers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. (1998). *Beyond Training*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J., & Farrell, T. S. (2005). *Professional Development for Language Teachers* . New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- RK, Y. (1989). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications.
- Savasci-Acikalin. (2009, June). Teacher beliefs and practice in science education. *Asia-Pacific Forum on Science Learning and Teaching*, Volume 10, Issue 1, Article 12.
- Savasci-Acikalin. (2009). Teacher beliefs and practice in science education. *Asia Pacific Forum on Science Learning and Teaching* , Volume 10, Issue 1, Article 12. Retrieved from https://www.ied.edu.hk/apfslt/v10_issue1/funda/funda9.htm
- Schultz, M. a. (1996, Apr 21). Living with multiple paradigms: The case of paradigm interplay in organizational culture studies. *Academy of Management Review*, pp. 529-557.
- Shabaan, K. (2005). An ESP Course for employees at the American University of Beirut. *ESP World*. 2(10)
- Standen, R. P. (2002). The interplay between teachers' beliefs and practices in a multi-age primary school.
- Stephenson, L. (2010). Developing curriculum leadership in the UAE. *Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues*, 146-158..
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: the development of higher psychological processes Kozulin, Trans. Rev. Ed*). Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press.
- Yin, R. (1989). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 2 ed. London: Sage Publications.
- Zughoul & Hussein. (1985). English for higher education in the Arab world: A case study of needs analysis at Yarmouk University . *The ESP Journal*. 4, 133-152.