Workplace-Context Syllabus Design towards ESP Learning and Teaching Materials Development

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Abstract

This article, which was part of a project undertaken at the Higher Medical College ISTM/Kisantu entitled "Syllabus Development for Nursing Students", deals with the issue of inconsistency between classroom ESP teaching materials and the real-life context in which students have to use them. Too often, what students learn in the classroom does not match the kind of language they will find in the target setting. Therefore, the present article proposes a systematic approach to syllabus design and materials development that reflects the specific language encountered in the target situation. It uses the context of a first-year nursing class in the DRC. The outcome of this approach is a workplace-context syllabus design which draws content from the target working environment of learners and reference books to come up with learning and teaching units which suit ESP learners' needs.

Keywords: curriculum, materials development, syllabus, workplace-context syllabus design

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1. Introduction

It has been noticed that many colleges and universities, DRC in particular, use ESP teaching and learning materials which do not reflect both the real learning needs of learners and the actual workplace needs (interaction on the job). Many students wonder why an English course was inserted into their curriculum. They are already demotivated due to the six years of English language learning in secondary school without attaining communicative competence (Rubango, 2019).

When they arrive at higher education, most students already have preconceptions about English learning. And this is emphasized by the kinds of content used in class, which are rooted in the Grammar-Translation Method and structural approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Thus, the classroom materials used do not prepare learners for the specific context in which they are learning English.

The above challenge results from the inadequacy of designing materials that would meet the needs of learners in different subject programs, especially the kind of materials which mirror the real-life needs of learners learning English.

This article advocates effective syllabus design and materials development in ESP based on analyzing the prospective workplace context for which English will be needed and used. The proposed design will help ESP teachers develop teaching content (units and activities) which matches the real target situation. Thus, the article aims at providing an overview of English language teaching in the context of DRC, highlighting the place of English language teaching in Congolese higher education in general, and specifically in the context of the higher institute of medical techniques. Finally, it presents the rationale for using a workplace-context syllabus design, and the six stages required to implement this design in various teaching situations. The outcome of this process is an elaboration of a syllabus which answers the basic questions of *why, what, how,* and *where* in designing and developing materials.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Context of the Democratic Republic of Congo

English is not the first language in Congo. It is considered a foreign language. Congolese People learn to interact and communicate mainly with foreigners. Due to its ever-growing international status, the Congolese government has instructed its mandatory teaching and learning from secondary school to higher education.

In secondary school, English instruction begins from the first form and goes straight up to the terminal class (six years). Pupils spend two to five hours (periods) a week learning English. The English classes are taught chiefly by qualified EFL teachers who graduated from teachers'

training colleges. Upon completion of secondary education, each pupil is believed to have learned the English language for almost six years.

In higher education, English language learning and teaching are mandatory in almost all subject programs. Most classes include thirty to seventy-five hours of English instruction. They are taught as modules that can take three days to a whole week to complete. Expository lecturing remains the primary teaching strategy used in many colleges and universities in DRC. By the end of their training, a graduate student is supposed to have been taught English for two or three years, depending on the program specification.

Yet, although the abundant hours of English learning and teaching are allocated to both secondary school and higher education, many Congolese students remain unable to interact and communicate in English.

Many authors have investigated the causes of such difficulties. Kabule (2021) highlighted some weaknesses of English teaching and learning in secondary schools in Goma. He noted that most Congolese secondary school students cannot communicate in English. The researcher identified students' negative attitudes towards the English language and the lack of teaching strategies as the main causes of communicative competence inefficiency.

 Similarly, much earlier, the lack of communicative competence had also been identified as one of the most problematic skills in first-year classes in Rubango's investigation (2019). The researcher conducted research with a sample of 750 learners (259 females and 491 males) of English at UEA/Bukavu. The outcome showed that students' inability to communicate in English was due to a lack of background knowledge, shyness, and interest in English language activities.

Unlike the two authors above, Kashindi (2020) attributed Congolese students' communication failures to the use of teacher center teaching approach which leaves no room for learners' independent learning. He acknowledged learner autonomy as a way to improve students' communicative competence.

These three authors all agree on the fact that most Congolese learners spend many years learning English in both secondary school and higher education, but they end up unable to hold conversations in the target language. They attribute this problem to learners' low motivation for learning and teachers' classroom autonomy. However, the roots of this issue may also be found in the kinds of teaching and learning materials that influence learners' motivation and the teacher's role in the classroom.

