

# Project Work in The ESP Classroom

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*A thorough needs analysis study carried out in the College of Pharmacy of the University of the Basque Country showed students' interest in improving their writing and speaking skills. Thus, project work was included as one of the components of the ESP course. This article describes the different stages leading to both the written and the oral presentations, the roles of the students as speakers and listeners and the role of the teacher. The results of questionnaires on students' pre-writing activities are considered and some general conclusions about the usefulness of project work in the ESP classroom are drawn.*

## **1. Introduction**

The needs analysis study carried out in the College of Pharmacy of the University of the Basque Country showed that students in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course were particularly interested in improving their so-called productive skills [cf. García Mayo & Núñez Antón (1995).] The second and third-year students taking the course, age 19-21 years, with an intermediate-high level of English, wanted to become familiar with oral presentation and writing techniques.

After providing some background to the course, this article comments on the stages leading to the oral presentation of students' projects, their roles as speakers and listeners and the teacher's role in project work design. The article also presents the results of questionnaires in which students provided information about their pre-writing activities and commented on their impressions of the project as a whole. Finally, we draw some conclusions on the usefulness of such projects in the ESP classroom.

## **2. Background**

The ESP course in the College of Pharmacy of the University of the Basque Country is offered to students who pursue degrees in Pharmacy, Dietetics and Food Technology, although the majority (95%) are Pharmacy students. The ESP course is an annual (October-June) 9-credit elective (3 hours per week) in their careers. A thorough needs analysis study based, among other elements, on

interviews with subject-area specialists and students' answers to a 50-item questionnaire, was carried out in the 1994-95 academic year. The study showed that both professors and students were interested in an English program that worked on the four skills, although a special emphasis should be placed on the improvement of both speaking and writing. The interviews indicated that subject-area professors are well aware of how important it is for their students to be able to write and present a research paper, or a merely informative one, in English. Students, used to working in high school with a methodology that emphasizes reading and listening skills, wanted more challenging activities in their university studies and expressed their interest in using the language in real tasks.

Faced with this situation, we decided to make project work one of the components of the ESP program. The most important objectives we wanted our students to reach by the end of the term in this specific component of the course were the following:

1. to learn the basics about how to write and organize a paper in English
2. to express thoughts clearly and logically
3. to work cooperatively in small groups (2-3 members)
4. to recognize and employ peers' feedback effectively
5. to reduce students' communicative anxiety when presenting topics orally

Students had to prepare their project work outside class-time because the other components of the ESP course in the College of Pharmacy had to be covered. Therefore, we had to develop a careful schedule of how the different stages of project-writing and in-class presentations had to be carried out. In what follows we explain what each part of the project involved.

### **3. Setting the stage**

At the beginning of the academic year, and together with the course program, students are provided the guidelines they should follow. They find there deadlines for the different steps in their work, as well as a number of selected reference books. This is, in our experience, an essential step in project work planning.

At this stage the role of the students consists in choosing the groups and deciding on a topic. The small group format was preferred to individual work because our students are not used to standing in front of a class to deliver a presentation. From the beginning, they complained that the pressure to perform individually in front of the whole class would be too much to bear because, for most of them, this would be the first time they had to present serious work in a foreign language. As the literature in cooperative learning demonstrates (Dishon and O'Leary 1984, Kagan 1985), small group work allows more opportunities for learners to exchange information and ideas, collaborate and revise than is available when activities center on one person speaking at a time.

As for the topic, the only requirement was that it had to be related to any of the subjects of their specialty areas and its thrust should be mainly informative. Each oral presentation should last 20 minutes, with 10 more for questions and discussion. As students pursue degrees with many subjects in common, the body of shared information was large enough to simulate the situation in a subject-area classroom.

