Designing English for Islamic Studies Courses: Some Basic Considerations

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Abstract

Undergraduate students majoring in Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia need to take an English-for-Specific-Purposes (ESP) course each year of the B.A. program. The material for all four courses was developed in-house by a group of instructors at those colleges. A review of the course material, particularly reading texts, showed many inadequacies. It was found that each course material consists of 6 units, consisting of a reading text followed by comprehension questions, few vocabulary items and their dictionary definition. Vocabulary exercises required the students to fill gaps with the words that were defined or by looking them up in a dictionary. English passages consisted of a literal translation of Arabic sentences rather than connected discourse. The texts lacked cohesion, coherence, and an organizational structure and the stylistic features of English texts. Ideas are abstract, vague and have insufficient details. Stories had no theme, no setting, and no sequence of events. Although the course requires the students to translate the same reading texts included in the course, there is no mention of the translation skills that need to be practiced by the students. English for Islamic Studies courses need to be re-designed by a team of subject-matter, curriculum design and native English language experts. The reading text structure, register stylistic features and specific reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and translation skills should be taken into consideration in designing the course. A model for re-designing the English for Islamic Studies courses is provided.

Keywords: Islamic Studies Curriculum Design, English for Islamic Studies, ESP, Curriculum Design, Curriculum Components

Introduction

Many graduate and undergraduate students, in many countries around the world, take English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses depending on their major area of study. Strevens (1977) defined ESP courses as those in which the learner's study requirements determine the objectives and content of those courses in part or in full, as in teaching English to doctors, meteorologists, secretaries, businessmen and diplomats, air traffic controllers, nurses, chemical engineers, students of physics and English literature, and others. Schleppegrell & Bowman (1986) added that the concept of teaching ESP revolves around the idea of not teaching English as a separate course that has nothing to do with the students' role in real life, but rather on the integration of language and students' area of specialization. Such an integration constitutes a strong motivation for the students because they can apply what they learn in class to their major area of study. Robinson (1985) indicated that the ESP course has a

specific goal, which is the student's success in performing his role while studying or working. ESP courses are based on an analysis of students' needs and are designed according to those needs. One ESP course may differ from another in the skills, topics, attitudes, functions, and structures chosen. An ESP course usually has a fixed time period. Students may differ in their mastery level of the language. Students may study the course before joining a study program or job, while on the job or while studying. They may be proficient in their job or area of specialization, but they need to perform their role in English as they do it in their native language.

When designing an ESP course, Schmidt (1981), Richterich & Chancerel (1980), Robinson (1980), Munby (1978), and Mackay (1978) indicated that the needs of students are of paramount importance in designing the course, because they determine the language skills that the students need to acquire and develop most, the teaching methodology, the course material, and the activities to be used in the course. Richterich & Chancerel (1980) added that students 'needs can beanalyzed by the students themselves or stakeholder, the college to which they belong, or all three together.

Edelfelt (1980) defined needs as what a person wants and does not have. It is the individual's perception of what exists in reality, and what should be. Stufflebeam et al. (1985) stated that the process of a needs assessment is the process of describing, obtaining, and applying information to determine what things are necessary to achieve a purpose that can be justified and defended. Needs assessment has two functions: (i) identifying existing needs and how to fulfil those needs, and (ii) using those needs as criteria that determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the program in meeting the students' important needs. Needs assessment is of particular importance in designing ESP courses, because teaching ESP revolves around the goal for which the students study the English language.

To assess students' academic and professional needs, the following steps can be followed: Preparing a needs inventory (questionnaires, interviews and observations), including the questions; identifying the participants, procedures for collecting data and data analysis procedures; interpreting the results; identifying the students' needs; preparing the needs assessment report that will be sent to the concerned authorities; using and applying the needs data that have been identified in planning and designing the program (Stufflebeam, et al., 1985).