2.2 The Context of the Higher Institute of Medical Techniques

Higher Institute of Medical Techniques (in French Instituts Supérieurs des Techniques Médicales, ISTM in short) are colleges spread all over DRC which aim to train students in medical fields of nursing, laboratory, health workplace management, paediatrics, midwifery, etc.

Students learn medical knowledge to apply in their prospective careers through a structured curriculum that includes English courses.

ESP courses are inserted in those fields. There are English for nursing, English for lab technicians, English for health managers and so on. Although the titles of those classes sound specific and specialized, the teaching and learning materials reflect a standard format based on grammar instruction as a central element.

Syllabuses in those courses mainly use activities and tasks drawn from the Grammar-Translation method such as fill-in-the-blanks, word completion in sentences, and reading comprehension (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Even though those activities alone cannot make learners communicatively competent, they constitute a core component of many ESP handouts. This emphasizes the difficulties of communicating in English.

The answer to this issue, common in many Congolese colleges in general and ISTM in particular, is nowhere to be found but in materials design. From Hutchinson and Waters' definition (1987, p. 96) to Tomlinson's (2011, p. 2), materials development is a process of collecting, evaluating, selecting, and writing one's learning and teaching content (units, lessons, activities, tasks, quizzes, etc.) to be used in real EFL contexts. The outcome is a syllabus which constitutes one of the primary elements of interaction between teacher-learner, learner-learner, learner-English, and learner-outside world.

Mundele's needs analysis of nursing students at ISTM/Kinshasa (2021) has proposed some key topics to include in the syllabus design. They range from the identification of people, departments, equipment, and objects in a hospital to key medical terms and documenting processes and procedures in nursing care. These findings show the necessity of designing teaching and learning content based on what students will likely find in their prospective workplaces.

The following lines state the rationale for using a workplace-context syllabus design and suggest different steps for designing materials based on the future workplace situation of students with appropriate language to be used on the job by taking into account the DRC context. This approach has been used to generate teaching materials for first-year nursing students at ISTM/Kisantu.

3. Designing Learning and Teaching ESP Materials from Workplace Context

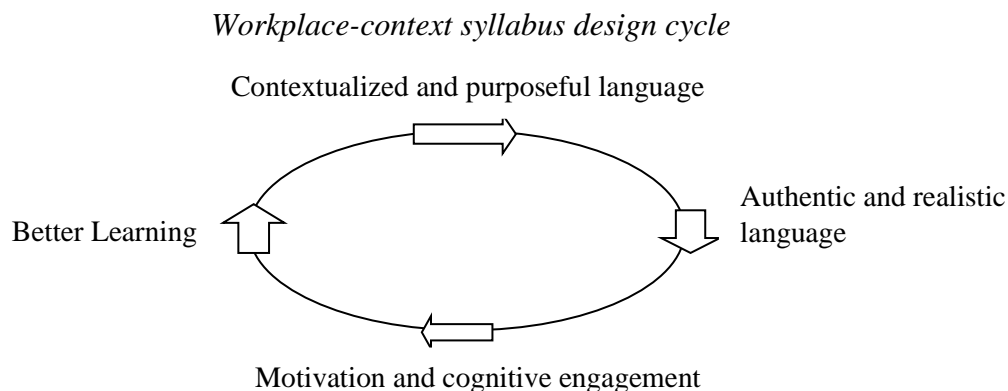### 3.1 Workplace-Context Syllabus Design

The researcher suggests collecting, evaluating, and selecting lessons, activities, etc., which fit the prospective tasks of students on the job. This should be reflected in all four language skills, vocabulary, and grammar elements. Students should be taught the kinds of grammatical features primarily used in their careers, common words, phrases, and expressions

used at work, and the appropriate topics of communication and interaction. For instance, a first-year nursing student needs to learn the proper issues to talk about when receiving a foreign patient, how to make up sentences and ask questions on those topics. The proper words and expressions to use.

This suggestion is backed up by literature. Firstly, selecting teaching materials directly from the kinds of language and tasks students will encounter in their profession fosters the contextualized, purposeful use of language (Crawford 2002, p. 84; López-Barrios & Villanueva de Debat 2014, p. 41). Students will directly connect the use of English and its real-life application. Secondly, a such connection will increase both their instrumental and integrative motivations (Harmer 2007, p. 102; Thomas 2014, p. 15). They will enjoy learning English because the tasks involved deal with their fields and future career. Thirdly, the teaching materials designed in this way will be realistic and authentic. Authenticity lies in creating and organizing content from everyday activities met on the job (Bouzidi 2009, p. 10). Fourthly, students will be affectively and cognitively involved in the learning process (Crawford 2002, p. 87). They will be curious and motivated to learn a set of language features that they can use immediately with people in the working environment (Stockwell 2013, p. 164).