During this preparation stage, the teacher writes down the different topics and makes sure that the same one is not dealt with by more than one group. Different aspects of the same topic can be considered by several groups, though. A very important aspect of the preparation stage is that the teacher devotes one class per week to giving mini-lectures on relevant issues. He/she provides students with different activities on how to select relevant information from different sources, how to reorganize data in response to a question and how to encode those data into academic English. Some of the topics that can be considered for mini-lectures on writing papers are the following:

1. Using the library and other local resources
2. Selection and organization of material
3. How to organize your ideas: Writing a first draft
4. Editing a draft
5. How to present a written version of a paper.
6. Bibliography and footnotes

As for the topics that were considered regarding the oral presentation of the students' project, we thought of the following:

1. The audience: Attention controlling devices. Audience-speaker relationship
2. Structure of the talk: openings, middles and endings
3. Speaking: pace and transitions to other speakers
4. Non-verbal communication
5. Timing
6. Visual aids
7. The language of discussion
8. How to take notes
9. Managing nerves

Obviously, each teacher can think of other topics to present in the mini-lectures. Our idea was that all these topics could be useful to most of the students who had never been formally exposed to the different steps in oral presentations or in paper-writing in English.

Two weeks before each oral presentation, the group must show the teacher the outline of their work and each member has to explain the content of his/her section. The role of the teacher at this stage is fundamental as he/she has to guide students with comments on both coherence of content and manner of delivery. Written and oral feedback to students is provided on a regular basis, though, within the classroom setting, outside the classroom and through assessment forms that the teacher completes.

Our students gathered information from different sources, mainly specialized journals and magazines, and consulted with subject-area specialists about the topics they had chosen. This was a particularly rewarding aspect of their work, as we will later see. The students' motivation was so high that, besides carrying out an excellent research job, most of the groups accompanied their oral presentation with slides, transparencies and even videotapes on relevant aspects of the topic. Some time of the preparation stage was devoted to training students on how to use the slide and the overhead projectors while keeping eye-contact

with the audience. A list of the topics presented this past academic year is provided in Appendix I.

#### **4. Oral presentations**

The day of the oral presentations students have a dual role as speakers and listeners. The two or three members of the group that is in charge of the presentation are expected to express their ideas in a clear and logical way. They have had considerable in-class training throughout the course. We need to remember, however, that for the majority of these students this will be their first oral presentation in English so managing nerves will be the most important aspect to tackle. In order to facilitate the job of the audience, each group has to provide a handout with the main points of their talk. Speakers are allowed to use this handout during the presentation but are not allowed to read directly from their paper. They are also expected to respond to listeners' requests for clarification and to anticipate possible questions from the audience.

The audience - the rest of the students in the classroom- is accountable for what their peers present. The members of the audience are expected to take notes and think of possible questions they might ask at the end of the presentation. We need to remember that any time a student asks a question, he/she paraphrases and synthesizes the content of the speaker's topic. This is one of the most useful activities for students at the university level. Another role given to some students in the audience is to judge their peers' work. In order to do that, the teacher provides presentation evaluation forms (see Appendix II).

The teacher evaluates each member of the group using the evaluation form provided in Appendix III. It is important to note here that students know what the evaluation form contains; they know what is expected from them. Both students' and teacher's evaluation forms are important feedback for future project work planning. The teacher keeps his/her directive role during this stage by asking one or two questions at the end of the presentation or by summarizing particularly difficult points. In general, interesting questions and discussion followed most of the presentations. Here, again, the knowledge shared by all the students in the audience helped when they had to make comments and ask relevant questions. It was interesting to see how students dealt with particularly touchy subjects (e.g. animal

experimentation), presenting the different positions at play in the issue and going beyond the mere informative paper to defend their own point of view.

### **5. Follow-up and students' response**

After the oral presentations, each group meets with the teacher at an arranged time after class. At the meeting, the teacher comments on individual and group performance using both his/her comments and the comments/suggestions made by the other students as members of the audience. We should mention at this point that, as this was the first time we tried project work with this ESP group, we did not even consider the possibility of videotaping the students' performance. We did not want to increase their level of anxiety, which was high enough just by having the teacher taking notes on the content of their presentation and their performance!

