

LANGUAGE-CENTERED AND SKILL-CENTERED COURSE DESIGN

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Abstract: *This research explores the concepts of language-centered and skill-centered course design in the context of language teaching. The study addresses the challenge of creating effective courses that meet learners' needs by focusing on either the linguistic structures they need to master or the practical skills they aim to develop. The purpose is to compare these two approaches, highlighting their design principles, applications, and outcomes in real-world educational settings. A qualitative approach was adopted, involving a review of existing literature and analysis of case studies where each method was implemented. Results indicate that language-centered design emphasizes grammatical structures and language rules, providing learners with a solid foundation in linguistic accuracy. In contrast, skill-centered design prioritizes the development of specific skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, or listening, making it highly applicable to task-based or professional contexts. The study concludes that while each approach has its strengths, the choice between them should depend on the learners' goals, contexts, and the teaching environment.*

Keywords: *Approaches, Steps Course Design, English for Specific Purposes, language-centered, skill-centered, needs analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Course design is the process of transforming the initial need for learning into a well-structured teaching and learning experience. Its goal is to guide students toward achieving a specific level of knowledge. In practice, this involves using theoretical and practical insights to create a curriculum, selecting or developing suitable materials based on that curriculum, designing effective teaching methods, and establishing evaluation procedures to assess progress toward the intended objectives.

In the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), course design plays a crucial role in addressing learners' specific language needs. Among the various approaches to course design, the language-centered and skill-centered approaches stand out as two foundational methodologies. The language-centered approach focuses on creating a direct link between the linguistic analysis of target situations and the content of the course, emphasizing the mastery of language structures. In contrast, the skill-centered approach prioritizes the development of underlying skills and strategies necessary for learners to engage with language effectively, particularly in real-world contexts.

Both approaches have been widely implemented, with the language-centered approach being especially common in structured ESP courses and the skill-centered approach gaining prominence in regions like Latin America, where students often need to read specialized texts in English. This article explores the principles, applications, and

challenges of these approaches, offering a comparative perspective on their effectiveness in meeting learners' goals. By examining their theoretical foundations and practical implementations, this discussion highlights the ways these methodologies contribute to the broader framework of ESP course design.

Methodology

1. The language-centered approach

The language-centered approach is the most straightforward type of course design and is the one of the common approaches that English teachers are most accustomed to. It is especially common in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs. This approach focuses on establishing a direct link between analyzing the target situation and determining the content of the ESP course. At first glance, this approach might seem logical and well-structured. The process typically begins with the student learning the curriculum, utilizing classroom resources, and finally testing their mastery of the curriculum objectives. The curriculum itself is delivered in various stages. However, this approach has several clear and straightforward drawbacks:³⁴While it starts by considering the students and their needs, it does so only in a very narrow sense. The student's role is primarily to evaluate specific objectives, and in contexts such as general English, only a small segment of the target language is taught rather than addressing the language as a whole.³⁵The student's involvement is limited to identifying this restricted focus area, and they are not actively engaged in further stages of the process. As highlighted, students should be considered throughout every phase, particularly during needs analysis. Unfortunately, this model overlooks the broader learning needs of the students. Consequently, it is not truly learner-centered but instead constrained by a narrow focus on the learners."

2. The skill-centered approach

The skills-centered approach to ESP has been extensively implemented in various countries, particularly in Latin America. In universities and colleges, students often have a specific but critical need to read academic texts in English, as these resources are not available in their native language. To address this, numerous ESP projects have been established with the primary goal of enhancing students' reading skills in English. This approach is based on two core principles: theoretical and pragmatic.

³⁶The theoretical foundation of the skills-centered approach is the idea that all language behavior relies on specific underlying skills and strategies that learners use to produce or understand discourse. This approach aims to move beyond surface-level performance to focus on the competence that drives it.