Literature Review

Due to the importance of ESP courses, many studies in the literature have focused on the type of ESP course design model that meets students' need and goals, suit their proficiency level in English and type of English language that the students will be using while studying and after graduation. For example, Sifakis (2003) suggested an integrative model for ESP curriculum design. Kim (1998) suggested a functional-notional approach to ESP syllabus design, which is learner-centered, self-motivating, emphasizes the communicative purpose of the language, students' special needs, and identification of the functions.

Further studies described in detail how ESP courses in specific disciplines can be designed. For instance, Kim (1998) reported on need analysis and curriculum design for an ESP program for Food Service in Texas A & M University based on the functional-notional approach. Gray-Richards & Kirley (1983) assessed the need for studying English among students majoring in the health sciences who have to sit for a certification exam, in order to use those needs as a basis for increasing students' mastery of general and specialized English. Furthermore,

Baumgardner et al. (1985) analyzed engineering students' needs at the diploma and bachelor's levels through questionnaires, interviews with professors and students, attending lectures, observed teaching methods and examining certification criteria set by the National Council. The diploma students' course focused on developing their cognitive skills using a skill-integration approach, teamwork, and problem-solving situations that are graded in difficulty level.

Similarly, Sorensen (1985) analyzed agriculture students' need for studying English and used those needs as a basis for making the necessary adjustments in the English language curriculum used to prepare those students for work in the field of agriculture. The researcher conducted interviews with the professors, analyzed the students 'written assignments in the various agricultural courses and collected the professors' notes on the students' research. Based on the data collected, the researcher identified the writing skills that students are expected to acquire and those that are difficult for them, then designed appropriate learning materials for developing students' problem-solving, discussion and persuasion skills.

In Germany, O'Flanagan (1982) designed a two-month program to train employees of the Siemens company to read specialized texts in English. The scientific material consisted of specialized dictionaries containing between 2900 & 4900 terms compiled from technical specifications and descriptions written in English. The program focused on teaching terminology intensively, reading specialized texts, and discussing the problems that the students faced while reading specialized texts.

In Chile, Huerta (1986), developed an ESP syllabus for students majoring in chemistry at the Catholic University in Santiago, after surveying faculty members' opinions on the teaching methods and instructional materials.

In Indonesia, Nababan (1993) the ESP materials design is closely related to the specific subject areas of language use and learner characteristics. The ESP program has four components: four levels of basic English, consisting of pre-reading information, reading passages, structure review, vocabulary, dialogue, and pronunciation review; two levels of an English correspondence component; 4 levels of oral English; and an advanced language level.

In Saudi Arabia, Al-Jarf (1994) designed an ESP course for graduate students at the Colleges of Liberal Arts, Administrative Sciences and Agriculture at King Saud University, based on their academic and occupational needs to learn English which were assessed by a questionnaire. In another study, Reynolds (1981) designed a program for developing the language skills of students at the College of Environmental Designs at King Abdulaziz University, to increase their technical vocabulary. The author used a theme-based and a task-based approach. The program focused on content related to the students' major and goals, and on learning by doing. In a third study, Bynum (1985) designed a course for Saudi students working in the field of petrochemical industries who are on scholarships to study English in the United States. The researcher used an integrative-skills approach, i.e., the course focused on reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammatical structures, technical terms, and general vocabulary, in addition to cultural activities and a program for qualifying students for the job upon return to the Kingdom.

Further studies have designed similar programs to teach ESP such as Tomizawa (1991), Eggly & Schubiner (1991), Wallace (1988), Noss (1987), Benoussan & Golan (1981), Goodfellow (1984), Schleppegrell (1985), Robinson (1985), Abo Mosallem (1984), Vivian (1984), Land (1983) and others.