Also at the meeting, each group is given a questionnaire along the lines of the one in Adegbija (1991:229). At home, students complete the questionnaire about their pre-writing activities and add any comment about their 'project-work experience' that they consider relevant. Let us briefly comment on the results of the questionnaire in Appendix IV.

From the results provided by students one point that comes out clearly is their involvement in these pre-writing activities. The members of the group had to negotiate the different sections in which they wanted to divide their job, whether or not to use supplementary material, how and when in the presentation this material should be used ... etc. As for the content-related activities, we have already mentioned that students gathered information from specialized magazines and periodicals. The essential part of this activity is that, in general, only a small amount of the data contained in any one source is useful so this leads to a critical selection of the relevant data in multiple sources. Students also obtained information and supplementary material from subject-area specialists. From the point of view of an ESP teacher, this part of the project work was particularly rewarding because it led to an interdisciplinary collaboration with different departments for future student-related projects.

Activities in section C of the questionnaire had been worked on in class so a high percentage of students used them when writing their first draft.

From the comments they added, we observed that this type of activity increased their responsibility for their part in the project and awoke in them a growing interest in other related topics found while gathering data for the project. As with Adegbija's students, the lower percentage is found in language-related pre-writing activities. A possible conclusion could be that students are mainly concerned with strategies for finding what to say and how to organize it, less so with grammatical correctness. We still think that pre-writing activities in which students are personally involved and that are related to the activities they perform in other subject areas have a great potential for motivating them to perform writing tasks. Also, the teaching of language-related issues would always be more effective when done in the context of a real academic task.

And what other comments did we find in the questionnaires? Let us start with the negative points. Most students felt terribly nervous before the presentation and for some it was difficult to control the situation until the very end. Another difficulty they seemed to find was to look for ways of paraphrasing information when asked questions about specific points in their presentation.

Most comments, however, contained positive feedback. According to the students, they benefitted from having to deal with real material (reading and rewriting it, talking about it and listening to other students talk about other topics); they also mentioned the advantages of working in small groups, how this encouraged their creativity, specially as to the use of supplementary materials. Another interesting comment was that what they learnt from the mini-lectures (research and presentation skills) was highly useful for their other subjects. To summarize, we can say that it was a positive experience for students.

From the teacher's point of view, this project work was also positive because, as Bloor and St John (1988) observe, the processes engaged in during the project (both research processes and language activation processes) are as important as the product. Besides, the role played by other departments in the College of Pharmacy led to several interdisciplinary projects that will soon be under way and will be of tremendous benefit for students.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of working through this example of project-work design was to establish its potential for application in other ESP situations. Some general conclusions that may be reached from this experience are the following:

1. In this particular group, the positive impact of carefully planned project work on student motivation was observed. The comments in the questionnaires suggest that this was mainly due to the fact that students had to deal with material of their choice and related to their other subject areas.
2. The questionnaires also showed that pre-writing activities in which students are personally involved are also motivating. ESP teachers should consider this result and teach language-related points in the context of these tasks.
3. Project work encourages student responsibility in planning, developing and presenting his/her job. This is a highly positive result in a university setting.
4. Besides integrating the four language skills, project work encourages cross-curricular work as students use knowledge gained in other subjects.
5. Project work requires a lot of planning and extra-work on the part of the teacher. Once a project design has been established, the teacher needs to keep in mind the main objectives and must provide encouragement to achieve those objectives in the time allotted.