On the practical side, the skills-centered approach is influenced by ³⁷Widdowson's (1981) distinction between goal-oriented and process-oriented courses. ³⁸Holmes (1982) highlights a key issue in ESP: the limited time available and the varying levels of student experience. He points out a contradiction in defining "needs" narrowly as "target situation

³⁴ Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

³⁵ Nunan, D. (1988). *The Learner-Centered Curriculum: A Study in Second Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

³⁶ Basturkmen, H. (2006). *Ideas and Options in English for Specific Purposes*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

³⁷ Widdowson's, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, London: Longman, 1981.

³⁸ Holmes, J. (1982). *Processes of change in English for specific purposes*. Language Teaching.

necessities." Designing ESP courses purely around goals implies an acknowledgment that many students will fail to meet the desired outcomes.

Since ESP is inherently a process meant to help learners achieve specific objectives, framing courses in a way that almost guarantees failure is counterproductive.

The process-oriented approach addresses this issue by eliminating the strict divide between the ESP course and the target situation.

Instead of viewing the course as a standalone unit where learners must emerge fully proficient, it considers the ESP course and the target situation as part of a continuous progression of developing proficiency.

This model avoids rigid success or failure metrics, recognizing that students achieve varying levels of ability over time. Holmes points out a contradiction in interpreting 'needs' narrowly as 'target situation necessities.

' When an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course is designed solely around specific goals, it essentially admits that many students are unlikely to succeed in achieving those goals.

This contradicts the purpose of ESP, which is to help learners develop the skills needed to achieve their objectives.

Designing a course that anticipates failure seems counterintuitive.

The process-oriented approach addresses this issue by removing the strict separation between the ESP course and the target situation.

Rather than treating the course as a standalone program meant to produce fully proficient learners, it views the course and the target situation as part of a continuous learning process.

Proficiency is seen as an ongoing development, with no fixed point marking success or failure. In a skills-centered approach, needs analysis serves two primary purposes.

First, it helps identify the core competencies required for effective performance in the target situation. Second, it allows the course designer to uncover the existing knowledge and skills that learners bring with them to the ESP classroom.

Results

³⁹Hutchinson and Waters explain that the language-centered course design approach is the simplest type of course design and one that English teachers are most accustomed to.

Its goal is to establish a clear and direct link between the analysis of the target situation and the content of the ESP course.

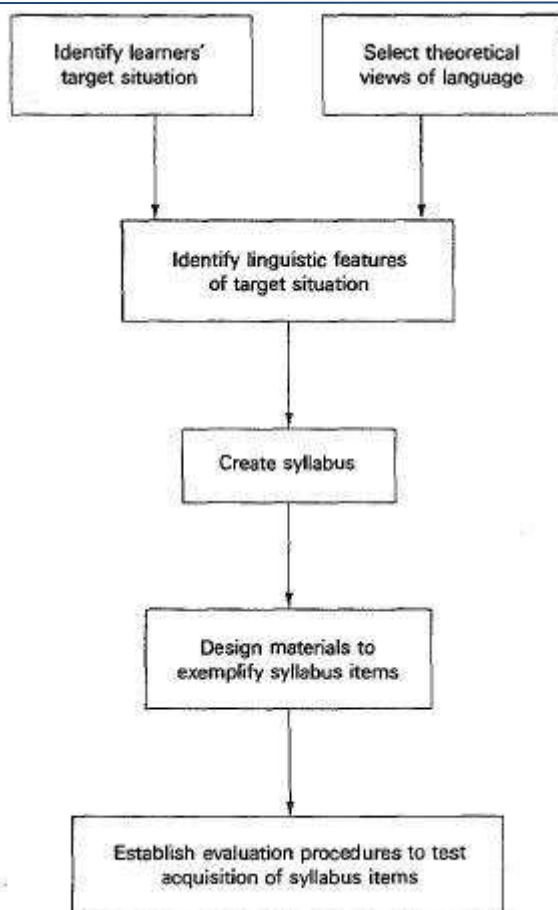
The language-centered method is often criticized for its lack of flexibility, error tolerance, and effective feedback, making it difficult to address mistakes caused by users unfamiliar with its linear structure.