It is noteworthy to say that the literature review showed lack of studies that focused on designing English for Islamic Studies (EIS) courses for students at the undergraduate or postgraduate levels, whether in Saudi Arabia or other countries. Therefore, the current study aims to examine and evaluate the EIS courses currently used at the Women's Colleges in Saudi Arabia, in general, and reading texts, in particular, to reveal their weaknesses. It also aims to propose a new model for designing EIS courses for undergraduate students at Women's Colleges in Saudi Arabia, show the course aims, skills and subskills that need to be emphasized based on the author's experience teaching English to graduate students majoring in art education and geography and Saudi students studying English for professional purposes in the UK (Al-Jarf 2021; Al-Jarf (2013); Al-Jarf 2009a; Al-Jarf 2009b; Al-Jarf 1994).

Context

In Saudi Arabia, there are 104 women's colleges of Education, Arts, Science and Home Economics scattered all over the kingdom. Undergraduate students majoring in Islamic Studies at some of the Women's Colleges are required to take an English for Islamic Studies (EIS) course each year of the B.A. program, i.e., a total of four EIS courses. The current EIS curriculum has been updated. The material for all four EIS courses was developed in-house by a group of instructors at the Women's Colleges. The author had the opportunity to evaluate those materials before assigning them to the students.

Each of the four courses consists of five units. Each unit consists of the following: (i) A reading component (text and comprehension questions); (ii) a vocabulary component (few words and their dictionary definition and a gap-filling vocabulary exercise); and (iii) a translation component (the same reading text is reprinted with blank lines for the students to write their own translation). An examination of the EIS course revealed the following weaknesses.

EIS Course Objectives

The course objectives are too general. The skills to be developed, the reading sub-skills, vocabulary, and translation skills to be developed are not specified. Grammar is not integrated in the textbook. A separate grammar book is used.

Amount of Course Material

The number of teaching hours allocated to the course per week or semester is not mentioned. The material in each unit can be covered in one class (50 minutes) and the whole reading material can be covered in 5 teaching hours, i.e., the material is insufficient for 14 teaching weeks.

Reading Texts and Exercises

Reading passages lack gradation in length and difficulty level within each college level and from one college level to the next. The reading texts lack variety in theme. Some of the themes covered are: The pillars of Islam, hijab, Muslim women from the early Islamic period, and stories of women who embraced Islam. The reading texts are vague and lack the necessary details that would enable the students to understand the content. Ideas are abstract. English passages are a literal translation of Arabic sentences. The reading passages consist of a series of sentences that lack cohesion and coherence. The texts have no organizational structure (enumeration, cause-effect, comparison-contrast, definition, classification ...etc.). Stories have no setting, theme, or sequence of events. The texts lack the stylistic features and register of English Islamic texts.

The reading comprehension questions focus on literal comprehension. The students can answer the comprehension questions by matching the words of the question with those of the text, without really understanding the text. The answer to some questions can be neither explicitly found in the text nor inferred.

Vocabulary Component

In each unit, fewer than 10 vocabulary items are selected from the reading text. Dictionary definitions are provided for the 10 vocabulary items. The vocabulary items and their definitions are listed in a table. No other way of teaching the new vocabulary items is provided except for providing the definition. Sometimes the language of the definition is more difficult than the defined vocabulary item. Many other difficult words in the passages were not explained and their meaning cannot be inferred from context. Sometimes the vocabulary list contains easy words or Arabic words such as "God, Shahada, Hadith" transliterated in English. The reading passages contain no context clues to develop the students' ability to infer meaning of unknown words from context bu using semantic and syntactic clues available in the reading text. Most vocabulary exercises require the students to fill gaps in sentences with the vocabulary items whose definitions were provided in each unit or by asking the students to look up their meanings in the dictionary. Matching exercises simply require the students to match some vocabulary items included in the table with their definitions. The students can match those by simply looking at the vocabulary list in the table.

Translation Component

The same reading text is re-printed and students are asked to translate it. Although the students are required to translate the same reading tests, there is no mention and no outline of the translation skills and techniques that students should practice.

Proposed Model

The EIS courses at the Women's Colleges need to be re-designed by a team of subject-matter, curriculum design and native English language experts. The register, discourse structure, stylistic features, and specific reading and vocabulary skills should be taken into consideration in the course design. Based on research findings from studies by Al-Jarf (2021); Al-Jarf (2013); Al-Jarf (2009a); Al-Jarf (2009b); Al-Jarf (1994) and others, the following guidelines should be taken into consideration when designing EIS courses.