In short, designing ESP content in this way makes learning English contextualized and purposeful. This design ensures the authentic and realistic component of the teaching materials, which, in turn, motivates students and engages them effectively and cognitively. In addition, it enables learners to learn materials that "adjust to the times and demands of work" (Rasyid & Zuriyati 2021, p. 174). The benefits of this syllabus design work like a cycle in which one element enforces and, or depends on the other, as illustrated below:

Workplace-context syllabus design cycle

Figure 1. Workplace-context syllabus design cycle

3.2 Implementing Workplace-Context Syllabus Design

This approach is centered on one of the two components of needs analysis, referred to as situational analysis or Target Situation Analysis (TSA) (Hutchinson & Waters 1987; Long 2005). The choice of this term relies on the paradox of teaching English to Congolese students. As long as the English language keeps the status of EFL in DRC, one may ask *why to learn it,* and *where to use it.* Although the Congolese higher education program answers these questions (that is, to communicate for question one, and; in the workplace and specific fields for question two), those two questions remain of paramount importance and still pose problems to implement in ESP teaching. Part of the problem is the difficulties (facilities, time, oversized classes, short time preparation, resources, etc.) of conducting a complete needs analysis at the beginning of an ESP course.

To overcome those difficulties and answer the above questions, the researcher proposes conducting a target situation analysis that is easy to carry out, avoids obstacles of a real needs analysis process, and above all, deals with the immediate communicative needs and wants of students. Unlike Bouzidi's three-step approach (2009) to fill the gap between ESP content and workplace linguistic expectancy, the present article suggests six of them. They are illustrated using the context of a first-year nursing class.

1. What are the core recommendations of the English language teaching program of the class involved?

This step is carried out in the administration phase. It consists of collecting and reading the guidelines and directives made by the Minister of Higher Education regarding the teaching goals of English instruction in each class. In DRC, the Minister in charge releases every year an official teaching program to be used in all colleges and universities. It lists the overall expected objectives in each class regarding required competence during professional placement.

2. What is the specialized core knowledge expected of students during the placement?

This is the beginning of the planning phase during, which the core knowledge required of a student in the workplace is assessed. In the case of this paper, the placement here reflects the working environment of the nursing student. Thus, this assessment is a twofold process:

a. What are the main subjects in the curriculum?

The teacher has to collect the main subject courses and list the core objectives of each in terms of essential knowledge. For instance, for a first-year nursing class, such information can be taken from courses like *general healthcare techniques* because it includes the main ability that each fresher should know.

b. What are the central notions expected in the workplace?

This type of information is gathered through visiting hospitals and health centers where students are to complete the placement and ask charge nurses, ward sisters, or other professionals responsible for evaluating placement. The latter provides the kinds of knowledge they expect each of their interns should exhibit.

3. What are the core skills expected of students during the placement?

As far as the difference between skills and knowledge is concerned, the teacher has to collect and list a set of abilities required for nursing fresher. Subject teachers, hospitals, and health centers will provide this information through talks and observations of student nurses in action.

4. What are the core responsibilities and tasks expected of students during the placement?

The primary responsibilities and tasks are everyday duties done in hospitals or health centers. The teacher has to make a list of them and determine the appropriateness of each based on students' required knowledge and skills (Malicka, Guerrero, & Norris 2019).

5. What are the core language features in the core responsibilities, tasks, skills, and knowledge expected of students during the placement?

After collecting data from steps 1-4, then comes the first step of writing a syllabus design. It consists of identifying the lexis and discourses used in the working environment. This is done through:

a. Visiting two health workplaces and asking for permission to record the kinds of discourses that are commonly used in different nursing tasks, skills, responsibilities, and knowledge.

b. Collecting English for nursing books and matching the above discourses with the book contents (see materials evaluation Hutchinson & Waters, 1987 for a complete analysis of this stage).

6. What are the core functions, notions, vocabulary, and forms based on the core workplace situations expected during the placement or on the job?