While its logical approach is commendable, it has been criticized for treating learning as a straightforward and logical process.

This rigidity has limited its appeal and hindered its ability to gain wider support (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

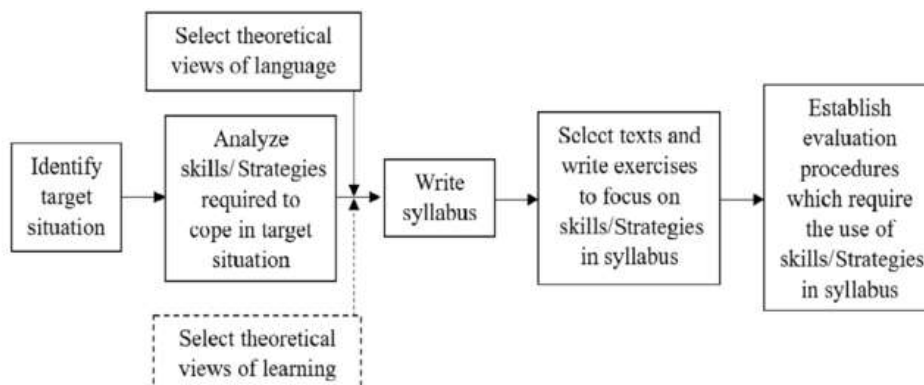
The process unfolds in the following manner:

³⁹ Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centered Approach*. Cambridge University Press.



The figure above illustrates that this approach begins by identifying the learner's target situation, followed by selecting relevant theoretical language to determine the necessary linguistic features. Using this data, a syllabus is developed. The next steps involve creating materials based on the syllabus and implementing evaluations to measure the course's effectiveness.

The skill-centered approach begins by identifying the target situation. From the target situation analysis, key information is gathered, including theoretical perspectives on language, the skills needed to handle the target situation, and theories of learning. This data is used to design the syllabus, which then informs the development of materials. Finally, evaluation is conducted to assess the course's effectiveness.



Although the skills-centered approach is often more effective than the language-centered approach, it has faced criticism from ESP practitioners and researchers. One significant drawback is that course designers tend to focus on achieving objectives without creating detailed strategies for implementation.

Another weakness of this approach is that teachers develop skills and activities for the whole class, leaving little opportunity to address the unique needs and abilities of individual learners. Some researchers caution that meticulously planning general goals and their execution may, to some extent, be an inefficient use of time.

Conclusion

This study examined the language-centered and skill-centered approaches to course design in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), analyzing their principles, applications, and outcomes. The findings revealed that while the language-centered approach offers a straightforward structure and focuses on linguistic accuracy, its rigid design often neglects broader learner needs and flexibility. Conversely, the skill-centered approach prioritizes developing specific skills and strategies, making it better suited to task-based and professional contexts, although it also faces challenges such as limited individualization and inefficiencies in goal execution.

The results align with Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) observations, which criticized the language-centered approach for its linearity and inflexibility, while highlighting the practicality of the skill-centered approach for specific learning goals. However, this study extends prior findings by emphasizing the importance of integrating learners' unique needs throughout the course design process to bridge gaps in both approaches. Unexpectedly, it was noted that skill-centered courses, despite their pragmatic orientation, often lack detailed implementation.

In terms of practical applications, educators and course designers are encouraged to adopt a hybrid approach, incorporating the strengths of both language-centered and skill-centered methodologies. For instance, courses could combine the linguistic rigor of the language-centered approach with the contextual adaptability and skill development focus of the skill-centered approach. Additionally, embedding continuous needs analysis throughout the learning process could ensure that courses remain responsive to learners' evolving goals and contexts.

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