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## APPENDIX I

### List of topics presented

The Different Food Groups  
Additives  
Shopping for Good Nutrition  
Food Allergies  
Vitamins  
Asthma  
Diabetes Melitus  
Malaria  
AIDS  
Sexually Transmitted Diseases  
Influenza Epidemics  
Cancer  
Neoplasms  
Cancer Chemotherapy  
Alternative Medicine  
Herbal Medicine  
Antibiotics  
Genetics Nowadays  
Biotechnology-Bioethics  
Animal Experimentation  
Natural Selection  
Science Errors  
Pharmacy in the Middle Ages  
Drugs, Alcohol and Tobacco

**APPENDIX II**  
Presentation evaluation form

Group number:

Please complete this form by circling the items in capital letters and by using the spaces below each item for comments or examples that will help the speakers with that aspect of the presentation.

1. Were you able to follow the main points?

YES                      WITH DIFFICULTY                      NO

2. Would you be able to summarize the talk for someone else?

YES                      WITH DIFFICULTY                      NO

3. Was the talk well-organized?

YES                      GENERALLY                      NO

4. Did the speakers indicate when they were moving to a new point?

YES                      GENERALLY                      NO

5. Was their speed of speaking appropriate?

YES                      GENERALLY                      NO

6. Was their voice loud and clear enough?

YES                      GENERALLY                      NO

7. How would you judge the speakers' eye-contact with you?

GOOD                      POOR

8. What about the quantity of information in the time available?

SATISFACTORY                      TOO MUCH                      TOO LITTLE

9. Did the speakers conclude with a summary at the end of the talk?

YES                      NO

10. What advice would you give the speakers for future talks?

(Adapted from *Study Speaking*. T. Lynch and K. Anderson. C.U.P. 1992)

### APPENDIX III

#### Evaluation of oral presentation

Name:

Date:

Topic:

Total score:

#### 1. COMPREHENSIBILITY (40 points)

Speech very slow and uneven; about half incomprehensible;  
frequent examples of miscommunication.                      20 22

Speech frequently hesitant but many examples of complete  
sentences; more comprehensible than not, although still  
some miscommunication.                      25 28

Some definite stumbling, but evidence of attempts to  
get around gaps; mostly comprehensible with infrequent  
miscommunication.                      31 34

Very little stumbling, even flow of speech with good use of paraphrase; almost completely comprehensible. 37 40

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2. VOCABULARY (15 points) 

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Frequent examples of inadequate usage and lapses into mother tongue 8 11

Some inaccurate usage or choice of words inappropriate to topic or style; vocabulary not tailored to audience 14 17

Generally accurate usage with only occasional inappropriate choices or lapses; level of vocabulary appropriate for audience 18 20

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3. ORGANIZATION (20 points) 

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Evident lack of structure, poor or nonexistent introduction and/or conclusion; poor organization of ideas. 3 6

Evidence of planning, good introduction and conclusion; some lapses in making transitions from one idea to the next, generally good order of presentation of ideas. 8 10

Well-planned structure, strong introduction and conclusion; clear, logical order of presentation. 13 15

4. USE OF SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS (15 points)	_____
Extend to which design/selection of materials aids the audience in understanding the topic.	4 7 9
Effective use of supplementary materials during the presentation	2 4 6
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5. MANNER OF DELIVERY (10 points)	_____
Voice projection: poor/adequate/good	1 2 3
Techniques for stimulating class interest: poor/adequate/good	2 3 4
Eye contact, stage presence: poor/adequate/good	1 2 3

#### APPENDIX IV

##### Types of pre-writing activities students engaged in

Activities	% of students
<b>A. GLOBAL STRATEGY</b>	
Choosing topic	100%
Deciding on an opening	89%

Understanding what the topic is about 100%

Interpreting or analyzing points 76.5%

#### B. CONTENT RELATED

Assembling, noting, and writing down key points on the topic 82.9%

Reading, researching the topic in textbooks, magazines and periodicals containing information on the topic; asking other people about the topic 96%

#### C. ORDER-RELATED

Organizing facts from different sources 86.5%

Outlining points 92.9%

Integrating information 90.8%

#### D. LANGUAGE-RELATED

Correction of possible grammatical errors by group-members 72.3%