This is the step of deciding on the final design of the syllabus. The researcher suggests an eclectic communicative approach to syllabus development which includes the following components:

a. Goals and objectives (based on the recommendation in step one)

b. Notions and grammar (based on the core knowledge in step two and the core skills in

step three)

c. Functions (based on the core skills in step three)

d. Vocabulary (based on the core knowledge in step two and the core skills in step three)

e. Activities and tasks (based on the core responsibilities and tasks in step four)

These six steps form the framework of workplace-context syllabus design as shown here:
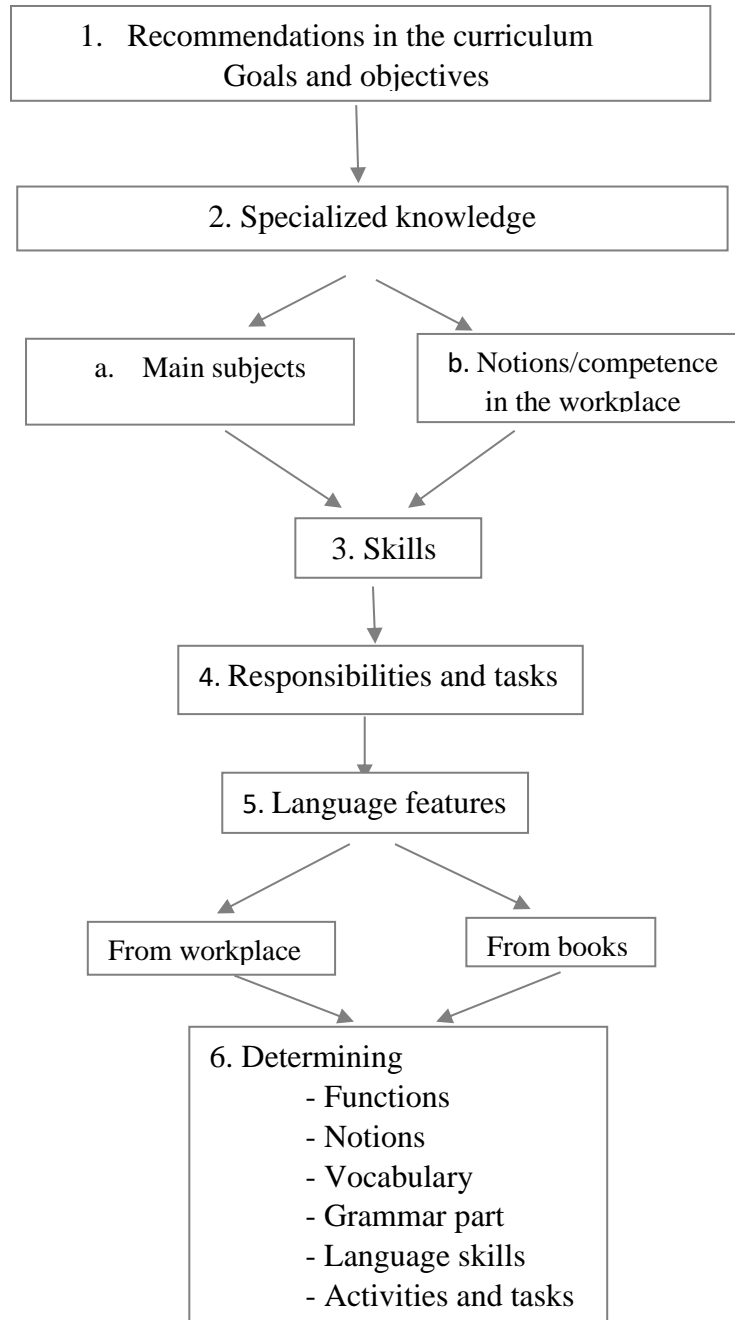
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│   1.  Recommendations in the curriculum         │
│              Goals and objectives               │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                         │
                         ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│              2. Specialized knowledge           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐
│  a.   Main subjects  │      │ b. Notions/competence │
│                      │      │    in the workplace   │
└──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘
              ↘                      ↙
               ┌──────────────────────┐
               │      3. Skills       │
               └──────────────────────┘
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          ┌───────────────────────────────┐
          │ 4. Responsibilities and tasks │
          └───────────────────────────────┘
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               ┌──────────────────────┐
               │ 5. Language features │
               └──────────────────────┘
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┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐
│   From workplace     │      │     From books       │
└──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘
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          ┌───────────────────────────────┐
          │ 6. Determining                │
          │          - Functions          │
          │          - Notions            │
          │          - Vocabulary         │
          │          - Grammar part       │
          │          - Language skills    │
          │          - Activities and tasks│
          └───────────────────────────────┘
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Figure 2. The six-step framework of workplace-context syllabus design

The above suggestions were applied to design a syllabus for first-year nursing students at the Higher Institute of Medical Techniques of Kisantu, DRC (ISTM/Kisantu). The result is below:

