

Title of Project

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the Field of Agriculture:
From Needs Analysis to ESP Task Design and Implementation

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TIRF Research Topic Investigated

Content-based Instruction

Final Report

Motivation for the Research

In today's globalized world, the increasing need for learning and using English in specific contexts, particularly workplace settings, has led to the need for designing "workplace-specific courses" (Marra, 2013, p. 175). In this regard, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) arose to address the demands of particular groups of learners with professional or occupational-related language needs (Hyland, 2007).

In the ESP literature, needs analysis (NA) as an approach to investigating the language needs of specialized groups of learners has been extensively recognized as a primary step in language programs, courses, and syllabus design (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Flowerdew, 2013; Long, 2005*b*, 2015). Many NA studies have been conducted to explore the language needs of students from different disciplines, for example, students of nursing (Lu, 2018), business (Chan, 2021), and engineering (Spence & Liu, 2013), to name a few. In the field of agriculture, English has an important role, especially for in-service agricultural professionals, as was shown in the findings from my master's thesis (Arias-Contreras, 2017), later published as Arias-Contreras and Moore (2022). However, few studies have explored this line of research, especially the language needs of students of agriculture enrolled in a vocational education and training (VET) program in an English as a foreign language (EFL) environment. Furthermore, and importantly, even though NA has been widely accepted as a key phase in syllabus design, little is known regarding how to develop pedagogic tasks derived from NA research.

Taking the above into consideration, the present study aimed, first, to conduct a task-based NA (using tasks as the unit of analysis) to explore the target English language needs of students of agriculture in Chile. Second, based on these target language needs, in a second stage, the study sought to explore how EFL teachers perceived the design and implementation of pedagogic tasks within the task-based language teaching (TBLT) framework in their local contexts. TBLT, well-supported theoretically, according to some researchers and theorists (e.g., Long, 2015), should start with a task-based NA; thus, tasks informing the approach are

developed from target tasks. Therefore, this study explored how TBLT can facilitate the teaching of ESP in VET contexts.

Research Questions

There were six research questions guiding the present study:

Stage 1: Needs analysis

1. What are the language needs and tasks performed by agricultural technicians in which English-language skills are necessary?
2. What are the views of industry and school professionals regarding the English language needed in an agricultural setting for students to perform their future jobs as technicians?
3. What are the students' views regarding their own English needs and wants in relation to their specialization?

Stage 2: Task design and implementation

4. In their reflection on task design, what do teachers perceive as the benefits and challenges?
5. In their reflection on task implementation, what do teachers perceive as the benefits and challenges?
6. How do teachers' reflections on the workshop experience and task implementation affect their views and practices?

Research Methodology

This research was conducted in two stages. In stage one, a task-based NA, following Long's (2005a) and Serafini et al.'s (2015) model, was carried out to investigate the role of English in the Chilean agricultural sector. More precisely, this stage identified the language needs and target tasks that require English in the job of agricultural technicians. Building on these target tasks, in the second research stage, three case study teachers (who also took part in the first stage) participated in a workshop intervention (drawing on Baralt et al.'s, 2014) in which they were required to design and implement pedagogic tasks in their language classrooms. To this end, the teachers were asked to create task(s) that were derived from the target tasks and fulfilled Ellis's (2003, 2009) four criteria within the TBLT approach on the other.

Study Participants

In stage one, participants were from two different sectors: industry and education. That is, 10 agricultural technicians and two heads of companies from the industry, and three school principals, five EFL teachers, three VET teachers, and 171 students from the education sector. Three of the five EFL teachers who took part in stage one participated in the second stage. The three teachers worked in VET schools located in agricultural-oriented areas in Chile.

Study Instruments

In stage one, data were gathered using semi-structured interviews conducted with industry and school professionals, an online questionnaire administered to students, and documents collected from the companies and the schools.

In stage two, data were collected from the three teachers via semi-structured interviews, workshop recordings, reflective journals, and tasks designed and implemented by the teachers.

Once ethics approval was granted, the researcher piloted each instrument used in each stage before starting data gathering for the main study.

Summary of Findings

In stage one, findings showed that technicians usually face two English language needs: (a) interactions with visitors (e.g., clients and consultants) and seasonal workers, and (b) reading technical documents. Within these needs, 12 target tasks were identified in agricultural technicians' jobs, which usually required technicians to use speaking, listening, and reading skills in English. Moreover, findings revealed important constraints regarding the English language teaching at VET agricultural schools, including, for instance, the lack of materials related to agricultural English and an appropriate focus and attention to the English language at these schools.

In stage two, findings showed that the three teachers had positive views regarding tasks that meet both requirements: tasks that were derived from target tasks and fulfilled Ellis's four criteria. Furthermore, the cross-case analysis showed that the teachers perceived this type of tasks as a promoter of language learning, learner autonomy, and identity in the classroom. In this regard, they believed that these particular tasks had the potential to (a) increase students' motivation, (b) make English part of the learners' identity, (c) encourage students' autonomous learning, and (d) activate students' previous knowledge.

In the task design phase, the three teachers designed pedagogic tasks meeting both requirements. They also perceived more benefits (as mentioned above) than challenges when designing the tasks. In the task implementation phase, first, the three teachers designed new tasks (after the workshop intervention), which they subsequently implemented in their language classrooms. It was found that these tasks, however, did not meet the two specified requirements abovementioned. That is, the teachers designed new tasks that either successfully fulfilled Ellis's criteria or were clearly derived from a target task. However, from the teachers' point of view, the tasks they designed (after the intervention) were considered tasks that met the two prerequisites. They also perceived that the benefits of these tasks surpassed the challenges when implementing them with their students.

Finally, the teachers' reflections showed changes in their views concerning the implementation of tasks in their contexts and encouraged changes in their instructional practices.

Implications

The present study offers implications and recommendations for the following parties.

For research and theory: Findings from the first and second stages suggest that putting theory into practice is not a straightforward process. More precisely, results show that teachers' experiences with designing and implementing tasks can shape their views and understandings of the theoretical definition of task, which tend to be linked to their views about what functions well or not well in their local contexts.

For EFL/ESP teachers: Findings suggest that it is essential that language teaching in specialized contexts be based on the language needs and interests of the particular groups of learners. This can be achieved if EFL/ESP teachers working in these contexts are provided with sufficient training and professional development opportunities in relation to the specializations

they teach. Thus, teachers can make informed curricular decisions regarding the content, skills, and teaching methodologies that are more pertinent to their teaching of specialized students.

For curriculum and language program design: First, stage one findings show that a task-based NA can be an effective method to explore target tasks (i.e., tasks that occur in the target domain) of specialized learners. Second, stage two findings provide insights into the development of pedagogic tasks (derived from NA research) underpinned by TBLT principles, which also suggest a practical and worthwhile approach to teaching English in VET and ESP contexts.

For policymakers in the VET sector: VET is a crucial strand of education, especially in contexts like Chile, as it is vital in helping students to transition from school to work. VET is key in enhancing students' employment opportunities and social mobility. Students with strong English skills can be at an advantage in these prospects. Thus, it is suggested that decision-making at the policy level consider the significant role of English education within the VET curriculum, which should be in line with the industry and job sectors.

Lastly, for VET institutions, it is recommended that schools (at the secondary level) and institutions (at the tertiary level) be in a constant dialog. That is, both entities should be connected across all segments of English language curricular content to be able to offer students relevant curricular continuation.

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