Planning the Course

Make a list of sub-skills, order them in term of difficulty and distribute them among the 4 years. Select the reading resources. The reading texts' length and difficulty level should increase from one year to the next. To brainstorm, advance organizers such as pictures, questions, a news story or event should be used before reading the text. Select the vocabulary items (500 words per year). Vocabulary items should cover Islamic terms as well as general English words. Make a list of basic grammatical structures that frequently occur in Islamic texts.

Assessing Students' Needs

Before designing an ESP course, a needs assessment questionnaire should be used to find out why undergraduate students majoring in Islamic studies need to learn English and what the students will be using English for while studying and after they graduate from college.

Defining the EIS Course Objective

On the basis of the students' responses to the needs assessment questionnaire, the major skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and/or using technology etc.) that the students need to acquire must be defined. Specific sub-skills should be identified. Islamic technical vocabulary and grammatical structures typical of Islamic texts should be integrated and learnt in context.

Translation skills

Translation instruction should focus on rendering a translation of the overall meaning of a short text that was already read and discussed in class, rather than a full or literal translation of each sentence in the text. The students translate the overall meaning of a text from Arabic to English and from English to Arabic. Students should draw on their background knowledge in Islamic studies in Arabic in comprehension and translation. The instructor gives some translation tips such as: (i) Arabic sentences begin with the verb, (ii) imagining an audience for whom the student is translating, and (iii) pointing out differences between English and Arabic Islamic Studies discourse. Students' in-class translation practice should be monitored, and feedback provided. The instructor gives group feedback in case of common problems. The students can post their re-written translations on an online discussion forum, online course or blog.

The ESP Course Components

The EIS course should have the following components:

Reading

The following specific reading skills should be practiced: (a) Identifying main ideas and supporting details. (b) Comprehending ideas that are explicitly and implicitly stated in the text. (c) Skimming and scanning for required information. (v) Distinguishing facts and opinions. (e) Identifying and understanding opposing points of view. (f) Finding reasons an author used to support his/her opinion. (g) Identifying bias. (h) Recognizing expressions of "all, each, every". (i) Detecting propaganda devices. (j) Detecting inconsistencies in the presentation of information. (k) Recognizing statements that lack proof. (l) Following directions. (m) Understanding long, complex sentences and breaking them down into smaller units. (n) Identifying pronoun antecedents. (o) Identifying the organizational structure of a text. (p) Identifying words that signal enumeration, illustrative examples, classification, cause-effect relationships, sequences of events, comparison and contrast and character traits (Al-Jarf, 2021).

The reading texts should increase in length and difficulty within each college level and between levels. The texts can be selected from different resources such as books, magazines, newspapers, and Internet websites. Texts with different organizational structures must be used. Texts should contain concrete ideas and have sufficient details such as names of persons, places, dates, and examples. Expository texts should have a main idea and supporting details (compare-contrast, cause-effect relationships, classification, illustration, enumeration, definitions, sequencing). The texts should contain transitional words between sentences and paragraphs, and devices that signal the text structure should be used. Narrative texts should contain all story elements: The main character's name, the setting of the story, i.e., time and place of the story, plot, climax, finale, sequence of events, and story moral, (Al-Jarf, 2021).

The reading themes should cover local themes such as sample verses from the Holy Quran, Prophet's Hadiths "sayings", excerpts from Islamic history, notable Muslim people's

biographies, miraculous Quran, status of women in Islam, women's rights in Islam, children's rights in Islam, the Muslim family, scientific and scholarly contributions of Muslim scholars and scientists to humanity, Hijab, women and work in Islam, marriage and divorce in Islam. The texts should include global themes such as: current global issues and problems, women's image in the media, comparison of world religions, relationship between Islamic and non-Islamic countries, world peace, effect of terrorism on societies, violence, conflict among religions, mixed marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims, Muslim minorities in Europe and America and others (Al-Jarf, 2003a; Al-Jarf, 2003b).