Table 1. *The workplace-context syllabus design sample*

Units	Functions/ Speaking	Vocabulary	Grammar focus	Reading	Writing	Communicative activities/ task
Unit 1: The hospital teams	Asking and talking about professions	Medical professions	Wh-questions (what) with the verb to be	Reading about local hospital teams in a newspaper	Writing about one's placement in hospital teams	Comparing hospital teams of two different local hospitals and health centers to be drawn on a poster

The above sample illustrates what has been previously mentioned. It includes all the components dealt with in the target situation analysis. Unit titles are designed according to the notions of the core knowledge in step two. Functions and speaking are chosen from the core skills in step three. Vocabulary words are selected from step two and the language features in the core responsibilities, tasks, skills, and knowledge in step five. The grammar part comes from steps two and three. Finally, communicative activities are designed based on the daily duties, responsibilities, and tasks of nurses in step four.

In addition, the two extra components of reading and writing are added for two simple reasons. First, they show the integrative aspect of language skills known as the integrated-skills approach. The four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, plus knowledge of grammar, lexis, and notion, occur simultaneously in communication and interaction (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, p. 106). Also, it is widely acknowledged that one skill enforces another one. Through listening, one improves speaking, and through reading, one can improve writing (Sreena & Ilankumaran 2018, p. 670). Thus including all four skills in the syllabus design enhances effective language use, and maximizes language learning.

Secondly, as far as the target situation needs and the individual learning needs of students are concerned, the four skills reach out to accommodate the wants of students and the necessities. Many learners are motivated to learn an ESP course where there is a mixture of speaking, listening, reading, and writing tasks, plus various learning styles (Burns & Slegel, 2018; Spolsky, 1989; Stockwell, 2013).

3.3 Some Points to Consider When Using a Workplace-Context Syllabus Design

1. Firstly, the workplace-context ESP syllabus design is not product-oriented but rather process-oriented. Identifying the language features of the target situation and producing materials is not the end of the process. The ESP teacher has to consider the latter as a starting point that goes all way up to considering other language learning factors such as students' motivation, emotion, engagement, and attitudes, plus the different dynamic ways their brains process the learning contents.

2. Secondly, although the above suggestion can be said to be based on the language-centered approach as opposed to the skills-centered approach and language learning-centered approach (Hutchinson & Waters 1987, p. 65), one cannot ignore the necessity of identifying first of all the target situation before defining the kinds of skills, strategies, and learning factors of that target situation. In the same way, this article claims that it is up to the ESP teacher to include all the precedent factors in the course design once the workplace needs have been analyzed.

3. As mentioned previously, this syllabus design does not account for all the processes involved in needs analysis. Yet, it allows ESP teachers, who are often urged to produce handouts urgently, to come up with first-hand teaching materials in a shorter time by simply examining the main subject topic areas of the class concerned (drawn from the core knowledge and the core skills) and appropriate communicative activities to implement (taken from the core responsibilities and tasks). As such, it reduces the stress due to the burden of designing ESP content for engineering students, while the only engineering word the teacher knows is a hammer.

4. The suggested approach helps in ESP teacher development. Too often, ESP teachers, who are asked to teach content in an unfamiliar field, feel stressed out and come up with either irrelevant teaching materials or long reading texts related to the area. One can guess the outcomes of such a design! Thus, by identifying the real needs of what English will be used for and where, the teacher can narrowly select content relevant to students and at the same time, educate themselves on those unknown field concepts. As a result, they will acquire both knowledge of the subject areas and expertise on how to design any syllabus for whatever class involved.

5. Lastly, ESP teachers should not only rely on the information they receive from subject teachers, administrative nurses, nurses, or any other professionals involved but also by observing all those stakeholders in action in the workplace, as suggested by Smoak (2003).

4. Conclusion

This article aims at providing English teachers in general, and ESP teachers in particular, with a systematic approach to syllabus design and materials development called workplace-context syllabus design. The latter is a tool that helps in designing materials based on the working environments of learners. To do so, there are six steps to take to come up with teaching and learning content that reflects the kind of language students will need to use in their specific context. Each step includes some sub-steps that require collaboration from all the stakeholders involved, such as the subject teachers, in-services workers, and English teachers. To illustrate the efficiency of this approach, the researcher uses the class of first-year nursing students at ISTM/Kisantu to produce materials that match the students' communicative competence needs.

About the Author

Enock MBENZA received a bachelor's degree in English language teaching from Institut Supérieur Pédagogique de Mbanza-Ngungu, ISP/Mbanza-Ngungu, in DRC, in 2019. He teaches medical English in general duty nursing, lab technique, and nutrition. His research interests include ESP syllabuses and materials design, as well as ELT in large classes. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7008-6450

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