Vocabulary in Context

Islamic terms and new general lexical items should be taught in context. Semantic, syntactic, and morphological clues should be used to infer the meaning of new words from context. Students should be trained to derive meaning from the semantic context (through definitions, use of punctuation marks, synonyms and antonyms, examples). Students should be trained to derive meaning of unknown words from the syntactic context (Al-Jarf, 2006; Al-Jarf, 2007; Al-Jarf, 2011; Al-Jarf, 2015).

Grammar in Context

Grammatical structures such as the historical present, reported speech and modals should be taught in context (Al-Jarf, 2005; Al-Jarf, 2017).

Internet Searching Skills

Internet searching skills include signing up for and using an e-mail; identifying Internet Explorer's menus; defining search terms; using search engines Google, MSN, Yahoo; downloading files; bookmarking websites; searching for Islamic websites (Islam Online, Islam Web); finding articles about specific topics in Islamic websites; and finding, searching, and writing in online forums (Al-Jarf, 2002; Al-Jarf, 2003c).

Reflections

The current study proposes a model for designing English for Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia. The proposed model has been used in designing other ESP course that the author taught to Saudi graduate students in Saudi Arabia such as teaching English for Art education (2021) and Al-Jarf (2009a) to graduate students at the College of Home Economics; teaching English for Professional Purposes to Saudi students studying abroad (Al-Jarf, 2009b); and teaching ESP to graduate students at King Saud University based on students' academic and professional needs (Al-Jarf, 1994). Specific components of the proposed curriculum model were the subject of few more research studies by the author such as: teaching English word-formation processes (Al-Jarf, 2011); teaching and assessing graduate students' research skills in English for art education purposes (Al-Jarf, 2013); training ESP college students in electronic searching (Al-Jarf, 2003c; Al-Jarf, 2002) and others. The results of the author's studies showed that the proposed model which she applied to the courses she taught to her students proved to be effectives as shown from the pre and posttest scores and from students' responses to a questionnaire-survey at the end of the semester.

Conclusion

Effective EIS instruction depends on the instructor's competence. Therefore, EIS instructors should receive some orientation about EIS through training programs, as they might be specialized in teaching general English, but not EIS. They should be introduced to the different

types of Islamic texts, Islamic studies terminology, reading, translation and electronic searching skills. EIS instructors may assess students' proficiency level at the beginning of the semester, if students are poor, then the EIS instructor needs to use supplementary practice material that consists of short, easy texts and move on to longer and more difficult texts for a couple of weeks before starting the actual course material. The instructors should teach Islamic terminology and grammatical structures in context. Listening, speaking and writing activities can be based on the topic of the reading texts under study. Focus should be on understanding and translating the overall meaning of the text, not on the literal meaning of every single text especially when reading narrative texts. The instructor should encourage the students to be active in class and the learning environment should be secure for making mistakes. Focus should be on communication and not on correcting every single error made by the students. Students should receive feedback on their performance and areas of improvement. In assessing the course, focus should be on identifying which reading and vocabulary skills have been acquired by the students and which ones have not. Assessment should provide feedback on the suitability of the reading material, activities, and assignments in terms of difficulty level and skills developed. EIS should be student-centered, not teacher-centered. The students should have an active role in the classroom. They may identify the difficult words and structures, read, translate, speak, bring texts of interest to them from paper and online resource, and correct their own and each other's errors. An online course or an online discussion forum can be integrated in EIS instruction where texts and assignments can be posted, and discussions can be held. At the end of the course, students and instructors' feedback is significant for the continual improvement of the EIS courses. Finally, to take full advantage of the proposed model and continue to make adjustments in it, the study recommends that future researchers try out the model with samples of students enrolled in the EIS courses, compare the students pre and posttest scores and survey students and instructors' views of the course

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